

HERITAGE PROGRAM
COMMUNITY ACTION INSTITUTE
HARYOU-ACT, Inc.
181 WEST 135TH STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10030

ABSTRACT

of Address on "The Significance of Ethnic Identification
for Americans of African Descent."

delivered by, KEITH E. BAIRD

AFT National Conference, Washington, D. C., December 9, 1966

The meaning of a word or expression is what it does, that is, the effect which it produces in its hearers. For example, 'black power', 'black nationalism' are expressions which produce responses of a quality and intensity which are directly or indirectly related to the signification attached to these expressions by the auditor. Thus members of an oppressed group who band together for self-protection, or the protection of fellow group members, against the tyrannical inflictions of the dominating group may at a certain remove in time or in a certain view of circumstances either be hailed as heroes or denounced as potential disturbers of the peace. A name can determine the nature of the response given to it by virtue of the associations which its use conjures up. The "Deacons for Defense" in Louisiana and elsewhere might perhaps have obtained a quicker comprehension of their purpose in some quarters at least if they had chosen the name "Black Maccabees."

By 'ethnic identification' is meant the nomenclature applied to a human group members of which share a specific common historical, cultural, social, often besides biological, sometimes as well linguistic identity. The term 'race' is often used to describe such a group. "Race", however is a rather imprecise term as at present commonly used, since it can refer to the so-called 'races' of mankind (a dangerous myth, to use F.M. Ashley Montagu's phrase) where the emphasis is mainly on physical differences; moreover the same term is also used to refer to a group sharing an historical, cultural and/or linguistic identity, e.g. Jewish 'race' Spanish 'race'. This latter use of the word 'race' is often, and perhaps less misleadingly, substituted for by the term "people." In the following discussion 'ethnic identification' will refer to the name borne by a people, such name being based on historical and cultural associations rather than on phenotypical and thus relatively superficial and insignificant considerations.

The militant efforts being made by Americans of African descent require attention in respect of every fact or factor which confers the status of humanity on an individual - the right and power to obtain and enjoy the physical necessities of life as well as the psychological. Positive and enhancing self-regard is a psychological necessity of life, and the name borne by an