

# **SOCI 422**

# **SOCIETIES AND CULTURES OF AFRICA**

## **SESSION 1 – Peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa: Physical Types**

Lecturer: Dr. K. Akpabli-Honu, Dept. of Sociology  
Contact Information: [kodzovi@ug.edu.gh](mailto:kodzovi@ug.edu.gh)



# **UNIVERSITY OF GHANA**

College of Education

**School of Continuing and Distance Education**

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# Lecture Overview

- Africa has several divisions such as the North, South, East and West. These various parts of the continent have been inhabited by different people. This lecture identifies the various categories of people inhabiting Africa and their physical characteristics.
- Topics to be discussed include:
  - One: The black race of Guinea Coast and the Sudanese zone one time pejoratively referred to as the ‘negro’
  - Two: The Mbuti, Baka, Twa, Aka etc. (derogatorily described as the ‘pygmies’)
  - Three: The Khoikhoi (‘Hottentot’)
  - Four: The San (‘Bushmen’)
  - Five: Caucasoid
  - Six: The Nilotes

# Objectives

By the end of this lecture students should be able to:

- list all categories of people occupying Africa;
- describe the physical characteristics of the people of Africa;
- identify the original ‘homes’ for the various categories of people in Africa

# Reading List

- Ottenberg, S. & P. Ottenberg, (1960) *Cultures and Societies of Africa*, New York: Random House.

# Session One: People of Sub-Saharan Africa: Physical Types : Introduction

- The attempt to classify the African people into categories has never been conclusive;
- Their origins are not known and the relationship among them (the people) is also obscure;
- Measurement of and observation of external bodily features have been abandoned and instead analysis of blood types instituted.
- This new approach of classifying Africans remains suggestive other than conclusive.

# Session One: People of Sub-Saharan Africa: Physical Types

- Earlier classificatory attempts were characterized by inaccuracies and misconceptions since language descriptions were used for racial groupings.
- For example, the word *Bantu* a language grouping was used for a physical type;
- It is difficult classifying Africans because of interbreeding among them;
- At best, visibly observable conspicuous physical differences suggestive of the genetic research on African populations is used for the prevailing paradigm for classification.

# Session One: Physical Types

## Topic One - Guinea Coast and Sudanese Zone

- The people occupying the Guinea Coast of Africa were (for the purpose of reference to history) derogatorily described as the ‘Negro’.
- These people should better be described by the language they spoke; as is the case with some European races known by their language: the French, English, Dutch, Portuguese etc.
- The description given to these people of the Guinea Coast has been outlawed (forbidden) alongside the description ‘oriental’.

# Topic One: The Guinea Coast and the Sudanese Zone

- The people of the Guinea Coast speak several languages but can be referred to as people of the Guinea Coast;
- Herskovits (1955) indicated that they are the classical black race of Africa (classical/true negroid in his own language);
- They are dark in skin colour, hair, and eyes, longheaded, wooly hair, broad flat-nose, everted lips, small finely formed ears, short in stature, slender legs, and powerfully developed torso (trunk).



# Topic One: Guinea Coast and the Sudanese Zone

- Lying north of the Guinea Coast are the Sudanese type believed to be marginal to the ‘Guinea Coasters’.

## Topic Two: The Mbuti, Aka, Twa, Efe etc.

- These people diminutive in height and size;
- These people have been derogatorily described as ‘pygmies’
- Derogatory because the word is ‘pygmy’ describes an animal or a bird smaller than others; it also means a person of no importance or of little skill;
- It is also a Greek word which means fist or measure of length between the elbow and knuckles;
- This is the word used for a member of many groups of very small people living in central Africa.

## Topic Two: The Mbuti, Aka, Twa, Efe etc.

- These people have an average height of 150 cm (4ft 11in);
- Their physical features are similar to those of the ‘Guinea Coasters’;
- The females are characteristically shorter in height than the males;
- Such smallish persons are also found in Australia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Andama Islands, Indonesia, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Bolivia and Brazil.

## Topic Two: The Mbuti, Aka, Twa, Efe etc.

- In the absence of a better term, it is more appropriate to use their ethnicity for them: Mbenga of Cameroon and Gabon, Mbuti of Congo, Twa of Rwanda and Burundi etc.

## Topic Three: The Khoikhoi People

- Pejoratively referred to as the ‘Hottentots, the people call themselves the ‘Khoi-Khoi’ (men of men);
- The derogatory term was used to describe them by the Dutch settlers.
- ‘Hottentot’ is a Dutch word of an onomatopoeia kind to express stammering in reference to the staccato pronunciation and clicks of the Khoisan native language

# Topic Three: The Khoi-Khoi and the San People

- These people are closely related to their neighbours the San also vituperatively referred to as the 'Bushmen';
- They are found in Southwest Africa; Namibia
- The San are short but not as the Mbuti, the Mbenga, and the others; their skin colour is yellow-brown to yellowish and wrinkly;
- Their hair is dark in colour and perppercorn in form;

## Topic Three: The Khoi-Khoi and San People

- They have broad cheekbones, flat noses, and fairly pointed chins;
- They also exhibit steatopygia, a normal condition among them in which the buttocks are enlarged by fatty deposits;
- The Khoi-Khoi are slightly taller and a little bit long-headed;
- They are similar to the San in physical type but they have different cultural orientations.

## Topic Three: The Khoi-Khoi and the San

- The inbreeding between the Dutch settlers in South Africa around the Cape region enable the diminishing characteristics of the Khoi-khoi people;
- There have been intermarriage between the Khoi-Khoi and other Africans producing a mixed physical type.



## Topic Four: The Caucasoid

- This physical type is found in areas such as North Africa and Egypt, south into the desert area and the Sudanic climatic zone;
- Some distinctions can be made between those in the north eastern and north western part of Africa;
- However, they all belong to the Caucasoid subgroup with the shores of the Mediterranean;
- They have brown hair and eyes, the hair ranges from wavy to straight;

# Topic Four: The Caucasoid

- Light olive to dark brown skin colour, fairly thin lips, and high-bridged narrow noses;
- As a result of inter-marriage between the Caucasoid and the rest of the groupings of Africa and the Arab-African contact, there have been intermixture of the Mediterranean Caucasoid and the Black race of Africa in the Sudan, Ethiopia, East Horn; and along the East African Coast;

# Topic Four: The Caucasoid

- The Caucasoid population of Africa bears semblance to those of Europe, and the Near and Middle East.

# Topic Five: The Hamites

- The Hamitic form is expressed in the Nilotes, the people of the Upper Nile, Kenya and Rwanda and Burundi;
- A type of people whose bodily proportions accentuate the vertical axis, slender in build, long narrow face and nose smaller lips, heavily pigmented, wiry and curled type of hair standing off the head;
- Among them are the tallest people of the world.

# Summary

- Though a compact continent, Africa is inhabited by different groups of people;
- Despite the fact that intermarriage among these groups limit the distinguishing features of the people of the various groups, distinctions can still be made out of them due to some unique characteristics of each group;
- The Guinea Coasters derogatorily described as the true 'negro', the diminutive personages such as the Mbuti, Aka, Twa, Mbenga etc., The Khoi-Khoi, the San, the Caucasoid and the Hamitic (Nilotes) all occupy Africa.

# Topic Five: Summary

- All these groups are distinguished by their unique physical characteristics.
- Some of these groups were derogatorily described instead of identifying them with their languages or their home area.

# Sample Questions

- List the various groups of people that inhabit sub-Saharan Africa.
- Describe the distinctive features of the people of Africa.