

Opinion – Anti-Blackness: A Go-to Foreign Policy?

Written by Christiane Ndedi Essombe

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CHRISTIANE NDEDI ESSOMBE, OCT 11 2021

As nearly ten thousand of migrating people, predominantly from Haiti, sought to enter the United States by land, a picture of a White police agent on a horseback unleashing his whip at a Black man, made its rounds on the internet. Labeled as “grim echoes of history” by some, the picture can easily (re)trigger generational trauma in those who share the same skin color as the man the border agent was firmly grabbing by his shirt. A generational trauma that cannot possibly be healed so long as Black people are constantly exposed to violence against their very existence and expected to normalize it.

Pictures of a White border agent on a horseback in the southern state of Texas enforcing state policies by whipping a Black man, is troubling when one understands the historical context. Such a scene echoes one of the earliest forms of policing in the United States: slave patrols. Slave patrols were composed of White men aged between 25 and 45, mostly from the South of the US, entrusted with the responsibility to oversee and control the movements of enslaved Black people. This included violently intercepting any enslaved person found outside of a plantation. Just like the border agent photographed, they were mounted on horsebacks with a whip as their weapon of choice. Specifically, they were to “arrest any slave or slaves whether with or without a permit [...]. Which slave or slaves thus arrested shall be subjected to corporal punishment not exceeding 30 stripes.” Commenting on the photograph widely shared, White House spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, expressed that she “can’t imagine what context would make that appropriate”. History indicates that the very fabric of policing in America would frame such actions as appropriate.

It is not the first time in recent years that migrating people, predominantly from Haiti, are mistreated at the border between the US and Mexico. In 2015, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced an extension of the temporary status of protection (TPS) granted to Haitian citizens due to the humanitarian crisis that unfolded following the 2010 earthquake. Thousands of Haitian individuals embarked on an extremely perilous journey across south and central America to exercise their human right to seek asylum. Instead, as more people from Haiti arrived at the US southern border, the DHS decided to resume deportations of Haitians a year earlier than first announced. For migrating people this resulted in a lot of incertitude and longer wait times in precarious conditions. Indeed, Haitian migrants were first forced to wait in makeshift camps and underfunded shelters on the Mexican side of the border. Then, after formally entering the US, they were to wait in jail while their claim was processed based on criteria that were unknown to many claimants themselves. Five years later, it appears that conditions still fail to protect basic dignity and human rights, poignantly happening in a government that advances more favourable immigration policies.

Even at home Haitians face foreign policies steeped in anti-blackness. Once an island split between French rule on the west and Spanish rule on the east, Haiti became the first and only colony of enslaved people to successfully overthrow the French empire. It even controlled its neighbour, the Dominican Republic for a generation. Despite this prowess, the country is now subject to racist policies from the same neighbour which are colloquially refer to as *anti-haitianismo*. This includes an amendment in the Dominican constitution to strip citizenship from any Dominican of Haitian descent and overall a political project to reject any affiliation to Africa and Black people. In its most brutal moments, this project has resulted in the execution of thousands of Haitian people and Dominicans of Haitian ancestry in 1937.

Across the globe, Black people – that is people with black skin, or at least perceived as such – face varying degrees of violence and violations of human rights, particularly when seeking to claim what should be human rights for all.

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That dichotomy between rights that theoretically apply to all yet are denied to some, is maybe where the main issue lies: Black people are still not seen as fully deserving of human rights. The US border agent's decision to incorporate whipping into his duties, a practice usually observed among some pastoralists and their animals (although also challenged in that context), actually speaks very loudly to the ongoing dehumanization of Black people and black bodies. This ideology is not new and is the corner stone of the Enlightenment era and pseudo-scientific attempts to associate skin color with intellect, morality, skills and therefore, humanity.

In hindsight it is (hopefully) now obvious that these false correlations were only subterfuges to normalize chattel slavery and genocide against Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Yet, the very philosophers who normalized a hierarchy of biological races with White people at the top and Black people at the bottom such as Kante, Hume and Voltaire to name a few, remain celebrated. It is therefore no surprise that their ideology has remained unchallenged and continue to permeate foreign policies, consciously or not, particularly as it relates to interactions with black bodies.

It could be argued that the Berlin conference of 1888 was a European foreign policy and that it paradoxically embodied disdain toward Black people, and a love for their natural resources. In a sense, the conference was a virtual whip whose lashes still hurt to this day, dividing and spreading Africans with no regard for their culture, history, rights to humanity or agency in decisions about their resources and identity.

Centuries later, as thousands of migrating people are left to die in the Mediterranean, as laws ignoring their human rights – such as erecting barbed wires with blades in Melilla and blocking rescue boats – continue to be approved, and as a head of state confidently qualified Haiti and African countries as “sh-tholes”, the European Union and the United States continue to present themselves as expert advocates for human rights. The only way that dissonance can exist is if, as mentioned before, non-White people – and specifically Black people – are still seen as less deserving of human rights. It is only on that ground that the historical violation of their human rights can be comfortably overlooked when assessing countries and their compliance with the human rights framework.

As can only be the case with any phenomenon tied to colonialism, anti-Blackness is global and therefore anti-Blackness in foreign policy is not limited to Europe and North America. In 2020, as the global pandemic was in its early days, citizens of African countries in China were forcibly tested for COVID-19, forbidden to enter shops, evicted from their apartment and forced to sleep in the street. The fact that many African nationals had negative test results or had not travelled was not seen as relevant in the enforcement of these measures. Researchers reported that “other foreign groups have generally not been subjected to similar treatment.”

Interestingly, at the height of the 2014-2016 Ebola crisis, many Africans in non-African countries also saw their rights violated regardless of whether they had been exposed to the Ebola virus. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, although African ambassadors in Beijing as well as Ghana's and Kenya's respective foreign minister – among others – “shared concerns”, in practice not much was done. Some government representatives from China denied the claims and both parts seemingly had a case of selective amnesia. African countries then moved on to wait for COVID vaccines that are yet to be received. Nineteen months into the pandemic Africa is currently the least vaccinated continent and projected to be the last to reach herd immunity. Examples of anti-Blackness in foreign policies truly abound.

As anti-Blackness and its normalization are present through time and space, one can wonder to what extent Black people themselves have also normalized anti-Blackness. Unsurprisingly, anti-Blackness in foreign policies can also be found in African countries, whether that is in the almost inexistant intra-African trade or in unnecessarily burdensome visa requirements for Africans seeking to visit other African countries. The list of manifestations of anti-Blackness in foreign policies, past and present, is long. The list of measures taken by predominantly Black countries to counter these measures is way shorter, to not say inexistent.

As the 76th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) takes place in New York, Haiti Prime Minister Ariel Henry referred to the right of sovereign countries to administer their border. He also tied migration to unending inequality and noted that countries that are now wealthy were once built by migrants. South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa

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highlighted among others the responsibility to fight the legacy of racism. With such a premise it is unfortunate that no one explicitly connected these two points to position racism as a race-based system of subordination that violates human rights to provide free or cheap labour and generate wealth for the socio-economic elite. History will tell whether any tangible change to seriously tackle racism and inequality can be observed following this 76th UN General Assembly. If the last centuries are of any indication, as long as predominantly Black countries themselves do not name, acknowledge and challenge anti-Blackness within their societies and in western quarters, nothing will change.

About the author:

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