

## 'Does You Mean 'Dis?' Race and the Marketing of Rowntrees Cocoa in the Twentieth Century.

Emma Robertson, Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

*The Rowntree firm, famous for brands such as Kit Kat and Smarties, as well as for its Quaker heritage, was founded in York, England, in 1862. This paper reflects upon the ways in which the company employed racial stereotypes in marketing campaigns of the twentieth century, focusing on two black cartoon characters created in the late 1940s to promote Rowntrees Cocoa. There has been relatively little analysis of the representation of black people in British advertising in this period. I therefore explore a selection of images of these figures – of the boy, 'Little Coco', and the girl, 'Honeybunch' – to reveal how they were used to create particular meanings about chocolate consumption. Far from being a recognition of the African labour crucial to chocolate production, or a reflection of the increasing presence of black people within Britain, these characters functioned within contemporary white western understandings of 'blackness'.*

*In 1946 and 1947 respectively, two new cartoon characters – 'Little Coco' and 'Honeybunch' – were created to sell Rowntrees Cocoa in the UK. They were both children, a common enough feature of many chocolate advertisements since the nineteenth century. However, in a departure from previous Rowntree marketing campaigns, these children were black: Honeybunch was the girl character, whilst 'Little Coco' was a young boy.<sup>1</sup> So why did Rowntrees and their advertising agents (J. Walter Thompson) choose to adopt black characters? And what ideologies were encoded in their representation? This paper will consider how 'race' was constructed within Rowntree chocolate advertising and to what effects. I will draw on a number of advertising campaigns from the 1930s to the 1970s, using visual material from posters and newspapers alongside written sources from the company archives such as market research data. This marketing*

*history will be situated within the social, cultural and economic contexts of chocolate production and consumption, focusing particularly on the relationship of Rowntrees to British imperialism and the end of Empire.*

*The Rowntree firm, famous for brands such as Kit Kat and Smarties, was founded in York, England, in 1862 by the Quaker industrialist Henry Isaac Rowntree. Along with Cadburys and Frys, it became one of the major confectionery producers in the UK during the twentieth century and was to develop a global market for its products. Moreover, the Rowntree family (in particular Joseph and his son Benjamin Seebohm) have been renowned both for their advanced policies of industrial welfare and for their wider philanthropic work. They left behind a legacy of charitable institutions with an impact far beyond the city of York. In spite of their reputation as 'enlightened' entrepreneurs, the Quaker chocolate manufacturers were key players in an industry which depended on the economic exploitation of colonial and former colonial peoples, including the cocoa farmers of West Africa. With a colonial dynamic very much part of the production process, how should we interpret the marketing of chocolate through the use of black characters?*

*The use of black people in advertising has a long history, as Jan Pieterse demonstrates in his important study, *White on Black*. Pieterse observes how products such as coffee and cocoa, made widely available through the use of slave labour, often used images of black people to enhance their luxury status: 'A whiff of luxury and indulgence, a luxuriousness to which black slave labour used to be the hidden flip side, still clings to these products' (1992, 193). With specific reference to the politics of chocolate marketing in France, Susan J. Terrio has also highlighted the use of black figures. She clearly connects the use of racialised characters to the construction of chocolate as an exotic commodity in France: 'Both the product and the race are marked primarily by their spatial, temporal, and cultural distance from Europe. The cultivation of this distance has always been a strategic component in the creation of demand for chocolate' (Terrio 2000, 249). This kind of exoticism has certainly been drawn upon in chocolate marketing within Britain. However, the use of black figures appears to have been both less common in Britain than in France and, at least in twentieth-century advertising, more complex in the*

<sup>1</sup> Jan Pieterse has observed how ageism and racism may go hand in hand (1992, 171). Black people were perceived to be childlike and therefore appeared frequently as children in media representations. This was also seen as a less threatening version of blackness. The addition of the diminutive 'Little' to Coco's name is part of this tradition. The name 'Honeybunch', meanwhile, is a sugary term of endearment, rather than a real name.

construction of boundaries between white/black, coloniser/colonised. Cocoa, like other products from the colonies, was encoded with racialised meanings in the specific context of British imperialism.

There has been relatively little historical analysis of the use of images of black people in British advertising, particularly for the twentieth century after 1914. According to Anandi Ramamurthy, after about 1910, even though chocolate manufacturers were buying large amounts of cocoa from West Africa, 'Most of the images which predominate ... are those of sugary-sweet white boys and girls.' (2003, 91)<sup>2</sup> Rowntrees certainly used 'whiteness' to promote their products, as I will demonstrate in my paper. The avuncular 'Mr York', for example, was used from the 1920s to promote a variety of chocolate bars. His non-threatening white masculinity allowed him to interact with, and hopefully appeal to, white female consumers. Consumption, like the production process at the Rowntree factory, was being supervised by an apparently benevolent paternalism. At the other extreme were the Cocoa Nibs: a girl and boy who just loved Rowntrees Cocoa. These healthy, white children were the new generation of Britons being brought up on Rowntree products. They signalled the ways in which Rowntrees, like many other firms at the time, were drawing upon and manipulating discourses of health, race and nation to market their products.

The main body of my paper will be concerned with 'Little Coco', 'Honeybunch' and the myriad of racial stereotypes who often accompanied them in their adventures. I will explore a selection of images of the two central characters in detail, looking at the ways in which they were used to create particular meanings about chocolate consumption. This will include a study of their speech and of their interactions with white characters. In addition, I will draw upon other instances of the 'exotic other' in Rowntree advertising: for example, the depiction of cannibals being tamed by drinking chocolate. By essentially converting the cannibals, the power of Rowntrees Cocoa as a 'civilising' force is stressed.

I conclude the paper by reflecting upon the ways in which Rowntrees employed racial stereotypes to create brand identities. Their depiction of black characters, far from being a recognition of African labour, or a reflection of the increasing presence of black people within the metropole, worked within contemporary white western understandings of 'blackness'. Honeybunch and Coco were part of cultural traditions such as minstrelsy which

were still very popular in Britain in the postwar period. Rowntree adverts, even in representing black characters, assumed and evoked a world of white consumers in which the black producers of cocoa beans and the black consumers of chocolate within Britain had no place.

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## REFERENCES

- Pieterse, Jan Nederveen. 1992. *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Ramamurthy, Anandi. 2003. *Imperial Persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British Advertising*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Terrio, Susan J. 2000. *Crafting the Culture and History of French Chocolate*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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<sup>2</sup> Ramamurthy does not highlight the irony of her metaphor of 'sugary' sweetness in relation to white children. Sugar was added to cocoa thanks to slave labour on the plantations of the British Empire. Like milk, it was believed to make the bitter cocoa more palatable.