

GIMPA LAW & ETHICS POLICY PAPER

ETHNOCENTRISM, XENOPHOBIA AND RACISM: SAME DIFFERENCE?

Executive Summary

On Tuesday, 30th June 2020, a Special Webinar on the theme: ‘*Ethnocentrism, Xenophobia and Racism: Same Difference?*’, was organized by the ACLE. The session, held via Zoom, was moderated by Nana Yaa Mensah, Supervising Editor, Asaase Radio (99.5 MHz) & Co-host, Asaase Breakfast Show. The panelists were Professor Emerita Takyiwa Manuh, Emerita Professor of African Studies, University of Ghana and Former Director, Social Development Policy Division, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa; Professor ‘Dejo Olowu, Professor of Law, Walter Sisulu University, South Africa; and Professor Anthony E. Cook, Professor of Law, Georgetown Law School, United States of America.

Recent happenings around the world, instigated by the murder of George Floyd, an African-American male by a white police officer in Minneapolis in the United States of America, has brought back to the fore conversations about racism, xenophobia and ethnocentrism. These vices are the outcome of political, economic and cultural constructs that trace back to colonialism, imperialism and slavery, against the backdrop of white supremacy and unbridled capitalism.

The impact of these vices are tangible in the abhorrent inequalities that exist between black and white communities in America, the economic inequalities between Africa and other continents, inferiority and division within the global black community generally, the false sense of nationalism that has fueled conflicts in Africa and other forms of segregation that stall regional integration and globalization.

Notwithstanding the complicated and multilayered nature of the problems, there is the need to facilitate conversations in consolidating and unifying our efforts to combat these issues on a political, economic and cultural levels, in ways that transcend physical boundaries.



I. Introduction

The murder of George Floyd, amidst the global pandemic, has led to mass protests and civil unrest in the United States of America and other parts of the world. This has led to a renaissance of some sort regarding issues involving systemic racism under the popular theme ‘Black lives matter’. The sight of a white man kneeling defiantly on the neck of a black man desperately clinging to his life for eight minutes and forty-six seconds may very well prove to be a watershed moment in the modern history of the United States of America and the world in general. The battle cry in the days and weeks following this incident has invited conversations about racism. However, it has been observed that ethnocentrism and xenophobia are closely related issues that are prevalent in different degrees in Africa, for instance. The evil trinity of ethnocentrism, xenophobia and racism cannot however be extricated from the historical narratives of domination, hostility and exploitation instigated by colonialism, imperialism and slavery. It is apparent that Africa has not fully recovered from the impact of the artificial borders imposed by the colonialists, which has created a very false sense of

nationalism and influenced questions of identity and belonging. Black America is equally yet to overcome the challenges posed by the Willie Lynch divide and conquer strategy and Jim Crow laws, which were employed to subjugate black people. This apparent sacrifice of black people on the altar of expediency, was to enable the consolidation of the power of white people and the concomitant construction of a power structure that will enable the latter perpetually dominate black people and other races. This policy paper discusses the nuances and underlying causes of the deep-rooted evil trinity of ethnocentrism, xenophobia and racism, their impact on society and possible solutions to the problems they portend. It acknowledges that understanding the history of these vices will be important in finding solutions to the historic and systemic problems posed. There is therefore the need to facilitate conversations on consolidating and unifying efforts to combat these problems on political, economic and cultural levels, and in ways that transcend the boundaries of the modern State. These conversations should therefore be a model for taking effective action that is revolutionary and transformative.



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II. Nuances and Underlying Causes of Ethnocentrism, Xenophobia and Racism

This evil trinity of Ethnocentrism, Xenophobia and Racism are nuanced in the following sense:

- **Ethnocentrism.** This is characterized by a super evaluation or projection of one's ethnic group, and a corresponding under evaluation of other groups. Ethnocentrism usually occurs within the boundaries of a Nation-State, among all citizens, but usually with a majority and minority divide;
- **Xenophobia.** This concept projects hatred directed against foreigners and anything of foreign origin. It usually also occurs within Nation-States;
- **Racism.** This is connected to a belief system of an innate biological and/or intellectual inferiority of certain racial groups, in particular the black race. It is thus manifested by the ability to practice and implement this belief system through the political, economic and cultural systems of a society i.e. systemic or institutional racism.

Ethnocentrism, Xenophobia and Racism are socially rooted and historically linked to the following:

Colonialism and Imperialism. African borders, arbitrarily drawn by European States at the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884 to 1885 has left Africa bundled into States that do not necessarily represent their heritage. The failure of Post-Colonial African States to address these artificial boundaries, which have now been perfected, has created a false sense of statehood, fueling conflicts and its attendant problems of ethnocentrism and xenophobia. Colonialism and Imperialism led to the steady extraction

of wealth and labour from Africa to build and bolster white communities, creating inequalities and disparities that fuel systemic racism today;

- **Slavery and Capitalism.** The historical exploitation of black people to work as slaves especially in the labour-intensive plantation economies, led to the idea of white superiority and left in its wake issues of segregation, mass incarceration and continuous forms of subordination and exploitation;
- **White Supremacy.** The notion that to be white is superior is a construct that has developed as a result of the need to justify the subjugation of black people and other races, including Native Americans and Latinos, politically, economically and culturally in order to create power and privilege for the white population. This commitment to white supremacy and racism drives the processes of divide and conquer, which is a way of ruling and making sure that the reality of white domination is perpetuated into the future;
- **Divide and Conquer Rule.** This ideology is alleged to have been postulated by William Lynch, a British slave owner in the West Indies. It was designed to control black slaves and has been a function of American history. The notion was to distinguish between and among slaves in any and every way, to divide them, to fragment their collective suffering and consciousness and thus their ability to collectively confront and challenge their enslavement. The impact is that black people differentiate between themselves for a number of reasons, including skin colour, status, education, hair texture and even the mode and time of migration or arrival in America.

III. Effects and Long-term Impact

- Viewing these concepts as a continuum, at different times and places, some of these vices seem more salient than others, but overall racism is an extreme form of evil which should be seen as the genus that covers everything that actually undermines any attempt at building inclusive, tolerant and self-sustaining societies;
- The statistics and hard facts suggest that there is a real disparity between the black and white communities in America politically, economically and culturally (i.e. incarceration rates, poverty rates, income inequality etc.), which is rooted in racism perpetuated by institutions or systems;
- Conflicts that have plagued the African continent cannot be divorced from the history of slavery and colonialism, that have fueled ethnocentrism and negatively impacted regional integration in Africa;
- The foundation of many African States from colonialism were fraudulent, fictitious, flawed and fractured, questioning the integrity and authenticity of statehood, and making the concept of citizenship a vexatious topic for many Africans;
- Historical factors such as colonialism, slavery, divide and conquer, have made it uniquely problematic for black people to define their position in the world and to begin to fight back against some of the racist tendencies from which Africans suffer;
- To downplay the realities of the vicious phenomenon of ethnocentrism, xenophobia and racism is to deepen the stranglehold of hyper nationalism and authoritarian politics that have arisen out of a false sense of globalization; and
- Although it is possible that every racial group can be perpetrator and victim of these vices, we are all not perpetrators to the same degree, as black people have been historically discriminated against, subjugated and treated without dignity, simply because of the colour of their skin.

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IV. Policy Recommendations

- There should be a serious commitment to restitution and reparations for the history of subordination and exploitation. This will represent a step towards ending the process of exploitation that continues to exist even to this day;
 - In order to deal with systemic racism, there is the need to commit to dealing with the problem comprehensively and holistically, and not just a focus on one part of the system such as the criminal justice system;
 - To combat the issues of fragmentation of the black race, brought about by slavery, colonization and imperialism, black people all over the world must unite to combat the inferiority construct which was unfairly superimposed;
 - There should be a global movement anchored around the notions of anti-racism, anti-xenophobia and anti-ethnocentrism, by recognizing and seeing the impact that the history of oppression has had politically, economically, culturally, internally and psychologically on black people
- and try to internally heal that process, by challenging it and constructing a new vision for black people everywhere;
- Alternative economic vehicles that are far less extractive than conventional unbridled capitalism should be put in place. These models should empower black people by putting them in charge of their own institutions and organizations so that they can build both personal and community wealth. Building the position and status of people economically gives them the wherewithal to be able to impact the broader society in a positive way;
 - In dealing with nationalism, neo-liberalism and unbridled capitalism, there is the need to intellectually construct and implement politically, economically and culturally alternative ways of being in a world that challenge the very core assumptions of processes of domination and subjugation;
 - Conversations should take place at different levels between the various stakeholders regarding how to begin
- changing the narratives built around black inferiority;
- There also needs to be separate conversations about colonial boundaries, to determine the kind of Africa we desire; and
 - There must be discussions on power, how to work with it, subvert it or relegate it, as well as how to build different kinds of power structures, States and systems that are more nurturing and permit the building of inclusive and resilient societies.

V. Conclusion

Despite the world becoming a global village, there are ethnocentric, xenophobic and racial undercurrents that are indicative that there are a lot of schisms, stereotyping and repression that plague the world. These prejudices continue to manifest themselves through political, economic and cultural systems of societies, resulting in apparent inequalities and suppression the world over. It is important however, that we do not externalize the conversations about these vices as Africans, but rather recognize the impact that the existence and the history of oppression has had on black people, draw the linkages in our conversations and further engage at all levels to find comprehensive and holistic solutions that tackle as many aspects of the problem as possible.

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