

*Xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa: A
Theological Reflection*



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1. Introduction

Since the dawn of democracy, many people from other parts of the African continent fled to South Africa. They fled their own troubled countries to make a new beginning and became refugees or immigrants among South Africans. In Africa, migration is a reality that we cannot escape. The majority of immigrants from Africa are displaced around the world as a result of economic crises often exacerbated by social and political factors that force them to leave their homes and countries of origin. The sad twist in the refugee tale is the hostility and xenophobia that they endure. The post-apartheid South African Constitution is founded in the principle of inclusiveness. The Constitution guarantees rights and protections for both local and foreign nationals living in South Africa, including protection from discrimination, protection of liberty and access to socio-economic rights. However, South African citizens have been exhibiting xenophobic tendencies towards foreign nationals.

At the heart of South Africa's complex problem with xenophobia, is the loaded meaning of the term "foreigner". The term foreigner in South Africa usually refers to Asian and African non-nationals. Other foreigners, particularly those from America and Europe, go unnoticed and often referred to as "tourists" or "expats". Due to this reason, some South Africans are hesitant to refer to the attacks on foreign national as xenophobic. They resolve that the attacks on foreign nationals are more afrophobic than xenophobic. Indeed, as argued by Shabalala (2015), the violent attacks against foreign nationals could be referred to as an expression of Afrophobia, however, given the deep sense of dislike for foreign nationals from other African countries, I prefer to regard the attacks as a form of xenophobic violence.

The question that we need to ask ourselves as South African citizens is: how can xenophobia exists in a country often presented as the model of reconciliation and hope for the African continent? The xenophobic attacks have inspired a great deal of soul-searching in South Africa as analysts seek to explain why the "rainbow nation" has become so unstable. As a result, scholarly literature has emerged that explores many causes of xenophobia. It warrants us to ask the following questions: What are the challenges brought about by this present situation? What is the sole responsibility of the Church? In view of this, this paper will look on to promote mutual co-existence between local people and foreign nationals.

To address the above mentioned-question I will draw on Liberation Theology. I will start the discussion by making some general comments on the phenomenon of xenophobia within the context of violence in South Africa and highlight the underlying reasons for the appearance

of xenophobia. After this description, I will consider some theological perspectives on what ought to be done to address the issue of xenophobia. Lastly some recommendations will be made on how the church can address the issue of xenophobia.

2. Xenophobic attacks in South Africa

It has been contended that xenophobia in South Africa manifest itself in various ways, from exploitation of foreign nationals in places of work through cheap labour, to physical attacks Black South African citizens in particular exhibit high levels of xenophobia towards fellow Africans, subjecting them to different forms of discrimination. Between 2000 and 2008, 67 people died in what was identified as xenophobic attacks (www.saha.org.za). A third of those who died in 2008 were South African citizens. The majority of the 2008 xenophobic victims died in Gauteng, KZN, Western Cape, and to a lesser extent in other provinces (www.saha.org.za). In January 2015, a Somali shop-owner shot and killed a 14 year old boy during an alleged robbery in Soweto, south of Johannesburg and it is said that this incident triggered the xenophobic attacks and looting of foreign owned shops (www.saha.org.za).

In March 2015, xenophobic attacks occurred in the Limpopo Province. Violence erupted in the Ga-Sekgopo village, after a foreign shop owner was found in possession of a mobile phone belonging to a local man who was killed, and villagers demanded answers as to how the shop owner got the phone. Villagers protested and threatened to burn foreigners alive and then looted them. After this incident, foreigners in the outskirts of Limpopo left their shops. In April 2015, foreign shops were torched and looted in KZN. This happened in Umlazi, KwaMashu, and Verulam outside Durban (Mail & Guardians, May 2015).

Over the years, South Africa has received foreign nationals from different African countries, including Mozambique, Angola, Somalia, Burundi Rwanda and Congo. Many of them fled from political and humanitarian crises in their countries. The xenophobic tendencies against foreigners have only been documented since 1994 (McKnight, 2008, 51). Many reasons for the xenophobic attacks have been offered and different scholars have tried to explain and contextualise the concept of xenophobia within the South African context. They have identified different theoretical explanations, for example, the “scapegoating hypothesis”. According to this hypothesis, rejection of foreigners in South Africa is a result of limited resources such as housing and employment. There is a common belief among certain South Africans that every job given to a foreign national is one less job for a South African (SAMP,2015, 10).

This is not something new. Foreigners in South Africa have always been accused of “stealing” jobs from South Africans, and these are stereotypes that are not grounded in reality. The “economic threat” posed by immigrants does not appear to be based on personal experiences of any South Africa losing a job due to a foreign national. Immigrant workers have become scapegoats for frustrations arising from persistent socio-economic inequalities which can dangerously take form of seeing “them and us”. They are also exploited in low-paid jobs, especially illegal immigrants, who can be blackmailed into accepting whatever salary and conditions imposed, for fear of being deported.

In 1994, the former minister of Home Affairs depicted immigrants as a threat to the success of the Reconstruction and Development Programme and to the security of all South Africans. He said that the immigrants were responsible for criminal activities such as drug trafficking and prostitution. He also condemned South Africans who were offering protection to immigrants and those who employed them (SAMP, 2008: p15). In 1995, a report by the South African Catholic Bishop’s Conference on xenophobia in South Africa concluded that there is no doubt that there is a very high level of xenophobia in South Africa. It also highlighted the fact that many immigrants have been lumped together as illegal immigrants and that the whole situation of demonising immigrants was fuelling the xenophobic phenomenon (SACB Report, 1995:p19).

The patterns of contemporary exclusion and violence have much in common with the patterns of colonial domination. The “us” and “them” concept achieved more sophisticated status during the apartheid era. The reality is that foreign nationals in South Africa have encountered a society that is grappling with the legacy of apartheid. The apartheid system turned Black South Africans into “foreign natives” in their own country. The motivation for alienating and excluding Black South Africans was a result of the apartheid racist political system. Therefore, black South Africans were seen as a threat to the country’s political stability and industrial peace (Landau, 2011: p5). The purpose here is not to decry the unjust system, but to highlight the antecedents to contemporary socio-political configuration that shape the 2015 xenophobic attacks.

On the annual celebration of Africa Day in 2001, the former president, Thabo Mbeki urged all South Africans to be vigilant against xenophobia. He blamed the levels of xenophobia on the lack of knowledge about the African continent, international isolation and focus on Europe (Mogekwa, 200:p21).

South Africa is currently facing a backlash from the rest of the world over the targeting of more African immigrants in a wave of xenophobic violence. However, xenophobia is not only a South African problem; it is a general worldwide problem. There are also some European countries that are considered as xenophobic and they are concerned about unrestricted immigrations from Africa and Asia. Some xenophobic parties in Europe want tighter border controls, and they are demanding deportation of minorities. Some merely call for greater national autonomy within the European Union (EU), whereas others are petitioning to quit the EU altogether, in order to resolve the supposed immigration crisis (Global Research, 2015: p4).

Xenophobia in Europe is also equally harsh against other European or white immigrants, particularly Greeks, Ukrainians and Romanians. In Switzerland, xenophobia is mostly directed against immigrants from the former Yugoslavia and in the Netherlands the xenophobic parties are particularly hostile towards Muslims, especially Indonesians and Somalis. Italy is said to be more xenophobic towards Southern Italians than towards Muslims immigrants (Global Research, 2015: p4). In January 2015, more than five thousand Germans marched against Muslim immigrants in Dresden and other German cities, in reaction to the influx of Middle Eastern and Arab immigrants into their country. In 2013, four Jews were killed in France (Paris) in what was identified as xenophobic attacks (www.algemeiner.com). The issue of xenophobia is a serious social quandary. It also conveys an urgent challenge to the ethical sensitivity of religious leaders and laity.

2. Towards a biblical theology of xenophobia

Xenophobia is a crisis that impels us to return to the Bible and search for the Word of God that is relevant to what we are experiencing today. As South Africans, our emergence from socio-political crises has deepened our interpretive crisis. We tend to forget what we have learnt from the struggle against apartheid. The struggle against apartheid was a vital resource for our return and rereading of the Bible, and the struggle for justice must now become our resource for the reading of the Bible.

In the *Torah* God gave the Israelites a command on how they should treat foreigners: “When an alien resides with you, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love aliens as yourselves” (Leviticus: 19:33). Furthermore, in the Book of Exodus, it says: “You shall not oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23:9). Caring for strangers was a key

element in the *Torah*. The divine command to love and care for strangers was an act of hospitality. The command of love for foreigners in Israel emerged from two foundations. One, the Israelites had also been strangers in a foreign land. Secondly, it corresponds with God's way of being and acting in history, He is the God of justice, favours the most vulnerable. "God executes justice for the orphans, widows and strangers..." (Deuteronomy 10:18). Solidarity with the marginalised and excluded corresponds to God's being and acting in history. The command for a just treatment of foreigners in the above mentioned biblical texts recognises the humanity of others.

The story of the slavery and liberation of the Israelites became the core of their annual liturgy of remembrance and gratitude. The xenophobic sentiment should also enable South Africans to look at the role non-South Africans played in the struggle against apartheid. It was the people outside South Africa who sacrificed their security and decided to be in solidarity with the suffering black South Africans. Many of the ruling party leaders were in exile outside South Africa. They were in Mozambique, Zimbabwe Tanzania, etc. The struggle against apartheid might have not been successful without these nations' sacrificial positions.

These are fine biblical texts for addressing the issue of xenophobia in South Africa. However, in our theological reflection it should be noted that the Bible happens to be a disconcerting book. It also contains disturbing multiplicity of voices that frequently complicates the theological hermeneutics. For example, in the Old Testament there are also statements with a distinct flavour of national xenophobia, such as the classical text of the liberation (post- exilic period) of the Israelites: "Proclaim liberty throughout all land unto all inhabitants...as for male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire female and male slaves. You may also acquire them from the aliens residing with you and from their families...and they may be your property (Leviticus 25:44-46). In other words, in the epilogues of Ezra and Nehemiah foreign wives and their children are thrown away, exiled as sources of impurity and contamination of the faith and culture of the Israelites. In the process, this demonstrates the presence of xenophobia in the Bible.

3. Recommendations and Conclusion

While we understand and appreciate the struggles that people in communities are going through, there is no justification to vent their frustration and anger to foreigners among whom are defenceless children and women. The attack of foreigners goes against the spirit of *Ubuntu*. Time has come for the government, the church community leaders and the other stakeholders to join hands in rooting out xenophobia, to work together and to find a solution to stop xenophobia. Robust anti-xenophobia discussions at community and national levels between local people and foreign nationals can also help in bringing unity among people of different nationalities.

In South Africa, churches played a central role in transition of democracy. In the early 1990's, they undertook peace initiatives through joint meetings with the politicians. They also played a central role in Truth and Reconciliation Commission through counselling the victims of human rights violation and ensuring effective public engagement. However, since South Africa's democratization in 1994, the religious sector has not been actively involved in addressing social and economic challenges. The xenophobia crisis is a call for churches to lament suffering and injustice towards foreign nationals. The church can play a vital role in making life worth living for victims of xenophobic attacks in South Africa. It should draw contemporary social and political concerns into its rites. However, lament should not end in despair; it should end in affirmation and praise that are hard won.

In conclusion, the church should work in partnership with the government to help and allow the immigrants to enjoy the right to live where they desire, to move freely and to enjoy social services offered to other citizens. These rights are not well known and respected by the public and some officials. There should also be debates on how the church can advocate for minimum wage requirement for all employee including foreigners. There is a tendency for many foreigners who are disparate to make a living, to work at exploitative rates beneath the minimum wage and this often results in unfair competition for casual labour.