

Greetings from Ghana #28 Shaded Meanings

I was going through my files to make certain I had a copy of each of these newsletters on a thumb drive and learned that I had skipped a number (28). If we were going in order this one should be #38, but this topic could have been written anywhere, so for now. . . Welcome to #28. I will get back to the order of things in a bit.

There are colloquialisms we use without thinking that here make absolutely no sense. If I say, "Give me a ballpark figure," for example, I get asked, "What is a ballpark?" It is hard to "nickel and dime someone to death" when there are no nickles or dimes around. "Gesundheit" (although I am not sure that qualifies as a colloquialism) raises concerns that I may have just cussed.

I came up with a question a few weeks back and was not sure how to ask for the answer. In America, people have since the Industrial Revolution valued getting a tan. Prior to the masses leaving farms to work in factories people valued white skin because it meant you were not a common laborer. Once factory and indoor work became the norm having a tan showed that you had leisure time and tans became a sign of status.

I never really considered it before. No reason to, I guess. I always thought that black people were just that, black. Or at least a darker skin by nature and that was it. Whereas my skin could darken or lighten depending on exposure to the sun, I always thought that black people stayed whatever skintone they had. Then one day a friend of mine here remarked that since he had been working outside all summer he was getting darker.

Before I even thought about it I remarked, "How can you get darker? You're black." He smiled and looked at me as if I was an idiot. "Everyone gets darker in the sun," he explained to me as if I had missed something very basic in my education. This realization brought up the question I was stymied on how to ask. "If a white person gets darker from being in the sun, we call it 'getting tan.' But if a black person gets tan they would actually be getting lighter. So what do they call it when a dark-skinned person gets darker?"

When I explained the quandary I was having to my friend he said, "We call it, 'getting dark'."

I am in the process of learning Akan or Twi (chee) as they call it. In a recent lesson the instructor brought up skin tone and how it is addressed. Considering the exposure that Ghanaians have had historically – which I believe you could say was limited in the overall scope of things – it is not really a surprise that for lighter skinned people the word used is *buroni*.

American, European, Mexican, Latin American = *buroni*. It translates as "white." In reality it means anyone not African. When I was stationed in England, after being there a while, I could look at someone and tell if they were American or English by the color of their skin. In Asia,

people can tell the difference between a Thai or a Laotian or a Vietnamese. (I can't but I can understand how that is possible).

In Twi, there are six words for African complexion: *Tumm* is very dark (something the instructor, who I consider about the color of charcoal, has said few people are). Again it is a matter of opinion, but I would consider there being a lot of people who are *tumm*.. *Tum Tum* is "regular" dark skin. The next complexion is *Megyegyeye* (meh-je-je) or simply *Gyegyeye* (je-je). It means, "to become a little light in color."

Meye Kɔkɔɔ (me-yah ko-koah) means fair skinned or "not dark." *Kɔɔ* (koah) is what they call someone whose skin they consider very fair or extremely fair. and *Ofiri* (Oh-fear-ee) is albino.

And if you are not one of those, you are *buroni*. Or sometimes you might hear "bibini," (Think bikini without the "k").

It makes sense when you think about it. The words of a language reflect the exposure of that group of people with their world. To us, dark skinned people are "African Americans" even if they are from Jamaica. Our language limits us. Here, regardless of where you are from, if you are not *kɔɔ* you are *bibini* or *buroni*.

Although to be completely honest, I rarely here *buroni* or *bibini*. Most Ghanaians assume someone of my skin tone does not speak Twi and the common greeting I get is, "Hey, white man!"