## Issues of race in Elizabethan England

The presence of Africans in early modern England has remained a subject in its infant stage of studies, suggests drama historian, Gustav Ungere (2008). As late as the 1980s, historians clung to the view that there is no way of establishing how many coloured persons had been taken to or had settled in early modern England, he states. Some evidence is gradually emerging from historical research; Ungere used Spanish documents to assist his discussion.

African Black History in Elizabethan England

One reason why the black populations of London are difficult to establish is lack of public record. With no tax on the import of slaves, such as operated in other European countries, and anyway a government monopoly on the trade of Africans from Guinea as house servants, it was 1588 before attempts were made to formalise their presence.

Most black servants were slaves, but some were freed men, the majority from Guinea, but a few Moors from North Africa, so Ungere's researches show. It was the Moors that gave rise to anxiety, perhaps because many had strong ties with Spain, with which Elizabeth was at war, but also because Moors were Muslims.

In what inventories of servants remain from grand households of the time, no discrimination is made between servants by colour, except where they are pictorially represented. Queen Elizabeth I may have instigated the change in that.

In 1596, Queen Elizabeth issued an "open letter" to the Lord Mayor of London, announcing that "there are of late divers blackmoores brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there are allready here to manie," and ordering that they be deported from the country, documents in the National Archive show. At the time the letter had little effect, but Elizabeth's skilled use of rhetoric may be considered to have stirred a sense of racist differentiation and to have begun the development of a vocabulary of discrimination.

## Islamic Arabic inhabitants of North Africa

The question of Othello's exact race is open to some debate. The word Moor now refers to the Islamic Arabic inhabitants of North Africa who conquered Spain in the eighth century, but the term was used rather broadly in the period and was sometimes applied to Africans from other regions. George Abbott, for example, in his A Brief Description of the Whole World of 1599, made distinctions between "blackish Moors" and "black Negroes"; a 1600 translation of John Leo's The History and Description of Africa distinguishes "white or tawny Moors" of the Mediterranean coast of Africa from the "Negroes or black Moors" of the south. Othello's darkness or blackness is alluded to many times in the play, but Shakespeare and other Elizabethans frequently described brunette or darker than average Europeans as black. The opposition of black and white imagery that runs throughout Othello is certainly a marker of difference between Othello and his European peers, but the difference is never quite so racially specific as a modern reader might imagine it to be.

The Moors were the medieval Muslim inhabitants of the Maghreb, Iberian Peninsula, Sicily, and Malta. The term "Moors" has also been used in Europe in a broader, somewhat derogatory sense to refer to Muslims, especially those of Arab or Berber descent, whether living in Spain or North Africa. The Moors came from the North African country of Morocco and crossed the Strait of Gibraltar to reach the Iberian Peninsula. The Moors were initially of Arab and Berber descent at the time of the Umayyad conquest of Hispania in the early 8th century. Later the term covered people of mixed ancestry, and Iberian Christian converts to Islam (the Arabs called the latter Muwalladun or Muladi).[7][8]

Europeans have classified a number of associated ethnic groups as "Moors," and terms for this are found in their languages. In the modern Iberian Peninsula, "Moor" is sometimes colloquially used for any person from North Africa, but some people consider this use of the term pejorative. In Spanish the term is "moro", and in Portugues it is "mouro".