

Barack Obama Goes Beyond Race

It seems Barack Obama's election has required many people to re-evaluate their definition of race and what it means to be African-American. In Barack Obama's case, because his Father is African and his Mother is American you would think he would fit neatly into this category. However, many people think this term only applies to someone who is descended from slaves and has inherited the unique historical and cultural attributes of this group.

Some have preferred to fall back on the term Black, sometimes noting that they have never been to Africa. In truth, DNA research has proven that all humans have descended from Africa and that race is just a social construct. This has caused a dilemma about what to call African immigrants and their offspring. To make matters worse, what happens when you introduce other races into the equation?

As opposed to some other mixed race countries, America has socially and legally divided people with those with one drop of African ancestry as Colored, Negro, Black and now African-American, while others are White, Hispanic, Asian or American Indian. For some people like golf star Tiger Woods, who considers himself "Cablinasian," because of his Caucasian, Black, Indian and Asian ancestry, these categories collide. Many people are championing the term bi-racial in order to more accurately describe their identity.

I also had to struggle with these categories. Like Obama, my father came from Africa (Ethiopia) to study in America and left me here with my Irish-American mother. Unlike Obama, whose mother kept him with the help of her parents; my mother had no support and met discrimination so she gave me up for adoption. I ended up being raised in an African-American foster home. I seemed to be dark enough and culturally fluent to pass as Black, but my straight hair was interpreted in a variety of ways both physically and culturally.

Throughout my life people have told me I am everything from Puerto Rican to Egyptian. It was not until I had the opportunity to find my birth Mother and her family in California that led me to find my Father and his family in Ethiopia that I was to discover who I really am.

It wasn't so much about the cultural grounding that knowing my roots afforded me, but how I was able to now relate to those around me. Having broadened my perspective on race and culture, I have become more sensitive to the complicated yet human personal stories of people I meet everyday. I had to go beyond the superficial stereotypes projected in society to discover the individual qualities that makes us who we really are.

Are we ready to rid ourselves of these constricting racial categories and progress to a colorblind society, or should we celebrate our differences in a multicultural world? I think it is very valuable to know your historical and cultural ancestry. It can be wonderful to identify and celebrate with

people similar to you. I think it can also be great to appreciate and respect others for their historical and cultural traditions.

Barack Obama has shown us that it is righteous to let people decide how they identify themselves to the world. He has also shown that you can go beyond those categories to intelligently understand the needs and dreams of all people regardless of their color, race, ethnicity, religion, gender or politics. By focusing on core human values as the basis for unity, he has given hope to so many people that we can work together in friendship for a more perfect world.

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