

Review Article

Africans and Hazel Eyes in the Race Debate

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Abstract: The hazel eye phenomenon is an attribute that contradicts views about race theory and racial discourse. What is omitted in conversations is its prevalence among Africans. Assertions that it hardly applies among Africans but a preserve of people in certain geographical locations exposes the weakness in academic and other pronouncements on the issue. It turns out that Africans themselves, for instance, Igbos, fail to notice its occurrence in Igbo communities that have no biological contact with the world outside Igbo land before Igbos encountered the Europeans during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade era or during the colonization of West Africa by Europeans. This research is an input into a crowded field that is even inadequate in its postulations. The aim of the study is to use the findings here to dismiss veiled ideas of racial inequalities in the world and to put an end to racial classification of humans, especially Africans, who are erroneously called blacks.

Keywords: Hazel eyes, blue eyes, colonialism, slave trade, race theory, identity.

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INTRODUCTION

There have been intriguing episodes in historical accounts about the eye and how humans utilize it. The eye has had a high profile over this time. Its mystical capacity has as well been sustained. In Africa where skin color is now a point of reference, the eye has remained relegated. Eye color elsewhere, like in the West, was once designed to empower some people over others. For instance, blue eye is a product the Nazis and the eugenics movement promoted. When it left the big stage, it was difficult to ignore. That deepened even at the individual level. Research on the eye color of Africans is constrained by assumptions about Africans. It poses a question, viz. Between Africa and the West who should lay claim to the hazel eyes of African Americans or Afro-Caribbeans? A good portion of the hazel eyes was surely imported into the Americas from Africa. Research on hazel eyes is extensive, but the outcomes indicate they are inadequate. In Africa, our knowledge of hazel eyes was confined to foreign literatures. We did not roll it over appropriately to recognize hazel eyes in real life. While in Europe, I did not notice the diverseness of eyes among various people I interacted with. It could probably be because we shy away from looking people in the eyes. I may have adjusted it now. I had previously not been involved in any conversation about hazel eyes. It is proof that humans should disengage from this man-made concept. The concept of blond, blue and hazel eyes should not be

used to classify people. Blue eyes and hazel eyes can be found in the most unlikely places.

The Eye

The eye has had an expanding sphere of influence over time. Its power lies in how it enables visual contact between one thing and another. It is an instrument one is at liberty to use as one chooses. Thus, Lot's wife in the Bible falls for an allurements. Against entreaty, she casts a glance at the cities Sodom and Gomorrah. Her escape from the two cities not only comes to an end, but she hardens into a salt statue (Holy, Genesis 26). The experience with Medusa in Greek mythology is identical to Lot's wife's episode, except that an offending eye now would turn to a stone if it beheld Medusa's severed head. Perseus, the protagonist is scheduled for a confrontation with the Gorgons and outwits the blind, Graeae sisters to take possession of the one eye that serves the sisters. The sisters must have to strike a bargain to reveal Medusa's location to repossess their eye (Gómez-Jeria, Jay). In other words, the beauty of the eye is almost lost in those narratives. The truth is that the eye has had a good as well as a bad run in Western societies. One of Sophocle's quotes that goes forth "*The golden eye of justice sees, and requites the unjust man*" gives one a lot to ponder over (Wacks).

The eye even has a softer presence in the type of beauty that would make Dante Alighieri write some beautiful lines in *La Vita Nuova* and "*La Divina*

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Commedia” or “The Divine Comedy” and “Inferno” about a girl named Beatrice. Dante would even later turn to philosophy as a result. One feature that stands out, for which Dante is overcome by emotion, are Beatrice’s eyes. Dante states that the girl’s beauty is surely an indication of a bond between God and man. Hollywood eventually rediscovers the power of the eye. National Geographic took note and gave it publicity on the front cover of the magazine. Therefore, the eye should not be a source of pain for anybody (Felder, Cunningham 2).

The image of a girl in Nigeria with blue eyes had lingered for a long time on social media. I refrained from reading or responding to the stories behind it until the news faded. It suggested there was a gap in knowledge about blue eyes. I revisited the story because of another incident, which was the euphoria on Facebook over a Nigerian man with Waardenburg Syndrome. Details of the story of the girl with blue eyes showed the girl’s father ejected his two blue-eyed daughters and his blue-eyed wife from their home. The man eventually denied his unwise decision, but he was in dread of misfortune from the blue eyes (Toye). Our Facebook discussion on the Waardenburg Syndrome spilled to hazel eyes. I contested majority opinion that it was inconceivable for an African to have these eyes. Someone had initiated a scheme on social media to improve the lot of the person with the Waardenburg Syndrome through publicity. There was a flow of goodwill for the cause, which was commendable. I then recalled it was an eye type associated with some people I am familiar with. The position taken by majority of commentators that having hazel eyes was un-African was soon abandoned.

I noticed that, among Africans, there had been increasing unfamiliarity with our world. It laid the groundwork for a little probe, in which I looked back to a life I had left behind. It was a life that never made any reference to eye color or hazel eyes. In my entire life, I have been linked to some people with hazel eyes. Since my attention had been drawn to it, some people I had known before began to make my list of people with the eyes. When I counted about six people at the first try, I thought I had a figure to tie my observation. I mentioned it to a sister of mine and, with the amount of knowledge she has about the people in my local community of Umunakwa and Umuecheogu, the figure climbed to above 18 when we counted. I did another count with a brother of mine, who guessed the number of persons with hazel eyes in that village exceeded 60. Death did not affect our list if we had encountered the persons at certain points in our lifetime. Some households had almost eighty per cent record for the two communities of about 2500 people. Further, it appeared as if the hazel eye featured in roll calls during gatherings. At a funeral ground shortly after the Facebook discussion, on December 30, 2021, I discovered that, seated to my left, were two people of different generations who had the eyes. Six days later, I remarked to a lady I shared

childhood with that I was never aware she has hazel eyes. Eventually, a friend confirmed to me that what another friend in Germany has are hazel eyes. It follows that if we have about 60 people with hazel eyes in the village, one can make a guess of 2.4% as belonging to this group. It is as high as any other place with that demography of indigenous people. How I precisely get what I am looking for, when at the time of contact several years ago it would have passed as any other eye type, is quite amazing.

I turned to the school where I taught and informed the small community that had tuned in to the Facebook conversation that two female students in a class in my department have hazel eyes. In the Nigerian university system, students do not just pass by. It takes a longer time for the students to be out of one’s sights. I have been placed in different positions to know what these two students look like. Yet, it had settled in my consciousness like any other memory. I had meetings with the students Precious Ibekwe and Shalom Abali. The meetings brought me closer to the distribution range of hazel eyes among the students’ blood relations. In Precious’ lineage, the girl’s paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother and a sister of her father’s have hazel eyes. Down to her family, three out of the seven Precious’ siblings take after those two grandparents. She had been to her village, Akaeze twice, but what she saw was enough to say it had strong presence in the place. From her account, when I pointed at her sunglasses, eye disorders like Wilson’s disease and ocular cancer being eye problems some experts say somebody with hazel eyes may have to deal with, she said there was no medical considerations behind her wearing sunglasses. Someone with hazel eyes is expected to be an introvert, if we consider various views, but she says she is an extrovert. Her friends often talked about what happens to her eyes, as though mood or atmosphere redesign the eyes. For Shalom, her friends also observe that one color yields to another occasionally. She counts her mother, her mother’s mother, two cousins on her mother’s side and all three children of one of the cousins as having hazel eyes. It is the same with her elder sister. She has no need for sunglasses and has healthy eyes. Having such knowledge about her village of Okwizi in Egbema required some familiarity which she does not have. Shalom is an extrovert (Ibekwe, Abali). Certainly, in Igbo land, people with hazel eyes are unaware it can qualify for any type of assessment of them. The people hardly pay attention to eye features. If it had any, the value of hazel, for instance, would have been observed in Igbo idioms and proverbs. With the publication of this book and with further inquiry into this phenomenon, this attitude will begin to give way to a new consciousness. It will no longer be referred to as *anya pussu* or *pussy eyes*. *Pussy eyes*, surely is not dignified. Neither is it derogatory.

Origin of Hazel Eyes

Iheanyi Onyeka, from Umunakwa, does not think Igbos who have hazel eyes have any ancestors outside Igbo land. During the colonial period, which started in the 19th century, the British colonial authorities provided guidelines for social engagement with the local people. By a sense of duty, the officials restrained themselves. Besides, they were joined by their spouses. Therefore, intimacy between the officials and the local people was curtailed in Igbo land and in the Efik, Ogoja, Ibibio, Esan and Anang areas. A time span of 232 years is not so far removed that the people will not detect deviations of that magnitude. Possible offspring through crossbreeding could not have had this type of dispersal all over Igbo land, which has a landmass of 40,900 to 41,400 square kilometers. Records obtained from Europeans do not contradict this view. If it is linked to geography, as some commentators allude, then Igbos may have severed that geographical link thousands of years ago. We may then be left with African ancestry of the world to work it. Curiously, the melanin levels of the fellows with hazel eyes in my village likely correspond to that of any other person in the same village. The common factor among the persons with hazel eyes is that the hazel eye is backed by good physical looks and very 'light' skin tone. Therefore, it can be considered a bonus (Onyeka).

Hazel Eyes and Excitement

Nature supplies us with a good collection of colors, ranging from green, yellow and orange to red. Color gives a certain quality to the life of a celebrity. The esteemed socialite gets more attention when it relates to an ornament like the hazel. Some non-African American celebrities with hazel eyes, whom the press talk about are Brooke Shields, Kristen Stewart, Ben Affleck, Heidi Klum, Demi Moore and Angelina Jolie (Moore). Did any celebrity adopt a practice common to many to score some points with their hazel eyes? This was what hazel-eyed Kelly Clarkson achieved with her song "Behind These Hazel Eyes," Charlotte B is devoted to issues of peoples of African ancestry. She recites the names of African American celebrities with hazel eyes, some of whom she lists as follows: Tyra Banks, Jada Pinkett Smith, Willow Smith, Rihanna, Tiffany Hines, Terence Howard, Lemar, Regina King, Raven Simone and Eva Marcille. The writer discusses the excitement they generate because of their hazel eyes (Charlotte B). Obviously, anything Charlotte B ponders about hazel eyes of African American celebrities occurs within the boundaries of the U.S. and the Americas. She writes,

In the United States and European countries, there are many people with hazel eyes. On the other hand, in Africa and Asia, it is a very rare phenomenon because the color that dominates is brown. It is unclear what can cause this hazel among ethnic minorities. This eye color may result due to the genes of parents, genetic material or Caucasian origin in their families. (Charlotte B)

Like Charlotte B, many African Americans are puzzled by the presence of the hazel among African Americans. Some respondents to a question say there was a possibility that affected Africans probably had a good dose of European blood in their lineage. Someone suggested the appearance of the hazel in West Africa may have originated from nomadic ethnicities from north Africa. Such views explain why a team, in an exhaustive work carried out in Africa about phenotype, passed over most West African countries. They set their research in Cape Verde, where they calculated their net would get people with hazel eyes in large numbers. Cape Verde served the purpose because Portuguese colonialists in the place were quite disposed to procreation with the local people. The research conclusion that the hazel in Africa was a fallout of 'genetic admixture' does not look tenable. Obviously, literatures on Africans who disembarked in the West from slave ships leave out the eye types. We would have benefitted from more inclusive literatures (Spritz). What is now clear is that the history of the hazel of many African Americans goes back to Africa. Therefore, it will not be unlikely for an inter-racial child to inherit the hazel eyes from the African side of the parents. That is why it should not be treated as if there was a biological disconnection with the African continent somewhere.

Description of Hazel Eyes

Three-quarter of the pupil of the eye is encircled by a ring, which is the iris. Eyes with high amounts of melanin take in more light. Less light is then released by the iris. This is how we get our brown eyes. If the melanin absorbs less light, the light cast off the iris is much reduced. The eye will be green or hazel. With very little melanin, light getting into the eye is reduced, giving the eye a blue color. The hazel is like the work of an artist with a pen. It is adorable and exclusive. It draws from black and brown colors. If the eyes are not light brown, darker, they are green (Kaushik). Kaushik writes that "Hazel eyes appear to shift colour from brown to green depending on the lighting." Interestingly, every pair of hazel eyes is unlike every other. Where there is melanin deficiency in the bodies of non-Caucasians and Hispanics, it may be due to external factors. They may absorb more melanin eventually, this leading to them having brown, green or hazel eyes. Those persons whose eyes turn brown are likely to have higher levels of melanin than those whose eyes turn green or hazel (Hellem, Charlotte B). It is uncertain, says Charlotte B, why "ethnic minorities" in the U.S. have their own share of hazel eyes. Brown color in those societies is prevalent. According to Charlotte B, "This eye color may be due to the genes of parents, or genetic materials or Caucasian origins in their families." In any case, the factors that combine to produce the hazel eye have not been explained satisfactorily.

Hazel Eyes and Health Concerns

The inconsistency in the eye color makes research on hazel difficult. The lighting in an

environment and attires impose themselves on the hazel eye. The hazel negates the observation that children take the features of their parents. This feature is like the blue eye, in which two blue-eyed parents may beget a child who does not have blue eyes. Why a blue-eyed couple may not pass the blue eye to their child may be because any of the sixteen genes that are responsible for eye color, excluding the blue cell, may present itself and prevail. Curiously, people may not retain the colors of their eyes later in life (Hellem). According to some experts, the sun creates problems for hazel eyes. Wearing of sunglasses eliminates the problems. It is common knowledge that Africans have always had the sun on their back. Contrary to the propositions of some experts, the indigenous people were not seen with sunglasses by the colonists. Though unacknowledged, hazel eyes are not alien to Igbo land. To the same degree, Igbos with hazel eyes have always spent much of their time in the farms and outdoor. It is being suggested that those who have hazel eyes could suffer from 'ocular cancers' due to exposure to the sun. If there have been such ailments linked to exposure to the sun in these societies, the ailments would have come to the local people's notice. Those people with hazel eyes do not face the risk associated with albinos, which are torments from intense sunshine (Heffington's).

Blue Eyes

The eye has played various roles. It was restrained until the emergence of the National Party or Nazis in Germany. It gave people grace and attracted sympathy in Nazi Germany. Blue eyes provoked violations of people's rights. The Nazis needed a visual display of racial dominance. The cast had Werner Goldberg, a blue-eyed SS officer as a worthy candidate. Hence, Kaushik gives further explanation thus, "Besides other criteria, eye colour was the key to obtaining a precious and prestigious 'Aryan certificate'" in Nazi Germany. For an ideology that followed strict rules of service, there was random selection of women to champion the cause of the nation. The state arranged abortions as a measure to reap blue-eyed blonds in its natural selection scheme. The government sometimes encouraged births outside cells it set up. The women could give up their children for adoption by rich families. The state hoped to get such results through financial inducements. Kaushik writes that "[b]londe Nordic-looking women were encouraged to bear babies with SS officers as part of an ambitious expansion plan of the 'master race.'" It was the commanding influence of the blue eye that compels Pecola in Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, to attempt to overturn her misfortune by acquiring blue eyes.

CONCLUSION

The eye is free of anxieties and severity. Society has yielded to the eye cultivated by advocates of eugenics and, lately, American Hollywood. Interest was centered on the colors of the eye. Reports reveal that Europe and the United States of America stand out as

places where colored eyes are much loved and where the numbers are considerable. In Africa south of the Sahel, the eye has been less visible than the skin tone. What is even not clear is the extent of distribution among ethnic groups in the world of an eye type like the hazel, whose nature has eluded scientific enquiry. Unlike in Europe, for instance, the number of people with hazel eyes is said to be negligible in Africa and Asia, as the geographies of these places do not support the hazel. A place like Cape Verde is merely chosen by a research group because it is a place where Portuguese acquaintances may contribute to a high roll out of hazel eyes. In direct contrast to that, there is indigeneity to the Igbo case. A probe into Igbo proverbs does not turn up anything to suggest that hazel in Igbo land was brought into Igbo society by some ethnic groups. If there had been any agency by colonialism, what could have been received would not have grown to cover the whole of Igbo land. Having affirmed the hazel eyes among some Igbos, one can declare that under the same environmental conditions, the person with hazel and the one with brown eyes receive the same amount of melanin. About the Americas, it is understood that what the African slaves came with included eye types like hazel eyes. The closest explanation could be on the grounds of African ancestry of mankind. Providing this answer is long overdue. Clearly, the hazel eye does not uplift anybody in Africa presently. Africans are still very unfamiliar with the attributes which some other societies assigned this physiological endowment. If elevated, with improvement in the profiles of people with hazel eyes, it would produce the same reaction that skin tone produces. This might affect social interactions. If I had not attained this type of awareness, it would have gone unnoticed by me. What it shows is that the world would have been free from prejudice.

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