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'Strangers in their own country': interpreting xenophobic symbology and gang subcultures in vulnerable coloured communities

In South Africa, *xenophobia* is most used and understood in relation to people from different nationalities, cultures or languages other than South African. Xenophobia is often interpreted as South Africans exhibiting prejudice or discrimination against people of other nationalities. This article seeks to reconstruct this "externality" notion, by arguing that xenophobic attitudes can also be directed internally. Du Pre (1992) in *Strangers in their Own Country* provided a political history of the coloured people of South Africa. A dominant feature of his analysis is the stigmatisation and marginalisation of coloured people throughout their history. This article posits that the stigmatisation and marginalisation of vulnerable coloured communities continue, and should be regarded as xenophobia. With reference to gang subcultures, the article shows how this xenophobia manifests in vulnerable gang-affected coloured communities, not only from the outside, but even within coloured communities themselves.

Keywords: coloured identities; gang subcultures; xenophobic symbology; vulnerable communities

Introduction

Xenophobia is by no means a recent phenomenon. From time immemorial, the negative outcomes of ethnocentrism include dislike of, and hostility towards, out groups. As an example, the ancient Greeks vehemently disliked not only barbarians (non-Greeks), but even other Greeks who were not from their particular city-state. This xenophobic attitude was so pervasive that it directly shaped ancient Greek identity and culture (Papanikos 2020: 237). Similarly, the Romans viewed foreigners in a most unflattering manner (Faulkner et al. 2004; Noy 2000). Africa is not left out when it comes to xenophobia. The ancient Egyptians perceived other countries and peoples as inferior. In the Egyptian worldview, "Egypt was the centre of the world and the foreign countries were seen as the periphery. Egypt stood for order and the vile foreigners for chaos." (Cornelius 2010: 322)

Xenophobia has a long history in many societies and countries, but despite an increased understanding of the causes of this phenomenon and related progressive developments, it shows little sign of abating. Recently, and within the context of the US, Dhanani and Franz (2021) have argued that the ongoing waves of the Covid-19 pandemic have triggered a notable increase in the expression of prejudicial and xenophobic attitudes that threaten the well-being of minority groups. In South Asia as well, in particular Bangladesh, Mamun and Griffiths (2020) demonstrated the link between Covid-19 and xenophobia by citing the case of the suicide of a Bangladeshi man. The suicide was not unconnected with xenophobic attitudes and behaviours (i.e. that the locals believed him to be infected with Covid-19) displayed towards the man by local residents. Other scholars (e.g. Ahuja et al. 2020; Batasin 2020; Esses & Hamilton 2021; Petrescu-Mag et al. 2021; Zeng et al. 2020) have also written about the effects of the pandemic on existing xenophobic attitudes in various countries across the world.

Although there are existing literatures on xenophobia, they have mostly addressed xenophobia from the perspective of targeting people of other nationalities. Literature addressing xenophobia from the perspective of targeting people from the same country is sparse. In this paper, the authors take the perspective of xenophobic symbology, in reference to gang subcultures in coloured communities. They posit that gang subcultures, a pervasive feature of many vulnerable coloured communities, are a manifestation of internal xenophobia, a response to long-existing stigmatisation and marginalisation both of, and within, these communities, as explained in the article.

An anthropological perspective on xenophobia

Attempts to understand xenophobia when confronted with media images of violent attacks on foreign nationals, or the looting and destruction of their properties, can often leave one at a loss. However, understanding this phenomenon is a critical first step towards finding ways to minimise this negative attitude and behaviour towards foreign nationals. Interpreting and understanding xenophobia have been a preoccupation of Social Science researchers globally (e.g. Beller 2020; Dodson 2010; Kirik et al. 2015; Peterie & Neil 2020; Pineteh 2017; Mhlanga 2021; Moagi et al. 2018).

Some anthropologists have interpreted xenophobia using the idea of witchcraft, focusing on the psychological and social anxieties created by the unknown or unfamiliar. According to Hickel (2014: 108), the perceptions of local people about foreigners can be informed by local understandings of witchcraft, where a perceived economic downturn of locals, and the seemingly rapid rise in fortunes of foreigners, is viewed with the suspicion attributed to people suspected of practising witchcraft.

Further, using the anthropological lens, xenophobia could also be explained by multiculturalism. Given globalisation, and, before the Covid-19 pandemic, movement and migration of people from different nationalities across borders are governed by policies based on multiculturalism. Multiculturalism can be conceptualised in three ways (Berman & Paradies 2008: 7). First, it is a description of the demographic make-up of societies, meaning the racial, ethnic, gender, nationality, or age diversity within a society. Second, it is principles that protect the rights of all individuals to equality and participation in political, economic, cultural and social life. Third, it is a policy diversity – a government strategy aimed at regulating and controlling diversity and intercultural/intergroup interactions. Anthropologically speaking, intergroup conflicts can stem from any of these three aspects of multiculturalism. Xenophobia specifically could be understood as a call for the exclusion of foreigners in equal participation and access to the economy of a country, or dissatisfaction with the current government policies relating to the control of foreign nationals within a society. It is particularly the latter two issues that seem to have had a significant impact on South African xenophobia. According to Matema (2020: n.p.), the apparent shift towards 'populism' in South African electoral politics has created a scenario in which political formations seek to win the support of citizens by using foreign African migrants as scapegoats for the country's socio-economic problems. Part of this strategy is also to blame the government for the perceived lack of control over borders, allowing many undocumented migrants to enter the country illegally.

Related to multiculturalism, interpretations of xenophobia can also be contextualised within discussions and debates on globalism and globalisation. While a popular concept in academia, politics and elsewhere, globalisation is a complex phenomenon, as evidenced by the variety of meanings and interpretations afforded to it (Scholte 2008). Its complexity also lies in its links to other concepts such as diversity, multiculturalism, cultural difference, national identity, citizenship, transnationalism and internationalisation. Xenophobia can also be added to the list. According to Ariely (2017: 89), "The multifaceted nature of globalisation … means that its impact on social identity is interpreted in diverse ways." This suggests that in some contexts, globalisation can be interpreted as a blurring of distinctive national, social and cultural identities, while in others it reinforces national and cultural identities. Xenophobia could be contextualised within the latter interpretation. As immigrants move into foreign countries, certain groups may react with hostility towards them due to their perceived identity as outsiders.

Ethnocentrism, a key concept in anthropological perspectives on intercultural relations, provides another useful way in which to comprehend xenophobia. One of the earliest definitions of ethnocentrism was that put forward by Sumner (1907), who conceptualised ethnocentrism as a subjective view of one's own culture or group as superior to others, and where one judges other cultures or groups in reference to one's own. In support of this view, John (2007: 1) viewed ethnocentrism as "ethnic self-preference or ethnopreference and a negative attitude toward other ethnicities or races". Most anthropologists would consider ethnocentrism a human universal, that is, it is common to all human societies and cultures. This view was first conceived by one of the fathers of modern anthropology, Franz Boas (1945: 28), who argued that, historically, every human society demonstrated hostility towards outsiders, and aimed to advance its own interests while disregarding those of others. If these views are applied to understanding xenophobia, then it can be argued that xenophobia is potentially the result of ethnocentric attitudes of one group towards another. In the South African context, ethnocentrism on the part of locals could be construed as one of the root causes of xenophobic attitudes and behaviours towards foreigners.

An overview of xenophobia in South Africa (pre-1994 to 2021)

Xenophobia has been an ongoing issue of national importance in South Africa for decades, and is certainly not a new phenomenon (Mlambo 2019: 53; Beetar 2018: n.p.). If news media articles and reports are anything to go by, xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals have, unfortunately, become an all too familiar and

common phenomenon in South Africa. These incidents are also not restricted to specific areas in the country, as they have the propensity to flare up in almost any community in any part of the country.

Prior to 1994, and South Africa's transition to a democratic dispensation, Apartheid legislation and policies against foreign migrants were quite harsh. According to Mlambo (2019: 54), it was in particular migrant workers from South Africa's neighbouring countries (including eSwatini, Lesotho, Mozambique and Zimbabwe) who "bore the impact of such Apartheid policies", and, subsequently, this brought with it "overt xenophobic tendencies shown via negative stereotypes [of] foreign nationals", and the emergence of the popular stereotypical term '*Amakwerekwere*'. Furthermore, it has also been argued that xenophobic violence in South Africa existed before the 1994 transition (Mutanda 2017: 278).

Post-1994, the lifting of Apartheid restrictions on cross-border migration appeared to be a reprieve for foreign nationals. Open borders led to the "increased flow of foreign nationals to South Africa, both documented and undocumented" (Mlambo 2019: 54). However, the increased flow of foreign nationals into the country, coupled with their integration into historically black communities, soon created tensions and problems, especially since the post-1994 government had not yet addressed the infrastructural, employment and other problems caused by the previous government's disruptive policies. The result? Increased hostility by local black South Africans against foreign nationals due to the perceived threats to limited resources and opportunities, and high levels of competition for these resources and opportunities. These factors created the context that has fuelled xenophobia in the country since then.

The tensions between local citizens and foreign nationals have boiled over into violent incidents that have occurred sporadically. Some of these received widespread public attention due to the extreme violence and destruction that characterised them. For example, in May 2008, xenophobic attacks in South Africa attracted much media attention, both locally and internationally, due to the extreme violence against, and destruction of property belonging to foreign nationals (Vahed & Desai 2013: 146-147).

Another case of xenophobic violence that attracted much attention occurred in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal in 2015. In this case, two foreign nationals and three South Africans were killed, while hundreds were forced to flee their homes in what was described as "one of South Africa's worst outbreaks of xenophobic violence in years ..." (Associated Press 2015: n.p.).

Most recently, and within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, xenophobic violence, structural and otherwise, has been seemingly exacerbated by the social

and economic repercussions of the pandemic. A report for *Human Rights Watch* by Roth (2020: n.p.), outlined how xenophobic violence and discrimination against foreign nationals in South Africa continued, despite the government's launch of the National Action Plan against Racism, Discrimination and Xenophobia in 2019. He highlighted in particular the structural violence perpetrated by government and law enforcement officials against foreign nationals. These included 'inciteful rhetoric' by some political officials, as well as law enforcement raids on alleged counterfeit goods, used as a cover to specifically target foreign-owned businesses. In addition, the government's COVID-19 relief programmes also ignored refugees and asylum seekers.

This overview suggests that xenophobia in South Africa has a long history, and the impact on foreign nationals continues to be severe. From destruction of their businesses and properties to discriminatory policies and legislation, foreign nationals continue to face both physical and structural violence, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges are not only faced by foreign nationals in South Africa, but is a global issue as discussed earlier. However, in the South African context, with its heightened sensitivity to racism and discrimination, can xenophobia be viewed as a new form of racism?

Xenophobia and neo-racism

One of the glaring ironies of xenophobia in South Africa is that while racism continues to be a significant issue in the country on multiple levels, black South Africans' xenophobic attitudes towards foreign African nationals suggest a form of racism in their own right. The concept *neo racism,* coined by Balibar, has become one of the main ways to understand postcolonial racism (Gaignard 2018). This "racism without race" has also been referred to as *cultural racism*, a concept that corresponds most closely to the earlier discussion on ethnocentrism. According to Jones (1999: 465), cultural racism can be understood as "the belief that another's culture is inferior to one's own", echoing the idea of ethnocentrism.

It appears that neo-racism is a phenomenon that emerged along with the global migration and mobilisation of non-European groups into Europe following World War Two and the emergence of globalisation. Consequently, neo-racism reflects the "culturalist tone … predominant in the discriminatory and exclusionist policies against immigrants and foreigners particularly in Europe" (Yerlikaya 2019: n.p.). In this new racism, no longer founded on the scientific racism of the past that was rooted in perceived biological differences, it is cultural differences that play the most significant part. The marginalisation of groups of immigrants and refugees perceived 'culturally different' becomes a key feature, and is manifested

in attitudes and behaviour towards foreigners, as well as in anti-immigrant discourses, policies and legislation.

The earlier discussion on the impact of the lifting of border restrictions in South Africa after 1994, and the resultant influx of foreign nationals, demonstrates the similarity of conditions favourable to neo-racism as those found in Europe. An 'us versus them' mentality, coupled with anti-immigrant rhetoric and discourses by populists, and the ethnocentric views underlying these attitudes, all contribute towards the negative behaviours towards foreigners, including discrimination and violence.

But how is this possible if the whole anti-apartheid movement was based on non-racialism and inclusivity? Ruiters (2020: 889) posits one argument, stating that "racial inequality is inscribed in the non-racial form of the state". This suggests that despite the populist rhetoric of non-racialism, even during and after the transition to a 'non-racial' government, racial (and cultural) inequality is still deep-rooted in South African society. This is perhaps why, even after decades after the transition to a black majority government, racism is still a pervasive issue. Ruiters (2020) also speaks of 'neo-apartheid' which, within the context of this discussion, is yet another term that can be used synonymously with neo-racism.

In light of the above, xenophobia and its various manifestations can be interpreted as a form of neo-racism. It should be noted that neo-racism is not unique to South Africa. The COVID-19 global pandemic has exposed the existence of neo-racist xenophobia worldwide. However, in the South African context, the symbology of xenophobia illustrates the specific significance that it has for certain groups within the country.

Stigmatisation, marginalisation and violence: the symbology of xenophobia

One way of interpreting or understanding xenophobia is to conceptualise it as a symbol. But a symbol of what? In most instances of xenophobia, it is often used as a vehicle to express perceived stigmatisation and marginalisation of the targeted community or social group, by the aggressor or attacking group.

A symbology of xenophobia necessitates a perspective that views xenophobia as a ritualised performance, imbued with a multiplicity of meanings, or what symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) called 'significata' and the 'polarisation of meanings'. In his analysis of conflict among the Ndembu of Zambia, Turner showed how the performance of ritual to resolve social conflict created various polarised meanings and interpretations. Elsewhere, authors elaborated

on Turner's concept of the *social drama*, a mechanism by which the Ndembu resolved social conflicts (Anonymous 2019: 98). The ritualised social dramas used by the Ndembu represented a type of social or collective therapy, rituals of performance designed to assuage or remedy tensions within the society.

Ironically, if the social drama concept is applied to xenophobia, unlike the case of the Ndembu, it does not appear to resolve conflict, but rather does the opposite. However, in this context, the value of the social drama concept lies in the notion of ritualised performance, and the symbolic meanings that can be identified. Certain significate or polarised meanings can be identified when looking at xenophobia through a symbological lens. For example, a cluster of meanings on one side of the spectrum could see xenophobia interpreted as protection of scarce resources; group loyalty; or even a representation of the 'Other' as the enemy. On the other side of the spectrum, a possible cluster of meanings could emerge from interpreting xenophobia as victimisation; criminality; intolerance; lack of respect for diversity; or a representation of South Africans as hostile and aggressive. Whether or not these interpretations are right or wrong is not the issue. What is important is that these are possible *perceptions* and *meanings* that could be applied to the central concept of xenophobia. In these ways, xenophobia functions as a symbol with different meanings attached to it, depending on perceptions and perspectives.

In South African xenophobia, the ritualised performance of xenophobia is often expressed through the three key aspects of stigmatisation, marginalisation and violence. The many examples of xenophobic incidents illustrate, almost without fail, these three dimensions being part of these incidents. However, inasmuch as stigmatisation, marginalisation and violence can be found in externalised xenophobia, that is, xenophobic actions taken against an external 'Other' or group, within certain communities in South Africa, there exists an 'internalised' xenophobia. This internalised xenophobia is characterised by the same symbology as externalised xenophobia, but has different consequences and impact.

Xenophobia from within: gang subcultures as reactions to 'internalised xenophobia' in vulnerable coloured communities

It is not often that one would include xenophobia and gang subcultures in the same discussion. However, the central tenet of this discussion is the argument that a symbological perspective on xenophobia reveals that the symbolic meanings of xenophobia can apply as well to local communities as they can to foreigners. Thus, this paper posits that the phenomenon of gang subcultures, particularly in

affected coloured communities, can be understood in reference to the symbolic meanings of xenophobia.

Within the context of this discussion, 'coloured communities' refers to the common or popular South African notion of persons of mixed racial, ethnic and/or cultural descent. While the notion of 'coloured' is complex, having multiple meanings in the South African context (Petrus and Isaacs-Martin 2012), the authors use the term here to refer to a specific historically categorised group composed of persons of mixed 'racial' descent.

Gang subcultures in South Africa can be contextualised as symbolic and meaningful. Elsewhere, Anonymous (2015) espoused the argument that gang subcultures could be seen as symbols of resistance to particular dynamics in South African society, both in the past and in the present. Along with vigilantism, gang subcultures are symbols of the challenge to state authority. This appears to be specifically the case with gangs in vulnerable coloured communities.

The existence of gang subcultures in vulnerable coloured communities is symptomatic of what can be called the *internalised xenophobia* impacting on these communities. Internalised xenophobia can be understood as xenophobia that is directed towards an in-group, rather than towards an out-group. Instead of negative stereotyping, stigmatisation and marginalisation of foreigners, these prejudicial attitudes are directed towards in-group members in a community. Hence, Du Pre (1992) used the notion of "strangers in their own country" to capture this phenomenon.

Xenophobic symbology and coloured identities in South Africa: historical and contemporary dynamics

The marginalisation and stigmatisation of coloured identities and people have a long history in South Africa, and have been well documented in historiographical literature (e.g. Adhikari 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Anonymous 2012; Anonymous 2013, 2021; Du Pre 1992, 1994). Both in the past and in the present, coloured identities have been characterised by ambiguity (Anonymous 2012: 87), which, in turn, has created sets of polarised meanings, both for people outside these identities, and for those within these identities. Anonymous (2012) provides an overview of the multiple meanings of coloured identities in South Africa, specifically referring to the negative categorisations of these identities since the colonial era.

These authors build on the argument put forward by Adhikari (2006a: 467), who argued that coloured identities had a "core of enduring characteristics" that remained relatively stable during the political, economic and social

transformations in South Africa between 1910 and 1994. These core features included the hope of assimilation into the dominant white European society; the liminal status of coloured people in relation to (white) Europeans and (black) Africans; the negative meanings attached to the racial and cultural hybridity of coloured people; and the marginality of coloured people on political, economic and social levels (Adhikari 2006a: 475-486). Ironically, the ambiguous position of coloured people in the racial hierarchy of South African society, as well as their marginalised status, not only shaped coloured identities, but kept these identities relatively stable, even through the major transformations pre- and post-1994.

Post-1994, the negative meanings attached to coloured identities persisted, and this is what has given rise to what we call internalised xenophobia. Often the refrain of 'not white enough' under apartheid, and now 'not black enough' under the black majority government (Adhikari 2005a), is heard particularly in those coloured communities that could be described as vulnerable or marginalised. Anonymous (2021a, 2021b forthcoming) has argued that the present perceptions of marginalisation and stigmatisation of vulnerable coloured communities is partly the result of historical factors, but now they are also the result of macro-level structural violence against these communities. Since the mid-1990s (see for example Caliguire 1996), vulnerable coloured communities have expressed similar concerns such as those expressed by foreign nationals experiencing xenophobia. With the exception of violent attacks, coloured communities also feel themselves targeted by external macro-level policies that entrench their marginalised and stigmatised status in the minds of those outside of these communities.

Interpreting the skollie: internalised xenophobia and gang subcultures in vulnerable coloured communities

While by no means exhaustive, the motive behind the brief sketch above of the impact of transitional periods on coloured communities in South Africa is to contextualise the symbol of the *skollie* (gangster, thief, thug, criminal), a well-known symbol in vulnerable coloured communities. The importance of this symbol lies in the fact that community anxieties about crime, violence and poverty are often embodied in the image of young men involved in gangs (Jensen 2008: 1). Gang members and formations not only symbolise communal anxieties about crime, poverty and violence, but they also represent the community's reaction to these. Returning to the earlier point about the macro-level structural violence against, and marginality and stigmatisation of vulnerable coloured communities, and the resultant socio-economic problems, gangs are the product of this symbolic xenophobia against these communities. However, gangs also symbolise liminality or ambiguity, the very same characteristic that

has been a feature of coloured identities historically. While they represent, on the one hand, the community's victimisation by the macro-level dynamics of the state, they also reflect the internal xenophobia against everything negative about coloured communities.

The *skollie* symbolises one of the most infamous negative coloured stereotypes. The late author and film scriptwriter John Fredericks, a former gangster from the Cape Flats, wrote a memoir entitled *Skollie*, that was adapted and turned into an award-winning film *Noem My Skollie* (Name Me Gangster), released in South Africa in 2016. When interviewed about the film, Hendricks alluded to the multiple meanings of *skollie*, reflecting not only the inherited negative stereotypes of coloured people from poor communities, but also the ambiguity of gang subcultures. In the interview, while speaking about why he wrote his book and scripted the film, Hendricks said, "I wanted to rise above the stigma of prison and gangsterism that had become my heritage" (Maragele 2017: n.p.). This reinforces the point made earlier about how the coloured gangster was used, and continues to be used, as a popular negative stereotype of coloured people, in particular coloured male youths. In this vein, the term *skollie* can be equated with the equally derogatory term *amakwerekwere*, often used to refer to African foreign nationals.

The ambiguous position of gang members makes recognition of internalised xenophobia difficult to observe, unless one is intentionally looking for it. While the *skollie* is the symbol of external stigmatisation and marginalisation of vulnerable coloured communities, it is also a symbol of everything from which coloured people want to dissociate. As Hendricks stated, he tried to escape the stigma of gangsterism for most of his life. Thus, within coloured communities, people often employ the very same stereotyping and stigmatising of gangs to reflect their dissociation from the negative meanings associated with gang subcultures and, by implication, of coloured communities. Hence, even the term *skollie* may be used by coloured people themselves to display internal xenophobic attitudes against their own. However, the fact that gang members are still part of these communities means that internal xenophobia against gangs is a form of self-stigmatisation within these communities.

Conclusion

While the more common understanding of xenophobia, namely the dislike or hatred of foreigners, is still very much applicable within South African society, especially given the many ongoing examples of xenophobic violence against foreign nationals, this discussion has suggested an alternative understanding of the phenomenon. Very little attention is given to what the authors refer to as

internalised xenophobia, the notion that in vulnerable communities, xenophobic attitudes can be internally directed towards members of these communities.

The existence of gang subcultures in vulnerable coloured communities specifically, and the challenges that they represent, could be interpreted in relation to internalised xenophobia. As discussed, gang subcultures have long existed as symbols of resistance against perceived real or imagined impositions of negative stereotypes, stigmatisation and marginalisation of coloured people and coloured communities. The influence of external stigmatisation and marginalisation, the symbols of xenophobia, has a significant impact on internal stigmatisation and marginalisation. However, in the context of gang subcultures, the liminal position of the gang member and the gang formation presents an ambivalent perception of the gang. While the gang is recognised as a serious threat to community safety and security on the one hand, it also fulfils a critical role in, and is a critical part of, the social structure of that community, particularly one already burdened by perceived marginality. This illustrates the key difference between common perceptions of xenophobia, that is, *us* (locals) versus *them* (foreigners), and internalised xenophobia, that is *us* (community residents) versus *us/them* (ambivalent gang subcultures).

Embodied within these dynamics is the symbology of xenophobia as applied to vulnerable coloured communities. Like the foreign nationals who experience hatred from xenophobic locals, the symbols of xenophobia, namely stigmatisation and marginalisation, engender within vulnerable coloured communities perceptions of being unwanted strangers. However, unlike the experiences of foreign nationals who know they are in a foreign country, residents in marginalised coloured communities experience themselves as being strangers in their *own* country. Hence, while gang subcultures symbolise internalised xenophobia within these communities, they also represent the externalised xenophobia of the structural violence perpetrated against vulnerable coloured communities. Lack of service delivery, poor socio-economic conditions, unemployment and various other indicators of marginalisation, all form part of the structural violence perpetrated against these communities. Gang subcultures are a reaction to this.

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