

# Free argumentative essay on the meaning of dark skin in relation to definitions o...

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



Having dark skin does not necessarily mean that a person is from Africa or even that they consider themselves 'black' at all, and in fact the entire question of what 'dark', 'black', 'brown' or 'white' really means has varied a great deal throughout history and different societies. None of the Aborigines of Australia or the Maori of New Zealand were considered Africans, although they were certainly treated as second-class citizens, much as the Native Americans were. In India, the dark-skinned people of the Deccan Plateau and the Untouchables and Dalit were not Africans, although they also suffered considerable discrimination. In Brazil and many other Latin American nations, there are vast numbers of mixed-race, pardo (brown) and mulatto people who are considered neither black nor white. In the Philippines, the original Negrito population was not African either, but related to the Aborigines and Polynesians, although they too were treated as inferiors and outcasts. South Africa had four official racial categories under the apartheid regime, white, black, Asian and Colored, with the latter having slightly more rights and privileges than other nonwhites at the time. As in many countries where racial mixing had gone on, the degree of 'darkness' was defined by appearance, not only skin color but hair texture, noses and lips. In the Middle East, the West Indies, Asia, and the Americas, virtually anywhere racial mixing has occurred, there are often very fluid boundaries between lightness and darkness that are not precisely defined, although in most times and places in history, being defined as dark was definitely a social, political and economic disadvantage.

In the U. S., the laws from the time of slavery stated that anyone who was 25% black or with one black grandparent would be considered black, and

unlike Latin America it generally did not have an intermediate caste system for those who were mixed white-Indian (mestizo) or mixed African-white (mulatto). All of those who were less than 100% white by appearance or ancestry were invariably at the lowest rung of the racist caste system, while those few who were light enough often tried to 'pass' into white society. Thomas Jefferson and other slaveholders had very light slaves, for example, perhaps even their own children and relatives, who were light enough to pass and therefore no longer be considered 'black' by white society. This situation was even more common in other societies where the laws and customs about racial mixing were not so strict, and many intermediate groups came into being that were neither black nor white. In Brazil in the 19th Century, half the population consisted of black slaves while whites were a minority, but now blacks are a very small percentage while there is a large group of mixed "pardo" (brown) persons who do not consider themselves black or African. As in other parts of Latin America, many who consider themselves white have at least some black ancestry, yet whites are still the wealthiest group and the poor are overwhelming black or mixed race. All of them speak the same Portuguese language, though, and identify with the Latin culture, as do all the descendants of the European immigrants who arrived in Brazil.

I once saw a documentary about the Dominican Republic, which struck me as very odd because many people who would be defined as 'black' in the United States did not consider themselves to be black or African at all. Instead, they were described as Hispanic or Latino, and do not identify with African or slave culture at all. Even though the country is right next door to

Haiti, where the slaves rebelled against their French masters and finally wiped them out, they do not see that as part of their own history. All of this happened in the period from 1791-1804, when Haiti became the first independent black republic in the world and the first country ever to be established by freed slaves. There all the whites were dead or in exile, but the mulatto and half-caste people took over the government, and are still considered the privileged elite class today, politically, socially and economically. In South Africa or other parts of Latin America, this mixed or mulatto group—neither African nor white—would have occupied an intermediate caste in the racial hierarchy, but in Haiti after 1804 no one was left above them. Even so, the ordinary people of Haiti still identify with their African heritage, including in language, culture and religion, but almost none of this exists in the Dominican Republic. Its history and culture took a very different course so that virtually no one there considers themselves black or African, regardless of their appearance.

I recall a trip to El Salvador that I never forget, since in the capital of San Salvador there were many people who I would call 'white' or European, particularly the middle and upper classes, who walked around the expensive shops very well-dressed, as if they were in Paris or London. In the countryside, there were many darker-skinned people who were not black or African, but of Native American ancestry. They would not have been considered as blacks in the U. S., but they were definitely treated as inferiors and menials by the lighter-skinned Salvadorans. This was quite obvious to anyone who could see, such as the time when a darker-skinned man with 'Indian' features helped me find a place where I could get a cash advance on

my credit card. The white manager of this place was very friendly, smiley and courteous to me, but he treated the darker-skinned man as if he did not exist at all. I could tell that the darker man was also nervous and frightened to even be around someone like this, and he just stood with his back to the wall with his eyes down and said nothing. I often say that as a tourist in Latin America, how someone lighter in appearance did have a certain level of 'privilege' that those defined as darker did not have.

On the Atlantic Coast of Guatemala and other Central American countries, there are many people who are black yet speak Spanish and have the same Latino or Hispanic culture as those of the Pacific Coast, yet I saw that they were badly discriminated against and treated like outcasts or servants. I saw some blatant examples of these that one would not even see today in the Southern regions of the U. S., such as light-skinned Hispanic tourists offering money to dark-skinned children to dance for them—almost as if they expected them to tap dance because they all must have rhythm. Another dark-skinned man who spoke a mixture of English and Spanish told me that it was very difficult for anyone who was too dark to find employment. In the past, many of them had worked on the banana plantations for the old United Fruit Company, which were absolutely huge and stretched for miles in all directions. I saw that much of the labor that was once done by hand is now done by machines, and there were no longer any dark-skinned people employed there. Originally, the U. S. owners had brought them from Jamaica and other islands in the West Indies to do this type of work because they spoke English and white North Americans were used to directing the labor of blacks. This was the same reason so many blacks from the Caribbean were

brought in to build the Panama Canal, and about 10, 000 of them died during construction. Today, though, many of these people's descendants in Central America are a poor and unemployed underclass.

Out in Asia, there are also many darker-skinned people who do not regard themselves as black or African. In Australia, the Aborigines are very dark, related to the original Polynesian inhabitants of all these Pacific islands, and they generally received very poor treatment from the white colonists. As with the Native Americans, the Aborigines lost much of their land, culture, language and way of life, while their children were taken away from training in white boarding schools. Like the American Indians, they became an impoverished underclass suffering from the effects of decades of discrimination and racism that has only begun to change in recent times. In the Philippines, the native Negritos (little black) people were not African either, but they had a similar fate. Thanks to centuries of Spanish and American colonialism, this country was also indoctrinated with the same type of European racial attitudes, which regarded darker people as lazy, dirty, ugly and inferior. Even today, these attitudes are commonplace and the stores in the Philippines have many aisles full of products designed to lighten the skin. When I was visiting there I often heard racist attitudes as bad as anything the most prejudiced white Americans might say, such as even if a dark person dresses well as seems educated they still never look as well as lighter-skinned persons. I have seen considerable racism against dark-skinned people in Korea and Japan, whose populations think they are light-skinned or even 'white' people, and look down on all outsiders. They tend to treat the darker peoples from South Asia very harshly, like the Filipinos and

Indonesians sent there to do all the dirty, difficult and dangerous jobs. Of course, during World War II, the Japanese treatment of these darker peoples in occupied countries was especially brutal.

In India and Pakistan, the Deccan people of the south, including the Dalit and Untouchables are also very dark-skinned, but are not called Africans. They were the original inhabitants of this region when they were conquered and enslaved by 'Aryan' invaders from the north. Even today, this caste system exists, with the darker-skinned people treated as outcasts and relegated to the poorest-paid and most menial work. Gandhi of course called them children of God and after independence India passed laws to guarantee them equal citizenship, but in culture and social norms the caste system as endured just the same. In the Middle East, I have seen these darker-skinned people also used in the most menial type of work, such as construction and road building where they labor all day in the desert sun for very little money. They are treated little better than slave labor by the wealthy Arabs who employ them, and basically have no civil or political rights. Occasionally, I have also seen black "Arabs" in the Middle East as well, who dress in the same type of clothing as lighter-skinned people, speak Arabic and follow the Muslim religion. I did not see that they were treated as outcasts or inferiors in any way, at least nowhere near to the same degree as these darker, foreign workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other countries. Nor were they even identified as blacks or Africans, but as Arabs, although in most places they did not seem to be a very large groups compared to those with lighter skins.

In this world, the ideas and attitudes about color are often quite different

from those in the United States, where the descendants of blacks or Africans have always been the largest identifiable minority group, at least until very recent times. In Asia, South and Latin America, there are many intermediate and mixed groups who have darker skin but do not identify themselves as black or Africans. In Australia, India and the Philippines, there are also darker-skinned people who are descended from the original inhabitants of these areas, but were never thought of as Africans. All over the world there are many people with darker skin and features who simply identify with the local language and culture and never think of themselves as blacks or Africans. Indeed, any connections their ancestors might have had with Africa in the past are highly tenuous and long-forgotten, since they and their descendants have been assimilated into the local culture, language and religion. Even if they would be called 'black' in the U. S. that is not how they identify themselves, although it is also true that darker-skinned people do continue to suffer from poverty, prejudice and discrimination in many parts of the world.