



AFRICAN ONTOLOGY AND RACISM IN MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S PHILOSOPHY: PANACEA TO THE CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY RACISM IN AFRICA

Valentine Ehichioya Obinyan, Ibrahim Abdullahi

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria.

Email: obinyan.valentine@uniben.edu

Received: 16/02/2026 ; Accepted: 28/06/2026 ; Published: 30/06/2026

Cite As:

Obinyan, V. E. & Abdullahi, I. (2026). *African Ontology and Racism in Martin Luther King Jr.'s Philosophy: Panacea to the Challenges of Contemporary Racism in Africa*. Journal of the University of Burundi – Humanities and Social Sciences Series, 23(1), pp 157-165.
<https://doi.org/10.71105/rub.shs.2026.v23.n1.12>

Abstract

Since the Second World War, racism has been conceptualized as an irrational prejudice according to which other groups are considered inferior on the basis of biological-racial characteristics. However, racism is not a personality disorder but a political, social, and institutional phenomenon expressed in both public and private spheres for exclusive purposes. In African ontology, hierarchy and exclusion are not instrumental paradigms; rather, interconnectedness, community, and holistic understanding of being are emphasized. Yet, with historical ideological constructions and changing economic-political conditions, racism has arisen within African social institutions. This work examines how Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy, grounded in Afro-centric ontological principles, addresses contemporary racism in Africa. Using a qualitative, philosophical analysis of King's texts, the study identifies his "Beloved Community," Six Principles of Nonviolence, and Six Steps for Nonviolent Social Change as instruments for peaceful society. The findings indicate that King's emphasis on Agape love, restorative justice, and community-centrism aligns with African ontology and offers a framework for decolonizing knowledge and promoting inclusivity. The study concludes that embracing King's Afro-centric ontological instruments can work toward a more equitable society that values diversity and social justice.

Keywords: *African ontology, racism, Beloved Community, nonviolence, Afro-centrism*

ONTOLOGIE AFRICAINE ET RACISME DANS LA PHILOSOPHIE DE MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. : PANACÉE AUX DÉFIS DU RACISME CONTEMPORAIN EN AFRIQUE

Résumé

Depuis la Seconde Guerre mondiale, le racisme est conceptualisé comme un préjugé irrationnel fondé sur une infériorité biologique-raciale présumée. Toutefois, le racisme n'est pas un trouble de la personnalité, mais un phénomène politique, social et institutionnel exprimé dans les sphères publiques et privées à des fins exclusives. Dans l'ontologie africaine, la hiérarchie et l'exclusion ne sont pas des paradigmes instrumentaux ; l'interdépendance, la communauté et la compréhension holistique de l'être y sont au contraire valorisées. Cependant, en raison de constructions idéologiques historiques et de mutations économico-politiques, le racisme est apparu au sein des institutions sociales africaines. Cet article examine comment la philosophie de Martin Luther King Jr., ancrée dans les principes ontologiques afro-centrés, permet de répondre au racisme contemporain en Afrique. À partir d'une analyse qualitative et philosophique des textes de King, l'étude identifie sa « Communauté Bien-Aimée », les Six Principes de la Non-violence et les Six Étapes du Changement Social Non-violent comme des instruments au service d'une société pacifique. Les résultats montrent que l'accent mis par King sur l'amour *agapè*, la justice réparatrice et le communautarisme correspond à l'ontologie africaine et offre un cadre pour décoloniser le savoir et promouvoir l'inclusion. L'article conclut que l'adoption des instruments ontologiques afro-centrés de King peut contribuer à une société plus équitable, respectueuse de la diversité et de la justice sociale.

Mots-clés : *Ontologie africaine, racisme, Communauté Bien-Aimée, non-violence, Afro-centrisme*

Introduction

African ontology fundamentally emphasizes interconnectedness of being, community of being, equity, and holistic understanding of being, which challenges Eurocentric views that have historically been used to justify inequality and racism, such as in Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's "primitive mentality" and Hegel's "Absolute Spirit" theories (Wilson, 1996). By recognizing the value and dignity of African perspectives, a more inclusive understanding of reality emerges that prioritizes diversity and challenges dominant narratives emphasizing class divisions and color differences.

The concepts of race and racism are of relatively recent origin. Although ideas about human differences based on color and phenotypic characteristics occurred in earlier societies (Wood, 1995), the present meaning of "race" only became current toward the end of the eighteenth century following the French and American revolutions. The notion of "race" originated in modern times and changed with the evolution of modern society. As Hannaford (1996) shows, the introduction of this concept constituted the culmination of a complex development in modern thought regarding descent, heredity, and human differences. Before and after the Reformation, explanations of the origin of people in terms of religion, continent, or reason were increasingly displaced by a racial discourse in which anatomy, bloodlines, climate, geographical location, and language were central. The development of the natural sciences and of related principles of categorization demystified the criteria for human conceptualization in many cultural world-views emerging from their ontologies.

Bulmer and Solomos (1999) noted that "race" had three central meanings such as; Humanity is composed of different groups, each with its own common physical characteristics; These groups have different origins; Racial boundaries have cultural and social significance (7) Distinctions between and negative evaluations of phenotypic differences in skin color, hair color, eye shape, and skull shape have long been central to the ideology of racism. These differences were used to explain differences in culture and mental properties. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this mode of thinking was common in the Western

world. It was developed in academia and spread throughout society, used to justify practices such as slavery and colonialism. "Race" was construed as a social fact and thus as an object of scientific inquiry.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the concept of "race" acquired major political significance. "Race" as a dominant ideological concept in Western thought was used not only to explain differences but also to justify inequalities at the political level. The shift to a political implementation of racist doctrines occurred in the 1930s under National Socialism, culminating in genocide during the Second World War. After the Second World War, at the request of UNESCO, social scientists examined the concept of race. In their 1950 declaration, they argued that "race" is less a biological phenomenon than a social myth:

...for all practical social purposes 'race' is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth. The myth of 'race' has created an enormous amount of human and social damage. In recent years it has taken a heavy toll in human lives and caused untold suffering. It still prevents the normal development of millions of human beings and deprives civilization of the effective co-operation of productive minds. The biological differences between ethnic groups should be disregarded from the standpoint of social acceptance and social action. The unity of mankind from both the biological and social viewpoints is the main thing. (UNESCO, 1950, as cited in Montagu, 1963: 172)

"Race" is a social construction invented by people. It is first and foremost a discursive category, "the organizing category of those ways of speaking, systems of representation and social practices which utilize a loose, often unspecified set of differences in physical characteristics--skin color, hair texture, physical and bodily features, and so forth--as symbolic markers in order to differentiate one group socially from another" (Hall, 1992b:298). The UNESCO statement advocated dropping the term "race" and replacing it with "ethnic group." Science abandoned the concept, but racism continued to exist.

While existing scholarship has explored King's theology and civil rights strategy, insufficient attention has been paid to the Afro-centric ontological foundations of his thought. This article addresses that gap. The central research question is: How does African ontology inform Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy on racism, and how can this synthesis provide a framework for addressing contemporary racism in Africa? This study argues that King's "Beloved Community" is an expression of African communalism and that his nonviolent methodology offers a practical application of African ontology. The article proceeds in four parts: 1) conceptualizing contemporary racism, 2) outlining methodology, 3) analyzing Afro-centric foundations in King's theory, and 4) discussing "Humanism beyond racism" in the Beloved Community.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, philosophical research design. It is a literature-based analysis rather than empirical data collection. Primary sources include Martin Luther King Jr.'s published works, sermons, and speeches, particularly; *Stride Toward Freedom* (King, 1958), *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (King, 1967), and *Strength to Love* (King, 1963). Secondary sources comprise scholarly interpretations of African ontology and critical race theory.

The analytical framework is conceptual analysis: key concepts from African ontology—interconnectedness, community-centrism, and holistic understanding—are used as lenses to interpret King's principles of nonviolence. Validity is ensured through triangulation of King's original texts with established scholarship on African philosophy (Miles, 1993; Goldberg, 1993). No ethical concerns arise as the study uses publicly available texts.

Contemporary Forms of Racism

Contemporary forms of racism are often characterized as modern racism or new racism. Martin Barker (1981), in his study of new racism in the United Kingdom, points to two changes in post-war ideological legitimization of racist practices. First, the superiority of one's own culture and nation is no longer emphasized openly; racist practices are now legitimized on the basis of "principal otherness." Second, presumed biological-genetical differences are replaced by differences between cultures or nations, represented as homogenous entities. "Race" is coded as culture or ethnicity. Barker characterizes new racism as pseudo-biological culturalism. In this vision, the building blocks of the nation are not the economy or politics, but human nature. He noted: "It is part of our biology and our instincts to defend our way of life, traditions and customs against outsiders—not because these outsiders are inferior, but because they belong to other cultures" (Barker, 1981: 78).

A shift in racist discourse from phenotypical characteristics to socio-cultural properties has developed since the 1920s. Influenced by the Second World War, this tendency has deepened. Contemporary racism is also characterized as "racism without race." Practices or ideas are characterized as racist if they are "oriented in intention or effect towards the production, reproduction or affirmation of unequal relations" (Wellman, as cited in Miles, 1993: 89). Goldberg (1993) rightly points to the fact that racism is not always about dominance, but more about exclusion: "...exclusion will be racist when the underlying characterization is racialized either explicitly or by being linked to a history of 'racialized' characterization" (102). He further characterized racism as "hybrid," "chameleonic," and "parasitic" on social and theoretic discourse.

A distinction may be made between four important domains in which contemporary racism is conceptualized, produced, and reproduced:

3.1 Elite Racism

Social elites working in politics, media, educational institutions, and welfare institutions pre-formulate racist ideologies, often in hidden terms (Hall, 1991a, p. 80).

3.2 Everyday Racism

The concept of everyday racism explains the integration of racism in everyday situations and practices (Essed, 199:91). Problematization, marginalization, and exclusion are important effects.

3.3 Institutional Racism

Institutional racism pertains to the discriminating effects of institutional rules and procedures that marginalize and exclude people from non-Western groups (Miles, 1993:87). Racism is institutional when practices are institutionalized while the ideology is no longer explicitly articulated.

3.4 Politically Organized Racism

Politically organized racism is the racism of xenophobic, anti-immigrant parties that have developed since the 1980s in several European countries. These right-extremist parties reject the established socio-cultural and socio-political system, appeal to the common sense of ordinary people, are authoritarian, and oppose the integration of immigrant communities by mobilizing xenophobic and racist sentiments.

Afro-Centric Ontological Foundations in Martin Luther King Jr.'s Theory on Racism

Racism has affected societal peace and harmony, instigating a society divided by color, religion, culture, or group. The effects include bloodshed, national policies of exclusivism, inhumanity, family disintegration, youth unrest, corruption, and injustice. These are antithetical to key aspects of African ontology:

- Interconnectedness: Emphasizing relationships between individuals, community, nature, and the spiritual realm.
- Holistic Understanding: Considering the well-being of the whole person and community.
- Community-Centric: Prioritizing the collective good and communal harmony. (Mbiti, 1990:106 Gyekye, 1995:154 and Menkiti, 1984:171)

In King's understanding, the "Triple Evils" of poverty, racism, and militarism are forms of violence that exist in a vicious cycle, resulting in anti-Semitism and modern forms of ethnocentrism and xenophobia such as Islamophobia. They are interrelated and stand as barriers to the "Beloved Community." To work against the Triple Evils, we must develop an Afro-centric ontological nonviolent frame of mind as described in the "Six Principles of Nonviolence" and use the "Kingian" model for social action outlined in the "Six Steps for Nonviolent Social Change."

4.1 Triple Evils and King's Afro-Centric Critique

Poverty — unemployment, homelessness, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy, infant mortality, slums.

King's response reflects the Afro-centric ontological defense against poverty. Interconnectedness in African ontology emphasizes relationships between individuals and community, creating sensitivity to societal needs. King noted:

There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it. The time has come for an all-out war against poverty...The well off and the secure have too often become indifferent and oblivious to the poverty and deprivation in their midst. Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. (King, 1967:26)

Racism — prejudice, apartheid, ethnic conflict, anti-Semitism, sexism, colonialism, homophobia, ageism, discrimination against disabled groups, stereotypes.

From a holistic understanding, the community is seen as one. Every individual takes a community-conscious disposition to ignite familyhood, equality, and consideration of the well-being of all. This encourages value for human life, communal sharing, and patriotic sacrifice. According to King:

Racism is a philosophy based on contempt for life. It is the arrogant assertion that one race is the centre of value and object of devotion, before which other races must kneel in submission. It is the absurd dogma that one race is responsible for all the progress of history and alone can assure the progress of the future. Racism is total estrangement. It separates not only bodies, but minds and spirits. (King, 1967:37)

Militarism— war, imperialism, domestic violence, rape, terrorism, human trafficking, media violence, drugs, child abuse, violent crime.

King's remarks reflect Community-centricity in African ontology, prioritizing collective good and communal harmony as a responsibility of all members to ensure social justice, empathy, and care. He stated:

A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war—'This way of settling differences is not just.' This way of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows...cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defence than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. (King, 1967:49)

4.2 Six Principles of Nonviolence

Fundamental tenets of King's philosophy of nonviolence described in *Stride Toward Freedom* (King, 1958:79-88)

- Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people. It is active nonviolent resistance to evil—aggressive spiritually, mentally, and emotionally.
- Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding. The end result is redemption and reconciliation. The purpose is the creation of the Beloved Community.
- Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not people. Nonviolence recognizes that evildoers are also victims. The nonviolent resister seeks to defeat evil, not people.
- Nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform. Nonviolence accepts suffering without retaliation. Unearned suffering is redemptive.
- Nonviolence chooses love instead of hate. Nonviolence resists violence of the spirit as well as the body. Nonviolent love is spontaneous, unmotivated, unselfish, and creative.
- Nonviolence believes that the universe is on the side of justice. The nonviolent resister has deep faith that justice will eventually win (84-88)

4.3 Six Steps of Nonviolent Social Change

Based on King's nonviolent campaigns:

- Information Gathering: Research all sides of an issue to increase understanding.
- Education: Inform others, including opposition, to minimize misunderstandings.
- Personal Commitment: Affirm faith in nonviolence and prepare to accept suffering if necessary.
- Discussion/Negotiation: Confront the other party with grace, humor, and intelligence. Seek to call forth the good in the opponent.
- Direct Action: When negotiation fails, take actions that impose "creative tension" to create moral pressure.
- Reconciliation: Seek friendship and understanding with the opponent. Nonviolence is directed against evil systems, not persons.
- 5. Humanism Beyond Racism in Martin Luther King Jr.'s Afro-Centric Beloved Community

"The Beloved Community" is a term first coined by philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce, but it was King who popularized it and invested it with deeper meaning rooted in Afro-centric foundations. For King, the Beloved Community was not a utopian goal but a realistic, achievable goal attainable by people committed to and trained in Afro-centric philosophy and methods of nonviolence. King's Beloved Community is an Afro-centric ontological global vision in which all people share in the wealth of the earth. Poverty, hunger, and homelessness will not be tolerated. Racism and all forms of discrimination will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of familyhood. International disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war.

African ontology recognizes that conflict is an inevitable part of human experience but believes conflicts can be resolved peacefully through mutual commitment to nonviolence. Using the Six Principles of Nonviolence and Six Steps to Nonviolent Social Change, no conflict will erupt into violence. Conflicts in the Beloved Community should end with reconciliation of adversaries cooperating in a spirit of friendship, brotherhood, and familyhood, such as *Akugbe* in Esan ontology and *Ujama* in Bantu ontology.

As early as 1956, King spoke of the Beloved Community as the end goal of nonviolent boycotts: "... the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends". (King, 1992:9) King said; "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community. The aftermath of nonviolence is redemption. The aftermath of non-violence is reconciliation" (Rieder, 2008:20). A year later, in; *Stride Toward Freedom*, King emphasized that the ultimate goal is integration—genuine inter-group and inter-personal living. Only through nonviolence galvanized by African ontology of community and human value can this goal be attained.

In his 1963 sermon, *Loving Your Enemies*, published in *Strength to Love*, King addressed the role of unconditional love:

With every ounce of our energy we must continue to rid this nation of the incubus of segregation. But we shall not in the process relinquish our privilege and our obligation to love. While abhorring segregation, we shall love the segregationist. This is the only way to create the beloved community. (King, as cited in Downing, 2006:150)

King distinguished three kinds of love: *eros*, "a sort of aesthetic or romantic love"; *philia*, "affection between friends"; and *Agape*, which he described as "understanding, redeeming goodwill for all," an "overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless and creative" (Ibidem). *Agape* does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people...It begins by loving others for their sakes" and "makes no distinction between a friend and enemy; it is directed toward both...*Agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community.

Conclusion

Consequent on the above, the instrumentality of African ontology, through Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy of nonviolence and the Beloved Community, provides a philosophical framework for examining and understanding the currents and tentacles of contemporary racism in Africa. One major motivation of this study was to demonstrate that African philosophical thought offers practical resources for fostering peaceful coexistence and social justice while crystallizing the danger racism. Hence it emphasized that a valuable principle of African ontology is inalienable justice—justice not for one oppressed group but for all people. This lacking ingredient in present African nations is the reason for contemporary racism.

Anchoring on the fundamental characteristics of African ontology, particularly its emphasis on interconnectedness, communalism, holistic understanding of reality and the inherent dignity of the human person, this study grounded its theoretical framework. With a qualitative philosophical methodology based on critical conceptual and textual analysis, the study examined King's major writings as well as scholarship on African philosophy and critical race theory to investigate interweaves between African ontological principles and King's nonviolence violence theory.

The analysis demonstrates that King's concepts of the Beloved Community, the Triple Evils, the Six Principles of Nonviolence, and the Six Steps of Nonviolent Social Change embody core African ontological values of communal solidarity, restorative justice, reconciliation, and Agape love. These philosophical resources challenge both historical and contemporary forms of racism by replacing exclusion, domination, and violence with human dignity, social inclusion, and peaceful conflict transformation. The findings therefore establish that King's philosophy represents a practical application of African ontology capable of addressing racism within contemporary African societies.

It has been observed that the decolonization of knowledge, strengthening of inclusive governance, promotion of intercultural dialogue, and cultivation of national unity in ethnically and religiously diverse African states has been the effort of recent Afro-centric moments; this study contributes socio-politically to this radical effort. Pragmatically, it recommends the education of African Ontological values in a wider space especially its integration into educational curricula, peace building initiatives, public policy, civic education, and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms, family based orientations, electoral processes and constitutions as it will strengthen democratic participation, reduce ethnic and religious intolerance, and foster societies characterized by justice, reconciliation, and sustainable peace. Ultimately, the study argues that the convergence of African ontology and Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy offers a compelling ethical and philosophical foundation for building a more just, inclusive, and humane Africa.

From the aforementioned, it is crystal clear that in the context of racism, this study emphasizes that African ontology offers a powerful framework for decolonizing knowledge by challenging dominant Eurocentric narratives and promoting diverse perspectives. It re-humanizes education by fostering systems that value African histories, cultures, and knowledge. Most importantly, its objective is to promote inclusivity by encouraging mutual respect and understanding across cultures in Africa and beyond.

Author's Contribution

Valentine Ehichioya Obinyan: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The author declares no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

AI tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript for language polishing, formatting to APA 7th style, and translation of the title, abstract, and keywords into French. All intellectual content, analysis, and scholarly interpretations are the author's own, and the author has reviewed and edited all AI-generated material.

References

- Barker, M. (1981). *The new racism*. Junction Books.
- Bulmer, M., & Solomos, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Racism*. Oxford University Press.
- Clayborne, C. (1992). *The autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Warner Books.
- Downing, F. L. (2006). *To See the Promised Land: The Faith Pilgrimage of Luther. Macom, Ga: Mercer University Press*
- Essed, P. (1991). *Understanding everyday racism*. Sage.
- Freedman, R. (2006). *Freedom walkers: The story of the Montgomery bus boycott*. Holiday House.

- Goldberg, D. T. (1993). *Racist culture, philosophy and the politics of meaning*. Blackwell.
- Hall, S. (1991a). *Nieuwe ethniciteiten [New ethnicities]*. In S. Hall, *Het minimale zelf en andere opstellen [The minimal self and other essays]* (pp. 171–180). SUA.
- Hall, S. (1992b). The question of cultural identity. In S. Hall, D. Held, & T. McGrew (Eds.), *Modernity and its futures* (pp. 273–326). Polity Press.
- Hannaford, I. (1996). *Race: The History of the Idea in the West*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kwame Gyekye. (1995). *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme* (Rev. ed.). Temple University Press.
- King, M. L. Jr. (1958). *Stride toward freedom: The Montgomery story*. Harper.
- King, M. L. Jr. (1963). *Strength to love*. Harper & Row.
- King, M. L. Jr. (1967). *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community?* Beacon Press.
- Mbiti, John S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.
- Menkiti, Ifeanyi A. (1984). In R. A. Wright (Ed.), *African philosophy: An introduction*. University Press of America
- Miles, R. (1993b). *Racism after 'race relations'*. Routledge.
- Montagu, A. (Ed.). (1963). *Statement on race*. Oxford University Press.
- Rieder, J. (2008). *The word of the Lord is upon me: The righteous performance of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Harvard University Press.
- Shipman, P. (1994). *The evolution of racism, human differences and the use and abuse of science*. Simon and Schuster.
- UNESCO. (1950). *Statement on race by social scientists*. In A. Montagu (Ed.), *Statement on race* (p. 172). Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, C. A. (1996). *Racism: From slavery to advanced capitalism*. Sage Publications
- Wood, P. H. (1995). 'If toads could speak': How the myth of race took hold and flourished in the minds of Europe's Renaissance colonisers. In B. P. Bowser (Ed.), *Racism and anti-racism in world perspective* (pp. 27–45). Sage Publications