

Names for an Albino among Jamaican Negroes

FREDERIC G. CASSIDY and DAVID DeCAMP

THE EARLIEST INSTANCE of the word *albino* given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from 1777; the word is said to be used by the Portuguese. An earlier instance, however, may be found in Edward Long's *History of Jamaica*: "The offspring of two Negroe-parents, if born with a white or light-coloured *reticulum*, is called an Albinoe.¹"

Negroes were, of course, of more immediate concern to Englishmen in the West Indies than at home, so it is no surprise to find this term in Long's book; we may note – however that here it is no longer treated as a foreign word, and that this antedates the OED example by three years.

This is a white-man's term meaning in Portuguese something like 'white-type.' It is merely descriptive; it carries no suggestion of what albinism must mean to a Negro, in whom it produces the most violent alteration of color. Nor does it suggest another reason why this condition might be feared: the fact that in a tropical climate albinism is a crippling handicap of terrible effect since it prevents one from working in the sun. Further, it is a source of horror to the folk throughout Jamaica, who believe that an albino is conceived as the result of intercourse during menstruation. The large number of names or nicknames for albinos coined in the island, always derogatory in some degree, testify to the kind of impression which these unfortunates make upon their fellow Negroes.²

As one would expect, the peculiar color is most often at the basis of these names. While negroid features and hair are retained, skin color approaches that of the white man, hence the name *Come-between*. The approach to whiteness is also responsible for *Whitey-Whitey*, *White-cockroach*, *White Eboe*, *White-labor*, *White-nayga*,

¹ London (Lowndes); vol. II, page 49.

² The following terms, all current, were collected for and will be found in F. G. Cassidy and R. B. LePage, *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, Cambridge University Press, 1966; abbr. hereafter *D. J. E.* As they are treated separately there it may be worth while to treat them together here.

Backra, and *Backra-betters*. The first uses iteration to give the effect of the suffix *-ish*,³ which implies something less than the full or true quality of the base word to which it is attached: *whitish*, not genuinely *white*. The cockroach is often used in Jamaica in unfavorable metaphors: it is considered ugly, disgusting, and even somewhat diabolical (compare the etymology of English *bug*); hence the second name.

Eboe is the traditional spelling in Jamaica for *Ibo*, a people of southeastern Nigeria, many of whom were brought to the island as slaves. They were looked down upon by the 'Cromanty' Negroes from the Gold Coast, and the word still today is used only in disparagement. As Bryan Edwards remarked in his *History . . . of . . . the West Indies*,

All the Negroes imported from these vast and unexplored regions [the Bight of Benin] . . . are called in the West Indies Eboes . . . In complexion they are much yellower than the Gold Coast and Whidah Negroes; but it is a sickly hue, and their eyes appear as if suffused with bile, even when they are in perfect health.⁴

In Jamaica *Red Eboe* is an insulting term used about a person a shade lighter than a mulatto,⁵ the word *red* among the speakers of Creole meaning yellow (the yolk of an egg is the 'red' and so for a number of other things). A still lighter person, negroid in other features, then becomes a *White Eboe* – an albino.

White-labor is probably a complicated irony. In Jamaica there are very few poor-whites: labor or physical work is normally the province of the black man. The albino working-man, looking white but laboring as a white man would not ordinarily do, is an anomaly – hence the name. *White-nayga* (*-negro*) is a simple recognition of the paradox.

Backra (sometimes *buckra*) is the widespread African loanword meaning 'white man.' In Jamaica its connotations are favorable

³ See F. G. Cassidy, Iteration as a Word-Forming Device in Jamaican Folk Speech, *American Speech*, 32 (1957), 49–53.

⁴ *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, Dublin (Luke White) 1793, Vol. II, p. 73.

⁵ Sometimes extended to an albino as a semi-euphemism. Conversely, names for albinos may be used to insult light-colored non-albinos.

more often than not; hence, used of an albino, it is ironic. The sense is probably made clearer by *Backra-betters*, as if the albino, really a Negro, were pretending to the better of, or better than, a white man.

Because the albino's complexion is only *whitish*, or off-white, the word *gray* is used in the names *Gray-bo*, *Gray-boo*, *Gray-bowza*, *Gray-Jane*, and *Gray-Joe*. The last two use typifying personal names, female and male. The first and second are either variants of one word or may be from different words: *-bo* as a suffix is frequently used to mean 'person'; *-boo* may represent [bubu], an insect or worm or something ugly and even unnatural – compare the cockroach above. (On the other hand, these may be reduced from *Eboe*.) What *-bowza* may represent is uncertain: possibly some kind of extension of these, or it may represent Spanish *bozal*, a Negro recently come from Africa, who speaks Spanish badly, or a stupid or torpid person.⁶ There may even be a connection with U. S. *bozo*, the source of which is itself a matter of debate. The 'gray' list includes yet other terms: *Gray-nayga* (like *White-nayga*); and *Gray-owl*, *Gray-puss*, which we return to below. Probably best classed with these is *Minnie-blister*, used of an albino woman. The first part appears to be another typifying name, while *blister* suggests the look of the skin.

Other color terms are made by direct metaphor: *Copper-color*, *Side-pork*, *Ripe-banana*, and *Mango-color*; these are self-explanatory. *Speckle* and *Freckle-nature* are descriptive, suggesting the mottled effect that the albino's skin often gives. In the latter *-nature* stands for *-natured*, which in Jamaican Creole means virtually the same as English *-kind* or *-sort*. Last of the color-terms are *Norwegian* and *German*. These probably refer not to skin alone but to hair and eyes as well. Since Norwegian ships come to Jamaica (especially to Kingston) this name may be due to direct observation. Germans are directly known from the German settlement of Seaford Town, in the Parish of Westmoreland. Both of these names are jocularly ironic.

Next to skin color it is the eyes of the albino, lacking normal pigment in the iris and generally squinting in bright light, that finds expression in these names. A direct one is *Glimpse*, which

⁶ Santamaría, *Diccionario General de Americanismos*, Mexico City (Robredo), 1942, 3 vols.

suggests the partial sight, the squint. Another reported as *payrin* but recorded as [pɛr'i:n], perhaps represents *peering* and if so belongs here. Others that involve comparison are *Puss-eye* and *Patu-eye* (abbreviated simply to *Patu*). *Puss* is the normal Jamaican word for *cat*; the *patu* is a kind of nightjar (*Nyctibius griseus*), proverbially ugly, gray, with staring or (by day) tight-shut eyes. The word *patu* is a loan from Twi, in which language it means *owl*. In Jamaica it is often mistaken for an owl; thus this name is associated with another group, *Screech-owl* and its variants: [ˈkɾɪfʲəʊl, ˈkɾɪʃəʊl, kwɪˈtʃəʊl, kwɪˈsɛl], etc., all applied to the albino. The mongoose, an animal which, since its introduction to Jamaica in 1872 has won a definite place in the folklore, is said to have 'red' eyes – actually they are a clear reddish-brown. This or the russet color of its fur, or perhaps both, account for the name *Mongoose* given to the albino. *Gray-puss* and *Gray-owl* are obvious compounds.

The name *Cedar* appears to allude indirectly to an old proverb: "Cheap cherry bear cedar." The Jamaican cedar (*Cedrela odorata*) bears a fruit which resembles the local plum but is quite inedible; thus it is deceptive and disappointing. By parallel this name therefore reflects unfavorably on the derivation of the albino.

Probably the most widely used name is *Quaw* with its variants [ˈkwaːɪ, kwaːb, kwraː], etc. This is one of the African "day-names" (cf. Fante *kwàw*) given to a boy born on the fifth day,⁷ but, as with all the day-names, it became in Jamaica a derogatory term implying that the person bearing it was still African, hence coarse, uncivilized, illiterate, stupid. In application to the albino it brings with it this burden of condemnation.

A number of other names are conferred on miscellaneous grounds. *Fleak* is obviously a variant of *freak*, the l/r substitution being quite common in the folk speech. *Dundus* [ˈdʌndʌs], though used very frequently as a term of endearment to children or sweethearts, is also used of the albino; but whether this is a homonym of different origin, or perhaps an extension of the same word, it is impossible to be sure. We may have here an example of "switching," in which a word, through irony or otherwise, acquires quite opposite meanings. Jamaicans who know only one meaning for *dundus* are shocked to hear (and may deny) that it has the other; those who know both

⁷ See David DeCamp, *African Day-Names in Jamaica*, forthcoming.

meanings do not seem to be disturbed by the coincidence. In any case, *dundus* as a term of affection is probably a nasalized variant of [dʊdʊs], which most likely represents French *doux-doux*, feminine *doux-douce* (compare the Créoles of the French West Indies), but possibly also Twi *adɔde*, a pet, darling. The other word – or other sense – means a freak or subnormal person generally and an albino specifically; no separate source for it has been found, though it could well be African. Variants of this are [dʊndʒʊ] and [dʊnz-dap].

Mudu [mʊdʊ] and *Muduk* [mʊdʊk] are almost certainly African loans: compare Hausa *muduk'uk'i*, a person of unprepossessing appearance. So perhaps is [ʊŋ'gʊrʊ], though the only possible source found, Twi *gurów*, to break down, to languish, is not very convincing. It is notable that these last words, *Dundus*, *Mudu(k)*, and *Ungguru* have a succession of syllables with the vowel [ʊ]. It may well be that such a succession carries phonosymbolically unfavorable suggestions in Jamaican Creole.⁸

The last two names are of very uncertain source or connections. *Habo* ['habe] perhaps ends with *-bo* (see *Gray-bo* above), or it may be a form of *Eboe*. *Hinigran* [hinɪ'gran] is quite obscure; conceivably it could represent *ignorant* or *immigrant*, but these are no more than guesses.

The attitude toward the albino is generally unfavorable, ranging from discomfort at his appearance to revulsion. His abnormality is thought of in the same terms as some degrading disease, and this, among the Jamaican folk, usually carries overtones of fear at the evil forces working behind. In the case of the albino, in a land where the worlds of the black man and the white are typically in contrast, the paradox of the Negro who is not black yet whose color does not make him a white man either, is not lost. Indeed, as we have seen, this sport of nature rouses the sense of irony to express itself in dozens of reproachful or harshly jocular nicknames.

⁸ See, in *D. J. E.*, such words as *bubu*, *grugru*, *guzu*, *juju*, *mumu*, *nuku*, *susu*, *tutu*.