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The War in Ukraine and its Stark Reminder of Racism: African Students Experience of Racism

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Abstract: Racism is not a natural event; it is a social construct. Racism continues to remain one of the existential threats to human society. It is not that most of the people do not know the sources, the perpetrators of racism or its effects they do, yet the problem still persists. Racism is based on the accident of colour, and it is used to categorize human beings along racial lines in terms of superiority or inferiority. Racism is a powerful tool in the hands of its practitioners that historically has and continues to cause inhumane sufferings and afflict pain, and to discriminate others. The recent racial discrimination of some African students trying to flee the current conflict in Ukraine is a stark reminder that racism still exists, and is no respecter of the essence of human beings, human dignity, equality or rights. Racism can be eliminated and become non-existent. The aim of this paper is to look into some of the ways in which racism can be eliminated.

Keywords: Racism, African students, Ukraine, Social construct.

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INTRODUCTION

Racism is an unfortunate social creation which has turned into endemic global pandemic. The recent discrimination of black students of African descent in the current conflict-ridden Ukraine is inhumane. It is a stark reminder of the existential reality of racism. It is well documented that some African students while trying to flee from the war-torn Ukraine faced some challenges, and the most outstanding challenge was their skin colour. As a result of this, as their European counterparts were being rescued, they were left on their own. The rationale that informed this action was nothing else but racism. Two years ago, the world was stunned by the racial instigated death of George Floyd, a black American in the hands of Derek Chauvin, a white police officer. Floyd death drew the world to the reality of racism even in the so-called advanced society. Floyd death and recent racial discrimination of African students in Ukraine are just but, a few indicators of sad reality of racism. In line with this, this paper seeks to affirm the presence of racism and the necessity to eliminate it.

UNDERSTANDING RACE AND RACISM

Race is not natural, it is a social constructed phenomenon, based on fallacious assumptions “that physical differences such as skin colour, hair colour and texture, and facial [or other physical] features are

related to intellectual, moral, or cultural superiority” (Henry & Tator, 2006). Although race is a social constructed phenomenon with no biological basis or rational basis it continues to be depicted in racism and racialization in various political societies (Mah-Vierling, 2019).

By racism we mean a form of discrimination through decisions, policies and practices on consideration of race aimed at subordinating a certain race group and maintaining control over them. Racism is based on fallacious belief in superiority of one’s race over the other(s) based on the accident of colour. Racists erroneously believe that they are biologically or superior than other races or a particular race.

Racism as an unfortunate social reality exists in numerous levels namely, internalized, individual, institutional and structural.

- Internalized racism refers to personal beliefs and biases about the superiority of one’s race and inferiority of the other race(s). To the racists, it is manifested as internalized racial superiority whereas to the victims of racism, as internalized oppression.
- Individual racism (also called inter-personal racism) occurs between individuals in their interactions. Individual racism is often manifested in various actions such as hatred, bias, physical attack, social media attack, *et cetera*.

- Institutional racism is found within institutions policies, working environment, practices, and inequitable opportunities that produce racially unequal results. Here the racists use the power of the institution to reinforce racism.
- Structural racism, social structures are organized in such a way that they promote racism, make racism possible and appear to be normal.

All these four levels depict how racism is exercised and felt. Racism in itself brings about categorization between an 'in-group' and an 'out-group.' An 'in-group' here is seen as people belonging from the same race and an 'out-group' those of the other race. The categorization between an 'in-group' and 'out-group' in the racial context is usually based in differences in skin colour, eye-type, hair colour, language, ethnic group and origin, *et cetera*.

The Historical Origins and Development of Racism

Historically, there was a time when racism was non-existent. Racism is a social construct that emerged in modern period. During the Renaissance period Europeans came into contact with people from Africa, Asia and the Americas whose skin colour was different from theirs (Fredrickson, n.d.). Europeans encounter with people from other races made them to begin making judgments about them. The Bible was used to justify enslavement of Africans by Europeans. The slave traders and slave owners erroneously claimed that Africans were descendants of Noah's cursed son Ham, thus they were meant to serve the other races. This in deed was a wrong interpretation of the Bible, according to the Bible, Noah cursed Canaan Ham's son, and not Ham. This wrong interpretation was only applied in the modern period (from 16th century) onwards, and served as a justification for enslaving Africans and racism.

Later on in the late 17th century laws forbidding marriage between whites and blacks were passed in North America, the offspring of such marriages were discriminated because one of their parent (black) was perceived as inferior (Fredrickson, n.d.).

The racial discourse became also a serious concern in the religious circles. The Catholics and some Protestant Churches debated on the humanity of the Africans and Indians. The crux of the issue being whether both Africans and Indians had souls. The Catholic Church was the first to admit Blacks and Indians had souls, which meant in many Catholic colonies it, was against the law to kill a slave without reason. The Protestant-Calvinist Church wanted to separate and distinguish themselves from Catholicism, and therefore was much slower in recognizing the humanity of Africans and Indians. In this way, religion was used as a means to justify racist divisions, classifying people of color as 'pagan and soulless'.

During the Enlightenment period, there was a shift from Biblical interpretation of race to scientific conception of race. Science was now used to justify racism. Scientists acknowledged the existence of different races, but on a sad note not claimed the white race to be superior to other races (Fredrickson, n.d.). Some of the leading European thinkers like David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Hegel among others supported this fallacious claim. Professor Bethwell A. Ogot opines that the current attitudes regarding race and colour originate from colonization of the non-Europeans by Europeans. Ogot describes the 19th century encounter between Europeans and Africans as an encounter of two races that were technically unequal. The Europeans were technically advanced than Africans, and because of this reason they considered Africans to be inferior (Ogot, 2005). The technical advancement of the Europeans had to do with Industrial Revolution that first occurred in England before spreading to other European countries. European Industrial Revolution was a transition from use of human hands in making goods to use of machines. It also had to do with transition from feudalism and commercial capitalism to industrial capitalism. A factor that gave them an upper hand over Africans leading to discrimination of Africans (on the basis of colour) as Ogot indicates below:

Whichever theory of imperialism we choose to adopt, one point seems clear: colonization process was closely tied up with the development of the economies of European nations from feudalism and commercial capitalism to full-fledged industrial capitalism. Hence, the encounter between the white world which was technically advanced- a world undergoing industrial capitalism, and an African world that was technically backward and where societies existed in the pre-capitalist world. And since social values are closely related to the stage of economic development of a society, the technical superiority of the West engendered among the whites cultural hegemony as a concomitant of imperialism. It is therefore true to say that present attitudes regarding race and colour are rooted in the history of colonization of the non-European World by Europe (Ogot, 2005).

As Professor Ogot rightly indicates above, colonialism in Africa was partly informed and influenced by racism. In the 19th century Europeans began to perceive Africans in the African continent from their cultural assumptions and values. They went on to invent negative propaganda and stereotypes against Africans so as to justify imperialism.

Racism ever since its construction has continued to cause untold sufferings to many people in the world. The world has witnessed and continues to witness atrocities after atrocities related to racism being

meted especially on Africans. In spite of the awareness of evilness of racism, racism is still a reality. Racism is used as tool to oppress, discriminate, victimize, abuse, *et cetera* Africans.

The Nexus between the War in Ukraine and Racism

On 24th February, 2022 Russia invaded its neighboring country Ukraine. Russian invasion attracted unprecedented world attention. Concerns were raised concerning the safety of Ukrainians and foreigners residing in Ukraine. All these concerns were informed by the rationale that war is worse experience, it is an existential threat to humanity. As Russia continued to invade Ukraine thousands of foreign students were stuck in the war-torn country. As various countries tried to evacuate their citizens, some of their citizens especially, Arab, Indian and African students reportedly experienced racism (Armangue, 2022). They experienced racial discrimination, abuse, humiliation, prejudices, *et cetera* from Ukrainian police and security personnel as they attempted to flee the country.

It is well documented that African students in their attempt to flee were blocked from boarding trains and buses. The social media is awash with videos showing Africans being treated as second-class citizens by blocked from boarding trains and buses, as well as entering some of the countries that share a border with Ukraine. This is something that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) acknowledged (Temple-Olaiya, 2022).

Although, Africans were not parties and are not parties in the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine the experience of racism in Ukraine was unfortunate. The experience of racism did not stop within Ukraine it extended up to its borders. It is noted that Africans were racially discriminated by being denied entrance or kept waiting for long before being granted allowed to enter in Poland, Romania and Belarus (Temple-Olaiya, 2022). All these acts which were racially informed endangered their lives. Upon entering these countries, they continued to face difficulties because of their race.

To compound the unfortunate condition of Africans at this time, some European politicians used the anti-migration laws to make it difficult for non-Europeans refugees to be allowed into their countries while allowing only Ukrainians (Cénat *et al.*, 2022). War is a traumatic experience, it was a double traumatic experience for Africans to experience war and at the same time to experience racism.

The unfortunate conflict between Russia and Ukraine has helped to expose the existence of racism in the world. It is a sad reality that racism is still with us, it is also sad that African students experienced racism from Ukrainian police and security personnel, from

some of the countries bordering Ukraine, and ironically from their fellow refugees, the Ukrainians.

Ways to Solve Racism

Racism is a global pandemic. The damage that racism has brought to the world and continues to do so, cannot be ignored. Cognizant of the fact that there are existing strategies to end racism. We would like to assert that racism being a social construct can be deconstructed. Racism can be eliminated. Some of the ways in which the problem of racism can be eliminated are (but not limited to):

- Critically questioning the essence of racism in human society, its source, context, assumptions and effects.
- Creating awareness about racism. Knowledge has power to liberate those who dwell in the cave of racism. The starting point of the fight against racism begins with being well informed. It is through this that people realize that racism is not only a social construct, it is also evil.
- Listening empathetically to some of the victims of racism, apart from being therapeutic to the victim, is an eye-opener to the listeners who come to understand the evilness of racism, and wanting to eliminate it.
- Discouraging and refusing to be a participant in racial stereotypical jokes and talks.
- Learning about other races culture is helpful in understanding and appreciating other races.
- Law and policies should be put in place to punish the racists, and also to promote zero-tolerance on racism.
- Being advocates of anti-racism.
- Avoiding racial discrimination by recognizing the fact that we are all human beings, with equal human dignity and equal human rights.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that there are various ways to combat the problem racism. However, one challenge that stands out from these various ways is that racism still exists. Its perpetrators appear to have normalized racism at individual level and social level. It is our opinion that a lot still needs to be done to arrest the situation once and for all. We recognize the fact that many studies have been conducted on racism, but at the bottom-line racism still remains unsolved. The roots of racism need to be uprooted and done away with.

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