

Racism in Africa: The Whites Are Not to Blame

¹Kehinde Olufemi Ogunyemi, Ph.D and ²Abiodun Emmanuel Bada

¹Department of Arts Education, Adekunle Ajasin University, PMB 001, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria.

kehinde.ogunyemi@aaau.edu.ng

²Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education, University of Abuja, Nigeria
badaemmy33@gmail.com

Abstract

Interestingly, despite the adoption of the convention committed to the elimination all forms of racial discrimination in 1965 by the International Community, no country can still claim to be free of racism and stigma it brings. This article looks through the problem of diversity in conceptual axes of racism and discrimination. The work encourages a shift of paradigm from the blame game that Africans play whenever the concept "racism" is mentioned. In this simple way, this work seeks to depart from the original discourse that always views and problematizes African 'racialized' as black and projects a non-colour discrimination. The work answers the question of blackness in and outside Africa. The intention in this work is not to be bogged down by the existence of hate crimes in and outside Africa but to examine critically, meandering the title of literary text of Ola Rotimi, The gods are to Blame, an adaptation of Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus to show how the Whites should not be blamed. This article differs from other critical articles of racism in that it draws antecedents from some racialized Africans in the diaspora. This paper projects a 'new' Africa where citizens would not be ashamed of their history and whatever defines them.

Keywords: Africa, racialized, racial discrimination, racism, social identity

Introduction

This work is modeled after Ola Rotimi's literary piece: The gods are not to Blame. Recently, there has been an international protest against racism fuelled by the killing of George Floyd an unarmed black American by white police officers in the US on the 5th day of May, 2020. Consequent upon this, The "Black Lives Matter" movement was formulated. The movement has received global support among sport personnel with football players and other athletes taking a knee before games. This is further highlighted by the strong condemnation of a group of White football supporters in the English Premier League who flew a banner over the Ethiad stadium with the inscription "White Lives Matter Burnley". Even the football club in question, Burnley Football Club, dissociated themselves from those "overzealous" supporters (Evans, 2020). The protests and agitations spreading across America and some European countries once more, has brought to front pages and the forefronts of our minds ugly truths about the African continent that shouldn't have been forgotten in the first place. But

the question that comes to mind is "are the whites actually culpable? Does racism only exist among the whites? Is the level of racism in Africa, among Africans towards Africans not higher than White induced racism? These are the thoughts that influence this research.

Anytime racism is mentioned, what always comes to mind is the discrimination against the black people. Africans, especially the black race, have consequently been reacting to flurry imaginations that may not perfectly define racism. In this publication, ideas about African racism are explored more fully. There is a large body of literature on the subject and it is not intended here to recapitulate the range of issue canvassed in those literatures. Here, the intention is simply to provide some outlines of what might be a set of important questions that arise from any discussion about Racism in and towards Africa where strive to survive the stifling suffocations of some essence of freedom and withdrawal of the sense of truth and knowledge. To begin with, the disparity between different definitions and conceptions of racism is not to be underestimated.

Demystifying the Concept of Racism

Racism is often considered as the ultimate violent act a person can commit towards another individual of another race. Racism is any action or attitude, consciously or unconsciously, that subordinates an individual or group based on skin colour or race (<http://academic.udayton.edu/race/01race/race08.htm>). It is present in the workplace, in education, in health care and in the courts. It is imbued in how majorities see and treat ethnic minorities, immigrants and asylum-seekers. According to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, racism is defined as "the assumption that psycho-cultural traits and capacities are determined by biological race and that races differ decisively from one another which is usually coupled with a belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race and its right to domination over others." Although, this definition is useful in demonstrating the dynamics of domination involved in racism, it has failed to specify behaviors or actions considered as racism. Consequently, Olagbaju and Ogunyemi (2021) define racism as a form of prejudice borne out of the belief that a particular race possesses certain qualities, characteristics or abilities which distinguishes it as inferior to other or superior to another. Similarly, Giddens (cited in van Dijk, 1993) states that "racism means falsely attributing inherited characteristics of personality or behavior to individuals of a particular physical appearance. Hence, a racist is someone who believes that a biological explanation can be given for characteristics of superiority or inferiority supposedly possessed by people of a given physical stock" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 170).

Defining racism without Alderfer and Ridley is like running with our eyes closed. Alderfer (1994) clearly states that there are a set of interdependent meanings for racism which include: 1) recurrent behavioral patterns with intellectual justifications about why one racial group is superior to another; 2) members of one racial group with more power than another group using that power to demean, subvert, or destroy members of another group; 3) individuals who are viewed as character logically bigoted people and collective entities that reproduce racist practices regardless of who holds key positions; 4) subtle forms that include racial jokes and unexamined

assumptions and heinous actions that involve assaulting and killing people based upon their racial identity; 5) and conscious expression (Alderfer, 1994, p. 217).

Looking critically into the assertions above, the percentage of the discriminated may not necessary count. It is sometime the minority. In actual sense, racism functions as a bait to exploit and control the masses. Racial concern thus functions as a product that is sold to the "ignorant masses", both socially and psychologically. In the last seven decades, the African community has become increasingly sensitive and aware of the issue of human rights. The need for ethical characters is now openly acknowledged literally by all of us. Despite this knowledge, some Africans still feel unsafe before their fellow countrymen. The reason for this is not farfetched. Many African cultures have always had a rich indigenous set of human rights practices, based on notions like family, community, religion and doing 'good' to others. Where they exist, these local notions of human rights, has been replaced by Western-centered concepts of individualism thereby leading to discrimination.

Racism: A Contemporary Term in Africa

Most African traditional societies have been well aware of the idea of wrongdoing and the need to sanction it. For instance, Sharia Law has become a way of maintaining peace and order in the Northern part of Nigeria. Where the main difference exists with the Western model is in the central role played by the community rather than individuals in many African societies. These place individual rights in a subordinate position with respect to community rights, and allow individual rights only if compatible and not conflicting with community rights. Moreover, the distinction between civil and criminal liability is non-existent in many African legal cultures compared to most White countries.

How then did we get to this point? In contemporary Africa, States were arbitrarily carved up and baptised as nations with borders which in fact violated African culture, ethnicities and of course histories. We cannot construct political orders in the neo-colonial states with no respect for the cultures, histories and ethnic formations on the ground, without running into

problems of discrimination. The state structures definitely, would become sources of disorder and strive and allow rival elites to use ethno-social constituencies to contend for power to dominate others.

A universal human rights era in which we now live gives us the necessary values and means to work to end such inequalities and the prejudices and attitudes that sustain them. We should understand that all African countries interact with one another, and most “developing nations do not have to sustain unequal relations with larger powers through all kinds of interventions, or unequal treatises.

Systemic Racism, Colour Privilege, and Legacies of Slavery

Why is blackness so closely associated with criminality in the American mind? Why has identifying, much less uprooting, invidious racial discrimination by police, prosecutors, jurors, and judges proven to be so difficult? We may therefore attempt to shift our readers' attention from the notion that “if there were no Negroes, there could be no Negro problem,” to realizing how numerous economic mechanisms rely upon the existence of the color line. Oliver (2003) concludes through studies that Black men were misidentified by all participants in his study as violent criminals. Wright (2004) highlights African blackness as operating through discursive spaces and hegemonic discourses which inscribe blackness in contradiction to whiteness. Fanon (2008) associates Black Africans with the margins of society within the context of power relations inherent in white-dominated western societies. From all indications, black is socio-politically relegated.

Furthering, we stress that certain people essentially depend upon the existence of racial division as a self-contained economic tribe. Although there seems to be divergence in the interest of the White and Africa, it appears that the Americans were aware of the difficult consequences that directly or overtly segregating African/American might have even before the killing of Floyd. Many have raised their voices against it.

Social Identity and Nigerian Perception about races

Those aspects of society that overtly and covertly attribute value and normality to white people and Whiteness, and devalue, stereotype, and

label Black People as “other,” different, less than, or render them invisible or evil should be given an urgent and critical attention. Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo (2017) submit that the word 'black' is often used with racial colouration to describe a category of people either assigned 'blackness' due to their phenotype or connections with Africa with a shared diversity of black experiences and black subjectivities. This has indeed gone beyond individual perception but a societal consideration among Africans and in Africa. Beyond highlighting the incidence of racism abroad, it is also pertinent to explore racism among Africans living in Africa. For instance, in Nigeria, there are established cases of discrimination against people from other ethnic backgrounds. Ogunyemi and Bada (2020) point out that people of a particular ethnic group have certain derogatory words they use to tacitly insult people from other ethnic groups. For instance, the Yoruba people in the South-West Nigeria call their countrymen from the North “Mola” a derogatory use of the word Mallam while Nigerians from the North and the East call the Yoruba speaking people of the South-West “Nggati ngbati” a derogatory description of how Yorubas speak. Also many Nigerians refer to expatriates from China as “Chinko” which is a derogatory description of their appearance. From time immemorial, the relations amongst the ethnic nationalities that constitute Nigeria have weighed more on competition and rivalry than cooperation leading to discrimination and racism.

Regardless of the fact that today, we have romanced with the white men, have embraced different social changes from them, and in a bid to be accepted by them, we have bathed and clothed ourselves with their second-hand clothes of racism. We have discarded our languages, and learnt their language and use the so-called language in a more derogative manner for ourselves without understanding the implications. For instance when a white man in the United State of America or United Kingdom describes a Nigerian living abroad as “that black man”, it's usually considered a racist gesture! The question is if a friend or colleague describes another colleague as "that black man" here in Nigeria, would such a man be offended or consider the statement racist? The answer is probably no. The lead author of this article who is a dark-skinned Nigerian has often been referred to/described as “omo dudu” (meaning the black boy) by friends, colleagues and family members. In fact, as a young

secondary school boy, he was nicknamed and fondly called “Duduyemi” (which means the black colour suits me). In the real sense, the usage of the word “black” becomes a racial micro-aggression in some parts of the world because some people have conditioned their minds to associate the word with negative connotation.

Here in Nigeria, we casually call ourselves some funny names without picking offence e.g. “were” (mad man), “?b?” (monkey), etc. This is very common among youths. Also there are some Yoruba (Yoruba is the language spoken in the South-Western part of Nigeria) idioms that compare some specific characters to animals without anyone getting offended e.g. calling someone *inàkí* (gorilla) in Yoruba culture implies that the person is powerful and fearless, calling a woman “*elede*” (a pig) may imply that the woman is extremely fertile in terms of making babies. Also, the Yoruba culture is renowned for its use of panegyrics to extol to virtues of important sets of people. One of such group of people is the twins considered to be special children. In the twins' panegyric that is as old as the Yoruba race, twins are described thus: “*Ejire ara Isokun, omo edun gbalaja ori igi*” meaning “Twins from the Isokun tribe, descendants of the colobus monkey residing on tree tops”. The use of this panegyric has never generated a negative reaction from the society or the group of people in question (note that the lead author is a twin from the Yoruba race). If Africans see these as normal and cultural, why do they pick offense when such words are used by the whites? Could it be a sign of inferiority complex? Have we not, all in the name of resisting racism, discarded our indigenous knowledge for western knowledge?

It is worth pointing out that, despite the prevalence and general acceptance, there are others who do not agree to indigenous people being described as “black,” particularly in official communication. Who are we to blame? Therefore, it comes as no surprise that organizations and individuals with seemingly conflicting and contradictory interests join forces to protest against black discrimination while they still ignorantly segregate either socially or regionally. Unfortunately, many independent African countries including Nigeria have not been truly independent after they gained their independence as a result of neocolonialists' interests in their formal colonies. Our principal contention that black embodiment imposes a burden that those with black phenotype

cannot escape is informed by Austin's (2004) view that there is a “burden of being black.” How then shall we blame the white when colonial experiences of most African countries have refused to go after many decades since the colonial masters left?

Identity Question in the Face of Oppression in Nigeria

Whether we are aware of it or not, we are all assigned multiple social identities. Usually, the term social identity is referred to as a set of features and traits which characterizes a person in a society. The notion of personal identity as relative to social groups is indispensable to the discussion of Nigerian social differences, especially against the backdrop of oppression as any form of discrimination is dependent on the existence of perceived differences. These differences are traceable to political and ethnic difference in Nigeria where some groups struggle for acquaintance and social identity in the face of discrimination. With the salient belief system that within groups in Nigeria, there are hierarchy_ social status with dominant and non-dominant groups, the consciousness of belonging to a socially dominant in-group has a stabilizing or even improving effect on a person's concept of identity. This implies that insecurity about group membership can have quite the opposite effect. A person of the “non-dominant group can experience oppression in the form of limitation, disadvantages or disapproval. An instance is the political structure of Nigeria with the dominance of the northerners and relegation of the southerners. This has made many southerners changed identity in the place of relevance, especially politically. Many southerners have taken the names belonging to major ethnic groups for the purpose of political acquaintance and fame. Like all subjugated people of a particular standpoint, this experience fosters in us a sharpness and awareness of conditions and interpretations regarding the dynamics of living as a minority in Nigeria. One may then posit here that racial concerns and oppression through self-identity functions as a product that is sold to the ignorant masses, both readily and profitably. This is because in Nigeria, appetites for wealth and a pursuit of political power emerge as the main motifs in human misbehavior. How then should the White be blamed? So, in Carbado (2007) tone, we have become “more racially aware and less racially intact.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing, one could argue that the negative feeling of being black, of being marked and cast in shadow, is experienced by African blacks both in Africa and in Diaspora. This has gone far beyond imperial and colonial subjects. It is not about the question of what enables a black immigrant to settle into the American or European polity without continually experiencing rejection. George Floyd's case and relative incidents proposed consideration of "return" as the only recourse when the inexcusable strangle of anti-black racism became unbearable but has the "return" been healthy for African who were considered barbaric for their inability to travel out? The superiority of the black "Returnees" is worth questioning even in African society. Quoting from the Floyd last words, "I CAN'T BREATHE", one could ask if some privileged Africans are allowing others to breathe with their actions and inactions. In all, this work serves a gentle reminder that racism is very much alive and growing stronger among the black. In that wise, the white should not be blamed. The "Black" needs to recognize the existence of in-house racism. We should understand that there is bias in every sector of society in Africa. The celebration of fair or white skin and degrading of black skin is nothing but racism.

The interest of this research is to project a new Africa where citizens would not be ashamed of their history and whatever defines them. Our choice of research and analytic concern therefore does not arise out of naïve curiosity but to have a sociological rationale. It is important that the new generation, from all background, learn and practice non-discrimination. In this regard, we recommend proper education which is the best panacea to tackle racism and discrimination which would in turn build inclusive society. This quality education should introduce younger generation to equality, respect and tolerance regardless of tribes and ethnic affiliations. Schools, ranging from primary to tertiary institution, should incorporate the fight against racism and discrimination, as well as respect for diversity, into their extra-curriculum activities. Non-governmental organizations in Africa need to be more active in raising awareness to combat hate crime and discrimination. Several countries of the world have made efforts in this direction, but more needs to be done in Africa. African should draw

antecedents from Negritude and other Pan-African movements to create the Africa of the dream of our fathers.

References

- Alderfer, C. P. (1994). A white man's perspective on the unconscious processes within black-white relations in the United States. In E. J. Trickett, R. J. Watts, & D. Birman (Eds.), *Human diversity: Perspectives on people in context* (pp. 201–229). Jossey-Bass/Wiley.
- Austin, G. (2004). The burden of being Black. *Delta Winds: A Magazine of Student Essays*, 17, 10-13.
- Carbado, D. W. (2007). How I became a Black American. Race, racism and the law (Website). Retrieved from <http://racism.org/index.php/racial-groups-2/296-afam04-01>
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, White masks*. London, England: Pluto Press. <http://academic.udayton.edu/race/01race/race08.htm>
- Mapedzahma, V. & Kwansah-Aidoo, K. (2017) *Blackness as Burden? The Lived Experience of Black Africans in Australia*. Sage Pub.
- Merriam Webster's New International Dictionary
- Ogunyemi, K. O. & Bada, A. E. (2020) Nigerian Languages, Ethnicity and Formal Education. *Studies in Literature and Language* 20(3) 22-27.
- Olagbaju, O. O. & Ogunyemi, K. O. (2021) Subtle Racism in English Language: A Socio-Semiotic Analysis of Black-Prefixed English Lexicons. *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 8(2) 84-93.
- Oliver, W. (2003). *The structural cultural perspective: A theory of Black male violence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Paixao, A. J. (2019). The international community and international system 1925-2019. Luanda-Angola
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). *Elite discourse and Racism*. Sage publication, Inc.
- Wright, M. M. (2004). *Becoming Black: Creating identity in the African diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.