

XENOPHOBIA AND AFRICAN UNITY

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Abstract

World history has shown that the centrality of sustainable unity among individuals, societies, nations and countries for the realization of desirable social order and holistic development is not contestable. Consistent with this belief, some thinkers who seek solutions to the various developmental crises in Africa are quick to identify “unity of African people and nations” as the requirement for effective development and desirable progress in Africa. Some of these thinkers often times pin down the ordeal of African unity and lack of development on the antecedents of colonialism and neo-colonialism. It seems that less emphasis is being laid on the role of xenophobia in the quest for African unity. Using the method of critical analysis and reflection on political issues and events in Africa, this research paper identified xenophobia as a huge stumbling block towards the attainment of African unity; it also identified, besides other causes of xenophobic tendencies, the lack of proper knowledge of the unique and self-identity of the various tribes and nations in Africa as the remote cause of xenophobic action. Thus, it proposed the advent of an African Orientation Agency that will create enough room for a large membership that will draw from the various tribes and nations in Africa. In its duties, this agency will be able to achieve certain goals—It will rationally domicile and disseminate the knowledge of the self-identity of the various tribes in Africa to Africans. As the saying goes— “the fear of the unknown is far greater than the fear of the known”. This knowledge and awareness will greatly reduce xenophobia with its tendencies; it will predispose the Africans towards a process of healing from the damages already caused by xenophobic actions and this will engender unity in Africa.

Keywords: Xenophobia, Africa, Unity, Union

Introduction

Arguably, many African thinkers recognize the need to attain an African unity towards the quest for the development of Africa; they also recognize and point accusing fingers to certain realities that form stumbling blocks to the noble quest for African unity. Our worry here is that most times, these accusing gingers appear to point to the realities of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and other external influences and manipulations while neglecting the role of xenophobia as a huge stumbling block against the desired progress in the quest for African unity. There is need for Africans to also turn the accusing fingers to themselves and look inward for solutions in the quest for African unity. The damage caused by xenophobia expressed by Africans against fellow Africans has put a huge question on the philosophical principle of African unity, which is easily identified as communalism. It means that the menace of xenophobia must be exposed vigorously and tackled.

This research paper states that besides other factors like the event of colonialism and poverty among people, the lack of proper knowledge of the self-identity of the various tribes and nations of Africa, is one of the root causes of xenophobia, which in turn constitutes a huge stumbling block to the attainment of African unity. Thus, the activities of an institutionalized African Orientation Agency can help in rationally disseminating required knowledge of Africans to Africans and this will drastically reduce the xenophobic sentiments and attacks in African societies and nations. Our objective is to lay emphasis on the obstructive role of xenophobia in the quest for African unity. We will identify lack of proper knowledge of the “other” as one of the remote causes of xenophobia. Our aim is to propagate the advent of an African Orientation Agency for the dissemination of proper knowledge of the peoples of Africa. This knowledge will reduce the fear of the unknown with its xenophobic tendencies among Africans and it will create the avenue for unity and holistic development in Africa.

The paper will draw from the accounts of the experiences of xenophobia in some African countries. It will draw from some books and paper publications, interviews granted and lectures on the events of xenophobia in Africa. Using the method of critical analysis and reflection on the political cum economic issues and events in Africa, this research paper identified xenophobia as a huge stumbling block towards the attainment of African unity and subsequently development in Africa. In our research, we shall briefly discuss African communalism as a philosophical principle of African unity. We shall have a conceptual clarification of xenophobia and we shall chronicle its manifestations in African societies. We shall examine the impact of Xenophobia in Africa. In our quest to remedy the damage of xenophobia in Africa, we shall itemize the possible duties of the proposed African Orientation Agency and concluding remarks will follow suit.

Philosophical Principle of African Unity

The quest for African unity is a worthwhile task. If we look through some of our indigenous languages, we will discover some expressions that agree to the fact that unity or togetherness generates power. This power can enable man (male and female) to positively conquer his environment and build a desirable human society. An expression in Igbo language says: *Igwe bu ike* (Strength in many). This could translate as saying that unity of a people or coming together of a people produces the required maximum “power or strength” to achieve the best possible goals. A number of African thinkers, both past and present appear to recognize the numerous advantages that accrue from the unity of African peoples and nations—such advantages as “strength and power to bring development and life-flourishing progress of African peoples. We could mention the late president of Libya, Muammar Gaddafi in his quest for African unity and economic empowerment. We could also mention Prof. Patrick Lumumba in his many lamentations for the unity and unification of African people and nations. For him, the remedy to the African ordeal is found in the unity of African people.

The idea of African unity is couched in the philosophical principle of African communalism. According to Polycarp Ikuenobe (10-20), African communalism is a moral doctrine that also values human dignity, rights and responsibilities. He went further to argue that African communalism does not necessarily see a conflict between individuals and community. Both the individual and the community are mutually supportive and people are required to have the moral attitude of contributing to the community for their own well-being. This attitude creates the priority of duty, which is for the fundamental goal of creating a community in order to provide the material conditions for actualizing individuals' substantive rights and well-being. His argument will agree with the ideology of *Ubuntu* which can be rendered as "I am because we are; I am because you are." The *Ubuntu* ideology has a communalistic conception of the human person where the individuals have maximum respect for the dignity and rights of one another in the society.

Explaining the concept of personhood within the ideology of *Ubuntu*, Khoza (5) holds that man's nature, his wants, and his capabilities are to a great extent the product of the society and its institutions. The most effective behavior is usually through groups and organizations, running the gamut from the family through all types of voluntary social and economic motivated associations to the state, the church, and national organizations. In our own little way, we will add that African communalism depicts the African self-identity, which is embedded in the traditional African culture; and basic to this identity are the humanistic values of communality, brotherhood, solidarity, cooperation, compassion, justice and so on. The critical question here will be – why is xenophobia still a reality among Africans despite the communalistic self-identity of the African? One of the causes of xenophobia as we envisaged in this paper draws from the fact that postcolonial Africans are heavily detached from the knowledge of their self-identity. This is why it is paramount to rejuvenate and domicile the knowledge of the African identity among Africans. If we borrow from the thought of Oladipo (14), we would say that the process of bringing positive change to Africa cannot be steady and beneficial unless it goes with an awareness of self-identity. This awareness is required as a means of achieving the self-confidence that will enable Africans sort out their pressing problems in a self-directed manner.

Conceptual Clarification

Reading through the online Wikipedia dictionary, one will discover that the meaning of "Xenophobia" has its root from two Greek words— "*xenos* and *phobos*". While "*xenos*" can translate into "strange, foreign, alien", "*phobos*" can translate into "fear". Thus, xenophobia could mean fear or dislike of anything which is perceived as being foreign or strange. It is an expression which is based on the perception that a conflict exists between an in-group and an out-group and it may manifest itself in suspicion of one group's activities by members of the other group, a desire to eliminate the presence of the group which is the target of suspicion, and fear of losing a national, ethnic, or racial identity. An alternative definition holds that xenophobia is an element of political struggle about who has the right to be cared for by the state and society. An Italian sociologist Guido Bolaffi (Wikipedia) holds that xenophobia can also be exhibited as

an “uncritical exaltation of another culture” which is ascribed “an unreal, stereotyped and exotic quality.

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, Xenophobia is a strong feeling of dislike or fear of people from other countries. The underlying words and phrases from the brief definitions so far include: fear of people, strong dislike, strange, foreign, alien, uncritical exaltation of culture against the other. What is emerging here is the case that “fear” is at the root of every xenophobic expression against a perceived strange person, foreign person, alien entity, etc. Therefore, on our own, we can understand xenophobia to mean an uncritical disposition and action taken against a people in the bid to conquer fear of the “unknown”. We categorized xenophobia as “uncritical” because there is really no desirable goal to be achieved with xenophobic action – it can only lead to the destruction, intimidation, subjugation and elimination of other people.

Xenophobia in Africa

The records of xenophobic manifestation in Africa are not hidden. In his work titled “Xenophobia—A Threat to the Unity of African Peoples”, Keenan Govender (online pub.) gives a brief overview of xenophobic actions in some African countries. According to his account, in 1969, Kofi Busia, a former Prime minister of Ghana, introduced the ‘Aliens Compliance Order’, which sought to expel ‘illegal aliens’ from Ghana. Prior to this order, there was a general perception that Nigerians in Ghana were the cause of large-scale unemployment. This order resulted in the deportation of 900,000 to 1,200,000 individuals (mostly from Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Togo and Ivory Coast). In 1978, Gabon expelled all Beninese from the country amid the drawing of an alleged aspersion on president Bongo and the people of Gabon by Beninese president Kerekou. In May 1977, Kerekou had earlier accused Gabonese officials of a foiled mercenary coup and this was the beginning of heightened tension between the two countries—about 9,000 Beninese were expelled from the country. In 1983, Nigeria expelled over 2 million foreigners from the country. This action was in response to a decline in economic fortunes as well as the perceived involvement of migrants in crime. Over a million of the 2 million people initially expelled from the country were Ghanaians with a further 300,000 leaving in a second wave occurring in 1985.

In 1999, Ivory Coast expelled between 8000 and 12,000 Burkinabe. This was in reaction to the declining economic situation in the 1990s whereby president Bedie drove the idea of ‘ivoirite’ to reinvigorate the economy by infusing Ivorian identity into political and economic access. This fueled resentment against migrants and resulted in mass deportations. In 2004, following an attempted coup, allegedly headed by a mercenary group, the president of Equatorial Guinea clamped down on migrants in the country. Many people were detained, intimidated and subsequently expelled. An estimated 1000 migrants, mostly of Cameroonian descent, were expelled from the country. In 2007, the

government banned West Africans from owning shops in the country and all existing shops were taken over by the government or abruptly closed down. Again in 2004, the government of Angola expelled an estimated 100,000 Congolese from the country as a result of the increase in rhetoric blaming of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for stealing the natural resources of Angola. A further 160,000 Congolese were expelled in a 12-months period, between December 2008 and December 2009. Meanwhile, in 2009 the DRC also expelled 50,000 Angolans as retaliation for the mass expulsions experienced in the hands of Angola. Again in 2009, Burundi expelled an estimated 1,200 migrants following increased pressure put on the state to address rampant crime. The expelled foreigners were mostly from Tanzania, Uganda and Senegal.

What is emerging from the account above is the fact that xenophobia is a reality in Africa. We could also remember the one of South Africa in 2019. South Africans targeted foreigners from other African countries like Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, etc. The brutal nature of the xenophobic attack in South Africa was too vigorous that it attracted condemnation from many African leaders who called for the protection of their citizens living in South Africa. The attacks led to diplomatic tensions between South Africa and other African countries.

The Impact of Xenophobia on African Unity

The destructive and devastating impact of xenophobia in the quest for African unity cannot be measured easily. According to Keenan Govender, “Xenophobia is destructive to the African peace, security and development agenda, and it is an impediment to the integration and achievement of the Pan-African project.” Xenophobic sentiment creates deep division and unhealthy tension among African peoples, societies and countries. The tension created by Xenophobia can make a certain people of Africa to be threatened by the presence of other people and this will create lack of cooperation among people and it will instill a reluctant attitude in the bid for regional integration. If people from other regions of African nations are not being integrated in the systems of the host nations, then, there will be lack of economic growth on both ends of the nations. It is a fact that African nations are naturally endowed in such a way that they complement one another. Where this complementarity is not recognized as a result of xenophobic sentiments, then there will be lack of economic growth.

Xenophobic sentiment is destructive to development at various levels; it kills innovative ideologies at the individual level. We should recognize at this point that xenophobia manifest at various levels and scales in Africa. Beside the official government promulgations as we recorded above, xenophobia in Africa is manifested at the various institutions—academic institutions, health institutions, economic institutions, industries, etc. At the institutional levels, innovative ideologies of individuals are targeted and destroyed. We read stories and interviews of how individuals with good innovative ideas were destroyed, especially when these individuals do now come from certain accepted groups. Xenophobia has destroyed many economic ideologies, technological ideologies and industrial ideologies deposited in individuals of African descent.

Xenophobia creates a hostile environment, which does not support individual and societal cohabitation. Xenophobic attacks have destroyed already-built infrastructures, markets and properties in various African countries. This situation does not in any way support development; it breaths stunted growth in economy of countries in Africa. The impact of xenophobia contributes to the mass exodus of many African talents to other continents of the world. Most of the technological inventions and innovations in the world today are traceable to many individuals of African descent who, due to hostile environment, have departed African soil.

The Way Forward

Certain reasons have been adduced as stimulants or causes of xenophobic actions witnessed in African countries. Some thinkers talk about the event of colonialism and the artificial boundaries created in African societies by the colonial era while some other thinkers lay emphasis on the high level of poverty in the society. Yet some people talk about terrorism and crimes as largely committed by foreigners and migrants. Some others talk about the false rhetoric being peddled by the social media internet, TV, radio, etc. There is also the narrative that politicians manipulate the people in their campaign to get political votes and power. Besides these and many other possible causes, we have identified “fear of the unknown” as a major root cause of xenophobia in Africa. This fear is generated as a result of the lack of proper knowledge of the self-identity of African people (which could be rediscovered from the precolonial traditional African society). Thus, we have proposed, as a way forward, the emergence of an African orientation agency, whose major task is to rationally bring the knowledge of various tribes and nations in Africa to Africans.

The idea of self-knowledge is key to the quest for African unity. The new generation of African societies must have a genuine knowledge, a re-understanding of themselves and their African identity within the foundations of African communalism. In rebuilding this African Identity, there is a need to make a critical re-entering into the African past. And here, borrowing from the thoughts of Professor A. Ajayi, the past is not the time of our youth as individuals or communities, which we outgrow or leave behind in our march towards greater maturity or progress and development. Rather, the past is our origin, which defines the essence of our being, which can be modified under the impact of various influences, but which remains part of our being and which we cannot outgrow or leave behind. It becomes obvious then that any positive effort made towards African unity and to uplift humanity of the African race must necessarily make reference to African identity within the traditional African culture in the revitalization of values, norms, philosophical principles of existence, etc.

Therefore, it will be the task of the African Orientation Agency to rationally gather information of the various people and nations of Africa and rationally disseminate such knowledge to all Africans. It is largely a task of education and re-orientation of the peoples of Africa. Education in this angle will not be on the conventional subjects of

academics, but on the subject of the “being” of the indigenous peoples of Africa—the mode of socio-cultural evolvement, economic evolvement, governance, world views, philosophical principles of existence, etc. There is need for the people of Africa to have authentic knowledge of themselves. This education could be carried out through various means—through the school system, coordinated publications, media aid, through inter-tribal symposiums, through organization of inter socio-cultural events and fiestas (the event of “African Cup of nation” is not enough). The idea here is to maintain a consistent inter-tribal and international interaction and authentic knowledge dissemination among the people of Africa. The knowledge of the identities of one another can foster cooperation among the peoples. This will lead to an economic cooperation; it will reduce xenophobic sentiments and ultimately lead to African unity. The agency would work in collaboration with the political leaders in making policies that will address issues of poverty and inequality in the society and policies that will promote human rights protection, regional integration, economic cooperation, etc.

Conclusion

A simple observation would affirm the obvious fact that most African nation-states are perturbed by lack of development practically in every facet of African existence. There is high level of inclination towards xenophobic conflict among individuals, groups and societies that constitute the African nation-states. At the root of this xenophobic tendency is what we have identified as “fear”. Of course, we understood xenophobia to mean an uncritical or irrational disposition and action taken against a people in the bid to conquer “fear of the unknown”. Such an irrational action by the people of Africa against their fellow Africans has formed a huge stumbling block against the quest for an African Unity. It has hampered development and desirable social order for life’s flourishing. We advocated for the advent of an agency (African Orientation Agency) to champion the course of reducing this “fear of the unknown” through proper education and dissemination of knowledge of the unique identities of the various tribes and nations of Africa (that we may recognize our complementarity). We believe that the knowledge of one another can engender tolerance, understanding, integration, interaction, cooperation and peaceful cohabitation among the peoples of Africa—these manifestations will certainly create avenue for desirable development and ultimately unity in Africa.

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