

Racism in the Early Saṅgha and the First Black Monk

In reading Bhante's essay on Mahākappina, I was struck by the descriptions, not of Mahākappina so much, but by those of Lakunṭaka Bhaddiya ("Bhaddiya the Dwarf") as "ugly (*dubbaṇṇaṃ*), unsightly (*duddasikaṃ*), deformed (*okoṭimakaṃ*), and despised by the mendicants (*bhikkhūnaṃ paribhūtarūpaṃ*). Bhante is absolutely right in highlighting connections, for it is indeed "one of the few suttas that has a similar form" to SN 21.11; however, there's a further parallelism here between 21.11 and 21.6 of which I would like to make note.

The description of Lakunṭaka Bhaddiya's appearance is noteworthy in its similarity to traditional descriptions of the appearance of famed storyteller, Aesop. For example, writing in the 17th century, British author, printer, bookseller, and proto-historiographer, Nathaniel Crouch had this to say about the satirizing fabulist: "What Aesop was by birth, authors don't agree, but that he was of a mean condition, and his person deformed to the highest degree, is what all affirm: he was flat-nos'd, hunch-back'd, bloober-lipp'd, jolt-headed: his body crooked all over, big belly'd, badger-legg'd, and of a swarthy complexion." And, just as SN 21:6 describes, despite his outward unseemliness, Bhaddiya was "powerful and mighty," and that there was no worthy attainment which he had not attained. Crouch continues in regard to Aesop, stating "the excellency and beauty of his mind made a sufficient atonement for the outward appearance of his person." It seems that, similar to Bhaddiya's having been recognized by the Buddha (AN 1.194) and esteemed by many (Thag 7.2) for the "sweetness of his voice," Aesop was likewise possessed of inner qualities which served to override his physical appearance. But perhaps there is a bit more to their shared "ugliness" than is immediately apparent.

Dubbaṇṇa, the Pāli word rendered "ugly" above, means, literally, "bad color." And, for the Sanskrit *durvarṇa*, Monier-Williams further gives "impurity," "of a bad colour or species or class," and "inferior." As such, it is an unmistakable reference to the color-based, *cātuvāṇṇa* social order instituted by the Brahmins. Regarding how the Brahmins defined *vāṇṇa*, themselves, and their own *vāṇṇa* in contradistinction to the *vāṇṇa* of others, we read:

"Brahmans alone constitute the supreme *vāṇṇa*, all other *vāṇṇa* are inferior; only brahmans make up the white *vāṇṇa*, all other *vāṇṇa* are black; brahmans alone can be pure, not non-brahmans; brahmans alone are the sons of Brahmā, born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, formed by Brahmā, heirs to Brahmā." (MN 84)

It may be reasonably concluded, then, that *dubbaṇṇa* connotes something along the lines of the *kaṇhābhijātiyo* ("the swarthy low-born" [cf. *Mettā Sutta*, Piya Tan]) of AN 7.62.

Duddasikaṃ is a reference to the ugliness of his (facial) features. And, in almost word-for-word repetition of Crouch's portrait of Aesop, among the meanings and/or possible translations for *okoṭimaka*, SC lists "dwarfed;" having "the head squashed in or down," resulting in a "compressed and bulging out stature;" "fat-" or "pot-bellied;" "hunchback;" "misshapen;" and "deformed." Thus, it seems, much like Aesop, what was disagreeable about Bhaddiya's appearance was his skin color, facial features, and body type. But, since it was said above that *dubbaṇṇa*, in particular, as it references *vāṇṇa*, implies a connection with the race-based, caste system of the ancient Brahmins, we would be remiss to not

inquire into the racial and social dimensions of this depiction of Lakuṅṭaka Bhaddiya, so similar to that of Aesop, which has come down to us.

Regarding Aesop, legends holds that he was a slave in Greece who lived circa sixth-century B.C. The appellation "Aesop" was probably less a personal name as it was an identifier based on his appearance which came from without: "Aesop" is simply a corruption of "Aethiop" (Ethiop), the common Greek term for Black and Brown people originating in sub-Saharan Africa. The description, then, of a sub-Saharan African as "flat-nos'd," "bloober-lipp'd," and "swarthy" seems a matter of course.

Unfortunately, that Aesop's Greek (presumably Caucasian) masters, while history testifies to the high esteem in which he was held by them on account of his wit and wisdom, should, at the same time, consider him "deformed to the highest degree" based, ostensibly, on the basis of his racial characteristics lying outside of the Greek aesthetic is similarly a matter of course. And it is a view which would assuredly be further reinforced by the disdain of being perceived as a member of a conquered and enslaved race. In Aesop's case, beauty, race, and social status almost imperceptibly merge in a way which should be very familiar to students of Indian social history. But what is the significance of all this for Lakuṅṭaka Bhaddiya?

Race, racial prestige, racial superiority, and racial purity, we have seen, were all very much a part of the aesthetic underpinning the Brahmin concepts of *vaṇṇa*, *suvaṇṇa*, and *dubbaṇṇa*. So it is safe to say that, for Lakuṅṭaka Bhaddiya, too, as for Aesop, the division of the *suvaṇṇa* from the *dubbaṇṇa* ran along racial lines which were designated as "white" and "black," respectively; and the contemptuous attitudes and abuse with which Bhaddiya had to contend are what we would today refer to as racism and racial discrimination.

It is not difficult to see how various linguistic terms relating to a person's perceived beauty were direct expressions of racial phenotype (skin color, facial features, etc.). And, of course, under the *cātuvāṇṇa* system, racial phenotype simultaneously bespoke social status. Thus, although the suttas certainly reject racial privilege, racial discrimination, and racial paternalism, such terms expressed therein (even by the Buddha himself) only reflect the inevitable consequence of the *cātuvāṇṇa* system as it asserted itself during the time of the Buddha.

Taking into consideration all of the many Brahmin religious and philosophical terms and concepts which the Buddha appropriated, deconstructed, and invested with new meaning, the fact that he sought not to re-define *vaṇṇa* should be a cause for reflection. For, while the suttas show him to have repeatedly attacked abuses under the *cātuvāṇṇa* system (in particular, the hegemony of the Brahmins), he is not seen to have challenged the definition *vaṇṇa* itself—at least, not the color/race-based, beauty standards which constitute the root concept of *vaṇṇa*. Rather, the Buddha seems concerned with how *vaṇṇa* often causes others to lose sight of more substantive virtues on the one hand, and to unskillfully discriminate against such non-substantive “virtues” on the other: again it is not an empirical question pointing to the validity of race or beauty, but the abusive behaviors arising out of unskillful views of *vaṇṇa*, which are problematic.

The point is to illustrate how the Buddha's method of dealing with the institutionalized racism of his time--not by questioning the idea of race as substantive beauty and/or virtue, but by addressing the abuses which the concept of race often engenders--seems to fly so completely in the face of how we tend to respond to it in our own time. Are there things we can learn from the Buddha in this regard? Could it be that we are naive in pursuing the idealistic goal of ushering in a "post-racial" world where physical differences do not exist? Perhaps it's fine to acknowledge differences within groups and within individuals. And, perhaps, where those differences are noted and spoken of, we can come to know them only as they are.

