

# MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



*Scroll down to read the article.*



St. Peterburg.

circumstances and position in life. You are even forced to put yourself in the picture as you ask questions about the nature of man in the world. For instance, What is in one man that makes him different from others? Does the face of others menace you because of your own feelings of

## THE ONES THEY LEFT BEHIND

AKIN TAIWO

The audience sat in hushed silence. But now and then a sigh. Then and again the shaking of the head. Not because it was sunset on 208 Sunset Avenue where the different clans gathered. But because the video-show they have come to watch was provoking, if not indeed provocative.

The documentary titled *The Ones They Left Behind* is a first-hand account of the African presence in Russia by Dr. Charles Quist-Adade, a professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Windsor. It is a heart-chilling story of the children of African fathers and Russian mothers after the collapse of Soviet-style communism in the former U.S.S.R. There are many heads in the groove now, but who shall save the children?

What can we do, as a people with conscience, to mitigate the effect of

racial discrimination against our children? 'Half-cast' they are pejoratively called. But 'bi-racial' they are correctly indexed. They are not Black, if indeed there are any 'black' men on the face of the earth. Neither are they White, if anyone is ever 'white'. Their colour lies within the continuum of brown and pink. Children of circumstances, now victims of uninformed prejudice. Could the world ever be kind? Could the society ever be humane? Could people ever be reasonable, if not charitable?

You may not have tears in your eyes as you follow the documentary. But, unless you have a heart of stone, you can't be indifferent to the contrasts and antitheses of your own existence. As the author summarizes, it is 'a story of love gone sour, goodwill turned to hatred; a tale of trust and betrayal, ignorance and prejudice, bigotry and racism.' In it you're forced to see yourself, the pigmentation of your skin, your

inferiority or pride? The Third World Resource Centre in conjunction with the African-Russian Link, the African Community Organization of Windsor and the Iona College of the University of Windsor, made the presentation of *The Bear's Ugly Face* feasible to the international audience. Recent events in Chechnya makes the Bear ever uglier.

In the very educative documentary, we realised that Black presence in Russia predated the communist revolution. Most Blacks then were sailors who later settled along the sea coast of Abkhazia, the southern part of the Russian Federation. They became so assimilated that only their skin colour differentiated them. The initial fifty families soon grew beyond five hundred along the coast. Arab traders joined the fray in the 16th and 17th centuries. Many people however migrated to Turkey after the revolution.

On the other hand, when royalties exchanged gifts between and among themselves, slaves were a commodity. Ibrahim Hannibal was presented to Peter the Great who, on sensing the Black boy's brilliance, sent him to school in Russia and France. Then the Russian

aristocrats spoke French. Hannibal became the chief engineer and a general in the Russian army. He married twice and one of his grandsons, Alexander Pushkin - widely reputed to be Russia's greatest poet - introduced and developed the Russian literary language. Aira Oldridge, an African-American introduced the dramatic art forms to Russian and later died in Poland.

But racism in Russia hasn't always been so obvious or manifest until now. After all, Russia has been an ally of the Third World, fighting Western subjugation and imperialism, providing aids and support for liberation movements. By 1992 about half a million students mainly from Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia, Algeria, Nigeria, Cuba and Grenada were educated on scholarships.

But all that was politics of the 'cold war' and of convenience. The bias soon showed in the *perestroika* era. Racism became the other side of paternalism. The Patrick Lumumba University where Third World students normally studied was renamed Moscow Friendship University party *apparatchiks* allowed racism to find its own level. Even university professors avoided Blacks as much as fellow students abhorred them. There were unimaginable racist attacks as if to justify the producer's assertion

that 'the ethnocentric blood is thicker than the ideological water.' Many Black students left, somewhat hurriedly after their studies, abandoning their children who they couldn't financially take care of.

As attested to by Joseph White Erakpotobor, a Soviet-trained Nigerian engineer, now resident in Detroit, U.S.A., some fathers left their wives and kids with the promise of coming back later, but never came. Many Blacks married out of convenience to satisfy their 'bodily longings', just as some Soviet ladies married as an act of adventure and a chance to leave Russia. At any rate, Russian officials did not encourage foreign students to stay on after their studies. It is only predictable what the plights of the children, born as results of these relationships, could be.

Paradoxically, many 'fathers' had indeed married 'back home'. Some feared the 'loose characters' of their Soviet wives. And some others who genuinely wanted to leave with their wives were prevented by official state policies, like the denial of visas. Many kids were disallowed from following their fathers 'to Africa', only to be left in orphanages. Some ladies had to be forced to abort, or seriously threatened to be dealt with, if they have babies for Africans.

Maria Ferdinandova Balige was born while her father, Rwechugura, a Tanzanian was in the city. But because Rwechugura overstayed his vacation in Sweden he was expelled from school on his return. He broke down under psychological pressure from the secret police. While in hospital he was forcefully removed, roughly bundled, taken to the airport and deported. He hasn't gone back since then.

Ten years later, Maria, his child became a promising gymnast, coming second in All-Leningrad Championship. But as she said: 'They called me names, made jokes about me. Sometimes they would ask where my father came from and whether

he was dark like charcoal.'

Others made uncomplimentary remarks about Blacks; they said things like 'obeziana' (monkey), 'black paint', 'chocolate', 'black sea.' Her mother was forced to withdraw her from school. Yet she's one of the thousands of African-Soviets suffering this plight.

In 1990 a dozen of them formed the Afro-Soviet Association, renamed African-Russian Society of St. Petersburg since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The aim is to 'unite all Soviets who have roots in Africa. It's a delight for each of us to feel that we are not alone in this world', says Joseph Okum, born of an absentee Ghanaian father. Mikhail Zayaistky whose father is an Ethiopian hopes that they could attract world attention to 'our perilous existence before we disappear like the dinosaurs.'

Though the Russian constitution made racial abuse punishable by law, offenders are hardly ever prosecuted. Dr. Quist-Adade who could be called 'a Black Russian' recounted a personal experience. He lived in Russia for ten years, commuting between London and Russia as a correspondent for Gemini News Service in England. He was severely beaten by the police and state thugs before his room was finally set on fire. He left the country for Canada in May, 1992. By December of the same year when he went back as a business escort, two of his friends had been killed by the neo-fascists. Are there civil rights organizations in Russia to take up a crusade for sanity? What happens to the ones they left behind?

The light came on in the cosy room after the forty-minute documentary, and there was no smiling face. God made the world and men invented borders. God made men of colours, men made races out of them. As we grow and go, we always leave people behind, can we not make the world a better place for them?

IGR



Dr. Charles Quist-Adade: Producer of the video documentary.