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Is it Really Xenophobia in South Africa or an Intentional Act of Prejudice?

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**Abstract**

*The recurrent xenophobic cultural environment in South Africa is both bloody and causes political fluidity. It is quite ironic that after twenty-one years of the first elections in South Africa, xenophobic violence against foreign nationals has worsened. Perhaps, such widespread xenophobic attacks have exploded since 1994 in provinces such as Gauteng, Western Cape, Free State, Limpopo and KwaZulu Natal.*

*There is a need for some fresh insights on the obvious psychological nature of the prevailing violence in a society that brags being democratic. It is thus important to contextualize some possible explanations behind this endless cycle of hate and violence against foreigners in South Africa. According to the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), xenophobia is “the deep dislike of non-nationals by nationals of a recipient state.” However, the term also reflects an acute state of hate, racism and violence, the usage of prejudiced discourses that stigmatize people, and the making of negative assumptions leading to grudge, revenge and destruction on the basis of nationality.*

*This attitude towards foreigners is traced to different reasons. Some attribute it to scarce resources. Some ascribe it to the nature of society itself being destructive and antagonistic for different historical reasons. Some relate it to economic disparity and frustrations. Others find it rooted in the ethnic and racial identity of primordial societies. Still others claim that the locals believe that foreigners are criminals who are granted access to services and police protection, so they need to be pushed away by different types of harm (psychological, physical and killing).*

*In all cases, South Africa is facing a crisis of image restoration regarding the fact that its locals do not like the presence of refugees, asylum-seekers or foreigners in their communities, and that they will use what it takes to punish them for being on the South African soil.*

*The present research not only aims to discuss xenophobia as a concept descriptive of a socially observable phenomenon, but also sets out to examine and compare cross-cultural scholarship on negative attitudes toward immigrants. The key issue that this research tackles is possible motivations, causes, and triggers of this violence.*

**Key words:** *xenophobia, violent society, harm & hate, reasons and explanations, meditated conflict, acculturation, South Africa*

**I. Introduction**

In this research, there will be a brief overview of the acculturation processes affecting immigrants to South Africa. In the beginning, it is important to emphasize that acculturation is a

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complex process of change on various levels including the individual, family, and culture that should not be conceptualized as a unidirectional process in which immigrants assimilate into their host country whereas the host culture remains the same (Berry, 2002).

Only little is known about the attitudes toward African immigrants because ethnicity and race become immediately conflated (Petkou, 2005). In general, African immigrants are seen as “Black” in mainstream culture, and this racial identification is more significant to systems of discrimination in the host country than is country, continent (or island nation), or origin (Organista *et al.*, 2002).

It is crucial to note here that acculturation orientations and the adaptation process of migrants are strongly dependent on patterns of communication. Communication patterns may shape, mediate, and contribute to the conflict that arises from the acculturation process and acculturation preferences. Conflict may arise from non-convergence between the host and migrant acculturation preferences (Van Oudenhoven, Ward, & Masgoret, 2006). An intrapersonal conflict may arise from the experienced stress of being in a new cultural environment and potential social stigmas that are levied upon the acculturating individual.

This research seeks to explain the reason multiculturalism in Africa has become so dangerously unstable. There is a lack of indigenous knowledge about violence in Africa that is furthered by the persistence to view xenophobia in the different cultures and settings through a Eurocentric monolithic vision that disregards the diverse contexts in which issues are handled differently.

## **II. Conceptualising the Cultural Crisis of Immigrants in South Africa**

The idea of foreigners as a foreign body in the South African society finds support in the use of words that have historically described immigrants. While the term ‘guest worker’ reflects economic utility of a person, the term ‘foreigner’ expresses cultural non-belonging. As described by Bauder (2008), immigrants are often categorized in the homogenous group of

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'foreigners', thus categorizing them as outsiders and betraying a devaluating or negative attitude towards them.

Research about attitudes towards foreigners in Europe has identified that negative views about foreigners are higher among people who are socially and economically vulnerable and hold conservative political ideologies (Semyonov *et al.*, 2008). The perceived size of the foreign population as well as the structural characteristics and the political climate of the host country are further factors that form perceptions about immigrants (Semyonov *et al.*, 2008).

Wilkinson (2006) argues that immigrants are often in between cultures, which often leads to identity crises among foreign nationals. Ehrkamp (2006) suggests that political integration discourses and public expectations that immigrants should assimilate have led immigrants to internalize, resist, and/or contest expectations of assimilation as exemplified in the debates amongst Turks about the meaning of being Turkish in Germany.

According to Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997), media exercise subtle influence on people's reasoning and attention about divisive issues, which has commonly been described in the field of communication in terms of agenda-setting, priming, and framing. It is thus important to assess the role played by media in addressing the migration issue and how violence against foreign nationals could be conceptualized.

The promotion of certain issues can impact the way immigrants are perceived in a host society. According to Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, and Armstrong (2001), messages that promote a common group identity may lead to improved attitudes towards foreigners, while media presentations of immigrants' success during times of economic hardship can induce perceptions of competition with immigrants and lead to unfavourable immigration attitudes.

Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart (2009) confirmed this notion by stating that the visibility of immigrant actors in the news is negatively related to anti-immigration attitudes. Ruhrmann and Sommer (2004) explained that intergroup communication on the public and personal levels is

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influenced by media's impact on attitude formation towards minority groups. Moreover, evaluations of immigrants in the news are found to be a strong predictor of immigration problem perceptions (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009).

Media portrayals of political immigration discourse and political evaluation of immigration may strongly influence the way foreigners are perceived and dealt with in any society. It is important to refer here to the "Theory on Representation" for analysing media images. Media images are constructed through language, sounds, meanings and images (Burning, 2009). The way immigrants and immigration policy are portrayed in the news may shape public opinion. They can contribute to public knowledge by amplifying "attitudes and opinions with regard to events, beliefs about rights and wrongs, and political leaders and groups" (Gardner, Karakasoglus, & Luchtenberg, 2008, p. 122).

While most acculturating people attempt to stabilize their situation through adaptation (Kim, 2007), the continuous reoccurrence of alienating discourse and the discourse of otherness may have harmed migrants' functioning relationship with the environment in South Africa. The prevailing attitudes of the host society towards migrants constrain their adaptation towards their new social identity. Newcomers may be aware of their devaluation, which leads to a negative impact on their acculturation outcome (Padilla & Perez, 2003). Following Dona and Berry (1994), the migrants' experience of stress based on news portrayals has led to a negative outcome of their psychological functioning. Migrants' general feeling of belonging to South Africa is distorted by an alienating integration debate which strips them from their host identity and role in society. The schizophrenic identity conflict then is the distorted imagination about belonging and non-belonging.

There has been much speculation of the causes and triggers of violence, and xenophobia has become a perpetual social concern in postcolonial South Africa (Crush, 2001; Landau *et al.*, 2005; McKnight, 2008; Steenkamp, 2009). The dominant rationale of the xenophobes is that

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immigrant workers – who are mainly from the rest of Africa but also include some shop-owners from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and China – threaten the livelihood of South African nationals, share the scarce resources, receive police protection and export criminal ideas to the society (Mantsinhe, 2011). A closer examination reveals a slightly more complex picture. The end of apartheid came with the inevitable enclosure of a once hated nation into a globalised machinery of capitalism as Africa's Southern gate involves a global network of capital, commodities, cultures, and cross-border movement of people, which created an unintended consequence of antagonism towards foreigners (Crush, 2001).

Such antagonism and hatred of foreigners are echoed through reactions that are often accompanied by physical and psychological violence. The violent nature of xenophobia in South Africa is a critical concern (Dodson, 2010; Crush *et al.*, 2008; Steinberg, 2008). The image of burning African immigrants set blazing during one of these xenophobic attacks still haunts the collective consciousness of many South Africans.

Most of the cases of xenophobia in different nations seem to be perceived as vindictive behaviour by some members of society who try to find scapegoats for their deprivation. Some even argue that xenophobic violence is ultimately the consequence of economic decay and uneven development due to structural adjustment and deindustrialization (Bond *et al.*, 2011; Tshitereke, 1999; Harris, 2002).

This research attempts to engage in deconstructing the reasons that have been extended for the culture of xenophobia in South Africa (Dodson, 2010). The 'black-on-black' narrative of South African xenophobia is historical, and it is based on a colonial legacy of South Africa being perceived and treated as a European outpost located on the African continent (Mantsinhe, 2011). It is argued that the social and cultural isolation of black South Africans from the rest

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of Africa during the apartheid regime coagulated South Africans' "we-ness" against the African other. This kind of identity politics has emphasized their ideology of exceptionalism defined by their closeness to European-ness or whiteness.

The South African notion of "otherness" is not only derived from South Africa's geographical location, but from physical, cultural, culinary, phonetic and other markers of difference. However, there is another strong argument that prioritizes the socio-economic context for xenophobia emphasizing the frustration resulting from the post-apartheid democratic dispensation which has not completely addressed the poverty that black South Africans experienced, and which was even escalated with the perennial problem of inequality (Morris, 1998). The economic argument is also based on capitalist manoeuvring to keep the cost of labour down while maximizing profits. In this sense, immigrant workers provide cheap labour to capitalists at the cost of local labour (Bond, Ngwane, & Amisi, 2010). This leads to resentment towards the former.

Many accounts have counter-argued the traditional cultural logic that xenophobic violence in Africa is senseless, chaotic, and anomic. Far from being so, they argue, it is rather symbiotically loaded. This research argues that the presumption that violence in South Africa is purely instrumental reveals that most of the studies on Africa fail to understand the implications of the use of arson as a tactic. The particular form of the violence used is not incidental or external to its purpose; rather, the form is the purpose itself.

It is also argued that the degree to which different generations identify with ethnicity and culture vary, but these processes can also vary within an individual. Phinney, Horenezyk, Liebkind, and Vedder (2001) postulate that immigrant ethnic identity development may involve two parallel dimensions: ethnic identity, which refers to the maintenance of a sense of belonging with one's heritage and culture, and the continuance of that culture's values and practices,

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on the one hand, and national identity, which refers to the adoption of the host culture's values and practices and the development of a sense of belonging within the mainstream culture.

In studying this two-dimensional model, they found that the relationship between these constructs varied between immigrant groups and the country to which one immigrated. Their results point to the necessity of studying the role that both ethnic and national (in this case South Africa) identity play in understanding the possibilities of conflict among different immigrant groups.

### **III. Media, Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa**

Most of the analysis of xenophobic violence in the world focuses on globalization as a primary drive with two main positions (Hickel, 2014). The first is the political economy perspective which closely relates neoliberal policies and structural adjustments to the rise in undermining livelihoods, which escalate violent competition over scarce resources such as jobs and housing. The second is the crisis of identity politics which holds that the cultural "flows" of globalization induces a state of hybridity, flux, and moral anomie that triggers the impulse to violently recreate social boundaries.

Xenophobic violence against foreign nationals in South Africa has worsened over the years since 1994 in provinces such as Gauteng, Western Cape, Free State, Limpopo and KwaZulu Natal. In April 2015, South Africa endured a resurgence of anti-immigrant violence. Sparked by a demand from the Zulu king Goodwill Zwelithini that foreign-born Africans "pack up and go home," the attacks on individuals and businesses quickly spread from Durban to other major cities (Egan, 2015). Events such as the killing of a Mozambican immigrant in Alexandra Township in Johannesburg made world headlines.

On the website of the UNHCR (IRIN, 2015), the UN refugee agency's representative in South Africa, Sanda Kimbimbi, said the "UNHCR is deeply concerned about the widespread

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xenophobic attacks targeting foreigners in the Gauteng Province in South Africa. Those affected include refugees and asylum seekers who fled to South Africa seeking protection from persecution in their own countries" (Rulashe, 2008).

With the increasing numbers of asylum seekers, public opinion started to question migrants' legitimacy as refugees. Negative media coverage as well as referring to migrants as 'bogus asylum seekers' or 'economic refugees' (Bauder, 2008, p. 100) have created strong social tensions between immigrants and South Africans.

Regardless of the motives behind these attacks, there has been growing reprisals from neighbouring countries, raising concerns among South African business leaders and officials that the violence against foreigners could further damage the weak economy. For example, calls for boycotting South African products have multiplied amid anger in Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique and elsewhere in the continent over their citizens' being attacked by mobs in Johannesburg and Durban. "Since the start of the attacks, our country has lost billions of rands in export foreign revenue," said Trade and Industry Deputy Minister Mzwandile Masi without giving further details (Mabe, 2015).

Some scholars argue that the issue of violent attacks against foreign nationals is not 'xenophobia,' but rather mischaracterization of violence that falsely draws equivalences between concepts of otherness. In many African nations, there is a growing crisis of social reproduction (Hunter, 2010) that is mapped through the precipitous decline in marriage rates down to less than half of 1960 levels. For example, today only 3 of 10 South African adults are married. The increasing rates of unemployment make most young men find it impossible to raise the resources they need to pay the *lobola* (bride wealth) and establish their own legitimate, respectable homes. Such argument is echoed by complaints of young males that foreigners are taking away their jobs, houses and women, even though the reality of it is more complicated (HSRC,



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2008, p. 6). As such, the cultural crisis is the groupthink among youth that they are losing their grip on the most basic means of social reproduction.

The South African Media Institute (MMA)<sup>1</sup> stated in a 2003 study on racism and xenophobia in the South African media, which covered eight years from the first free elections in 1994, that as long as there remains a large gap between the rich and poor, voting along race and class lines will continue for years to come. It is thus still a prevailing trend in South Africa that people would cast their votes based on colour of skin. That is why campaigns take place only in townships and squatter camps because most people in the affluent suburbs would not meaningfully respond. Such primordial sentiments empathize that the inequalities that were there during apartheid still persist today. MMA describes racism and xenophobia as supporting each other and sharing discriminatory discourses as they both operate on the same basis of profiling people and making negative assumptions. MMA argues that the profiling in the case of racism is on the basis of race and in the case of xenophobia on the basis of nationality.

The frequency of reporting is meant to indicate that there are high levels of xenophobia in South Africa, and victims of xenophobia are mainly represented through a dependency frame. Thus, “illegal immigrants” are consistently portrayed as victims of racially-motivated crimes rather than perpetrators. Nevertheless, they are concurrently portrayed as perpetrators of other criminal acts, especially drug dealing, fraud and confidence scams. The representations of the economic status of the victims (employed) and perpetrators (unemployed) align with representations of class struggle which were common in the dependency image (Kaplan, 2008).

Most media struggle with the definition of what constitutes a ‘foreigner.’ The main focus is on nationality as the larger part of the victims originates from Zimbabwe and Mozambique. However, it becomes clear through examining media reports on the events for a considerable

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<sup>1</sup> MMA is a renowned South African organization for media monitoring and research. It has recently changed its name into MMA, the ‘A’ referring to Africa. Until 2008, they were called MMP, P for project.

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period of time that 'foreigner' is actually a translation of the isiXhosa-word *amaKwerekwere* which means "somebody speaking an unfamiliar language." It is obviously easier for media to refer to foreigners by naming their nationality than trying to explain which non-Zulu or Xhosa speaking people are regarded as foreign (Frerks, 2008). At the closing event of the interaction between MPs of various committees and ministers on xenophobia, Bhengu said:

The media ... has (*sic*) a right to report on issues. The media has (*sic*) a responsibility to think about the possible consequences of the angle that they take when they report on issues. Before you become a reporter in the media, you are a South African. Before you focus on selling the news, you must think there are consequences (Merten, 2015).

#### **IV. Final Observations**

Taking the whole coverage of events into account, it is fair to state that the dominant discourse in the coverage of xenophobic violence is "South Africa has returned to the ways of the anti-apartheid struggle which set the townships on fire in the 1980ies." This includes all kinds of discourses such as "this is the familiar way in which black violence manifests itself in (South) Africa" and "South Africa is part of Africa after all." These discourses are constructed through representations of victims, perpetrators and events which are linked to classic images of Africa. However, the coverage of xenophobic violence was not framed through one fixed image. A new discourse on South Africa is being created that can best be described as 'the end of the rainbow nation,' and it is most closely related to the lost continent image focusing on security. The coverage of the 2010 Soccer World Championship in South Africa also had an emphasis on crime. Since then, there have been potential threats of attacks on migrants, which raises the question of whether the South African society has learned any lessons from the appalling events of the past at all. According to the Congress of South African Trade Unions, "What started off as attacks against 'illegal aliens' soon became attacks against immigrants

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legally here with their families, and then attacks on South Africans who 'looked foreign' because they were 'too dark' to be South African. This is the evil story of the beginnings of fascism ... and ethnic cleansing which has been practiced in other parts of the world” (Valji, 2003).

It is obvious that xenophobia is on the rise in South Africa and elsewhere around the world. Mainstream media feed fears and biases against foreign nationals by constantly hyping up inflated dangers that they pose to society's safety. Foreign nationals are painted as potential criminals or threats to the average citizen in South Africa, and this drives a growing number of gullible people into a sort of witch hunt using these groups as a convenient scapegoat. Moreover, mounting polarization, ethnic wars, widespread economic instability, rising poverty and the resultant impoverishment amongst a growing number of South Africans have only inflamed the xenophobia sentiments. Additionally, the unprecedented soaring disparity rate between the rich and the poor further extended the problem.

By pitting different races, classes, religions, nationalities and ideologies against each other domestically, the South African society will remain for some time stained with relentless, unending violence and bloodshed. What also aggravates the crisis is that attacks and reactions to foreigners are no longer limited to casual talks in 'real' life but have developed to active conversations on digital communication platforms. This has facilitated sharing the exchanges with people across many geographical locations, thus making the phenomenon expansive with far-reaching consequences. The anonymity, disembodiment and lack of inhibition that communication platforms provide allow for this.

It should be noted that there is an overlooked side of the often-cited narrative of the 'black-on-black' pattern of South African xenophobia as both black and white South Africans display xenophobic attitudes. Although there are many reported cases of violent attacks on foreigners

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by black South Africans, which creates a common ideology that black South Africans are xenophobic towards African immigrants, the attitudes of other racial groups toward black immigrants, and foreigners in general, are often neglected.

No one can deny that there is general improvement in reactive measures in the South African society, albeit with little change with regard to the underlying social and economic risk factors that have driven xenophobic attacks. With South Africa's broader crime problem and violent society, it is crucial that inroads be made. Current attempts to stop xenophobia by appeals to morality will not change the situation. What is needed, apart from the radical upgrading of education, is an initiative to challenge entitlement and generate a new attitude to work that emphasizes productivity, effort and enterprise – in short, a revival of that classic understanding of the dignity of work that is central to Catholic social thought.

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