



Xenophobia in South Africa:

# Problematizing Ubuntu as an Ethical Response

By Zama Mthombeni

## Abstract

Despite the human rights principles established in South Africa's Constitution, there have been recurrent waves of xenophobia throughout the country's history. Foreigners who live in South Africa have been perceived as the victims of xenophobia and South Africans as the perpetrators. This paper aims to problematise the usage of the 'ubuntu' ideology as a utopian African ethic to promote 'universal' African humanism. It seems that apartheid's heritage, which produced the present-day South Africa in which these xenophobic events occur, is often overlooked when South Africans are characterised as xenophobic and in need of ubuntu salvation. The study makes the case that colonial and political issues, which continue to have an impact on high levels of poverty and unemployment, should be considered as ongoing

contributors to xenophobia. Several anti-immigration organisations have emerged as discussion points in the country. This study will only concentrate on one of these: Operation Dudula. This paper critically examines the reasons why Operation Dudula is continuing to expand despite protests from civil society organisations. This paper demonstrates, via media stories, how the media primarily portrays the organisation as vigilante that vex ubuntu and African unification. The paper makes the claim that marginalised South Africans are 'Native Foreigners', as opposed to simply perpetrators, drawing on Neocosmos' idea of native foreigners. Instead of being considered as a problem that needs ubuntu's salvation, the paper argues that anti-immigrant organisations should be understood as a sign of unsolved colonial and political problems that need to be addressed.

## Introduction

The prevalence of xenophobia is rising throughout all of Africa's nations. In Southern Africa, discrimination against foreigners is on the rise from Kenya to the Maghreb (Fayomi et al., 2015). However, Crush (2008) asserts that after the continent's independence, discrimination based on the idea of being 'non-native' has persisted throughout Africa and was codified during colonialism. One of the most recent manifestations of restricted ideas of citizenship, which have existed in Africa for two centuries, is contemporary xenophobia (Fayomi et al., 2015). Since the country's transition to democracy in 1994, South Africa has seen a rise in xenophobia. The extraordinary influx of primarily African immigrants in search of greener pastures is linked to the rising xenophobia in South Africa (Ogunnubi and Amusan, 2018). Due to the perception that South Africa has a favourable economic, political, and social climate, African citizens seeking better pastures find the country to be quite alluring (Akinola, 2018).

Insidious and violent xenophobic attacks against foreign people living in the country, which have resulted in fatalities and the wanton destruction of property primarily owned by African citizens, are evidence that South Africans are not fully comfortable with the presence of foreigners (Ogunnubi and Aja, 2022). Approximately 121 Nigerians were slain in South Africa between 2016 and 2018 because of xenophobic prejudice and discrimination (Ogunnowo and Joshua, 2019). Since the 1990s, there have been numerous instances of xenophobic crimes. In 2018, more than 60 foreign people were killed in the nation, making the situation worse (Bishogo, 2020). In June 2021, South Africa was introduced to 'Operation Dudula', a purportedly patriotic campaign established to address issues of crime, a lack of jobs, and poor health services allegedly caused by an influx of illegal immigrants (Myeni, 2022). *Dudula*, which is an isiZulu word meaning 'to force out' or 'knock down' alludes to the movement's objective of expelling immigrants. Operation Dudula has been labelled a xenophobic vigilante group (Myeni, 2022).

The group led their first march through Soweto on June 16 2021, with a focus on immigrant informal traders and those they believed to be involved in international drug trafficking (Bornman, 2021).

Following the march, numerous additional anti-immigrant organisations bearing the name Dudula or a version of it, including the distinct Alexandra Dudula Movement, were founded. This strengthened their popularity and Operation Dudula was expanded to Durban in KwaZulu Natal in April 2022 (Bornman, 2021). The initiative shut down all the food stalls maintained by foreign nationals who were unable to produce the necessary paperwork for conducting business or a current passport (Bornman, 2021).

Several scholars have analysed the phenomenon of xenophobia. According to Adebisi (2017), xenophobia has historically posed a problem for social relationships and co-habitation. The word 'xenophobia' has its origins in the Greek terms *xenos* ('stranger' or 'guest') and *phobos* ('flight' or 'fear') (Adebisi, 2017). The term describes an aversion towards different ancestries, races, or skin tones. According to Fayomi et al. (2015), xenophobia in this sense refers to the fear or hate of foreigners living in an individual's country. However, for some scholars it also includes assault and violent confrontations against foreigners who are residents of the country, going beyond simple statements of rage, hatred, or dislike (Adebisi and Agagu, 2017). Saleh (2015) broadens this concept by defining xenophobia as a strong hatred or disdain for someone due to their national origin. According to Gordon (2015), discussions in South Africa about xenophobia generally focus on or are equated to violence. There are other ways that anti-immigrant sentiment could manifest itself, even if xenophobic violence is a vital component of any study of xenophobia on the African continent (Gordon, 2015). Furthermore, there is no clear connection between xenophobia and anti-immigrant violence, as prejudice towards immigrants is not a direct source of violence (Gordon, 2015). This view of xenophobia coincides with that of Phiri who believes that the conceptualisation of xenophobia needs to be reconsidered. Xenophobia needs to be separated from violence because it is not every xenophobic sentiment that translates into violence (Phiri, 2021).

A definite dichotomy between South Africans as perpetrators and immigrants as victims is drawn in the literature on xenophobia. The perpetrators of genuine violent crimes have been characterised as

vigilante organisations executing senseless atrocities. This paper offers an alternative perspective and explanation of xenophobia in South Africa rather than attempting to refute these views. The introduction to xenophobia in South Africa is covered in the first subsection, which then examines ubuntu as a problematic framework for understanding and addressing xenophobia. The essay then provides a critical analysis of how Operation Dudula has been portrayed in the media as a vigilante group. To convey a contrasting viewpoint, it demonstrates how South Africans can also be perceived as victims.

### Overview of Xenophobia in South Africa

South Africa is a destination for immigrants of all racial backgrounds and origins, including Asians, Americans, Europeans, and Australians. All regions of South Africa have experienced xenophobic violence and incidents date back to 1994 (Valji, 2003). South Africa is a desirable destination due to its high level of growth and technological advancement, which accounts for the significant influx of immigrants and foreign travellers (Dauda et al., 2018). Indeed, a big lure for immigrants is the wealth of opportunities and the structure of the South African economy. The nation's long-term colonial presence promoted rapid development and set it on the route to industrial development (Tella, 2016). This led to a surge of people seeking refuge from political regulations, conflict, poverty, and economic issues. In 2015, a survey by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees found that more than 300,000 refugees and asylum seekers resided in South Africa (UNHCR ROSA, 2015). Each year, 60,000–80,000 people are anticipated to request asylum in the country.

Due to this influx of foreigners, numerous xenophobic assaults have been recorded, with most attacks occurring in Gauteng province (Johannesburg, Soweto, Alexandra). Some of the causes of antipathy towards immigrants by South Africans are the perceptions that foreigners are to blame for the unemployment rate, high crime rate, and drug-related violence (Dauda et al., 2018; Ogunnubi and Amusan, 2018). Table 1 shows documented xenophobic incidents by province between 1994–2018. It shows that xenophobic incidents have taken place in all provinces in varying degrees. Gauteng is the leading province, and it is

therefore not a surprise that Operation Dudula is alleged to have started in Gauteng and then spread to other provinces (Myeni, 2022).

**Table 1:** *Xenophobic Incidents by Province (1994–2018)*

| Province      | Number of incidents |
|---------------|---------------------|
| Gauteng       | 212                 |
| Western Cape  | 111                 |
| KwaZulu Natal | 67                  |
| Limpopo       | 40                  |
| Eastern Cape  | 33                  |
| Mpumalanga    | 22                  |
| Northwest     | 20                  |
| Free State    | 19                  |
| Northern Cape | 5                   |

**Source:** (BBC, 2019)

Crush and Pendleton (2007: 64) used the National Immigration Policy Survey (NIPS) as a research tool to understand South African citizens' attitudes toward foreigners and migration. They found that people in Southern Africa tended to overestimate the number of foreigners living there and tended to view immigration as 'a problem rather than an opportunity'. Evidence from the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) survey literature demonstrates that anti-immigrant sentiment is common in Botswana, Namibia, and especially South Africa. The Project uses 2007 public opinion poll data from Pew's Global Attitudes Project (Miller, 2012 observed a similar conclusion). South Africans were found to be most favourable towards

“ The results of the SAMP study, however, also demonstrated that prejudice towards immigrants in South Africa crosses racial, gender, and class divides. According to further SAMP findings, xenophobic sentiments are far more prevalent among white people than among Black people. Xenophobia is also more prevalent among poor, working class, and wealthy people as opposed to the middle class. The entire report concluded that the majority of citizens share sentiments of xenophobia towards other Africans. ”

immigration limits, as compared with the inhabitants of other countries (Crush et al., 2008). South Africans, however, do not view immigrants as a single group. To better understand xenophobic ideas in South Africa, questions concerning immigrants from other countries were posed in the 2006 SAMP study on views about immigration. The results showed that South Africans viewed immigrants from Europe and North America more favourably than those from Africa (Crush et al., 2008).

According to public opinion statistics from SAMP on South Africa, the majority of South Africans believe that immigrants cause unemployment and deplete the country's economic resources (Crush and Pendleton, 2007: 71–72; Crush et al., 2008: 29–30). The results of the SAMP study, however, also demonstrated that prejudice towards immigrants in South Africa crosses racial, gender, and class divides. According to further SAMP findings, xenophobic sentiments are far more prevalent among white people than among Black people. Xenophobia is also more prevalent among poor, working class, and wealthy people as opposed to the middle class. The entire report concluded that the majority of citizens share sentiments of xenophobia towards other Africans. Du Toit and Kortze (2011: 182–188) corroborated this conclusion by finding that attitudes in favour of restricted immigration were widespread throughout the nation's various socio-demographic groups. In other words, sentiments were the same amongst the wealthy and the poor, the employed or the unemployed, and Black and white population groups. To better understand the factors related to the wards where the 2008 anti-immigrant riots occurred, Fauvelle-Aymar and Segatti (2012) undertook a study. Debunking theories that solely focus on economic factors as the causes of xenophobic violence, it was discovered that neither unemployment nor absolute poverty played a significant role.

### **Problematising Ubuntu as a Conceptual Framework for Understanding Xenophobia**

According to African scholars, the solution may not ultimately be based on a range of external ideologies and institutional interventions, given that most of these efforts have failed the African people (Obioha and Okaneme, 2017). Eleojo (2014) emphasises how pointless it is to classify African issues and thought

processes using Western concepts. This raises concerns about the use of ubuntu as a catch-all solution to address xenophobia, particularly in South Africa. While I recognise the moral importance of ubuntu as a philosophy rooted in African humanism, I also recognise its importance in bridging different African civilisations. Ubuntu, I contend, has been exploited to moralise South Africans while neglecting the underlying problems that lead to recurrent acts of xenophobia. Ubuntu's core principle is the honouring and respect of each person's dignity, regardless of differences in race or culture. Ubuntu promotes kindness, generosity, compassion, and a peaceful co-existence with one's neighbours and the wider community (Nussbaum, 2003; Kaungu, 2021). For many generations, the principle of ubuntu and the way of life it encourages have served to maintain African communities in South Africa and throughout Africa (Eliastam, 2015; Kaungu, 2021).

Due to the resonances of ubuntu in other African nations, supporters feel that this concept should form the basis for African unity (Eleojo, 2014). Expecting such unity with other African communities while the structure of Black South African society has not been unified strikes me as a bit unrealistic. This research considers additional social, political, and economic elements and demonstrates how just applying ubuntu to be a moral judge of xenophobia does not resolve concerns. African philosophies are admirable because they provide African communities with a moral code; this paper does not dismiss them as unimportant. However, these philosophies insinuate that South Africans are forced to adhere to a borderless African mentality because of ubuntu's blind application, as if other nations were doing the same. Ubuntu appears to be advocating a religious or utopian African ethic that chooses to ignore the existential context of difficult issues like xenophobia in South Africa.

### **Methodology**

This article will place a strong emphasis on qualitative data from South Africans as seen in news articles and videos. I investigate how people who use opinion articles and internet media based on qualitative empirical evidence feed the narrative that Operation Dudula is a thorn in destabilising oneness and ubuntu. Table 2 documents the primary data source which is made up of 14 news stories that were published

between June 2021 and June 2022. I chose to focus on news clips published during this time frame because the first Operation Dudula march was held in Soweto in June 2021. Documentation of Operation Dudula is still ongoing. For the purposes of this study, it is enough to cover news clips that emerged in June 2021–June 2022. These news reports discuss events that led to the maturation of the xenophobic attacks that happened under Operation Dudula (Note in Table 2). Pseudonyms have been employed, much like in the news clips, to shield interviewees' identities.

### Operation Dudula as an Enhancer of Xenophobic Attacks? Review from the Data

I will reflect on Operation Dudula in this section utilising primarily secondary data as support. The analysis' key findings show that Operation Dudula is viewed as a contributor to the recent xenophobic violence in South Africa.

**Table 2: List of News Clips Articles Reviewed**

|     |  |
|-----|--|
| 1.  | Africa News. (2022). 'South Africa: Anti-Immigration Movement 'Operation Dudula' Launched in Durban.' Africa News [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.africanews.com/2022/04/10/south-africa-anti-immigration-movement-operation-dudula-launched-in-durban/">www.africanews.com/2022/04/10/south-africa-anti-immigration-movement-operation-dudula-launched-in-durban/</a>   |
| 2.  | Fihlani, P. (2022). 'Dudula: How South African Anger Has Focused on Foreigners.' BBC News [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60698374">www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60698374</a>   |
| 3.  | Bishogo, C. (2020). 'Xenophobia in South Africa.' Harvard Human Rights [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.harvardhumanrights.com/xenophobia-in-south-africa">www.harvardhumanrights.com/xenophobia-in-south-africa</a>  |
| 4.  | Bornman, J. (2021). 'Operation Dudula Pushes Ahead with Hateful Politics.' New Frame [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.newframe.com/operation-dudula-pushes-ahead-with-hateful-politics/">www.newframe.com/operation-dudula-pushes-ahead-with-hateful-politics/</a>  |
| 5.  | Evans, J. (2022). 'Operation Dudula Brings Its Campaign Against Foreign Nationals to Cape Town.' News24 [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/operation-dudula-brings-its-campaign-against-foreign-nationals-to-cape-town-20220514">www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/operation-dudula-brings-its-campaign-against-foreign-nationals-to-cape-town-20220514</a>   |
| 6.  | eNCA. (2022). 'Operation Dudula Let the Law Take Its Course.' eNCA news [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.enca.com/news/operation-dudula-watch-let-law-take-its-course-dlamini">www.enca.com/news/operation-dudula-watch-let-law-take-its-course-dlamini</a>   |
| 7.  | Mafata, M. (2022). 'Immigrant Traders in Gauteng Fear for Their Safety After Threats of Xenophobic Attacks.' News24 [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/immigrant-traders-in-gauteng-fear-for-their-safety-after-threats-of-xenophobic-attacks-20220202">www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/immigrant-traders-in-gauteng-fear-for-their-safety-after-threats-of-xenophobic-attacks-20220202</a>   |
| 8.  | Madia, T. (2022). 'Ramaphosa Calls Operation Dudula a Vigilante Force, Says ANC Can't Support Them.' Eyewitness News [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.ewn.co.za/2022/04/04/ramaphosa-calls-operation-dudula-a-vigilante-force-says-anc-can-t-support-them">www.ewn.co.za/2022/04/04/ramaphosa-calls-operation-dudula-a-vigilante-force-says-anc-can-t-support-them</a>  |
| 9.  | Makwakwa, T. and Dlamini, T. (2022). 'Operation Dudula: Migrants Trading at Shops Fear Outbreak of Xenophobia, Lament Unprovoked Attacks as Threat Still Looms Large.' IOL News [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/kwazulu-natal/operation-dudula-migrants-trading-at-shops-fear-outbreak-of-xenophobia-lament-unprovoked-%E2%80%A61/7">www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/kwazulu-natal/operation-dudula-migrants-trading-at-shops-fear-outbreak-of-xenophobia-lament-unprovoked-%E2%80%A61/7</a> |
| 10. | Mncube, P. (2022). 'Operation Dudula: When Deep-Seated Frustration Meets Prejudice and Weak Leadership.' Daily Maverick [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-04-20-operation-dudula-when-deep-seated-frustration-meets-prejudice-and-weak-leadership/">www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-04-20-operation-dudula-when-deep-seated-frustration-meets-prejudice-and-weak-leadership/</a>   |
| 11. | Myeni, T. (2022). 'What is Operation Dudula, South Africa's Anti-Migration Vigilante?' <i>Aljazeera</i> [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/8/what-is-operation-dudula-s-africas-anti-immigration-vigilante">www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/8/what-is-operation-dudula-s-africas-anti-immigration-vigilante</a>   |
| 12. | Peralta, E. (2022). 'A Movement Gains Force to Put South Africans First and to Drive Migrants Out.' <i>NPR News</i> [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.npr.org/2022/06/07/1103445432/south-africa-anti-immigrant-operation-dudula">www.npr.org/2022/06/07/1103445432/south-africa-anti-immigrant-operation-dudula</a>   |
| 13. | Sibanda, N. (2022). 'Operation Dudula is a Symptom of Unresolved Colonial and Political Issues.' <i>Mail &amp; Guardian</i> [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.mg.co.za/opinion/2022-06-12-operation-dudula-is-a-symptom-of-unresolved-colonial-and-political-issues/">www.mg.co.za/opinion/2022-06-12-operation-dudula-is-a-symptom-of-unresolved-colonial-and-political-issues/</a>   |
| 14. | Wroughton, L. (2022). 'Vigilantes and Violence Have Migrants in South Africa Scared for Their Lives.' <i>The Washington Post</i> [online]. Available at: <a href="http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/05/south-africa-operation-dudula-immigration/">www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/05/south-africa-operation-dudula-immigration/</a>  |

“ Organisations like Operation Dudula arguably point to the possibility that anti-immigrant sentiment is rooted in poverty. It is important to acknowledge the social, economic, political, legal, cultural, and psychological ramifications of these recurrent Black-on-Black persecutions (Sibanda, 2022). This paper contends that it is idealist to believe that ubuntu alone can effectively combat these socio-economic and political ramifications. ”

Operation Dudula is seen as a symptom of unresolved colonial and political issues in the country. The All-Truck Drivers Forum, which campaigns for all truck drivers operating in the country to be South African, guarded the Maponya Mall in Soweto when the campaign's focus shifted from the call to protect shops from the frantic looting in some areas of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng in July 2021 (Evans, 2022). Shortly after, the Operation's Chair (Mr. Nhlanhla Lux) made the announcement that any new businesses would first need to go through his organisation to ensure that South African stores and spaza shops were formed in Soweto (Myeni, 2022). Anxiety over Operation Dudula's focus on foreigners and the possibility for bigotry quickly replaced the joy of defending companies during raids. In an interview with eNCA, Operation Dudula's Deputy Chairperson, Dan Radebe, stated that the organisation also encouraged its members to sign up as police reservists to contribute to crime prevention (eNCA, 2022).

The Operation Dudula campaign is heavily debated in South Africa as some feel that it is an Afrophobia campaign, spreading xenophobic tendencies under the banner of putting South Africans first. In his reflection on the existence of the organisation and its spread in the Western Cape, Ricardo McKenzie shares his sentiments:

Ricardo McKenzie, a member of the Western Cape provincial assembly for the DA, disapproved

of the march's message and claimed that the organisation was a part of a concerning trend of xenophobia and Afrophobia that is spreading throughout South Africa. (Evans, 2022)

The sentiments shared above by McKenzie regarding Operation Dudula resemble those expressed by the South African President. During the African National Congress (ANC) Conference that took place in Mpumalanga in April 2022, President Ramaphosa described Operation Dudula as a 'vigilante-like force' (Madia, 2022). Ramaphosa further argued:

'We cannot support a vigilante-type-of move against a group of people and particularly targeting them as foreign nationals because what we are doing then is just to divide our people on the African continent.' (Madia, 2022)

Ramaphosa's opinions differ from those of ANC National Spokesperson, Pule Mabe, who supported communities that fought unlawful activity in an interview with the *Mail & Guardian*. A divisive campaign in Johannesburg spearheaded by Operation Dudula has targeted foreign nationals. One of the organisation's objections is that it is challenging to find unlawful foreign nationals who have been charged with crimes because they are not recorded in any South African databases. They contend that immigrants are displacing South Africans from their jobs and fuelling criminality in various parts of the nation.

The members of Operation Dudula, on the other hand, believe that they are not acting in a xenophobic manner, but rather are upholding the law, which they claim the government is not doing. One of the group members explained their dedication to law enforcement as follows:

'So, the issues are that people are coming into the country and they are not documented, and the government is doing nothing about it, and it's difficult to find them when they commit a crime. We just need our departments to enforce the laws that are there, because these laws are not enforced.'

– Zandile Dabula, National Secretary for Operation Dudula. (Africa News, 2022)

According to Operation Dudula, their goal is purportedly to persuade the South African government to act against illegal immigrants and those who are allegedly involved in criminal activity (Ndaba, 2022). On paper, this appears to be the reason for the organisation's origin, composition, and behaviour. However, to purport is to suggest or assert that something is true without providing any supporting evidence. This is the key issue at hand, and the reason why Operation Dudula is so plagued with rumours and contradictions.

### **Putting South Africans First**

Operation Dudula is purportedly centred around putting South Africans first in terms of job security and owning local businesses such as spaza shops in the townships. The organisation contends that the South African government is failing to emancipate them from the indecent living conditions that they are subjected to. According to the organisation's secretary, minimising the influx of illegal immigrants will supposedly help to reduce crimes incited by immigrants (Myeni, 2022).

The organisation's campaign gives the idea that it is Afrophobic. However, another possible view is that Operation Dudula represents an outcry seeking genuine economic equity for historically disenfranchised Black South Africans. The organisation's efforts are mostly focused on underprivileged Black citizens living in townships and shacks (Ndaba, 2022). Black South Africans long for social and economic reform, rather than persecution. Ndaba (2022) claims that Operation Dudula's intentions are blatantly anti-African and xenophobic. However, another possible perspective is that the organisation's efforts represent an outcry of frustration by people whose economic conditions have been repeatedly ignored by the government. The state's inability to address societal issues is arguably one of the reasons why Operation Dudula and other groups of a similar nature exist. This study contends that this is a view that is hardly considered when discussing xenophobic violence in South Africa.

Xenophobia has been denounced throughout Africa, especially given how common it is in South Africa due to Africanisation (Ogunnubi and Amusan, 2018). Charles Onunaigu, director of China Studies, claims

that the attacks were a response to the unmet expectations of common citizens from the ANC-led post-apartheid South African government (Ogunnubi, and Aja, 2022). However, only a small number of elites in Africa have benefitted from the anti-colonial struggle. Therefore, regular people are expressing their resentment in various ways, including these attacks (Odoh, 2019). Akinola (2018) and Fayomi et al. (2015) argue that these tendencies are the result of a mix of social-political influences, some of which are overt and others which are more quietly present. It is difficult, if not impossible, to isolate a specific cause of xenophobia in South Africa. High rates of poverty and unemployment, inefficient immigration restrictions, provocative remarks made by the media and government authorities, and negative perceptions of Nigerians as a people are some examples of these triggers (Akinola, 2018; Fayomi et al., 2015). Whilst acknowledging that the issue at hand is not just moral degeneration by poor South Africans, this paper finds it important that the response to xenophobia should not just be an effort to moralise South Africans, but rather to address the socio-political influences of xenophobic attacks.

### **Should Ubuntu be an Ethical Response to Xenophobia in South Africa?**

Organisations like Operation Dudula arguably point to the possibility that anti-immigrant sentiment is rooted in poverty. It is important to acknowledge the social, economic, political, legal, cultural, and psychological ramifications of these recurrent Black-on-Black persecutions (Sibanda, 2022). This paper contends that it is idealist to believe that ubuntu alone can effectively combat these socio-economic and political ramifications. I acknowledge that ubuntu advocates for universal African humanism and teaches us to appreciate and value people for who they are, regardless of their social, political, or cultural backgrounds. However, I argue that one must problematise the blind application of this philosophy to the South African context, whilst ignoring the country's existential circumstances. I do not endorse the tactics used by Operation Dudula. Rather, my interest lies in showing that there is more to these recurring xenophobic incidents than meets the eye.

As it promotes a 'universal' African humanism, ubuntu is also problematic as an intellectual theory

that has the propensity to downplay the significance of geographical boundaries. Why should South Africa be forced to adhere to a borderless African philosophy if other nations are not also doing so? Several authors have written about ubuntu's untapped potential as a social engineering tool to combat xenophobia in South Africa (Landau, Ramjathan-Keogh, and Singh, 2005). However, xenophobia in South Africa is largely triggered by socio-political ills; it is not entirely about general hate towards foreign nationals.

It is possible that the motives of anti-immigrant groups like Operation Dudula emanate from the fear of continuously being excluded from employment. Therefore, I find it problematic when academics and South African theologians contend that 'learning and putting Ubuntu's principles and ideals into practice can challenge and motivate South Africans to view and treat African immigrants differently' (Mnyaka, 2003; Koenane, 2013; 2018). Shaping the views of South Africans will not take away the deep-rooted fear they have of foreign nationals taking their jobs. Whilst many preach the rhetoric of 'the rainbow nation', the 'new South Africa', and the country's progressive Constitution, the actual situation on the ground does not attest to these far-fetched ideals. South Africa's colonial and apartheid legacies persist and reflect the African experience. As Phiri writes: 'The post-colonial pattern across the continent follows a trend in which the people are condemned to relatively the same conditions that they suffered during the colonial or apartheid era. Even after independence, the situation of the people remains deplorable, despite the change of leadership' (2020: 88).

Koenane argues that there have not been any other significant violent incidents in South Africa against other racial or immigrant groups. However, the point of view that ubuntu and other African principles should be used to combat Afrophobia can be contested (Koenane, 2018). Scholars such as Fanon and Mamdani can help us to understand the foundations of xenophobia in South Africa (Fanon, 1967; Mamdani, 2017). They identify how colonialism intentionally kept the majority of the colonised underprivileged and how this is still maintained. Many South Africans are subjected to economic conditions that are not based on their personal choice, but are rather the result of intentional colonial creations. Since such people have nothing to lose, they opt to respond in revolt to these

unbecoming living conditions. Therefore, this paper contends that it is the colonial situation that is violent. It is possible to argue that those who are cast as 'perpetrators' (poor south Africans) and 'victims' (poor foreigners) are in fact all victims and xenophobic behaviour is the direct result of their frustrations.

### **Alternative Perspectives on Xenophobia: Neocosmos' 'Native Foreigner' Conception**

Xenophobia in South Africa has been seen through the lens of violence, but Phiri (2021) has extensively argued that not every anti-immigrant sentiment translates into violence. According to Phiri (2021), xenophobic attitudes are much more widespread than recorded attacks. It is exclusion based on difference that is central to that definition of xenophobia and violence is one of its consequences. Neocosmos says: 'Xenophobia is a discourse concerned with a process of social and political exclusion of some group or population' (Neocosmos, 2006: 15). He further explains that there is another form of exclusion that operates even within borders, but that discriminates or marginalises those who are politically weak. For instance, those who are excluded in this sense might be South African citizens who are unable to fully enjoy the rights accorded to South Africans. This refers to South African citizens who are too poor to even afford decent accommodation and instead end up living in informal settlements. These citizens are *foreigners* in their own country, or are what Neocosmos terms 'Native Foreigners'.

Xenophobic attacks have occurred year after year in South Africa since 2008. This shows that little progress has been made in addressing this issue. It is interesting to note that historically and currently under Operation Dudula, xenophobic violence is conducted by those who could be termed *native foreigners*: South Africans who feel excluded and unable to fully enjoy their citizenship rights (Neocosmos, 2006; Phiri, 2021). Whilst media coverage refers to them as 'vigilante mobs' who are committing inexplicable atrocities, another possible perspective is that these are South Africans who are genuinely poor and neglected by the state. Whilst trying to deal with their own sense of exclusion, these South Africans must also contend with how the media portrays immigration issues and how these reports instil fear in the everyday South African. The media often speaks of migrants *flooding*

“ I have shown that South Africans are not only perpetrators, but are also victims. Citizenship cannot be reduced to recognition by political institutions; it must also include full participation in the life of a nation, in a way that allows for decent living and dignified humanity. Those who live below the poverty line and in deplorable conditions cannot be called citizens, but are instead ‘native foreigners.’ ”

South Africa, which gives the impression that South Africa will be full of foreign people and all available opportunities will be taken away. This gives native foreigners the impression that they need to panic when they see an influx of foreigners.

The issue of nationalism has been intimately related to xenophobia in South Africa and this has been demonstrated through policies. South African political discourse has always portrayed xenophobia as a threat to the unity of South Africa and the rest of Africa because it begets intolerance and disunity. Xenophobia is represented as a disease that must be cured in order for ‘the new South Africa’ and the realisation of the African renaissance to function in harmony. For this reason, many propose that native foreigners need ubuntu to cure xenophobia. However, I argue that it is unfair to impose ubuntu on this group of native foreigners without considering that the same group has on many occasions expressed dissatisfaction with how the South African government rules them. I argue that it is essential to look at both the perpetrators and victims of xenophobia to understand what is happening in South Africa. In the post-apartheid period, many South Africans are politically recognised but nonetheless remain on the periphery, divorced from opportunities that should be accorded to citizens. When these native foreigners revolt against such treatment, they are blamed.

Opressors accuse the oppressed of being violent, when in fact the oppressed are reacting to the

violence of their oppression (Freire, 1993: 38). South Africa has been referred to as the protest capital, but one finds that protests generally take place in areas where violence is expected to take place. Most of these protests end up being violent because the masses realise that the country’s rulers choose to either ignore their voices or to lie about the fact that their grievances will be addressed. The protesters want to live in conditions that allow for decent humanity. They are fighting for true citizenship. It is not enough to only be South African by citizenship/birth, as this does not guarantee them full participation in their citizenship. These ongoing protests are a plea to regain a humanity which was soiled during the colonial era. The masses have been betrayed by the very people who they thought would contribute to their freedom. This situation is not unique to South Africa; it can also be observed in most other African countries. Fanon has illustrated that there is no change between the colonial and apartheid states. The colonial system is inherently violent, and so violence becomes the only means available to the oppressed/the colonised.

It is for this reason that I argue that Operation Dudula should not only be seen as a problem that needs ubuntu redemption, but should rather be seen as a symptom of unresolved colonial and political issues. This is why even foreign nationals quoted in the media express the opinion that this is ‘politics’ rather than merely xenophobia (Wroughton, 2022). According to Mncube (2022), the government has long been urged to act over the presence of unauthorised foreign nationals in South Africa. However, as the nation struggles with higher rates of unemployment and poverty, the voices of internal discontent have grown louder. Despite being one of Africa’s economic powerhouses, South Africa still must conquer internal political issues before it achieves socially fair economic independence (Sibanda, 2022). It is time to embrace introspection and to find the political will necessary to conduct discussions with the key parties involved.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued for the need to consider xenophobia as related to the internal ramifications of colonialism/apartheid in South Africa. This paper does not advocate for tactics of violence, nor does it seek to exonerate the perpetrators. Rather, I have tried to draw attention to the fact that violence has been the

most travelled avenue that poor South Africans have used to demand decent humanity and livelihoods. In problematising ubuntu as an ethical response to xenophobia, I argue against the blind application of this philosophy, especially when all South Africans are simply cast as 'xenophobic' with no consideration of their context or circumstances. To combat the rampant xenophobia in the country, this article contends that it is not enough to tell Black Africans in post-apartheid South Africa to simply embrace the spirit of ubuntu and its principles. This is especially the case when people are continuously subjected to inhumane conditions. Using Neocosmos' view on native foreigners, I have shown that South Africans are not only perpetrators, but are also victims. Citizenship cannot be reduced to recognition by political institutions; it must also include full participation in the life of a nation, in a way that allows for decent living and dignified humanity. Those who live below the poverty line and in deplorable conditions cannot be called citizens, but are instead 'native foreigners.' South Africa has remained the same and the failure to improve the livelihoods of native foreigners will always create conditions that are conducive to xenophobic-related violence.

## References

- Adebisi, A. P. (2017). 'Xenophobia: Healing a Festering Sore in Nigerian–South African Relations.' *Journal of International Relations and Foreign Policy*, 5(1): 83–92.
- Adebisi A.P. and Agagu A.A. (2017). 'The Challenges of Xenophobia and Terrorism for the Development of Higher Education in Africa.' In: F. Maringe and E. Ojo, eds. *Sustainable Transformation in African Higher Education: Research, Governance, Gender, Funding, Teaching, and Learning in the African University*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 115–125.
- Africa News. (2022). 'South Africa: Anti-Immigration Movement 'Operation Dudula' Launched in Durban.' *Africa News* [online]. Available at: [www.africanews.com/2022/04/10/south-africa-anti-immigration-movement-operation-dudula-launched-in-durban/](http://www.africanews.com/2022/04/10/south-africa-anti-immigration-movement-operation-dudula-launched-in-durban/)
- Akinola, A.O. (2018). 'Introduction: Understanding Xenophobia in Africa.' In: A.O. Akinola, ed. *The Political Economy of Xenophobia in Africa*. New York: Springer International, 1–4.
- BBC News. (2019). 'Xenophobic attacks spark South African response.' *BBC News* [online]. Available at: [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47765863](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47765863)
- Bishogo, C. (2020). 'Xenophobia in South Africa.' *Harvard Human Rights* [online]. Available at: [www.harvardhumanrights.com/xenophobia-in-south-africa](http://www.harvardhumanrights.com/xenophobia-in-south-africa)
- Bornman, J. (2021). 'Operation Dudula Pushes Ahead with Hateful Politics.' *New Frame* [online]. Available at: [www.newframe.com/operation-dudula-pushes-ahead-with-hateful-politics/](http://www.newframe.com/operation-dudula-pushes-ahead-with-hateful-politics/)
- Crush, J. and Pendleton, W. (2007). 'Mapping Hostilities: The Geography of Xenophobia in Southern Africa.' *South African Geographical Journal*, 89(1): 64–82.
- Crush, J.D., McDonald, V., Williams, K., Lefko-Everett, D., Dorey, D., Taylor, and R. la Sablonnière. (2008). 'The Perfect Storm: The Realities of Xenophobia in Contemporary South Africa.' *Southern African Migration Project, Migration Policy Series*, 50. Cape Town and Kingston, ON: Idasa and Kingston and Southern African Research Centre.
- Dauda, M., Sakanyau, R.T., and Ameen, A. (2018). 'Xenophobic Violence in South Africa and Nigeria's Victimization: An Empirical Analysis.' *Pertanika Journal of Social Science & Humanities*, 26(4): 2677–2700.
- Du Toit, P. and Kortze, H. (2011). *Liberal Democracy and Peace in South Africa: The Pursuit of Freedom as Dignity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Egbunu, F.E. (2013). 'Personhood (One) in Igala Worldview: A Philosophical Appraisal.' *Journal of Cross-Cultural Communication*, 9(3): 1–9.
- Elejo, E.F. (2014). 'Africans and African Humanism: What Prospects?' *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 4(1): 297–308.
- Eliastam, J.L.B. (2015). 'Exploring Ubuntu Discourse in South Africa: Loss, Liminality and Hope.' *Verbum Et Ecclesia*, 36(2): 1–8.
- Evans, J. (2022). 'Operation Dudula Brings Its Campaign Against Foreign Nationals to Cape Town.' *News24* [online]. Available at: [www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/operation-dudula-brings-its-campaign-against-foreign-nationals-to-cape-town-20220514](http://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/operation-dudula-brings-its-campaign-against-foreign-nationals-to-cape-town-20220514)
- Fanon, F. (1967). *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin Books.
- Fayomi, O., Chidozie, F. and Ayo, C. (2015). 'A Retrospective Study of the Effects of Xenophobia on South Africa–Nigeria relations.' *CORE* [online]. Available at: [www.core.ac.uk/download/pdf/32225837.pdf](http://www.core.ac.uk/download/pdf/32225837.pdf)
- Fauvelle-Aymar, C., and Segatti, A.W.K. (2012). 'People, Space, and Politics: An Exploration of Factors Explaining the 2008 Anti-Foreigner Violence in South Africa.' In: L.B. Landau, ed. *Exorcising the Demons Within Xenophobia, Violence and Statecraft in Contemporary South Africa*. Johannesburg: United Nations University Press/Wits University Press, 58–88.
- Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin.
- Gordon, S. (2015). 'Xenophobia Across the Class Divide: South African Attitudes Towards Foreigners, 2003–2012.' *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 33(4): 494–509.
- Kaungu, G. M. (2021). 'Reflections on the Role of Ubuntu as an Antidote to Afro-Phobia.' *Journal of African Law*, 65(S1): 153–170.
- Koenane, M.L.J. (2013). 'Xenophobic Attacks in South Africa—An Ethical Response: Have We Lost the Underlying Spirit of Ubuntu?' *International Journal of Science, Commerce and Humanities*, 1(6): 106–111.
- Koenane, M.L.J. (2018). 'Ubuntu and Philoxenia: Ubuntu and Christian Worldviews as Responses to Xenophobia.' *HTS: Theological Studies*, 74(1): 1–8.
- Landau, L.B., Ramjathan-Keogh, K., and Singh, G. (2005). *Xenophobia in South Africa and Problems Related to It*. Johannesburg: Forced Migration Studies Programme/University of the Witwatersrand.
- Madia, T. (2022). 'Ramaphosa Calls Operation Dudula a Vigilante Force, Says ANC Can't Support Them.' *Eyewitness News* [online]. Available at: [www.ewn.co.za/2022/04/04/ramaphosa-calls-operation-dudula-a-vigilante-force-says-anc-can-t-support-them](http://www.ewn.co.za/2022/04/04/ramaphosa-calls-operation-dudula-a-vigilante-force-says-anc-can-t-support-them)
- Mafata, M. (2022). 'Immigrant Traders in Gauteng Fear for Their Safety After Threats of Xenophobic Attacks.' *News24* [online]. Available at: [www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/immigrant-traders-in-gauteng-fear-for-their-safety-after-threats-of-xenophobic-attacks-20220202](http://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/immigrant-traders-in-gauteng-fear-for-their-safety-after-threats-of-xenophobic-attacks-20220202)
- Mamdani, M. (2017). *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Miller, B. (2012). 'Exploring the Economic Determinants of Immigration Attitudes.' *Poverty and Public Policy*, 4(2): 1–19.
- Mnyaka, M.M.N. (2003). 'Xenophobia as a Response to Foreigners in Post-Apartheid South Africa and Post-Exilic Israel: A Comparative Critique in the Light of the Gospel and Ubuntu Ethical Principles.' Doctoral Dissertation, University of South Africa.
- Myeni, T. (2022). 'What is Operation Dudula, South Africa's Anti-Migration Vigilante?' *Aljazeera* [online]. Available at: [www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/8/what-is-operation-dudula-s-africas-anti-immigration-vigilante](http://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/8/what-is-operation-dudula-s-africas-anti-immigration-vigilante)

- Mncube, P. (2022). 'Operation Dudula: When Deep-Seated Frustration Meets Prejudice and Weak Leadership.' *Daily Maverick* [online]. Available at: [www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-04-20-operation-dudula-when-deep-seated-frustration-meets-prejudice-and-weak-leadership/](http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-04-20-operation-dudula-when-deep-seated-frustration-meets-prejudice-and-weak-leadership/)
- Murenje, M. (2020). 'Ubuntu and Xenophobia in South Africa's International Migration.' *African Journal of Social Work*, 10(1): 95–98.
- Neocosmos, M. (2006). *From "Foreign Natives" to "Native Foreigners": Explaining Xenophobia in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Dakar: Imperimene.
- Nussbaum, B. (2003). 'Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on Our Common Humanity.' *Reflections: The SoL Journal*, 4(4): 21–26.
- Obioha, U.P., and Okaneme, G. (2017). 'African Humanism as a Basis for Social Cohesion and Human Well-Being in Africa.' *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education*, 4(5): 43–50.
- Odoh, I. (2019). 'The Challenges of Nigeria's Citizen Diplomacy.' *Business Day* [online]. Available at: [www.businessday.ng/amp/features/articles/the-challenges-of-nigerias-citizen-diplomacy/](http://www.businessday.ng/amp/features/articles/the-challenges-of-nigerias-citizen-diplomacy/)
- Ogunnubi, O. and Aja, U.A. (2022). 'Citizen Diplomacy in Nigeria–South Africa Relations: Confronting the Paradox of Xenophobia.' *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 9(3): 133–151.
- Ogunnubi, O. and Amusan, L. (2018). 'Nigeria's Attitude Towards South Africa's Perceived Xenophobia: Exploring a Shared Hegemonic Power for Africa's Development. In: A.O.Akinola, ed. *The Political Economy of Xenophobia in Africa*. New York: Springer International.
- Ogunnowo, O. and Joshua, S. (2019). 'Xenophobic Attacks in South Africa and Nigeria's Foreign Policy: Rethinking Nigeria's Afrocentrism.' *African Research Review*, 7(1): 1–19.
- Phiri, S. (2020). 'Learning to be 'Out of Order': A life of CLP and the Development of its Praxis.' Doctoral Thesis: University of KwaZulu Natal.
- Phiri, S. (2021). 'South Africa and Xenophobic Violence: A Critical Analysis of the Post-Colonial State.' In: *Xenophobia, Nativism and Pan-Africanism in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Africa*. New York: Springer, 137–153.
- Peralta, E. (2022). 'A Movement Gains Force to Put South Africans First and to Drive Migrants Out.' *NPR News* [online]. Available at: [www.npr.org/2022/06/07/1103445432/south-africa-anti-immigrant-operation-dudula](http://www.npr.org/2022/06/07/1103445432/south-africa-anti-immigrant-operation-dudula)
- Saleh, I. (2015). 'Is it Xenophobia in South Africa or an International Act of Prejudice?' *Global Media Journal – African Edition*, 9(2): 298–313.
- Sibanda, N. (2022). 'Operation Dudula is a Symptom of Unresolved Colonial and Political Issues.' *Mail & Guardian* [online]. Available at: [www.mg.co.za/opinion/2022-06-12-operation-dudula-is-a-symptom-of-unresolved-colonial-and-political-issues/](http://www.mg.co.za/opinion/2022-06-12-operation-dudula-is-a-symptom-of-unresolved-colonial-and-political-issues/)
- Tella, O. (2016). 'Understanding Xenophobia in South Africa: The Individual, the State and the International System.' *Insight on Africa*, 8(2): 142–158.
- The Economist. (2016). 'To the Land of Good Hope: African Migrants Head South as Well as North.' *The Economist* [online]. Available at: [www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/03/03/to-the-land-of-good-hope](http://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/03/03/to-the-land-of-good-hope)
- UNHCR ROSA. (2015). 'Situation Update on Xenophobic Attacks in South Africa.' *United Nations* [online]. Available at: [www.un.org/youthenvoy/2013/09/office-of-the-united-nations-high-commissioner-for-refugees](http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2013/09/office-of-the-united-nations-high-commissioner-for-refugees)
- Valji, N. (2003). 'Creating the Nation: The Rise of Violent Xenophobia in the New South Africa.' Unpublished Master's Thesis, York University. *South African History Online* [online]. Available at: [www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/file%20uploads%20/riseofviolent.pdf](http://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/file%20uploads%20/riseofviolent.pdf)