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Xenophobic attacks in South Africa: an ethical response – Have we lost the underlying spirit of Ubuntu?

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Abstract

In this paper, I am troubled by the xenophobic situation that has come to characterise Black South Africans to the point of overshadowing any goodness South Africa has collectively achieved. The paper attempts to initiate an objective debate on the possible reasons, both for the acts of xenophobia and (passive) complicity with it. The paper closely analyses these reasons and suggests a way forward. The authors do not attempt to judge those labelled xenophobic but challenge politicians and the elite to come out and speak out against such attitudes and behaviour. In other words, political leaders are called upon to take a moral position and condemn the so-called xenophobic acts more strongly than they have done until now. Accordingly, I ask a question: "Have we lost the underlying spirit of Ubuntu "expressed in motho ke motho ka batho ba bang". The author offers his own understanding of this Ubuntu spirit, in the hope of making sense of what Ubuntu entails in the present context. In other words, the paper challenges political leaders, religious leaders and even traditional leaders in our communities to speak-out with one voice and defend the ideals of Ubuntu.

Key words: Xenophobia, foreigner, racist, Ubuntu, structural or institutional violence, proximate and ultimate causes.

Before I commence my reflections on the distressing subject of xenophobia the sheer irrationality of the latter needs to be emphasised. As in the case of the problem of evil itself – of which xenophobia is but one poignant manifestation – this very irrationality radically defies any satisfactory form of rational analysis. Indeed, philosophers of religion have spoken of the „mystery of evil". How can we as philosophers critically analyse a mystery? I am not unaware of this underlying element of futility at the heart of my investigation. Nonetheless, the horrendous phenomenon of the recent xenophobic attacks in our country presents itself as a philosophical and ethical challenge. One cannot simply remain silent and thereby contribute to this horror. Another point to clarify is that it is not my purpose to judge any particular group as such. Although philosophy takes the form of critical thinking (thinking as judgement) it is never meant to be focused on individuals but rather on their thinking or ideas

(or the acts directed by these ideas). In any case, this xenophobia is a national disgrace – we are all responsible for it.

The concept xenophobia

The concept xenophobia in its simplest form bears a number of negative meanings. First, xenophobia means dislike for foreign nationals and second, it bears the connotation of racial intolerance. Third, the concept xenophobia is derived from the Greek □ □ □ □ □ □meaning fear and □ □ □ □which refers to a stranger or foreigner. Therefore, the two concepts together refer to unreasonable fear of foreigners. Given the two meanings of this concept it is clear that the underlying definition describes the act or attitude of hatred or contempt toward others (i.e. foreigners and people of different races). If the above is adopted as a working definition, it is clear that there can be no other reason for xenophobic attitudes or acts than simple hatred for foreigners. The hatred directed to Black people from other countries is embedded within other concepts South Africans use to describe African foreigners such as „makwerekwere" (a concept generally used to refer to foreigners, „izifikanamthwalo", „matswantle", etc). While these other terms are discriminatory in nature within their respective languages, namely isiZulu and Sesotho, the term „makwerekwere" is deprecating to say the least. This paper attempts to expose the political dimension(s) of the concept xenophobia, with the hope of stimulating debate on the issue, thus facilitating a more harmonious coexistence with our foreign brothers and sisters. Sometimes political dimensions hide real issues which must be dealt with. This in turn disrupts crucial governmental issues. For now we wish to focus on what we consider evidence to support a theory to be discussed in the next section.

Xenophobia as Black on Black hatred

Our operational definition reveals that what is termed xenophobia in the South African context fails to qualify as such. I therefore argue that the phenomenon of attacks on Black people from other countries should be classified as racism and/or Black on Black hatred. I base this standpoint on the fact that South Africa is home to are all kinds of foreigners, from various countries: Europeans, Americans, South Americans, Australians, Africans, Asians and so forth. Yet there have been no attacks on any of these other (genuine) foreign nationals, i.e. non-African foreigners. The question I now ask is: If our definition is correct, why are these attacks targeting Blacks from other African states? We need to be clear that I am not in any way insinuating the legitimacy of these other non-African nationals being attacked; that is not our position. The point I am raising is that what I refer to as xenophobic attacks on other Africans may be a political cover-up. Put differently, there is more to the so-called xenophobic violence than meets the eye. The question I ask is why are Africans (Blacks) attacking other Africans (Blacks) from other African states? The attacks on Blacks are calculated and carefully planned. I am not aware of attacks by Blacks from neighbouring states such as Lesotho, Swaziland or Botswana. Again the question we ask is: Why? Why are these attacks by some Blacks on Blacks being referred to as xenophobic? What is the government doing to ensure that the root causes of this shameful and tragic phenomenon are understood and exposed?

Most people in South Africa and abroad believe uncritically that what we have seen recently in South Africa is indeed xenophobia. In other words, people have taken it for granted that, whoever came up with the idea, describing this situation as xenophobic constitutes a valid assessment. I question this assessment and therefore propose a robust debate that will help analyse the true nature of this problem. In order to do so, we need to ask who benefits if there is Black on Black violence. In our view, politicians in particular benefit because whenever there are the so-called xenophobic attacks the focus shifts from service delivery to addressing these attacks, thus eclipsing the priority of the former. When South Africa recently experienced these so-called xenophobic attacks, the government through the ministry of the South African Police Services vowed to investigate and bring to book perpetrators of this violence. Parliamentarians and cabinet ministers alike focused on these so-called xenophobic attacks. Yet no commission was ever set up to investigate. There has never been any report on the findings concerning previous xenophobic incidents. No wonder the snake has reared its ugly head again.

Xenophobia or political cover-up

Under normal circumstances, before we come to an assumption about a given problem, we need to identify the true nature of the problem. This is important for the obvious reason that if the problem is properly identified, then it becomes possible to identify its cause or causes. Adopting the Aristotelian methods, in order to understand something we need to understand different modes of causes. Applied to xenophobia two causes could be used to understand its underlying factors; these are ultimate and proximate causes. Ultimate cause refers to behaviour in terms of purpose or function the behaviour serves. Therefore, the purpose served by the xenophobic attitude or behaviour is in-group psychology or belonging. On the other hand, proximate causes are explanations in terms of immediate behaviour such as biological, psychological and intellectual basis of behaviour. This is best explained by Maslow"s hierarchy of needs. Culture comes to play satisfying these needs. This suggests that xenophobic people forms a kind of belonging to each other as they falsely believe they belong together since they can identify with each other. There has never been a focus on why South African Blacks are attacking other Blacks. Do these Black on Black violent attacks qualify as xenophobic acts? In August 2009, Jody Kollapen, chairperson of the Human Rights Commission, maintained that with regard to the 2008 xenophobic violence, "not enough was done to understand the cause of the attacks". According to Kollapen, not enough was done to establish the root cause of the so-called xenophobic violence. As stated earlier, politicians and government officials seem to be the ones benefiting from these acts of violence and we also stated that focusing on these so-called xenophobic acts is a pretext for shifting the focus away from Government"s primary task. We do not know what informed the conclusion that the current conflict and violence against the powerless qualifies as xenophobia. Like other South Africans, we listen to almost every news bulletin, and watch TV news every day. We are familiar with swiping statements like "foreigners take our jobs", "they impregnate our girlfriends" and "they sell drugs". These apparent explanations suggest the perception on the grassroots level that these so-called xenophobic attacks are related to socio-economic problems. This means that there are South Africans who fear that the

presence of foreign nationals disadvantages them economically. In other words, it is believed that foreigners pose a threat to many South Africans" ability to make money. Foreign nationals (Blacks from other African countries) are also a threat; they are feared by South Africans because they „take their jobs". It becomes clear that economic factors seem to be a contributing factor towards what we have termed Black-on-Black violence. This by implication means acknowledging that foreign nationals are better skilled and ready to take up jobs South Africans would not deign to do. These claims are not supported by evidence and some South Africans who seem sympathetic and distance themselves from violent incidents, believe foreigners should nevertheless go back to their countries, claiming that foreigners contribute toward negative service delivery (City Press, 18 July 2010, p4). These claims are provided as pathetic justifications for attacks on Blacks from neighbouring countries. The primary task of government is service delivery. In South Africa service delivery has been lacking to such an extent that boycotts and rioting have resulted, while government officials in strategic positions were busy positioning themselves for opportunities brought about by the Soccer World Cup recently hosted in this country. Besides, we do not understand how poor service delivery can be linked to foreign nationals living in South Africa. On the contrary, the World Cup which was hailed as an all-African event, was envisaged to bring Africans together. Yet even before the World Cup Final, threats on foreign nationals were reported and some people dismissed these as nonsense. However, foreigners were indeed attacked and within a week 12 foreigners were reported dead in the Western Cape (Khayelitsha in particular). Something does not add up here. Our past experience of Black-on-Black violence (labelled xenophobia), in 2008 was that these acts spread like wild fire. They start in one area and spread to other places in the country in a split second.

In their attempt to respond to the current violence against other Blacks, politicians keep on referring to the time most of them were exiled in different parts of Africa. This response is not different from the response that failed to curb previous attacks on fellow Africans, and we do not understand what makes politicians believe that this pathetic reasoning is going to make a difference this time when it did not do so in 2008. Assuming for a moment the validity of the reasons given for these attacks on foreign nationals, would that mean the means justifies the end? From a moral point of view this cannot be the case and so it follows that these glib reasons fail to provide a satisfactory explanation for the crisis.

Competition for the job-market

South Africa is experiencing difficulties in drawing its citizens into the job market. The crisis of rising unemployment is at the centre of the attacks. This crisis should be understood as being ethical in nature, one that cannot be resolved by politicians alone but calls for a moral response. It is our opinion that the current state of war, to use Hobbes" language, is only a symptom of the crisis and frustration experienced by most South Africans, particularly Black people. Working enables human being to satisfy their needs and, as Marx puts it, the first historical act is to create needs and satisfy those needs. Job security is what is bothering most working South Africans. People ask themselves whether they will be able to keep their jobs and feed their families; uncertainty is the order of the day. Foreign nationals pose a major threat as they are skilled and the most needed and exploited by capitalists. Given the fact that

they are willing to stay in South Africa at all costs, they are also willing to take anything the employer offers. In certain situations, foreign nationals occupy strategic positions. Yet there are South Africans who qualify to occupy the same positions, a state of affairs which causes conflict, and explains why some Black South Africans so struggle to find jobs. These claims must not be taken lightly. As far as these South Africans are concerned, foreign nationals are taking their jobs. However, we need to be realistic for in most strategic positions Black South Africans are found wanting, while foreign nationals are much better qualified. In such cases, the best candidate must still get the job. But morally, and this is crucial, if the best candidate is a foreign national or a previously advantaged person, then it is morally incumbent on the foreign candidate or the previously advantaged person to transfer knowledge and skills by way of training to a Black local person, who would thus qualify, at a later stage, to assume the position in question. This suggests that certain government policies, particularly Affirmative Action and Equity other policies, should be closely analysed and their moral implications debated. We are of the opinion that the missing link in government policies is an understanding of the moral implications of such policies.

Government policies are made because they address a certain social problem, which arises from societal needs. Sometimes policies may fail due to the lack of human capital, that is, people who can effectively make these policies work. In academia, for example, there may be academics who come with experience and knowledge the country does not have. These are may be outstanding academics who have arrived in this country from other African states. In order for Black South Africans to raise their standards, we believe the country is under a moral obligation to identify scholars and researchers from neighbouring African states who can impart knowledge and transfer skills to Black South Africans by training and mentoring them. However, a further moral requirement in this regard would be to set rules and to agree on a turnover period for training and the consequent facilitation of meaningful employment. In this way, South Africans would learn from foreign nationals while foreign nationals would benefit from transferring skills and imparting their knowledge. Once this is achieved, the Kantian maxim of treating others not merely as means to an end but also as ends in themselves, would be satisfied. If there are no terms of reference, conflict will arise and the government will have a problem. At the moment, government policies such as Affirmative Action are meaningless, because of poor implementation strategies. Basically, it appears as though socioeconomic and political issues can be identified as the cause of conflict. If this is the case, we believe socio-economic and political problems cannot be effectively managed by alienating people from each other. These problems, in our view, should rather be addressed by reviewing and revising some of our delivery programmes and strategies.

The World Cup has created a positive image of South Africa and South Africans, yet conversely, the lack of political willingness to address so-called xenophobic acts creates a negative image of us. This is serious; something needs to be done by our traditional, political and religious leadership. The problem facing South Africa at this stage is a lack of moral leadership. Within Black communities the youth have taken over, dictating the tone to everyone, while political, traditional and religious leaders stand aside and look. There is a breakdown of values that is causing moral values to disappear without trace from among

Black communities. It is as if we have lost the glue that holds the African people together, it is as if we have lost the Ubuntu spirit, and adopted a feeling of helplessness while looking on as young people alienate themselves from others in the community, destroying everything and completely losing all respect for authority, in the process. We probably also have an image of what a moral community, a moral government, or a moral society, should be. Ethics really has to do with all these levels – acting ethically as individuals, creating moral governments, and making our society as a whole moral in the way it treats everyone (more so foreign nationals). At the same time, we all have an image of our better selves, images of how we are when we act ethically or are "at our best". As stated earlier, this paper was provoked by the manner the current state of affairs among government officials has gone from bad to worse in terms of addressing the so-called xenophobic attacks in certain parts of our country. This „best selves‟ is better embraced by Ubuntu philosophy and values.

The way we see it, we have lost the values of Ubuntu, which we learnt from African culture. In this way they shaped who we are and what we are. Without these values, we cannot speak of Ubuntu. The next section outlines our understanding of Ubuntu philosophy and what it stands for. This will in turn elucidate the problem of Black-on-Black violence we have seen and experienced in South Africa. Against this background, we think that there is a need to challenge xenophobic acts morally and respond to these acts in a more appropriate way, namely in terms of the Ubuntu worldview.

The concept of Ubuntu

In this section, we will try to clarify the crisis against the backdrop of the Ubuntu ethos. But first we begin by defining the concept Ubuntu. The concept Ubuntu is so broad that its underpinning definition refers to and promotes a number of values and indeed a whole way of life. In what follows, we briefly discuss certain key points among various possible definitions. Basically, the concept Ubuntu is all-encompassing and it expresses values, attitudes and actions that are uniquely African. According to Maluleke (2000:20), Ubuntu as a way of being human in Africa is at the core of its humanness. Maluleke‟s definition suggests that central to the African worldview and culture is the idea of Ubuntu. Maluleke‟s definition is supported by Broodryk (2006:52) who emphasises the fundamental nature of values which constitutes Ubuntu. Broodryk concludes that the concept is derived from a worldview in which the values of humanness like caring, sharing, respect and compassion, are of cardinal importance in the living of a selfless life. In this way, one who has Ubuntu is an empathetic person, a person who empathises with the problems and suffering of others. In a sense Ubuntu is being neighbourly and concerned about the other. Furthermore, in Ubuntu, compassion binds people in such a way that even strangers feel they belong. Hospitality was the order of the day, a practice which ensured that guests and strangers were cared for and protected. An interesting implication of the concept of Ubuntu is that it renders the term „xenophobia‟ a misnomer in the present context, for, given the root meaning of xenophobia as fear of or prejudice against foreigners and the fact that the victims here are other Africans (all surely conceived to belong to one family or general community), these victims are not foreigners at all.

Apart from the insights of these and other definitions cited elsewhere, the concept of Ubuntu is also understood and defined as a non-racial philosophy or value system in terms of which all people are to be regarded and treated with respect. It therefore follows that the concept Ubuntu involves the fundamental treatment of all people as equals, worthy of respect. This principle harmonises with Immanuel Kant‟s deontological theory, encapsulated in the simple maxim: Never treat people as mere means to an end but always as ends.

Concluding remarks

We are now left with an agonising contradiction: the hatred and inhumanity of African xenophobia versus the community ethic and human solidarity of African Ubuntu. How has this darkness come to eclipse this sunshine? It should be noted that xenophobia does not imply an invalidation of the principles of Ubuntu, any more than Nazi or apartheid atrocities have the power to invalidate the principles of biblical Christianity. Sadly, human beings have an alarming propensity to treat their own kind with the most atrocious inhumanity. Just as the essential point of Ubuntu is humanity and to teach us what it means to live as humans in harmony with each other, so the biblical ethic is one of the realisation of our humanity. At the heart of the Christian gospel is a story of incarnation, of God becoming human, taking on humanity in its most fulfilled sense. Yet despite this, despite our moral traditions that can guide and inspire, we turn our backs on what it means to be human, we trample human dignity under foot.

It is significant that xenophobic atrocities did not occur under apartheid. Could this be explained by Ubuntu as the African community bonded and worked together under a „foreign oppression‟? It is precisely under a Black government that these unspeakable violations of human integrity and community have occurred, a Black government that has morally failed its people. Both the racist agenda of apartheid and the self-enriching cartel of a Black government that has failed its people have consequently had the effect of dehumanising our people, or at least the most desperate among us. Each has inflicted a form of structural or institutional violence on its subjects, in terms of which unjust features of the political system have violated the dignity and integrity of the people it was meant to serve. We live with the immoral legacy of the brutal system of apartheid, horrifyingly attested to by our inordinately high violent crime rate. Now the mechanisms of a democratic alternative, designed to redress past injustice, seem to be inadequate (whether in principle or in terms of their application). This is how we can only begin to make sense of our xenophobic shame. Having dehumanised our people – and poverty most assuredly dehumanises – we cannot expect them to behave humanely. Moving forward will involve all who call themselves South Africans. Strategies of redress will have to be rethought – critically rethought (hence the abiding relevance of philosophy) and each citizen‟s attitudes and values examined and revised where necessary, the individual, as an ethically accountable agent and member of society, also being a subject of the political community. The beginnings of a tentative solution to the problem of xenophobia (and crime generally) and of the healing of our nation, at the ethical, political and societal levels, must surely lie in retracing our steps back to our human wholeness via the well-trodden route of an Ubuntu ethos of human solidarity, compassion and practical care.

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