

# Tracing Hopes of Racist-Free and Multicultural-Friendly Campuses: A Phenomenological Exploration on the Lived Experiences of Blacks in the National Capital Region Universities (Philippines)

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**Zaldy Collado (MS)**

Adamson University, Manila, Philippines  
zaldy.collado@adamson.edu.ph

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**Abstract** - *In the Philippine campuses nowadays, the presence of foreign students is a common sight, making our academic communities one of the most culturally diverse universities in the world. This requires us to provide necessary local environment appropriate and ready to attend to multicultural sensitivities. Thus the research aimed to look at how well-prepared Philippine universities are in terms of having multi-cultural friendly campuses. Through in-depth interviews and phenomenological method, the researcher explored the lived experiences of Black African students in their respective campuses. The results showed that (a) the participants' decision to study in the Philippines was based on factors such as the hassle-less application process, cheaper yet of quality education and the image of Filipinos as being friendly and kind (b) the common, though very light, concern was not racism nor discrimination, but speaking in the local language in their presence made them feel sometimes isolated or insulted and (c) that racism and discrimination against blacks were not an institutional reality, though unfriendly encounters with Filipinos were also recorded, those were not seen as serious cases of racist behavior. The study suggested that since blacks' experiences are generally devoid of racism and discrimination, school administrations do not tend to formulate explicit policies and enough activities to ensure racist-free campuses and inter-cultural inclusiveness among Filipinos and the blacks. In any case, the black students were determined to obtain their degrees here no matter what and such a goal was made easier because of the kind of tertiary academic communities their respective schools offer.*

**Keywords**—*Black Africans, Philippine Universities, Racism*

## INTRODUCTION

Philippine educational institutions have been marked by an increase in the number of foreign students seeking Philippine diploma. According to Bureau of Immigration Statistics, from 21,000 in 2011, the number has tripled in 2012, accounting 61,000 foreign students in that year. This sudden surge of international students is attributed to the rising tide of schools which are allowed by the government to admit international students, which from 104 schools in 2011, have ballooned into 2,145 in 2012. Thus, foreign students walking around Philippine campuses are now a common sight, making our academic communities one of the most culturally diverse universities in the world. This, in turn, requires us to provide necessary local environment appropriate and ready to attend to multicultural

sensitivities. But are our campuses really prepared to accept foreign students, especially blacks, into the arena of social relationships without discrimination issues? It is for this reason that the researcher has conducted this study.

Campus racial discrimination seems to be a perplexing social issue in the academic settings and environments. From different universities and colleges (and in the level of governments), the fight against this social pathology is continuing and must not stop to ensure further its total eradication in the future and for future generations. The academic communities of tertiary education, from its teaching and non-teaching personnel, must be responsible enough to pin point sources of racial discrimination in the institutional and interpersonal levels and help them gradually eliminate this social issue through a united effort and various

means or strategies which could be used in recognition of its impact in the academic lives of those who are victims of racism.

As this study is done in the context of the blacks' experience in the Philippine campuses of tertiary education, the researcher could get vital ideas that parallel experiences of racism in other parts of the world in contrast to the Philippine experience and whether such experiences or encounters frequently or rarely occur in our campuses. Hence, it would ultimately define the Philippines' standing in the ranks (if there is such) of racist-free and multi-cultural friendly campuses in the world as an educational destination of blacks seeking tertiary diploma.

Harper et al. [1] and Anderson et al. [2] believed that teachers should discuss more inside the classroom about the downside of racism in order to eliminate racial toxins in the campus. The fight against racism though seen as largely a success, must not be prevented the academic communities to be complacent, still much of the work is in the hands of the educators themselves. However, as has been said by D'Andrea et al. [3], everyone in the academic community should understand that each occupies a position that can proliferate racism in the campus, but the important thing is that each position can also stop a mentality against people of colors. Aside from educators, college staff too are said to be partners in this cause by understanding that their positions as sub-authorities can do so much to eliminate racism.

In anticipation of racial harassment and discrimination in Philippine campuses, our educational institutions should learn from other schools and researchers worldwide about best practices on how to combat these lurking threats to students of color such as those presented in researches of Jaman [4] and Beatty et. al. [5] respectively such as the use of educational systems to incorporate responsibilities of fighting racism in the campus and the utilization of the racial identity development technique inside the classroom.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study, hence, sought to survey the lived experiences of the black students in describing racist-free and multicultural friendly universities which also includes the factors or considerations that led for blacks to decide to study here in the Philippines. As blacks mix with the locals in their respective campuses, the objective is to describe the state of their relationship, how well (or not well) it is going, and

trace or determine whether the existence of such relationship in the universities is devoid of racial toxins. The study wished also to show how blacks do respond or address these unfriendly encounters with their school authorities and ultimately seek to answer whether blacks do feel that their respective academic communities are socially healthy environment.

Interested readers on this area of concern must understand the significance of this study in the light of "global education". Since globalization has been a "norm", educational institutions, from where we are, have to decide in order to catch up to the demanding culture of standardization and openness, not only for Asia, in the context of ASEAN integration, but also to the much larger international stage.

#### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research employed phenomenological method to analyze collected data in the study. From there, the researcher, through a phenomenological technique, drew and theorized vital summaries or insights related to the study. Phenomenological method let the narratives from the co-researches to surface, and to just let them be and present themselves as their own lived experiences. From those experiences, the researcher does not judge and put meaning into those stories but merely describe them. These stories eventually lead to the recognition by the researcher of common themes among all the narratives. These common themes, as they recur, help the researcher to identify the eidetic insight (conclusion) which signifies how the co-researches see the world along the areas of this particular study.

The co-researchers (interviewees) include black African students from five (5) Tertiary or Higher Learning Educational Institutions (HEIs) namely Adamson University, Centro Escolar University, Emilio Aguinaldo College, Far Eastern University and the National University. The selection of these universities was based on the concentration of black students in their respective campuses. There are three co-researchers per school, thus the narratives accumulated are in the total of fifteen.

Specifically, there were nine (9) Nigerians, three (3) Eritreans, two (2) Rwandans and one (1) Sudanese co-researchers in this research that were asked to share their lived experiences regarding campus racism or discrimination. The selection of these black students was obviously based on the needs of this research namely, they had to be, college students, black Africans and were currently enrolled in their

respective universities. Since it was not easy to just talk or contact any black African, the researcher used the snowball sampling technique wherein those who were first identified as participants were asked to suggest any of their friends who could also be part of the study.

The researcher assured the co-researchers (participants) of the confidentiality of the study, telling them that no part of the research or of the interviews would be directly attributable to any of them.

These interviews were conducted in locations near or in the places of residence of the co-researchers or also in places they chose for reasons of comfortability or also in the places suggested by the researcher himself.

## RESULTS

After the in-depth interviews conducted, these several themes emerged as the recurring themes, purporting how the foreign students see the Philippine campuses as higher learning institutions (HEIs) and as a social environment. These themes are supported by some quotes from the narratives below.

**1. Philippine Higher Educational Institutions are preferred.** Blacks favor Philippine schools over other potential academic destinations. Considerations range from the high quality of education, minimal cost, simpler admission policies and the friendly and undiscriminating kind of the Filipino people.

“Deciding to study abroad is a kind of a complicated issue back in Nigeria. Because in Nigeria the academic system is quite different from here, especially in the Philippines. It's quite easier here, the academic system. In Nigeria, we have to go series of screen examinations before we can go into the higher institution. While here, it's just one exam or at most two exams.”

“I have a friend who studied in Batangas in Lyceum. Actually he graduated now, basically he said the system was, you know, pretty smooth and fast, there were no strikes, the tuition was affordable, even though not too cheap, it's affordable and then you could transfer schools if you wanted to and then you have a choice of doing whatever course you wanna do and back in Nigeria I wasn't so flexible, I was a bit rigid, getting admission was kinda difficult and then tuition was a bit higher so Philippines was so, you know, like a good choice after all those”

“I had higher expectations that the universities here would be like better than the ones in our country in my country, would be good in education and something to learn. I have to say that some of the expectations were met, the University reached the expectations I had.”

“I choose Philippines because first of all Philippines is an English education system, they use English. Secondly, it is cheaper because compared to other countries like China, Europe and US, it's affordable for my parents, so that I can stay here. It's cheaper and they use English as a system of language in education.”

“When you are coming from Africa to countries like Philippines, you don't know. It is said that people will be racist, that's what you expect but when I go here I didn't, I have never experience it today in my school and it's a very good thing and I'm happy that's why I feel like it's a good country and you feel at home. Except the language barrier everything is okay. So, I think Philippines is a good country for black Africans to study in.”

**The language barrier is a real concern.** Though blacks admit that speaking in our local language seems to be inevitable, they express concern about not being able to understand instructions and small talks in Tagalog, whether in class hours or not, and interpret those as somewhat offending and unfriendly though not really seen as strictly discriminatory.

“When they start to talk then they will say, I'm shy. I feel lonely. It's like the problem of language, language barrier. Sometimes, I have a class like I'm the only black in the class and others are Filipinos. Sometimes, the teacher, to better explain it they speak in Tagalog and I don't know anything about Tagalog so I feel like I am not welcome. The teacher is in the front he/she speaking Tagalog and you are in the class and speaks like for, if I have a class for one hour he/she speaks in Tagalog for thirty minutes, it's like what are we doing here, because we're like apart.

“So I really don't know, but sometimes they really gossip about you in Tagalog, just for the few I understand, they talk about you, you would just hear your last name, I just hear my last name, Payube, but when I'm staring, they will not say anything.”

“I also felt and experienced that some are unfriendly to me, inside the campus I came across in situation like that because Philippines, most of the students in FEU they communicate in Filipino language, Tagalog. I'm not so fluent in understanding Tagalog but I try to understand their actions. I try to

understand that but few students make some kind of discriminating comments and put this bias not to appreciate foreigners. But gradually I'm studying here for almost five years so I'm beginning to understand Filipino language. Most Filipino students really they embraces me, they like foreigner but few of them are indifferent and quiet about it. Some could make back statement which in Filipino language which I know but I understand."

## 2. **Lack of concrete programs and policies.**

Schools are not doing enough to provide concrete and explicit activities and policies to effect real and deliberate avenues for locals and blacks (foreigners in general) to come together with the ends of bridging their differences further, developing friendships beyond colors and allowing constructive inclusiveness.

"I'm not really familiar with any policy that contributing for a friendly campus. I think the, well there is this creation of foreigner's room back in FRC building. It kind of gives us a place where we can go to and be with ourselves but I think that's okay but I don't know any other policy. No policy, just the program and the place."

"I think the school has to do some more, create some more programs to integrate the foreign students and the Filipino students and you know, let them come together more often because the association been putted place where foreign students doesn't have any Filipinos involved, just the people who are taking care of the affairs. Foreign shows where the Filipinos and the foreign students come together and get to know each other. So far, the school has not been doing much about it."

"There were no specific programs for us Africans and Filipinos to bond together. We're just meeting class, sometimes when we have projects of the class we're doing that in group but no programs."

## 3. **Philippine Higher Educational Institutions are considered ideal environment for learning.**

Blacks maintain that Philippine tertiary schools are well-equipped both with facilities and people to run these academic communities with excellence and professionalism. The campuses as composed of Filipino students and teachers are very well attentive to the blacks' needs and sensitivities.

"I think this is a very nice school to be in. It's a very good place because, if you up for peaceful person, sure, why not, you have a peaceful term, a

peaceful four years, five years depending on the course here. So I think, it's a very good place to be."

"I believe I can achieve my dream in my school because I like too much my course, Medtech, and I like my professors and especially my Dean. She's so good with foreigners, with Filipinos, with everyone so that's why I feel like I can make my dream, even my classmates are good."

"Our university is really an ideal place to learn because the openness of the school is just incredible you can see that in athletics, you can see that in social gathering, you can see that in meetings where the students gather and stuff like that foreigners boast their heads they can either be supportive. The school is really open in a way and so that foreigners can bring an idea which is a really good thing and most of all the girls like foreigners they are really pretty by the way the Filipinas, so you can come over."

4. **The end in mind keeps the focus.** Blacks never want to waste their efforts being here in the Philippines. At all cost, these blacks vow to concentrate on their studies despite some negative experiences in the school. They claim that by focusing on the goal, they would return in their home country as educated and professional citizens and are therefore productive members of their respective families and countries.

"It feels kind of awkward because it will take time for you to adjust to see the people that aren't of the same color in the same classroom so I just tolerated them. Also, it didn't change my view because I knew I'm just here to study, and that was my main purpose. I'm not here because I want to make friends with someone or I want to seek approval from someone. My main reason for being here is just study so that's why. I have to focus on my studies."

"So it has nothing to do with color, so it's language barrier. However, those experiences never let me think of leaving the school because I have another friend not only Filipinos so, and I came to the school not to like being friendly with others. I just came for one direction like I want to be a doctor. I want to study so hard, so I don't mind it. I don't care about it. So I never thought of leaving the school because of that."

"I am be able to be strong enough to withstand and as long as it doesn't disturb my physical being, well-being. So far, so good, you know, I'm moving on, I'm focus on my studies because I came here to study and accomplish my graduation and go back and

become successful. I don't allow any form of racism to distract me or misdirect me from my goal."

### **Key Findings**

1. For black Africans, deciding to study in the Philippines was shaped by various factors. The narratives reveal that the common factors are that Philippine tertiary education has cheaper yet of quality instruction, easier application process and that people are friendly and kind.

2. For black Africans, the common concern has nothing to do with racism or prejudice against them. The concern is about the language used in their presence both as to instruction and on some encounter with Filipinos. Speaking "Tagalog" in their presence makes them feel, at times, isolated and insulted.

3. For black Africans, issues of racism and discrimination are not a reality in the Philippine universities. The narratives suggest that Philippine universities are generally conceived by the foreigners as multicultural friendly and racist-free campuses, as both their local counterparts and the professors are generally approachable, helpful and friendly. As such, they think that Philippine schooling is really a good idea.

4. For black Africans, having bad and unfriendly experiences with teachers and classmates does not reflect institutional racism or widespread practice of discrimination. Though those experiences are real, they believe that those are just very minimal, thus, do not warrant them to leave the Philippines. In the first place, the black Africans maintain that they stay in the Philippines with the primary purpose of getting a diploma, and they are focused to that no matter what.

### **CONCLUSION**

The rising tide of foreign students coming to our academic shores has been an increasingly normal reality. Thanks not only to the Philippine Higher Educational Institutions' image of being affordable yet of high quality standards, but also to the kind of admission system and students and educators we advance, cater and shelter. This prepares us to understand that foreigners or blacks find it not unusual to choose our country as academic destination to gain knowledge and hone their practical skills. They believe and trust the Philippine educational system. This compliments to the research made by Walters [5] which describes Australia as an ideal place for tertiary education as the Australian government pressed for universities to be more responsive to the needs and

well-being of foreign students. This research corroborates also to such findings by Walters [7] that by virtue of having a good international image in so far as academic communities are concerned, our schools are highly qualified to accommodate potential learners from abroad without them feeling bothered by racism and assured of multi-cultural friendly campuses.

Nonetheless, as microcosms of society, our campuses are not devoid of social tensions between the locals and foreigners. However, these are not seen and interpreted as large scale and institutional discriminatory gestures against the blacks but rather as isolated episodes of personal and human imperfection that leads to misunderstandings.

Since our social realities differ from other parts of the world, wherein cases of racism happen so ordinarily in the west like that of evidenced by Sheard [8] and Chambers & Sharpe [9], the Filipino society rarely witness nor guilty of large scale racial discrimination against the blacks. The black African students who were part of this research as co-researchers generally affirmed that it is so the case so far. Unlike the Philippines Higher Education counterparts in the west, the Philippine campuses appear to be friendlier and sensitive to people of colors. This prepares us to understand why a lot of researchers in the west proposed several mechanisms or approaches on how to deal with racism in their respective campus.

Researchers in the field of racism studies like D'Andrea et al [3], Harper et al. [1] and Anderson et al., all proposed that academic personnel most especially teachers have to step up efforts to contain the issues of racism and actively participate reorienting students of their ideas of racial differences. It is also in that note that Jaman [5] and Brondolo et al. suggested some very useful tools in coping with cases of actual racial toxins in the academic environment. Obviously, this chain of researches in the west points to a very different reality than ours here in the Philippines. Those researches are evidently under the pretext of an environment racially hostile to blacks. However, fortunately, the Philippine case is different. Though their points must be seriously taken to secure well-rounded, conducive learning environments for black Africans who study in the Philippine tertiary institutions, their suggestions do not call for an immediate implementation and quick ground work to counter campus racism here. As seen in this study, blacks so far positively describe our

tertiary educational communities as multi-cultural sensitive and friendly campuses.

If there is any, the blacks' recurring concern lies in the problem of language that serves as barriers for a more open and constructive communication between them and the Filipinos. Color is not the problem, it is the language. At times, blacks may feel annoyed and insulted when Filipinos speak in Tagalog in their presence depending in the circumstances in which Filipinos do not necessarily intend to. Blacks consider this language barrier a legitimate concern to be addressed, a problem so counterproductive to our aim of becoming truly prepared to accept foreigners in our academic communities. Nonetheless, with the right amount of determination and focus, blacks are confident to finish their studies here. This is actually made easy because people that surround them in the campus are generally seen as helpful individuals who are always ready to assist them. They maintain that with that positive attitude and the Philippine schools' physical, academic and social preparedness to provide learning environment conducive for multi-cultural sensitivities and needs, they can be successful in the future as holders of Philippine diplomas.

The absence or lack of concrete activities and policies to further promote inclusiveness and friendliness between Africans and Filipinos are obviously not a priority of Philippine tertiary schools. Though their establishment could have advantageous impacts in the academic communities (as the cited related literatures would say), those are not seen as necessary.

### **Theorizing from Experience (with recommendations)**

Countries with "questionable" quality of education and difficult tertiary admission system drive away home grown economically capable students to study abroad. Destinations in this regard point out to countries with quality education and easier admission process and affordable fees. This makes the Philippines a top contender and a logical choice. As foreigners or blacks continue to flock here for purposes of getting tertiary education, the Philippines would have to expect more and more aliens to study here in the next years to come. If there is one thing which is clear in this scenario, it is the foreigners' assumption that our higher learning institutions are up to their standards and that their expectations would be fulfilled.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Philippines must maintain and work out further advancement of quality of education in order to ensure influx of foreign students that seek affordable but good education away from their home country if such a goal is of our national interest. We must also further formulate measures that allow easier access to Philippine education by foreigners but without compromising academic quality and security. This is to secure our spot in the most visited schools in Asia as we introduce and showcase the quality of 21<sup>st</sup> Philippine tertiary education.

Language barrier is a problematic factor of Filipino-blacks relations in the campus. Though not really alarming in the sense that blacks would get out of the country, speaking in the local language has been expressed by blacks with a serious tone which at times could be interpreted in a very negative light.

The schools, its students and academic staff, must acknowledge and understand the negative sentiments of blacks (foreigners) regarding speaking in Tagalog in some circumstances. To avoid miscalculations and frictions between locals and blacks, the school administration has to do something in order to ensure that every encounter between locals and foreigners is a potential encounter for friendship and inclusiveness.

Instituting concrete activities and explicit policies that convey and promote social harmony and inter-racial integration to diminish or eradicate racism or discrimination in the campus is not seen as a priority in the Philippine tertiary educational system. This is because there is no racial discrimination to begin with. The blacks themselves deny being discriminated on account of their color so nobody in the black community complains about it, the schools find it unnecessary to provide and initiate concrete programs and explicit policies that allow more avenues for bonding and recognition between the locals and the blacks. This is a policy of complacency.

Our schools must not remain satisfied in the current social attitude towards the blacks in the campuses and indeed must introduce certain specific activities and policies to advance further inclusiveness among studentry of diverse racial backgrounds. While it is true that there is neither institutional discrimination nor widespread racism in the campus, our schools must not adapt the policy of complacency with regard to this matter. For one, schools must deny any possibility that ignorance to others' racial and cultural background may lead to racist remarks from local students as our schools must attend responsibly

to multi-cultural sensitivities at all times. As they said, however passé, prevention is better than cure. In addition too, through these activities and policies, schools allow foreign students to feel that the local community that they are into is interested to them, willingly embracing them into a racial and cultural union in the context of mutual respect in the campus. When programs and policies of these sorts are provided, further stories of how we positively and extraordinarily handle foreigners in the Philippine educational system will circulate across potential countries of origins and encourage more foreign students to come here. We can therefore showcase what it means to experience Filipino education at its best.

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