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## **Mobilizing Ubuntu as the Unifying Language for the Descendants of Bantu during Xenophobic/Afrophobic Attacks in South Africa**

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### **Abstract**

South Africa has witnessed a lot of xenophobic uprisings in recent years, and it comes with violent attacks mainly by the black African hosts on the black African migrants, who are mostly Bantu-speaking descendants, just like some of the black ethnic groups in South Africa. This has prompted some scholars to call it Afrophobia because they see it as a fratricidal brawl since the attacks are hardly extended to non-black Africans. This paper, therefore, explored the re-vitalisation of the traditional ways black Africans used to relate with one

another in their communities, employing the philosophy of Ubuntu. Using a desktop study secondary data collection approach as its methodology, the study draws from existing literature, academic journals, reports, relevant media sources, books and electronic databases, and employs the narrative analysis to contextualise the phenomenon. The study concluded that the mobilisation and positioning of Ubuntu as the theme in the communication and languages used by the media, scholars, political and cultural leaders while addressing the causative factors responsible for these attacks will go a long way towards highlighting their historical affinity and create a conversation about it, and thus, the violence will abate. The study also showed that, many times, the causative factors are built on misconceptions and myths. The study recommended that, if these steps are taken, the descendants of Bantu will not only live peaceably but also enjoy the good of the land.

**Keywords:** *Afrophobia, Bantu, Language, Migrants, South Africa, Ubuntu, Xenophobia*

## **Introduction**

Africa, according to Flahaux and De Haas (2016), has always been seen as a continent of mass migration, and this is caused by poverty, violent conflict and environmental stress. To get a better living condition, Africans have had to migrate to countries outside the continent, through any means. This pattern of migration to Europe and North America is abating because of stringent immigration policies being introduced by the West, which has made it difficult for Africans, especially unskilled ones, to move. This has somehow redirected the migration pattern towards Asia and more endowed African countries like South Africa.

Solomon (1994) states that South African migration should be characterised as a brain drain type as well trained professionals from neighbouring countries and unskilled illegal migrants from Mozambique and Angola. He argues that these migrants, either skilled or unskilled, came into South Africa for economic reasons, but the influx itself came with its own challenges in South Africa, one of them being social tension. However, he counsels that the government should evolve a policy to appreciate that, while they exude pride as having a more robust economy than some countries in Southern Africa, they should also take cognizance of the fact that they are Southern Africans themselves.

A report written by *The Economist* (posted online on October 30, 2021<sup>1</sup>) says that many more Africans are migrating within Africa than to Europe, and this has obviously pulled more people to South Africa with a relatively middle-income and industrialised economy. Some of these migrants are the Bantu people. Undoubtedly, the arrival of these groups has caused unrest between them and the Bantu in South Africa. Apart from the causative factor of competing for economic opportunities, there has also been a lack of socio-economic cohesion that would have been fostered by the use of language, with Ubuntu which is the philosophy of the people being the central theme.

This study, therefore, mobilised a secondary data instrument and conducted a search on various materials and documents, including published academic papers, government documents, statistical databases, historical records, textbooks, encyclopedias, news articles and analyses, and other Internet sources that contain academic and other historical journals to justify the study (Dunn, Arslanian-Engoren, DeKoekkoek, Jadack, & Scott, 2015). The study also employed the narrative analysis approach (Allen, 2017) to discuss and interpret data gathered from the secondary sources by various scholars and authors within the context of Ubuntu, Bantu and Afrophobia.

According to Tshaka (2016), the episode of Afrophobic attacks wrongly called xenophobic attacks is not new; it dates back to pre-apartheid era as stated by Neocosmos (2010), and has continued till date. Between 2000 and 2008, at least 67 people died in these xenophobia attacks, though 21 of the killed people were South African citizens. In 2015, another nationwide wave of Afrophobic attacks against immigrants in general prompted a number of foreign governments to begin repatriating their citizens (Brudvig, 2014; Dixon, 2015; Nyamnjoh & Masenya, 2017).

To contextualise the discourse, there is the need to clarify that the black African groups that are being attacked are immigrants, and are different from tourists that visit South Africa yearly. An immigrant is a person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country. Therefore, according to the British Refugee definition<sup>2</sup>, immigration is the international movement of people to a destination country of which they are not natives or where they do not possess citizenship in order to settle

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2021/10/30/many-more-africans-are-migrating-within-africa-than-to-europe> - Accessed January 30, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/the-truth-about-asylum/> - Accessed July 8, 2021

as permanent residents or naturalised citizens. Immigration is different from other forms of people's movement like Commute, tourism, and other short-term stays in a destination country. They do not fall under the definition of immigration or migration or seasonal labour, who only come to work briefly or at most a year in a country (British Refugee Council, 2016). It is, however, argued by some scholars that immigration brings some level of benefits to the sending and receiving countries (Giovani, Levchenko, & Ortega, 2015; World Bank, 2016<sup>3</sup>).

Dodson (2010) asserts that the origins of immigrants in South Africa include many countries belonging to the African continent, and they include Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. However, writing for *The Conversation* (September 20, 2020), Innocent Moyo of the University of Zululand says it will be difficult to confirm the population of undocumented migrants in South Africa. He says that Statistics South Africa (StatsSA, 2011) gives a figure of about 4.2% of the total population, or about 2.1 million people. Statistics show that over 75% came from the African continent, with the majority (68%) from within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. Over 45% of those from the SADC region were Zimbabweans. Moyo (2011) states that, to manage this wave of migration, the newly enacted law provides for the establishment of a Border Management Authority, whose primary function is to provide integrated border law enforcement. Its core functions include the governance and management of the lawful movement of people and goods within the border law enforcement areas and at ports of entry.

## **Separating Facts from Myths about Migrants**

South Africa is the second largest economy in Africa, according to the World Economic Outlook of Africa and Bloomberg News<sup>4</sup>. Nonetheless, it has the most developed infrastructure and, therefore, the most industrialised economy in Africa, according to World Bank (2021) report<sup>5</sup>, and has witnessed many African migrants arrive for better

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<sup>3</sup><https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/672181468185348016/pdf/WPS7628.pdf> – Accessed July 8, 2021

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-03/nigeria-now-tops-south-africa-as-the-continent-s-biggest-economy> - Accessed July 8, 2021

<sup>5</sup> <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups> - Accessed 8 July, 2021

economic life. A research done by Pew Research poll in 2018 shows that 62% of South Africans viewed immigrants as a burden on society by taking jobs and social benefits and that 61% of South Africans thought that immigrants were more responsible for crime than other groups (Tamir & Budiman, 2019). World Bank (2021) also posits that, between 2010 and 2017, the immigrant community in South Africa increased from 2 million people to 4 million people. The proportion of South Africa's total population that is foreign born increased from 2.8% in 2005 to 7% in 2019, according to the United Nations International Organisation for Migration (2019). However, despite widespread Afrophobia, South Africa is still the largest recipient of immigrants on the African continent in 2019<sup>6</sup>.

Two studies were done by Migrating for Work Research Consortium (MiWORC), an organisation that examines migration and its impact on the South African labour market, and based on the labour data collected in 2012 by Statistics South Africa found out that 82% of the working population aged between 15 and 64 were non-migrants; 14% were domestic migrants who had moved between provinces in the past five years, and just 4% could be classed as international migrants. With an official working population of 33, 017 579 people, this means that around 1.2 million of them were international migrants. The research also shows that a racial breakdown of the statistics reveals that 79% of international migrants were African, 17% were white and around three percent were Indian or Asian.<sup>7</sup>

According to MiWORC's research published by Mail & Guardian in April 2017, international migrants are far more likely to run their own businesses, rather than seek employment in South African indigenous companies. Therefore, 11% are employers and 21% are classed as self-employed. By comparison, only 5% of non-migrants and domestic migrants were employers and only 9% of non-migrants and 7% of domestic migrants were self-employed. MiWORC's research concludes that international migrants do play a positive role in South Africa and that the evidence shows that they contribute to South Africa and South Africans by providing jobs, paying rents, paying value added tax (VAT) and providing affordable and convenient goods, and that 31% of the 618 international migrant traders interviewed rented properties from South

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.co.za/immigrant-numbers-for-south-africa-are-still-rising-despite-xenophobia-and-violence-2020-2> - Accessed July 8, 2021

<sup>7</sup> <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-04-17-analysis-are-foreigners-stealing-jobs-in-south-africa/> - Accessed July 8, 2021

Africans. Collectively, they also employed 1, 223 people, of which 503 were South Africans. Therefore, the notion of migrants taking South African jobs, according to Dr Zaheera Jinnah of the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS), University of the Witwatersrand, is based on myths and misconceptions.

It is on this premise that this study intends to interrogate the issues raised that migrants are taking the jobs of the host community, which has stifled them out of economic opportunities and led to social tension and conflict between the Bantu descendants with historical and anthropological ties. The study intends to revisit and revitalise the ancestral values and relationships that always existed among Africans, particularly of Bantu descent, which is based on hospitality aptly captured as Ubuntu with varied expressions in the respective languages among the Bantu people. The study's objective intends to point the way forward by addressing the misconceptions and thus avoid further fratricidal conflicts.

### **Bantus and the Philosophy of Ubuntu**

Certainly, these myths and misconceptions have occasioned many attacks on Black Africans by the Black South Africans that is commonly called xenophobia, and Afrophobia by some others. Xenophobia is an ancient Greek word 'xénos' that means stranger or foreigner, and phobia, meaning fear makes it the fear or hatred, which is perceived to be foreign or strange. It is an expression of perceived conflict between an in-group and an out-group and may manifest in suspicion by the one of the other's activities, a desire to eliminate their presence, and fear of losing national, ethnic or racial identity<sup>8</sup> (Bolaffi, 2003). Simply put, xenophobia is a strong feeling of fear of the other.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report on protection from xenophobia in 2015 describes xenophobia as threats to the lives and livelihoods of refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and other locally defined 'outsiders' including domestic migrants and Persons of Concerns (PoCs). Solomon and Kosaka (2013) aver that xenophobia is the fear or hatred of foreigners or strangers; it is embodied in discriminatory attitudes and behaviour, and often culminates in violence, abuses of all types, and exhibitions of hatred. The patterns of xenophobic attacks have been

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.co.za/immigrant-numbers-for-south-africa-are-still-rising-despite-xenophobia-and-violence-2020-2> - Accessed July 20, 2021

more on the black Africans, but Tewolde (2020) argues that xenophobia is actually colour blind since Asians that live close to black-dominated townships also suffer from the attacks if they live proximally to the black townships. Tshishonga (2015) is more concerned about the damage xenophobia does to the local economy of Durban CBD in KwaZulu-Natal Province, but concedes that the attacks are more on black African migrants, thereby reinforcing the concept of Afrophobia.

According to Tshaka (2016), Afrophobia is the fear of a specific other like. His argument is that South Africans see other races that come from Europe as contributing to the country's economy because of their white skin, but sees non-South African black migrants as a foreigner. He states that the term 'Afrophobia' became popular after the breakout of violence in 2008 against African migrants. He, therefore, submits that hostility towards black African foreigners is triggered by a nervous condition created among hegemonies in which the oppressed become willing participants in their oppression, which Fanon (1961) uses to describe the effect of colonisation. Further in his argument, Tshaka (2016) concludes that Afrophobia has its roots in slavery and particularly in how slave owners controlled their slaves, by exploiting the differences among slaves and using these differences to sow fear, distrust and envy which negate the philosophy of Ubuntu – a major philosophy among the Bantu people. So, who are the Bantu people?

The Bantu people first originated around the Benue-Cross rivers area in southeastern Nigeria and spread over Africa to the Zambia area<sup>9</sup>. Sometime in the second millennium BC, perhaps triggered by the drying of the Sahara and pressure from the migration of people from the Sahara into the region, they were forced to expand into central Africa in the phase one of their migration. About 1000 years later, they began a more rapid second phase of expansion beyond the forests into southern and eastern Africa<sup>10</sup>.

Bantu means people in many Bantu languages, and it is a general term for over 400 different ethnic groups from Cameroun to South Africa, united by a common language family and, in many cases, common customs (Vansina, 1979). In South Africa, the Bantu speakers use closely related languages, and linguists divide them into four categories, namely Nguni, Sotho-Tswana, Venda and Tsonga speakers.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhhnB1BZK1I> – Accessed July 20, 2021

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.cs.mcgill.ca/~rwest/wikispeedia/wpcd/wp/b/Bantu.htm> – Accessed July 20, 2021

Ubuntu – a word in Nguni Bantu language – means humanity<sup>11</sup>, as aptly described by Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It is sometimes translated as “I am because we are”, or “humanity towards others”, but it is often used in a more philosophical sense to mean the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity (Helmke, 2013; Hill, Helmke, Graner, & Burger, 2011).

### **Disruption of Ubuntu as a Way of Life among Bantus**

People have been living in South Africa for over 100,000 years, according to history<sup>12</sup>. The Stone Age hunter-gatherers created a wealth of rock art. They were the ancestors of Khoekhoe and San (‘Hottentots’ and ‘Bushmen’) also known as the ‘Khoisan’. Some 2000 years ago, they adopted a lifestyle of herding sheep and later cattle. At the same time, the Bantu-speaking people began arriving in southern Africa, bringing with them an Iron Age culture, which in itself brought its kind of technology into the agrarian lifestyle of the people. This civilisation continued until the arrival of the first white settlement in South Africa, which occurred at the Table Bay on the Cape under the control of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). This foothold was established by Jan van Riebeck following his arrival with three ships on April 6, 1652<sup>13</sup>. This event did not only mark the advent of Europeans in South Africa but also bring with it the attendant disruptions of the lifestyle of the people who had built their philosophy and communalism on Ubuntu. From the 1770s, colonialists came into contact and inevitable conflict with Bantu-speaking chiefdoms some 800 km east of Cape Town. A century of intermittent warfare ensued during which the colonists gained ascendancy over the isiXhosa-speaking chiefdoms<sup>14</sup>.

Tshaka (2016) consequently argues that the colonialists disrupted the Ubuntu lifestyle of the Bantu settlers through subjugation particularly how they controlled the black slaves. They deliberately sowed the seed of discord between them to create an atmosphere of mistrust. Meanwhile, they were not only extracting the resources in the land, but were also exploiting the people based on the concept of nervous condition by

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftjdDOftzbc> – Accessed July 20, 2021

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.jyu.fi/viesti/verkkotuotanto/kp/sa/soc\\_history.shtml](https://www.jyu.fi/viesti/verkkotuotanto/kp/sa/soc_history.shtml) – Accessed July 20, 2021

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.filmeducation.org/skin/history/timeline.pdf> – Accessed July 20, 2021

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gov.za/about-sa/history> – Accessed July 20, 2021

Fanon (1961), who argues that the colonisers encouraged an atmosphere where colonised people became willing participants in the oppression of other oppressed people. That mistrust stands as the root of Afrophobia in these modern times as many Black South Africans have not weaned themselves off conflicts within the communities.

Scholars from the Global South have advanced the decoloniality or decolonialism which focuses on untangling the production of knowledge from what is primarily Eurocentric production of knowledge. It preaches against the universality, either perceived or real, of western knowledge and the superiority of western culture as this is the basis of western imperialism, and the disruption of non-western societies (Quijano, 2007). It is, therefore, important for scholars in South Africa, and indeed Africa, in re-building their societies to distance themselves from the vestiges of colonial rule and apartheid, and focus on African brotherly values encapsulated in the maxim “*I am because you are*”, with a view to putting home-grown structures, which will better develop social cohesion among them, and the concept of Ubuntu will flourish; therefore, the language mobilised in the engagement of efforts to resolve Afrophobia will diminish.

### **What are the Expected Behaviours of the Bantu People in the Context of Ubuntu?**

Human behaviour refers to the way humans act and interact. It is based on and influenced by several factors such as genetic make-up, culture and individual values and attitudes. It is the potential and expressed capacity (mentally, physically and socially) of human individuals or groups to respond to internal and external stimuli throughout their lives (Lerner, Kagan, & Bornstein, 2016).

Human behaviour is influenced by the culture dominant in the society and determines human activity and lifestyle (Airhihenbuwa, 1995; Dutta, 2008). Society, in turn, forms social norms, which are the often unspoken rules of a group, and it shapes not only our behaviours but also our attitudes. An individual's behaviour varies depending on the group(s) they are a part of, a characteristic of society that allows their norms to heavily impact society. Without social norms, human society would not function as it does.

Hence, there is a certain behaviour that Ubuntu confers on the Bantu people, and they are expected to exhibit them in human interaction among themselves and others. Fischer (1962) states that the Bantu live in

a complex society that makes them to develop double identities, involved in minority adaptation to majority standards. Therefore, the more firmly an individual is embedded in his primary in-group, the better integration he may be expected to make with the dominant culture. Fischer also canvasses that people who have negative or ambivalent identifications are likely to find themselves without identity in larger communities. While this may characterise some of the observable behaviours in South Africa today, it is however due to the effect of apartheid rather than a natural and cultural predisposition (Tshaka, 2016). Ubuntu, as a major ethos of the Bantu, confers on them respect for one another, giving and caring for one another.

Ubuntu, which is an African philosophy that convenes human beings with a code of conduct with other people, ranges from communication, politics and religion to healthcare (Mbiti, 1969; Lubombo, 2015). Ubuntu is critical in social works within the societies in Bantu Africa (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019) and even in adult learning (Nafukho, 2006). Ubuntu even transcends human interaction and affects the ways and ethics of environmental management (Chibvongodze, 2016).

### **Ubuntu as a Language of Cohesion among Bantu Descendants can Unite Black Africans in South Africa**

Ubuntu, as earlier stated, is an isiZulu language, which is a branch of Bantu language. It is the most popular form of expression about humanities among the Bantu. However, in other Bantu countries and ethnic groups, it has its distinct indigenous words, and they are: in Angola, it is known as gimuntu, Botswana (muthu), Burundi (ubuntu), Cameroon (bato), Congo (bantu), Congo Democratic Republic (bomoto/bantu), Kenya (utu/munto/mondo), Malawi (umunthu), Mozambique (vumuntu), Namibia (omundu), Nigeria (mutunchi), Rwanda (bantu), South Africa (ubuntu/botho), Tanzania (utu/obuntu/bumuntu), Uganda (obuntu), Zambia (umunthu/ubuntu) and Zimbabwe (Ubuntu, unhu or hunhu) as enumerated by Mangena (2016) and Mugumbate and Chereni (2020).

Patrick (2020) argues that the adoption and use of Ubuntu as a language in promoting social cohesion within communities is important. Language that is indigenous and intelligible to the local people is important. Thus, indigenous language is autochthonous, and spoken among native people in a community. It is used for communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression, and emotional

release, and Ubuntu consequently becomes necessary as an instrument to engage these issues. After all, the aggressors and the victims are all descendants of Bantu, and thus have a common heritage and share the same community.

## **Conclusion**

Mobilising Ubuntu as a central theme in the communication and discourse among the black Africans, both the migrants and the host community, will go a long way towards bringing about social cohesion. Therefore, Ubuntu should be the central language, which, according to Umrzoqov, Hakim jon and Sharipova (2019), unites different cultures. Umrzoqov et al. (2019) argue that culture is usually transmitted through languages, either written or oral, and it binds the society historically and creates a common cultural identity and heritage. They allude to the fact that, though social groups may have conflicts, the groups who have these common identities are less likely to have these conflicts because they view every speaker of their language as one of them while others who speak another language are seen as strangers (Umrzoqov et al., 2019). It is against this backdrop that this study concludes that, if Ubuntu is brought to the focal point of the relationship between the Bantu descendants and nurtured into a historical referenced and language communicative tool, there is a likelihood of a reduction of Afrophobic attacks since it will educate them on their history and heritage.

## **Recommendations**

There must be a deliberate and intentional ways of engagement by political and tribal leaders with the migrant community, and the media, given its pivotal role (Paul, Singh, & John, 2013), must be in the forefront of promoting social cohesion and tolerance by the migrants and the host community. Although culture is dynamic and is always in a state of flux (Ahmed, 2016), Thomas and Thomas (1994) argue that culture may differ and even inter-personal values may also differ as it is with the African migrants and the South African host communities, and sometimes among host communities' cities that are multi-ethnic even when they are all South Africans. Language, however, becomes the glue that keeps culture and people together.

Language indeed, is an instrument of cohesion among people, and it is best promoted by the media (Durant & Lambrou, 2009; Hall, Hobson,

Lowe, & Willis, 2003). Language can, therefore, become the channel that plays a crucial role not only to establish and maintain social cohesion, but also to strengthen the ripple effects of promoting trust, belonging, opportunity of upward mobility and inclusion (Maleku, Kim, & Lee, 2019).

Respective South African and other African scholars, governments and their various departments and agencies, especially the Departments or Ministries of Education in South Africa, and other Bantu-related countries can include Ubuntu in their curricula for primary and secondary school levels and, in some cases, for the tertiary level. The tribal chiefs and clergies should be encouraged to preach this message among the various communities and congregations which are predominantly Bantu, and also encourage songs and programmes' script writers and artistes to focus their arts, music, movies, drama, television productions and literary works on the promotion of Ubuntu and its associated language and philosophies.

The media has a principal role to play in this regard since it is the institution in the society that informs, educates and entertains its mass audience (Florescu, 2014; Preeti, 2014). The media also has an agenda setting role in the society (Lippmann, 1922; Rogers, Dearing, & Bregman, 1993; Zain, 2014). Finally, social media is instrumental in this campaign since, in recent times, it has become a veritable tool for campaign, agenda setting and framing of public discourse and national conversation, and also to mobilise young people who are mostly involved in these Afrophobic and xenophobic attacks. Therefore, Patel (2019) argues that, since the use has increased on a daily basis in the hands of the young generation, they need to be educated on its use. In this regard, the government information offices and the traditional media have a role to play.

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