

## A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF XENOPHOBIA AS A STUMBLING BLOCK TO THE QUEST FOR NIGERIA'S UNITY

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### ABSTRACT

The key role of unity among individuals, societies, nations, and countries in achieving desirable social order and holistic development is not contestable. In line with this position, many thinkers who seek solutions to Nigeria's developmental crises often identify the unity of the Nigerian peoples—epitomized by the maxim "One Nigeria"—as a prerequisite for effective development and sustainable progress. These thinkers frequently attribute the challenges of Nigerian unity and underdevelopment to the historical antecedents of colonialism and neo-colonialism. However, less emphasis appears to be placed on the negative role of xenophobia in undermining the quest for national unity. Employing the method of phenomenological exposition and philosophical analysis of political issues and events in Nigeria, this paper argues that xenophobia constitutes a major stumbling block to the attainment of unity among Nigeria's diverse peoples. It observes that, among other causes, the lack of proper knowledge of the unique identities and cultural heritages of Nigeria's various ethnic groups remains a fundamental trigger of xenophobic attitudes and actions. Consequently, the paper recommends the establishment of a specialized Nigerian Orientation Agency with broad membership drawn from the country's ethnic, economic, cultural, and religious communities. Such an agency would be responsible for rationally articulating and disseminating knowledge about the self-identity, history, and values of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. As the saying goes, "the fear of the unknown is far greater than the fear of the known." Increased knowledge and awareness of one another's identities will significantly reduce xenophobic tendencies. It will also predispose Nigerians to a collective healing process from the damage already caused by xenophobic actions, thereby contributing meaningfully to the promotion of unity and national development.

**Key Words:** *Xenophobia, Nigerian Unity, Communalism, Nigerian Orientation Agency*

### INTRODUCTION

Arguably, many Nigerians recognize the need to attain and sustain Nigerian unity towards the quest for the development and life flourishing in Nigeria. While some Nigerians speak of this unity within a proper federal system of government, others speak of unity within a restructured system of regional independence. Yet, others speak of it within a total independence of major tribes (nations) of Nigeria as a geographical entity. Many of these Nigerians recognize and point accusing fingers to certain realities that form stumbling blocks to the quest for Nigerian unity. The worry here is that most times, these accusing fingers appear to point to the realities of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and other external influences and manipulations while neglecting the role of xenophobia as a huge stumbling block against the desired progress in the quest for Nigerian unity. There is need for Nigerians to also turn the accusing fingers to themselves and look inward for solutions in the quest for Nigerian unity. The damage caused by xenophobia expressed by Nigerians against fellow Nigerians has put a huge question on the philosophical principle of existence, 'communalism', which is mostly identified as the principle of unity among Africans and Nigeria included. It means that the menace of xenophobia must be exposed vigorously and tackled.

This paper holds that besides other factors like the event of colonialism and poverty among people, the lack of proper knowledge of the self-identity of the various tribes and societies of Nigeria, is one of the root causes of xenophobia, which in turn constitutes a huge stumbling block to the attainment of Nigerian unity. The objective here is to lay emphasis on the obstructive role of xenophobia in the quest for Nigerian unity. This paper identifies lack of proper knowledge of the "other" as one of the remote causes of xenophobia; and as such, it aims to propagate the advent of a Nigerian Orientation Agency for the dissemination of proper knowledge of the peoples of Nigeria. This knowledge will reduce the fear of the unknown with its xenophobic tendencies among Nigerians and it will create the avenue for unity and holistic development in Nigeria.

The research draws from the accounts of the experiences of xenophobia manifested in various forms, including ethnic cum religious conflicts, in many parts of Nigeria. It draws from available literatures, interviews granted and lectures on the events of xenophobia in Nigeria and Africa at large. Using the method of phenomenological exposition and philosophical analysis on the political cum economic issues and events in Nigeria, this research paper argues that xenophobia is a huge stumbling block towards the attainment of Nigerian unity and development. The paper briefly discusses communalism as a philosophical principle of unity. It makes clarification of the concept of xenophobia and gives evidence of its manifestations in Nigeria and other African societies. It examines the impact of Xenophobia in Africa and particularly in Nigeria. In the quest to remedy the

damage of xenophobia in Nigeria, this paper highlights the possible duties of the proposed Nigerian Orientation Agency and conclusion follows suits.

### PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLE OF NIGERIAN UNITY

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

The idea of Nigerian unity could be couched in the philosophical principle of African communalism. According to Polycarp Ikuenobe (2018), African communalism is a moral doctrine that also values human dignity, rights and responsibilities. He went further to argue that African communalism does not necessarily see a conflict between individuals and community. Both the individual and the community are mutually supportive and people are required to have the moral attitude of contributing to the community for their own well-being. This attitude creates the priority of duty, which is for the fundamental goal of creating a community in order to provide the material conditions for actualizing individuals’ substantive rights and well-being. His argument will agree with the ideology of *Ubuntu* which can be rendered as “I am because we are; I am because you are.” The *Ubuntu* ideology has a communalistic conception of the human person where the individuals have maximum respect for the dignity and rights of one another in the society.

Explaining the concept of personhood within the ideology of *Ubuntu*, Khoza (1994) holds that man’s nature, his wants, and his capabilities are to a great extent the product of the society and its institutions. The most effective behavior is usually through groups and organizations, running the gamut from the family through all types of voluntary social and economic motivated associations to the state, the church, and national organizations. In our own little way, this paper will add that African communalism depicts the African self-identity, which is embedded in the traditional African culture; and basic to this identity are the humanistic values of communality, brotherhood, solidarity, cooperation, compassion, justice and so on. The critical question here will be – why is xenophobia still a reality among Nigerians and Africans at large despite the communalistic self-identity of the African? One of the causes of xenophobia as envisaged in this paper draws from the fact that postcolonial Nigerians are heavily detached from the knowledge of their self-identity. This is why it is paramount to rejuvenate and domicile the knowledge of the peoples’ identity among Nigerians. If one borrows from the thought of Oladipo (2009), one would say that the process of bringing positive change to Nigeria cannot be steady and beneficial unless it goes with an awareness of self-identity. This awareness is required as a means of achieving the self-confidence that will enable Nigerians sort out their pressing problems in a self-directed manner.

### CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

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

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

manifestations of xenophobia could be observed among some countries in Africa and in particular, among the peoples of Nigeria as a country.

### **XENOPHOBIC MANIFESTATIONS IN AFRICA**

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

In 1999, Ivory Coast expelled between 8000 and 12,000 Burkinabe. This was in reaction to the declining economic situation in the 1990s whereby president Bedie drove the idea of ‘Ivoirite’ to reinvigorate the economy by infusing Ivorian identity into political and economic access. This fueled resentment against migrants and resulted in mass deportations. In 2004, following an attempted coup, allegedly headed by a mercenary group, the president of Equatorial Guinea clamped down on migrants in the country. Many people were detained, intimidated and subsequently expelled. An estimated 1000 migrants, mostly of Cameroonian descent, were expelled from the country. In 2007, the government banned West Africans from owning shops in the country and all existing shops were taken over by the government or abruptly closed down. Again in 2004, the government of Angola expelled an estimated 100,000 Congolese from the country as a result of the increase in rhetoric blaming of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for stealing the natural resources of Angola. A further 160,000 Congolese were expelled in a 12-months period, between December 2008 and December 2009. Meanwhile, in 2009 the DRC also expelled 50,000 Angolans as retaliation for the mass expulsions experienced in the hands of Angola. Again in 2009, Burundi expelled an estimated 1,200 migrants following increased pressure put on the state to address rampant crime. The expelled foreigners were mostly from Tanzania, Uganda and Senegal.

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

### **XENOPHOBIC MANIFESTATION IN NIGERIA**

Xenophobic manifestation in Nigeria takes many forms, especially the form of ethno-religious conflict. A major manifestation could be seen in the pogrom, the killings of ethnic Igbos and its culmination to Nigerian civil war (6<sup>th</sup> July, 1967 – 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1970). According to Chinua Achebe (2012, 82), “thirty thousand civilian men, women, and children were slaughtered, hundreds of thousands were wounded, maimed, and violated, their homes and property looted and burned; and no one asked any questions. A Sierra Leonean living in Northern Nigeria at the time wrote home in horror: The killing of the Igbos has become a state industry in Nigeria”. These killings do not fall short of the mark of xenophobic sentiment, which has continued in the guise of ethno-religious conflicts and other forms of conflicts in many regions of Nigeria. Currently, the result of xenophobic sentiment is manifesting in grave conflicts and killings in some parts of Nigeria as Pleatue, Jos, Benua, Lagos, Abuja, Kwara and so on. There are various IDP camps housing internally displaced persons from some of these conflicts and killings.

Xenophobic sentiment manifests in the guise of ethnic and religious bigotry and the attendant rivalry, animosity and violence have become so pervasive in Nigeria that politicians easily use it to manipulate their ways into political power and influence. One may argue that Nigeria just like many other African countries, held the idea that democracy is the total solution to all the problems facing the country; unfortunately, shortly after the return of democracy in Nigeria, the country began to witness series of eruptions in the name of religious, ethnic, communal and political violence such that it is on record that Nigeria witnessed over forty major civil disturbances in form of ethno-religious and communal clashes between 1999 and 2002. Both in the past and present, accounts abound of the reality of ethno-religious violence in many parts of Nigeria.

If one reckons with the publication of Salawu Blessing (2010) on the manifestation of ethnic and religious bigotry in Nigeria, it is obvious that ethnicity and religious bigotry have become a fulcrum of various forms of

nationalism ranging from assertion of language, cultural autonomy and religious superiority to demands for local political autonomy and self-determination. All these sometimes lead to some forms of contextual discrimination of members of one ethnic or religious group against another on the basis of differentiated systems of socio-cultural symbols and religion. Therefore, in a multi-ethnic and religiously diverse society like Nigeria, with some forms of contextual discrimination, relationships between people may be characterized by lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear as it is the case among the ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. In fact, this mutual suspicion and lack of cordiality among the various ethnic groups explains why ethno-religious conflicts have become a permanent feature of Nigeria largely since the 1980s. These conflicts generated by xenophobic sentiments have serious negative impact on the quest for Nigerian unity.

### **THE IMPACT OF XENOPHOBIA IN THE QUEST FOR NIGERIAN UNITY**

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

Xenophobic sentiment is destructive to development at various levels; it kills innovative ideologies at the individual level. One should recognize at this point that xenophobia manifest at various levels and scales in Nigeria. Beside the official government promulgations as we recorded above, xenophobia in Nigeria is manifested at the various institutions—academic institutions, health institutions, economic institutions, industries, and so on. At the institutional levels, innovative ideologies of individuals are targeted and destroyed. We read stories and interviews of how individuals with good innovative ideas were destroyed, especially when these individuals do not come from certain accepted groups. Xenophobia has destroyed many economic ideologies, technological ideologies and industrial ideologies deposited in individuals of Nigerian descent.

Xenophobia creates a hostile environment, which does not support individual and societal coexistence. Xenophobic attacks have destroyed already-built infrastructures, markets and properties in various parts of Nigeria: at Igbo market in Abuja, Ladipo market in Lagos, Trade-fare market in Lagos and several other markets. This situation does not in any way support development; it breaths stunted growth in economy of the country. The impact of xenophobia contributes to the mass exodus of many Nigerian talents to other continents of the world (The *Japa* syndrome). Most of the technological inventions and innovations in the world today are traceable to many individuals of Nigerian descent who, due to hostile environment, have departed Nigerian soil.

### **NIGERIAN ORIENTATION AGENCY TOWARDS THE WAY FORWARD**

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

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



Therefore, it will be the task of the Nigerian Orientation Agency to rationally gather information of the various peoples of Nigeria and rationally disseminate such knowledge to all Nigerians. It is largely a task of education and re-orientation of the peoples of Nigeria. Education in this angle will not be on the conventional subjects of academics, but on the subject of the “being” of the indigenous peoples of Nigeria—the mode of socio-cultural evolvement, economic evolvement, governance, world views, religious evolvement, philosophical principles of existence, and so on. There is need for the people of Nigeria to have authentic knowledge of themselves. This education could be carried out through various means—through the school system, coordinated publications, media aid, through inter-ethnic symposiums, through organization of inter socio-cultural events and fiestas. The idea here is to maintain a consistent inter-ethnic interaction and authentic knowledge dissemination among the peoples of Nigeria. The knowledge of the identities of one another can foster cooperation among the peoples. This will lead to an economic cooperation; it will reduce xenophobic sentiments and ultimately lead to Nigerian unity. The agency would work in collaboration with the political leaders in making policies that will address issues of poverty and inequality in the society and policies that will promote human rights and dignity, protection, regional integration, economic cooperation, and so on.

## CONCLUSION

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

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