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Introduction to the special issue: xenophobia in Africa

This *Acta Academica* special issue on xenophobia in Africa has followed a complex trajectory to reach publication. A delegation from the University of the Free State (South Africa) visited the University of Ibadan (Nigeria) from 9-14 September 2019 to expand collaboration and develop strategic partnerships between the two institutions. One of the strategic outcomes was a proposed colloquium on the topic of xenophobia in Africa planned for 26-27 May 2020 to coincide with the 2020 Africa Day Memorial Lecture hosted annually by the Centre for Gender and Africa Studies at the University of the Free State (UFS). The colloquium was to be held in Bloemfontein and hosted by the Centre for Gender and Africa Studies, the Faculty of the Humanities, and the Office for International Affairs at the UFS in collaboration with colleagues from the University of Ibadan (Nigeria). Colleagues from the University of Ibadan, notably Prof. Peter O. Olapegba, and from the UFS (Dr Stephanie Cawood, Prof. Heidi Hudson, Dr Cornelius Hagenmeier) were in the process of developing the call for papers when in March 2020, COVID-19 was officially declared a global pandemic and countries, including South Africa, instituted a series of 'hard lockdowns' leading to the mass curtailment of international and local travel, as well as the cancellation of face-to-face events such as the planned colloquium. The constraints of the pandemic and successive 'hard lockdowns' created great uncertainty at the time for universities in terms of their operations, but especially in terms of how to proceed with international collaborations when countries and institutions by necessity were

becoming increasingly insular to find ways to overcome the challenges of the time. By the end of 2020, it became apparent that international travel and a possible colloquium would not be feasible anytime soon, and the decision was taken to convert the colloquium into a special issue in *Acta Academica* with Dr Stephanie Cawood from the UFS and Prof. Peter O. Olapegba from the University of Ibadan as guest editors.

The pandemic and stringent measures imposed to contain the spread of the virus exacerbated existing socio-political and economic problems in Africa (and elsewhere) including gender-based violence, xenophobia, extremism, state corruption, repression of press freedom, increased authoritarianism, and threats to free and fair elections. Pandemics represent periods of extraordinary pressures that Zhou Xun and Sander Gilman in their book *I know who caused COVID-19: Pandemics and Xenophobia* (2021) attribute to a 'primal fear' that amplify existing prejudices, often scapegoating the already marginalised in society (White 2022: 512). The proposed special edition on xenophobia in Africa thus became even more relevant during the course of the pandemic.

Some of the most violent manifestations of xenophobia in the past two decades in Africa are associated with South Africa. Between 2008 and 2019, numerous violent attacks on foreigners in South Africa made news headlines around the world. The African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) reports that the xenophobic attacks in South Africa, which peaked in 2008 and 2015, led to the destruction of property and caused displacements, injuries, and deaths. Beyond the South African context, xenophobia has a long history in Africa. Indeed, xenophobia may even manifest as Afrophobia, or the hate or fear of peoples and cultures of Africa (including the African diaspora). However, the phenomenon has become more violent and destructive, with severe implications for the achievement of peace, security, and integrative and inclusive development on the continent. Many factors have been adduced as relevant to understanding xenophobia, from poor social and economic conditions to politics and power struggles, and state failures in the face of rising expectations.

Some of the guiding questions raised in the call for submissions for this special issue include what conceptual, theoretical, and epistemological problems are raised by xenophobia, and what purpose does it serve in thinking about African societies in the 21st century? How can we progressively understand and dialogue about the concept without reifying or essentialising it? Are there ways in which the discourse on xenophobia can be useful in reengaging state failure in Africa while simultaneously affirming the role of power, class, race, and agency of peoples as calculative and coordinated in igniting and perpetrating xenophobic acts and practices? How do we interrogate the representations

of what is popularly considered xenophobia and the role of the media, arts, and other creative frames in shaping xenophobic perceptions and attitudes as an everyday reality? In what ways are the crises and violent manifestations of behaviours constructed as xenophobic historically constituted with peculiar continuities and meanings? Of what use are historical affinities, affinitive histories, and historico-comparative gazes for diagnosing, understanding, elaborating, and subverting xenophobic tendencies, attitudes, and practices? How can history (be made to) matter or be instrumentalised to advance a new, better, and more progressive vision of pan-Africanism, collaboration, and humanism? How may we meaningfully and critically spotlight xenophobia as a threat to Pan-Africanism and continental integrations?

The substantial response to the call for submissions served as indication of the timeliness of the special issue and the need for scholars to revisit the phenomenon from diverse vantage points, frames of reference and contexts. The final selection of articles for this special issue was highly competitive and brings together a pleasing range of different perspectives and areas of expertise to contribute to an interdisciplinary exploration of xenophobia in Africa, with full recognition that the South African context is over-represented. This is attributed to the fact that xenophobia as contemporary socio-political phenomenon is so closely associated with the South African context.

The article by Paalo, Adu-Gyamfi and Arthur sets the scene for the special issue by considering how xenophobia poses a challenge for regional integration in Africa. In their consideration, they explore how notions of citizenship and economic participation may facilitate xenophobia, also at state-level, from a wide range of literature including political science, history, peace and conflict studies, migration studies, international relations, development studies and sociology. In their argument, they demonstrate the generative power of xenophobia to construct discourses of belonging or othering, how foreign policy may be shaped by notions of duplicity and retribution leading to violence against non-citizens and how xenophobia reconfigures residency rights and complicates economic access.

In their article, Lotter and Bradshaw, reconceptualise xenophobia in South Africa as Afrophobia from the perspective of conflict transformation. They highlight the contradictions of xenophobic violence (often against African migrants or refugees) in a society that once prided itself on national unity and solidarity with the frontline states that supported the struggle for liberation. The authors argue that future social cohesion for all people living in South Africa is dependent on dedicated interventions combatting xenophobic tendencies and they propose conflict transformation as a means to transform xenophobic violence in South Africa.

Sule offers a philosophical consideration of xenophobia by problematising it through the lens of ubuntu. The author uses xenophobia to conceptually differentiate between ontological ubuntu, as distinctly African humanism, and axiological ubuntu, a normative moral ideal for all humanity. Sule argues that xenophobia and similar exclusionary tendencies render ontological ubuntu as uniquely African philosophy implausible. In its stead, axiological ubuntu is offered as normative ethical philosophy for all humans towards the creation of a more humane society.

From a philosophical consideration of xenophobia, the special issue segues to a historical perspective in the article by Maliehe and Schraten. The authors consider xenophobia in reference to the principle of all-inclusive human rights ensconced in the South African constitution and the concomitant complexities of a post-apartheid democracy deeply intertwined with the competitive world economy. They conceive of xenophobia as a struggle between exclusion and inclusion which they trace historically to nineteenth century imperialism, the colonial accumulation of land under exclusive control and the rise of a global market economy.

In Mavengano's article, the special issue makes a welcome literary turn that explores notions of othering in the novels, *One Foreigner's Ordeal* by Tavuya Jinga and *Harare North* by Brian Chikwava, Zimbabwean authors in diaspora in South Africa and the United Kingdom. The author productively utilises a decolonial frame to explore experiences of unbelonging and the desperate search for 'home' from a diasporan perspective.

Viljoen examines the symbolic role of song in relation to Afrophobia in South Africa. The author juxtaposes the politics of fear and othering in political songs endorsing ethno- or Afrophobia with the messages of peace, unity and healing of anti-Afrophobic songs from a range of artists from South Africa such as Boom Shaka, Mthandeni, Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Salif Keita from Mali. The author argues that Afrophobic violence in South Africa can be traced back to apartheid isolation but is also part of a contemporary upsurge in anti-immigrant politics globally. She suggests anti-Afrophobic songs with their messages of unity, peace, harmony and reconciliation as possible remedy to overcome the hatred of the other associated with xenophobia and in particular Afrophobia in South Africa.

Opara considers xenophobia against the backdrop of globalisation and looks beyond xenophobic violence to focus on systemic forms of exclusion specifically directed against West African migrants and the implications thereof for identity formation. They borrow Petkou's concept of 'West-a-phobia' to explore this tendency by focussing on the experiences of migrants from Ghana and Nigeria living in the Western Cape locales of Cape Town and Stellenbosch. This article

demonstrates the complex, intersectional identities of transnational migrants from West African countries and how systemic 'West-a-phobia' complicates their sense of belonging, even for those who are South African born citizens with West African ancestry.

In the penultimate article, Petrus reconceptualises xenophobia beyond its conventional understanding as externally directed exclusionary force and argues that it can also be internally directed to marginalise and stigmatise vulnerable minorities. He explores the meaning of xenophobia from an anthropological perspective productively using concepts such as 'ethnocentrism' and 'neo-racism'. By casting xenophobia as ritualised performance or social drama replete with multi-faceted symbolic meanings, he contends that xenophobia can be directed against an externalised 'other', but also against an internalised 'other' where he argues that the existence of gang subcultures in vulnerable coloured communities is indicative of the marginalisation and stigmatisation experienced by these communities as internalised xenophobia.

The special issue concludes with a discourse analysis of prejudicial social media narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic by Hove focussing on negative representations of Zimbabwean migrants as reflected in Tweets between March 2020 and July 2021. The author contends that foreign nationals, such as Zimbabwean migrants, were scapegoated, or 'covidised', reflecting offline biases against foreigners and that such negative representations in social media were sometimes fuelled by government officials towards achieving a particular political objective. The author concludes by arguing that while social media platforms such as Twitter may perpetuate xenophobic tendencies, it may also offer a platform to counter negative representations and to redefine African identities and a sense of belonging.

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