

## Ubuntu's philosophy and the challenge of Xenophobia: towards peace in Africa

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### Abstract

Xenophobic attacks in South Africa have put to question the authenticity and veracity of Ubuntu philosophy. Remarkably, Ubuntu as a normative philosophy, promotes and conveys the openness and availability of the individuals for the benefits of others, especially in the paradigm of "I" and "others." This philosophy unequivocally presents an African world view of care for others, the affirmation of the existence of others and the participation of others. Altruism, which is the western version of Ubuntu, encourages show of compassion, generosity, care and living with others. Yet, the resurgence of the xenophobic attack is a signpost of misguided individuals who have lost the traits of personhood and otherness, which are central in Ubuntu. Xenophobia breeds violence, hate, destruction of lives and property and threatens peace in Africa. Cognizant of this asymmetry between Ubuntu philosophy and xenophobia lineaments, this work attempts to restate a mutual need for African togetherness and maps a commitment to Ubuntu norms.

### Keywords:

Ubuntu philosophy; Xenophobia; peace.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The preponderance of peace in Africa emanates from the fundamental values of togetherness, existence of others, solidarity and communion of individuals. These values bespeak that man as an individual is not self-sufficient. This platitude of communion incites in African society that no single person is an isolated individual. As a commonplace, truism ubuntu depicts the "otherness" in humanity. An individual was given birth to by another person, from infancy through adulthood, taught by another person. This axiomatic inclination nurtures brotherhood, mutuality, trust, accommodation, tolerance and shared joy and sadness; (Ramose 1999; Metz 2007; Asouzu 2004). These values in Africa subsist and are articulated in Ubuntu. Jamia Malan on the same line of reasoning asserts "every single human being only becomes a truly being by means of relationship with other beings" (Best, 2006: 26). This assertion creates a durable foundation that serves as a basic condition for human dignity and human conglomeration in Africa.

Flowing from this, Ubuntu becomes a normative philosophy that preserves the fabric of African society and encourages peaceful co-existence. The promotion and sustenance of peace in Africa has its greatest challenge in xenophobic attitudes prevalent in South Africa and some parts of African societies; which culminate into violence, killings, destruction of lives and property. It also translates, extends and metamorphoses into hostilities against non-natives and foreigners. The concern of this work probes the sources and causes of these xenophobic attitudes and specifically beacons on the Xenophobes to imbibe Ubuntu's phrase "a person is a person through the other person". This becomes the bedrock for peace in Africa.

## 2 THE DISCOURSE ON THEMATIC UNDERSTANDING OF UBUNTU

The method consists of design, procedure, and data analysis.

The Bantu and Nguni languages are prevalently used in the East, Central and Southern African societies and in their linguistic vocabulary the word "Ubuntu" is captured. In Izulu language it symbolizes being human. The Shona language of Zimbabwe, a variation is "Unhu" meaning humanness. "Ubuthosi" is Ndebele language of Zimbabwe meaning being human. Botswana's word "Botho" expresses the similar meaning, in Tanzania, it is expressed as "Bumuntu", in Congo it is "Bomoto"; in Angola it is gimuntu; Malawi conceives it as "umunthu". In Mozambique it is "vumunty" and Uganda used it as "umuntu." (Samakange and Samkange 1980, Mugumbate & Nyanguru 2013). The pre-occupation of this paper is hinged on the prestige, confidence, and distillation/attached to Ubuntu by these African societies.

By simple estimation "Ubuntu" captures and conveys the meaning of the existential and essential reality of what Africans conceived of what is human. Desmond Tutu's appreciation and articulation of this word in South African societies speak of the essence of being human. Tutu's definition speaks volumes in these words "when we want to give high praise to someone we say, "yu, unobuntu;" Hey, so and so has Ubuntu, then you are generous you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate; you share what you have, it is to say, my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in XXX, we belong to a bundle of life" (Tutu 2000: 3, Best 2006: 26, Mboti, 2015:127). The representation of Tutu encapsulates Africans as extraordinary communitarians and harmony, bound collectivists who are dependent on each other's goodwill. (Mboti, 2015: 127). Also, Mboti template speaks "This superstructural script adheres to a specific normative and succinct account of Ubuntu that explains how persons, particularly Africans, achieve meaningful, ethical and full humanity. Humanity, so asserts this elegant account, is given to a person by and through other persons. That is humanity is a goodwill gift" (Mboti, 2015: 127).

In another perspective Ted Metz's (2007) construction of Ubuntu betrays a moral percussion in this statement; an action is right just in so far as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on goodwill; an act is wrong/to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposite of division and ill-will (338). The distinctive word here is 'goodwill'. Again explicable indications of Metz's goodwill are aptly stated. One has a relationship of good-will, insofar as one; wishes another person well (conation). Believes that another person is worthy of help (cognition); aims to help

another person (intention); acts so as to help another person (volition); acts for the other's sake (motivation), and finally, feels good upon the knowledge that another person has benefited and feels bad upon learning she has been harmed (Affection) ( 336).

The African web of comprehension of Ubuntu captivates and highlights basic maxims that Ubuntu captures. Samkange and Samkange inculcate these maxims clearly in these words, The first maxim asserts that to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them and the second maxim means that if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life. The third maxim as a principle deeply embedded in traditional king owed his status, including all the powers associated with it to the will of the people under him "(Samkange and Samkange, 1980; Mugumbate, and Nyanguyu, 2013: 84). Most interesting is the phenomenal variances upon which Ubuntu could be conceived. "some of these are sympathy, compassion, benevolence, solidarity, hospitality, sharing, openness affirming available, kindness, caring, harmony, interdependence, obedience, collectively and consciousness". Ubuntu is opposite to vengeance, opposite to confrontation, opposite to retribution, Ubuntu values life, humanness, harmony and reconciliation (Mugumbate and Nyanguyu, 2013: 85). Undoubtedly, Ubuntu philosophy exudes communal love and humaneness in Africa. It, therefore, spikes the next phenomenon which is anti-Ubuntu that is xenophobia.

### 3 UNDERSTANDING XENOPHOBIA

By etymology, xenophobia is a derivative of a Greek word "Xeno" meaning stranger or foreigner and "phobia" meaning "fear" (Mngomezulu & Dube, 2019). A combination simply put stands for fear of strangers or foreigners. Alkiviadou opines that "it is hatred for foreigners" embodied in discriminatory attributes and behaviours and often culminates in violence abuses of all types and exhibition of hatred (2018: 5). In the words of Oluwaseun Tella, socio-psychologically, South Africans see themselves in the image of their colonizers, where the white was perceived as superior and black was bad and evil. This metamorphosed into South Africans exceptionalism in the post-apartheid era (2016: 144). This exceptionalism makes xenophobes possess distinct traits which are discriminatory attitudes and racists outpour directed to black migrants who are Africans. This bespeaks that the Xenophobes do not have adequate and sufficient knowledge of their hatred against the black foreigners they hate.

In another frame of reasoning, the rationale for the attitude arises from fear of loss of social status and identity, a threat perceived or real, to citizen economic success; a way of reasoning the national crisis (Harris, 2002: 29). Scholars, theorists, and writers on Xenophobia seem to suggest that one source of pressure which encourages xenophobic attacks to arise from poor intercultural information. His frustration identifies indisposition to others and frustration caused by laziness and despondency of these xenophobic attitudes. Addressing this complex racial vagueness, negative and ill-perceived entanglement, three hypotheses have been propounded to unravel the intention and the consequential expectations of the xenophobes. Neocosmas draws strength from these hypotheses as he notes "since 1990s, various government departments, members of parliament and the police among others have perceived foreigners as threat to the survival of the South African State. This speaks enormously on how African foreigners are perceived and treated, and being placed by South African natives. They are perceived as freeloaders who benefit from South Africa's resources and offer nothing positive in return" (Akinola, 2010: 39).

### 4 HYPOTHESES OF XENOPHOBIA

The pieces of literature on the rationale for xenophobic attacks in South Africa are numerous. But Harris' article titled "Xenophobia: A New Pathology for a new South Africa" speaks incisively on these hypotheses as being the justification for xenophobia in South Africa". These are isolation hypothesis, scapegoating and bio-cultural hypotheses. A simple understanding of the isolation hypothesis is captured by Matsinhe who observed what he termed "South African Exceptionalism" in the post-apartheid era. He observed that during the flourishing of the colonial apartheid regime, South Africa detached itself from the rest of Africa which was occasioned by technological development and infrastructural enormity. The South Africans perceived themselves within the ambiance of the Europeans and whites. Other colored people especially the blacks were seen as bad, evil and wretched. Also, few African immigrants in South Africa enjoyed minimal rights and were not adequately protected by the laws of the land. (Tella, 2004: 144). The isolation hypothesis led to the modern Afro-phobia which also urged the South Africans to see themselves not as Africans but whites. Steenkamp observed "while anti-immigrant hostility was non-apparent before the dawn of democracy was because there were few non-South African residents, the end of apartheid and influx of African immigrants sparked anti-immigrant hostility in the country" (Steenkamp, 2009, Tella 2016: 144)

On the other arm, the scapegoating hypothesis speaks of xenophobia in South Africa as arising from the blame game, where the citizens of South Africa presumed that the strangers and immigrants are the sources of their misfortunes. This hypothesis further espouses that the majority democratic rule had promised better opportunities and lives for all South Africans, yet they still remain in abject poverty and dehumanized state. Tella in line with Neocosmos observed that various important government departments, members of parliament and the police, among others, have perceived foreigners as a threat to the survival of the South African nation. Foreigners are seen as a direct threat to development, social services, and national stability. They are perceived as free loaders who benefit from South Africa's resources and offer nothing positive in return (Tella, 2004; 145), (Akinola, 2010: 56 - 57). Incisively Dodson and Oelofse observe, the primary cause of xenophobia is economic survival illustrated by competition for employment, housing, social services, and amenities. Stereotypes such as illegal migrants, job takers, criminals, and disease agents are imposed on foreigners. It is, therefore

not surprising that there is a feeling of fear and hatred towards foreigners and that they have been targeted on this basis (Akinola, 2010: 124 - 48).

The third hypothesis of xenophobia is known as biocultural differences. Tella narrates that, language, dress, stature, birthmarks and other characteristics make it easy for South Africans to recognize foreigners and create a notion of us and them. Foreigners are also appeared reluctant to assimilate South African culture, perhaps as a result of xenophobic treatment (2014: 145). It is worthy of note here that a combination of these hypotheses presents an apt exposé of xenophobia in South Africa.

## **5 HIGHLIGHTS FROM SOUTH AFRICAN PRESIDENTS, GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, SECURITY AGENCIES AND MEDIA.**

Apart from the hitherto examined hypotheses, substantive evidence reveals some xenophobic undertones which emerged from South African Authorities. Human Rights watch hinted "in general, South Africa's public culture has become increasingly xenophobic and politicians often make unsubstantiated and inflammatory statements that the 'deluge' migrants as being responsible for the current crimes, unemployment and even the spread of diseases. As the unfounded perception that migrants are responsible for a variety of social ills grow, migrants have increasingly become the target of abuse at the hands of South African citizens as well as the members of the policy, the army and the Department of Home Affairs (Tella, 2014: 149, Human Rights Watch, 1998: 4).

Arising from this statement former Presidents of South Africa, Late Nelson Mandela hinted that undocumented foreigners are responsible for the crime in South Africa (Tella, 2014: 14). Jacob Zuma, former South Africa President while addressing an audience at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg at the implementation of the e-toll system on Gaweng in October 2013 said "we cannot think like Africans in Africa. This is Johannesburg. It is not national road (sic) in Malawi" (Tella 2014: 150, Tella & Ogunnubi, 2016: 145 - 63). In April 2015 Jacob Zuma unveiling the monument of South African communist party Chris Hani said: "we therefore urge our people to treat those who are in our country legally with respect and ubuntu" (Tella 2014: 150, Eye witness news, 2015).

Also, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, leader of Inkatah Freedom Party and former Home Affairs Minister remarked: "if we as South African are going to compete for scarce resources with millions of aliens who are pouring into South Africa, we can bid goodbye to our reconstruction and development programme" (Klotz 2012, 199). Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithin addressing the pongolog community said "I would like to ask the South African Government to help us. We must deal with our own lice, in our heads let us take out ants and leave them in the sun. We ask that immigrants must take their bags and go where they come from" (translated from Isizulu to English by Enews channel Africa CNCA 2015).

According to Danso and Mc Donald (2001) and Smith (2010) South African mass media, especially the print moving often portray foreigners in a negative light. Derogatory labels such as illegal immigrants, job stealers, criminals, and drug traffickers are common in the pages of South African Newspapers (Tella 152) The South Africa police is not exempted from being an accomplice in the xenophobic misdemeanor, Masuku notes that the police attitude is also manifested in violence and abuse of foreigners. (19-24) (Tella 152)

## **6 UNDERSTANDING PEACE**

The phenomenal import of peace in human existence and society is imperative upon which man sustains himself (Eyo & Udofia 2011). This is that rationale for several scholars and philosophers of peace opined that despite large volumes of literature written in this area and the practical deployments of the various methodologies' peace has been elusive (Eyo, 2017:146). As a phenomenon that impacts on human existence, Renato Martino opined that peace "is not a preposterous, nor a utopian dream. It is rather, an attainable reality which even though just beyond our realization is still a worthy and reachable goal" (Eyo 2011:21).

In Africa, Philosophical frameworks on Peace have been proposed and developed by "Ephraim Essien (Debellibilism), Jim Unah (Phenomenology of Tolerance), Campbell Momoh (Conflictology) and Chigbo Ekweolo (Ndu mmili Ndu Azu)" (Eyo, 2017:146). But in the General paradigm of understanding, peace from social dimensions pre-empt harmony and concordance within human social-political volitions and their interactions. From a global perspective, peace is conceived as the universalization of harmony among nations. Philosophically, peace as a concept includes a state of tranquility of the mind and extrinsic calmness (Eyo: 2019, 12). The research at this juncture examines the crux of this essay titled "Ubuntu Philosophy and Xenophobia: Towards Peace in Africa".

## **7 UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY AND XENOPHOBIA: TOWARDS PEACE IN AFRICA.**

The interpretive framework of Ubuntu philosophy and the destructive complexion of xenophobia as espoused in the essay intuit that African normative consciousness of "brotherhood and other person" has been besieged, by uncomplimentary negative attitudes of xenophobia. By moral and existential standards, xenophobia becomes the watershed of the philosophical discourse of African brotherhood, communitarianism, and peace. What follows at this footing, is that Africa desires peace and harmony to reconstruct her enduring conviviality of the 'other person'. The Ubuntu phrase "I am because of who we all are" emphasizes "being self through others".

Thoughts of xenophobia espouse the epitome of individualism, materialism, and parochialism. Thoughts of Ubuntu vanward collectivism, communitarianism, brotherhood and being oneself through other persons. Implicitly, the recurrence and regency of xenophobic attacks on other Africa-migrants open the cocoon of conflicts, crises, violence, and mistrust among Africans. Regrettably, the elites, scholars and nation-states leaders in Africa, have not accorded attention to the consequences upon which Africa could face amidst wars, diseases, poverty, lack, and corruption. When xenophobia is allowed unabated then the root of peaceful co-existence would be abashed in Africa.

Past and present indications of violence reveal a turbulent Africa; turbulence across Africa reveals that Africa ought to work out a paradigm towards peace (Eyo & Essien 2017). Gilles Yabi paints Africa's troubles aptly "Africa's most populated country Nigeria is by far the most affected by terrorism and the dominant form of violence in recent years. Book Haram was the most violent terrorist group in the world, killing more people than even the Islamic state. He reiterated with emphasis, "Boko Haram is still active and relies almost exclusively on suicide attacks on easy targets in Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad". The group has taken advantage of weak state control of the border between Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad to move fighters and weapons across these countries of Africa. It is a fact that West Africa, the Sahel Region, and North Africa are caught in between the terrorist presence of the well-established Al- Qaeda and quickly expanding SIL" (7). There are attacks in Bamako, Mali, Burkina, Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire. Somalia remains an epicenter of insecurity and violence in the horn of Africa. Sudan and South Sudan Nation are not exempted from these violent crises which have ravaged Africa. There are also skirmishes and ethnic cleansings as witnessed in Central Africa. Then the recent herculean xenophobia in South Africa which has caused deaths, killings, and reprisal attack. Notably, this phenomenon (Xenophobia) is an outgrowth of fundamentalism which emerged in post-apartheid behavior found in the notion that person(s) especially Africans from other countries are foreigners/strangers to their community and as such deserve no rights of fair and hospitable treatments (Okoro and Nkama, 2018: 118).

The perplexing question in all these scenarios in Africa is; can Africans work towards peace in the face of these adversities? This essay answers that the attainment of peace in Africa through the instrumentality of Ubuntu philosophy is a possibility. Innocent Asouzu opined that "Ubuntu is being human, the perpetual and constant will to demonstrate, show humanness, humane, respectful and polite attitude towards other" (2017: 208). This is the answer to peace in Africa. Basic indices are pertinent towards peace in Africa, amidst Ubuntu philosophy and xenophobia. Firstly, there is a need for profound measures to be taken to established and sustained peace in a xenophobic environment. This could be possible not only by the absence and cessation of hostilities but by establishment, institution, and sustenance of peace in African sub-consciousness. Secondly, there is a need for a paradigm shift in understanding ubuntu and xenophobia especially by knowing the imputations of these two notions. It is apparent to conceive this new paradigm as upon which conflict is not seen as open violence but as a result of the systemic oppression inherent in a society's cultural, economic and political structures. This paradigm shift requires peace that will tackle the socio-economic drivers of conflict for example corruption, gender inequality and unequal distribution of resources. The advocates and participants of xenophobia opined that the migrants and strangers have whittled their economic resources and steal their jobs and women. The issue here points clearly to a breakdown of governance and insensitivity of the nation's leaders to its citizens. The leaders and politicians have blatantly refused to promote the wellbeing of their citizens. To work towards peace, there is a need to tackle this menace holistically, politically, economically and socially.

Working towards peace in Africa requires the inclusion of civil society organizations in peace talks to bolster the legitimacy of the negotiation and improve public buy-in; if citizens feel that their interests have been properly represented then they are more likely to feel a sense of responsibility to maintain the peace. (Bwanyire, 2019). It is feasible to work towards peace in Africa by the direct use of formal negotiations, observer's status and official consultative forums to more indirect form such as informal consultations, public platforms, and awareness of peace programmes. The other aspect of peace programme which has been neglected is the non-inclusion of women in the peace negotiation programme. Across Africa, as a continent women are conspicuously excluded in peace programmes, the way forward is not limited to the inclusion of women in peace programme rather women need to take control of peace process and make the substantive input in an environment where they are compelled to adhere to the patriarchal impositions. By extension, peace programme in Africa must take into consideration all aspects of gender issues and the dynamics that underline the relationship between masculinity and femininity.

In another perspective, attainment of peace in Africa fails because of lack of emphasis on justice. The pursuit of justice is indispensable in peace programme especially where it is observed that the indigenous justice system is culturally effective and efficacious. These positions fit squarely into the rationale for providing a solution to xenophobic attacks. The thrust of the paper imputes that cognizance of the Ubuntu philosophy and its nuances, xenophobia is alien to African consciousness and ought to be discarded and discouraged and abandoned. Indisputably, Chinomona (2016) submits that to work towards peace in Africa in the face of entanglement of xenophobia with the Ubuntu dictates, "the spirit of Ubuntu should be encouraged at all cost for peace in South Africa and the whole of Africa. Without equivocation, this paper anchors its thrust on the statement that xenophobia challenges berate and molest the norms of Ubuntu: it is the reinvigoration of Ubuntu philosophy that xenophobia can be made extinct.

## 8 CONCLUSION

The thematic discourse of this essay is explicit on the range of coverage within Africa as a continent and Africans as the people. The examination of Ubuntu philosophy and xenophobia attacks pre-eminently as observed in South Africa expose the intolerance of Africans to other African immigrants. The exposé of the rationale of xenophobia is not enough justification for this inhumane treatment by the advocates of xenophobia.

The essay, however, is a quick reaction to the outburst of xenophobic violent attacks experienced in South Africa Urban Cities. This paper points incisively to the African political leaders to show enormous concern and care for the welfare of their citizens and bring up long term initiatives at strengthening African States policies and capabilities. Current challenges of xenophobia must be entirely condemned with utmost moral, social and political incisiveness fundamentally, even in the face of xenophobia Africa must survive and Africans ought to work towards peace in Africa.

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