

CAPITALIZING THE WORD "NEGRO."

(By William Pickens for The Associated Negro Press.)

It was a custom growing out of American slavery to write the word Negro with a small "n" (negro.) That custom had at least a semblance of reason in slavery days, but even that semblance has passed, as we shall explain.

In some of the very old English books, books beyond the influence of the customs of slavery, the word Negro was capitalized ages ago.

Of course the word was originally a common adjective in Spanish, derived from the word "niger," Latin adjective meaning Black. But the word is in its present use a noun, designating a particular race or group. When a noun denotes the name of a particular person, group or institution, it is a proper noun, and should be capitalized. To say that the word Negro should not be capitalized simply because it is derived from a common adjective which was used as a substantive to denote at first "black people," is as erroneous as to say that when a man's name is Baker, Shoemaker or Smith, the name should be written with lower case letters (baker, shoemaker, or smith) simply because those words in fact were derived from the common nouns, and denoted in their beginning the trade or vocation of people. Any common noun becomes a proper noun when used to denote a particular person or thing, or a particular group of persons or things.— "Sirius" and "Dog Star."

It is manifestly indefensible when an American newspaper puts it this way in a news column: "The inhabitants of this town are 5,000 Caucasians, 33 Mongolians, 3 Indians, and 652 negroes." If the word Negro is a common noun, it is by no means co-ordinate with "Caucasian, Mongolian and Indian."

But, it might be said, we would also write white people and Mongolians" and not capitalize "white." Yes, and that is because "white" is not exactly co-ordinate with "Mongolian." "White" is simply a descriptive adjective,—not a racial name, but an inaccurate racial description. There may be some brown "white" people, and there are certainly white "Mongolians." And in the accepted meaning of "Negro" in America, there are certainly black, brown, and white "Negroes." The term "Negro" is no longer "negro" meaning black, but is now a proper noun designating a group of people, a race. We do not, of course, capitalize "blacks," nor should we capitalize "colored." These descriptives,— "white, black, colored,"—are co-ordinates, simply descriptive adjectives,—more or less ineptly applied, of course. But while "white" is co-ordinate with "black or colored or brown or yellow," still "white" is not co-ordinate with Negro. The word Caucasian is co-ordinate with the word Negro in the word Mongolian.

We sometimes use other words more narrowly designatory of race; Celtic, Gallic, Slav,—and we capitalize these words, as we should.

The word Negro was capitalized before slavery, but it looked inconsistent for a slave-owner to advertise for sale: "six plows, 3 mules, 2 cows, 6 bales of cotton and 10 Negroes," capitalizing only the last. It looked bad to capitalize the name of a mere chattel. That was the original motive, almost instinctively expressed, behind the custom that made out Negro to be a common noun.

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