

The Hands of the Blacks: Racism and Myths of Origin

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I am black and beautiful,
Daughters of Jerusalem —
Like the tents of Quedar,
Like the curtains of Solomon.

Song I: 5

A música dos brancos é negra
A pele dos negros é negra
Os dentes dos negros são brancos
Os brancos são só brancos
Os negros são retintos¹

Adriana Calcanhotto, *Negros*

“As mãos dos pretos” [The hands of the blacks] is the penultimate of the seven short stories which make up the volume *Nós matámos o cão tinhoso!* [We killed mangy-dog] published by Luís Bernardo Honwana in 1964, in the (then) city of Lourenço Marques. Despite the poor quality of the edition and the repressive atmosphere that was felt in Mozambique at the time – which would eventually lead to the author’s arrest in September of that same year, a few months after the book’s release – its success was huge, both immediately and in the medium term. Its translation into English, made by Dorothy Guedes and published in book form in London, in 1969, by Heinemann Educational Books, contributed to this success. Before that, however, the short story which will be the focus of this article had been published in two prestigious periodicals: the Nigerian magazine *Black Orpheus* (1965)² and the British newspaper *The Sunday Times* (1967). In the latter, the text was accompanied by the following side note:

*The author of this story is a political prisoner in Portuguese East Africa. Luis Bernardo Honwana was born 25 years ago in a Mozambique village. He worked as a cartographer and journalist in Lourenço Marques until he was imprisoned last year for ‘political subversive activities’. He has published one book of lyrical short stories in Portuguese. Though he has served his sentence he is still in jail. This story was sent to Britain by the South African writer Nadine Gordimer.*³

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¹ “Whites’ music is black/Blacks’ skin is black/Blacks’ teeth are white/Whites are just white/Blacks are deep black” [Here and elsewhere, except when noted, the translation is my own.]

² Subsequently, the story would be included in the volume *Political Spider: An anthology of stories from ‘Black Orpheus’* (Edited by Ulli Beier. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969, pp. 81-83).

³ *The Sunday Times Magazine*. 26th March 1967, pp. 18-19.



Ilustração 01 – Illustration, unsigned, which accompanied the publication of “As mãos dos pretos” in *The Sunday Times Magazine*.

In the more than half a century that has passed meanwhile, there have been many studies on Honwana’s book, a great part of which centered on the short story that gives the volume its title, though “As mãos dos pretos” has also been the object of several studies and readings.

In the story, a school-age child reports, in the first person, on the results of the interviews that he/she is having with his/her acquaintances regarding a topic introduced by the teacher, who had said

that the palms of the blacks' hands were much lighter than the rest of their bodies because only a few centuries ago they walked around on all fours, like wild animals, so their palms weren't exposed to the sun, which made the rest of their bodies darker and darker (Honwana, 1969a: 49).

In general, as one would expect, the studies which have been published underline the racism to which the protagonist is exposed and relate the case to the colonial situation in Mozambique at the time. More recently, several Brazilian researchers have been drawing attention to the similarity between one of the mythical explanations mentioned in the text (the bath in a lake or in a river) and certain ingredients of Brazilian traditional folktales. An analogous case was that of an episode of Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma*, although it is not always stressed that this was not an 'invention' by the Brazilian author, but rather a remake of a traditional motif. Despite these and other works, however, there are at least two issues that have not yet been developed, both of which I will now approach briefly. The first issue has to do with the fact that Honwana's story had an earlier version, published in a newspaper in March of the previous year. Although this fact is well known, I believe that it has not yet been analyzed. This circumstance is indeed of interest, especially since there are three significant differences between the two versions, something which suggests a maturation of the text when passing from newspaper to book form. A first modification concerns the title, which changed from "As mãos e as palmas" [The hands and the palms] to "As mãos dos pretos" [The hands of the blacks]. We should note that, even though both titles make sense, the perspective is different: the first title highlights the starting point of the story (that is, the difference in color between the hands and the palms of black people), while the second is related to a proposed conclusion: that of the narrator's mother, who teaches her son that such a difference was created by God in order to show

That what men do is done by hands that are the same – hands of people who, if they had any sense, would know that before everything else they are men. He must have been thinking of this when He made the hands of the blacks be the same as the hands of those men who thank God they are not black!" (Honwana, 1969a: 51-52).

In addition to this, there is a difference in length between the two texts: the second one is longer, introducing two new levels and two new characters (Sr. Antunes and Sr. Frias) to the narrator-protagonist's quest. This change is quite significant, as it is precisely these two figures who provide explanations which are closest to the myths of origin, through the inclusion of motifs present in Portuguese-African folklore. The scenes in which they appear thus serve to underline the deeply ingrained racism of the society of that time, though without changing the main theme of the story.

Thirdly, there is a series of small modifications, mainly stylistic, together with the substitution of the phrase "*homem normal*" [normal man] in two moments close to the end of the text, the last of which accompanying an expansion of the original passage:

palmas das mãos dum homem normal > as palmas das mãos dos outros homens⁴ mostrar a todos o que os homens fazem também pode um preto fazê-lo porque todos têm as palmas das mãos iguais e por isso ela [sic] é também um homem normal como os homens que dão graças a Deus por não serem pretos. > mostrar que o que

⁴ "palms of a normal man" > "the palms of the other men".

os homens fazem, é apenas obra de homens... Que o que os homens fazem é feito por mãos iguais, mãos de pessoas que se tiverem juízo sabem que antes de serem qualquer outra coisa são homens. Deve ter sido a pensar assim que Ele fez com que as mãos dos pretos fossem iguais às mãos dos homens que dão graças a Deus por não serem pretos.” ¶ Depois de dizer isso tudo, a minha mãe beijou-me as mãos. ¶ Quando fui para o quintal, para jogar à bola, ia a pensar que nunca tinha visto uma pessoa a chorar tanto sem que ninguém lhe tivesse batido.⁵

How can we interpret this change? Was there a mistake in the first version which the author felt should be corrected? If so, the mistake may be read in at least two ways: either the expression “*um homem normal*” did not match the character, the narrator’s mother, who uttered it; or its purpose of denunciation may have been considered too harsh, thus justifying a retraction. Be that as it may, both the replacement of the phrase and the modification of the context emphasize the didactic dimension of the story – a maternal, though very assertive, didacticism, especially since it is marked by two diametrically opposite reactions: laughter at the beginning and tears at the end, both uncontrollable. A last difference between the two versions has to do with the fact that the one published in the newspaper contains an illustration by someone who came to be the most important Mozambican painter, Malangatana Valente Ngwenya (1936-2011).



Ilustração 02 – Illustration by Malangatana.

⁵ “to show everyone that what men do can also be done by a black man because everyone has the same palms and therefore she [sic] is also a normal man like the men who thank God they are not black.” > “to show that what men do is only the work of men... That what men do is done by hands that are the same – hands of people who, if they had any sense, would know that before everything else they are men. He must have been thinking of this when He made the hands of the blacks be the same as the hands of those men who thank God they are not black! ¶ After telling me all this, my mother kissed my hands. ¶ As I ran off into the yard to play ball, I thought that I had never seen a person cry so much when nobody had hit them.” [I have used Dorothy Guedes, translation for the version in book form].

Although the drawing can be interpreted in several ways, I believe that the play between black and white is noticeable, as is that between hands and palms, left and right, and probably also between male and female, in a proposal involving crossings and communion which suggests the meaninglessness of the question underlying the story.

The second of the questions which has not yet been raised about this short story is precisely that of the absurdity (at least from a scientific viewpoint) of the problem posed at the beginning. As has been known for a long time – and may indeed be confirmed by a quick empirical observation – in all human beings and regardless of their color, the skin of the palms and soles is different from that of the rest of the body, even if that is more evident in dark-skinned people. According to experts, the skin in these areas of the body is thicker, presenting an extra layer, called *stratum lucidum*, which has a lower amount of melanocytes compared with that of the rest of the body, thus resulting in a lighter color. It is likely that such an explanation would not be available to all the characters in Honwana's story, although the first two (the teacher and the priest) ought perhaps to know it. The strange thing, however, is that they all provide clearly foolish answers, updating – whether aware of it or not – mythical forms of thought (or, at least, of language), still today fairly present in many types of folklore and oral tradition. As for the Portuguese case – and we should not forget that this is where the characters who are questioned by the narrator come from – an example can be found in short story N.º 139 of the second volume of *Contos Populares e Lendas*, by José Leite de Vasconcelos (1964: 606-7).

Entitled “A criação do preto” [The creation of the black man], this story tells us that Satan, seeing that Adam had been created by God out of a piece of clay, wanted to do the same, but as a result obtained a black man, which left him stunned and enraged. Being close to River Jordan, he decides to bathe his man there “*para lhe tirar a negrura*”⁶ (Vasconcelos, 1964: 606). The lighter palms and soles are explained by the reaction of the river: “*Mas as águas do Jordão afastaram-se imediatamente, enojadas com aquela negrura, e o homem de Satã, o primeiro negro, apenas mergulhou os pés e as mãos no lodo.*”⁷ (*ibid.*) The Devil's subsequent attitude would explain other physical traits attributed to people of color: furious, Satan punched the black man, flattening his nose and making his lips swell; then, repenting, he caressed him by stroking his head, thus searing his hair, which would forever remain frizzled.

Judging by the collections which have been published, this kind of folktale is not common in the Portuguese tradition. In spite of this, there are other examples in which the dark color is presented as a stigma and a fault that limits people's lives. See the case of “A preta esfolada” [The black woman skinned], collected by Ataíde de Oliveira in the Algarve and published in 1900 (Oliveira, 1989: II, 60-62). It tells the story of two black women, one of whom is turned white by fairies and later comes to marry a prince. As she is envied by her sister, she advises her to have a barber skin her, and then to put herself in a lime oven to whiten, an advice which her sister follows with consequences which are easily imagined. Besides, and strange as it may appear today, even *Acta Sanctorum* (a collection published between 1643 and 1925), as noted by Charles Loomis (1948: 81), includes accounts of cases of miraculous transformations of black people into white.

Even more unexpected, at least at first glance, is the presence of similar mythical motifs in African oral literature from different regions. A first guideline can be found in the well-known Aarne-Thompson Motif-Index: in volume I, under N.º A1614 – “Origin of white and colored races” (Thompson, 1955: I, 243) – a list is included of some of the versions

⁶ “to take away his blackness”.

⁷ “But the waters of River Jordan moved away immediately, disgusted by that blackness, and the man of Satan, the first black man, only dipped his feet and hands in the mud.”

on the subject, which also appears in the various branches of the motif. One of them is called “Why some men are white and others black”, and is included in the volume *Notes on the Folklore of the Fjort (French Congo)*, by Richard Dennett (1898: 101-2); it makes the explanation return to the “beginning”, when four men were crossing a forest and encountered two rivers: one of them “was of water, clear as crystal and of great purity; the other was black and foul and horrible to the taste” (Dennett, 1898: 101). Although it seemed that only the dirty river could lead directly to their destination, the group hesitated and split into two. After the crossing, it turned out that the two men who had chosen to cross the black river “were of a pure white colour” (Dennett, 1898: 102) and the others “had become black, except just those parts of them that had touched the black river, namely, their mouths, the soles of their feet, and the palms of their hands.” (Dennett, 1898: 101). Then they went their separate ways, and the whites “were agreeably surprised to come across a large house containing white wives for them to marry; while the black men also found huts, or shimbecs with black women whom they married” (Dennett, 1898: 102). As can easily be seen, the motif of the river is identical to the one which appears in the Portuguese tradition – and in one of the answers obtained by the narrator of Luís Bernardo Honwana’s short story – there being also apparent a kind of punishment inflicted upon the black men. In the absence of an interpretive explanation, a question remains: Why are some rewarded and others punished? Because the former have chosen what is beautiful and pleasant over what is ugly but practical?

A decade earlier, on the other side of the Atlantic, Joel Chandler Harris had published *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, a collection of Black American folktales and other materials compiled and adapted by the author. The book includes the short story “Why the Negro is Black” (1881: 141-143), which starts with a white boy noticing that the palms of Uncle Remus’ hands are as white as his own. Uncle Remus then begins to explain to the child, in the black dialect created by the author to represent the deep South Negro language of the time, that “Niggers is niggers now, but de time wuz w’en we ‘uz all niggers tergedder.”⁸ (Harris, 1881: 141). He adds that, by dipping their entire bodies into a pool of enchanted water, many of the blacks were able to become white. But

dey wuz sech a crowd un um dat dey mighty nigh use de water up, w’ich w’en dem yuthers come long, de mostest dey could do wuz ter paddle about wid der foots en dabble in it wid der han’s. Dem wuz de niggers, en down ter dis day dey ain’t no w’ite ‘bout a nigger ‘cep’in de pa’m’s er der han’s en de soles er der foot⁹ (Harris, 1881: 142).

As for the Chinese, “dem w’at git ter de pon’ time nuff fer ter git der head in de water, de water hit onkink der ha’r. Hit bleedzd ter be dat away.”¹⁰ (Harris, 1881: 143). Despite some similarities with the version previously mentioned, in this one men are said to be originally black and equal, which is particularly significant in the clearly racist social context that the book portrays.

Let us take yet another example, concerning the Fang, collected by Father Henri Trilles in 1905. In a primeval time, “*il y avait des hommes comme maintenant, comme maintenant il y avait des hommes, et ils n’étaient pas tous de la même couleur: il y avait des Noirs, il y avait des Blancs, il y en avait qui n’étaient ni blancs ni noirs*”¹¹ (Trilles, 1905: 141). Harmony

⁸ “Niggers is niggers now, but the time was when we was all niggers together.”

⁹ “there was such a crowd of them that they mighty nigh use the water up, which when them others come along, the most they could do was to paddle about with their foots and dabble in it with their hands. Them was the niggers, and down to this day there ain’t no white about a nigger excepting the palms of the hands and the soles of the foot.”

¹⁰ “them that get to the pond time enough for to get their head in the water, the water it unkink the hair. It blessed to be that way.”

¹¹ “there were men as there are now, as now there were men, and they were not all the same color: there were Blacks, there were Whites, there were some who were neither white nor black.”

reigned among all the people: “*des Blancs servaient les Noirs, des Noirs servaient les Blancs, les choses ne changent guère. Les uns n’avaient pas plus d’esprit que les autres, tous étaient égaux, et ça n’en allait pas plus mal pour cela, au contraire!*”¹² (Trilles, 1905: 142). However, a great dispute arose and the two groups went to Nzame to solve it, asking their god to appoint them a chief. However, since there was no agreement on his choice, Nzame declared that the two peoples must live separately, each with their own leader. But there was still a pending issue: “*La terre est divisée en deux parties égales: dans l’une, vous trouverez une quantité de bonnes choses, fusils, colliers, bracelets, tout; dans l’autre, à peu près rien de tout cela.*”¹³ (Trilles, 1905: 143). As both groups preferred the former half, Nzame submitted them to three tests, declaring that the reward would be given to the winning group. The black people made one bad choice after another, determined as they were by apparent ease and laziness, and were eventually defeated for having been unable to cross a river that gave access to the “*terre des richesses*”¹⁴ (Trilles, 1905: 151). Even though the conclusion seems obvious, we must be cautious when reading the story. As its compiler explains, the account is probably the result of “*cette adaptation toute spéciale au milieu*”¹⁵ (Trilles, 1905: 141).

*Si le narrateur parle des Blancs, c’est que dans son imagination, comme dans celle de ses auditeurs, les Blancs représentent pour lui la Richesse personnifiée. En réalité, il s’agit d’un peuple qui a dû jadis lutter longtemps avec les Fang; les chants intercalés çà et là nous ont conservé son nom: ce sont les Benthoua (...)*¹⁶ (ibid.).

We could multiply the examples of African folktales representing in a similar way the diversification of peoples. Furthermore, it could be observed that examples of the same type can also be found in peoples from other regions, such as the Caribbean. According to Hartley Burr Alexander, relying on information from Boddam Whetman,

The Great Spirit Makanaïma made a large mould, and out of this fresh, clean clay the white man stepped. After it got a little dirty the Indian was formed, and the Spirit being called away on business for a long period the mould became black and unclean, and out of it walked the negro (Alexander, 1920: 271).

In her Ph.D. thesis, published in 1978 – *Noirs et Blancs: Leur image dans la littérature orale africaine* [Blacks and Whites: Their image in African oral literature] – Veronika Görög-Karady confirmed the often negative image that black people project of themselves in oral literature, including texts related to peoples’ myths of origin. But, as Suzanne Lallemand advised, these seemingly masochistic tales must be read with caution:

*Près de la moitié de ces récits ont été recueillis avant 1920, période où les méthodes de collecte et de transcription de la littérature orale ne sont pas au-dessus de tout soupçon: mais surtout, période où l’ethnographe, souvent administrateur ou militaire, ne doute guère de sa supériorité intellectuelle et morale sur les colonisés*¹⁷ (Lallemand, 1978: 224-5).

¹² “Whites served Blacks, Blacks served Whites, things hardly changed. None were smarter than the others, all were equal, and it wasn’t worse for that, on the contrary!”

¹³ “The earth is divided into two equal parts: in one of them you will find a quantity of good things, guns, necklaces, bracelets, everything; in the other, almost none of that.”

¹⁴ “land of wealth”.

¹⁵ “this very special adaptation to the environment”.

¹⁶ “If the narrator speaks of Whites, it is because for him, in his imagination, as in that of his listeners, Whites represent Wealth personified. In fact, they are a people who once had to struggle with the Fang for a long time; the chants, interspersed here and there, have kept their name for us: they are the Benthoua (...).”

¹⁷ “Nearly half of these accounts were collected before 1920, a period when the methods of collecting and transcribing oral literature were not beyond suspicion: but, above all, a period when the ethnographer, often an administrator or a military man, hardly doubted his intellectual and moral superiority over the colonized peoples.”

On the other hand, according to the same author,

*Le fait que ces récits d'Africains aient été racontés à des enquêteurs blancs prend alors un singulier relief: si elle ne met pas en cause leur "authenticité" longuement discutée par l'auteur, cette particularité de leur émission (et peut-être de leur production) expliquerait leurs aspects insolites: ces contes des Noirs s'adresseraient non pas à un auditoire autochtone, mais à un partenaire étranger; récits au centre d'un dialogue inégalitaire, ils commenteraient "en abîme" la situation du conteur africain et celle de l'interlocuteur blanc; leur marginalité et leur spécificité d'usage évoqueraient celle de ces masques effectivement fabriqués par des artisans locaux, mais conçus pour la vente aux touristes issus d'autres continents*¹⁸ (Lallemand, 1978: 225).

In any case, whether we accept this explanation or put the emphasis on the colonial situation and the imposition of the colonizer's ideology, the truth is that the subject is complex, in the past as in the present, in Africa or in any other place, affecting even the field of science. In August of this year (2020), an article in the digital version of *The Guardian* caught my attention: under the title "Decolonising dermatology: why black and brown skin need better treatment", a dark-skinned GP reflects on his failure to detect a simple case of psoriasis in a black patient. Rethinking the training he had received in the field of dermatology, he concluded that "I could recall only three occasions when dark skin was used to demonstrate a skin problem" (Singh, 2020: s/p). Further expanding his reflection to medical education, he went on to show that the system is entirely built on white skin, despite the fact that the diseases affecting people of different color have their own specificities, and not only as regards dermatology. Let us look at only one example:

Medicine seems to have been built with the same solipsism as photography. For instance, pulse oximeters – those devices health workers peg to your finger, which read your oxygen levels by ping-pong a red light through your skin – were calibrated using white patients, and they have been shown to consistently overestimate oxygen levels in dark-skinned people by up to 7% (Singh, 2020: n.p.).

More than half a century after Honwana's short story, skin and its color continue to serve as justification for discriminating between different ways of treating people, or sometimes as a basis for clearly racist constructions. We even forget, as the geneticist Adam Rutherford writes, that "pigmentation is not a binary trait, even though we use binary terms like black or white" (Rutherford, 2020: 58) and that "there is more genetic diversity in Africa than the rest of the world" (Rutherford, 2020: 59). In this as in other cases, looking back and at the remnants of myths of origin can be a useful strategy, even if it does not solve all problems.

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¹⁸ "The fact that these accounts about Africans were told to white investigators thus takes on a singular relief: if it does not question their "authenticity", discussed at length by the author, this particularity of their enunciation (and perhaps of their production) would explain their unusual aspects: these tales about Blacks would not be addressed to an indigenous audience, but to a conversational partner who is a foreigner; narratives at the center of an unequal dialogue, they would comment "in abyss" on the situation of the African storyteller and on that of the white interlocutor; their marginality and specific use would evoke that of the masks actually made by local artisans, but designed to be sold to tourists from other continents."

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