

The Complexities of Being a Foreign African Student in a South African Tertiary Institution

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Abstract

This article is based on a study which focuses on the experiences of foreign African students as they became ‘insinuated’ into new gendered contexts at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban South Africa. UKZN is not only global and universal as can be observed by the number of foreign or international students but is also integrated into a given society and region as well as social, political and economic system. As a result of immersing themselves in this context, foreign African students must negotiate this new social and cultural environment. For instance, by immersing themselves in a new South African context, the students by their very status as African foreigners became vulnerable to xenophobia a phenomenon they assert is not common in their home countries. This article begins by giving the background of UKZN and locates it in the broader South African social-political and economic context. Using data elicited by the use of in-depth interviews within a qualitative paradigm this article thereafter examines the varying shades of xenophobia experienced by these students as African foreigners. The article also looks into the gendered nature of xenophobia.

Keywords: Xenophobia, Afrophobia, Xenophilia, foreign African students

Introduction and Background of the Study

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is as a result of the merger between the University of Natal and the University of Durban-Westville in

January 2004. The South African government higher education restructuring plans led to this merger whose objective was,

To promote access to learning that will expand educational and employment opportunities for the historically disadvantaged and support social transformation and redress of the devastating legacy of apartheid education (Makgoba 2004:3).

It is instructive to highlight that other African countries played an enormous role in the anti-apartheid struggle either by pressurizing international bodies in condemning apartheid and by supporting the military struggle.

The post-apartheid system of education in South Africa had previously been elitist and exclusionary. However, with the change to a democratic government, the number of international students increased steadily. Moja (2002) proposes that a balance be struck between responding to inherited problems of the legacies of apartheid and new demands of internalisation of South African education. International students or foreign students are an integral part of an internationally recognised institution and it is important to recognise the academic, cultural and financial benefits to be gained from these students. UKZN advances that its commitment to internalisation is embedded in its stated intention 'To be a world class university and an active global player'.

Ramphela (1999) describes the university as global and universal as well as local and regional with the issue of foreign or international students depicting the global nature of university education. This then means that universities are integrated into a given society and region, social, political and economic system. Geographically, in terms of place, the UKZN is embedded in concentric local contexts namely; in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, in KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa and in the global South each of which is a viable geographical context. Durban where the interviews in the study took place is one of the four major urban industrial centres in South Africa and is located in the province of KwaZulu- Natal (KZN). KZN also known as the Zulu Kingdom is one of the most densely populated provinces in South Africa and is home to the isiZulu speaking group of people.

The specificity of Durban as compared to other towns in South Africa is the mix of cultures and races. Alongside Black Africans and the

white population, Durban has a large Indian population, the largest outside of India (Bhana 1990). Despite the close proximity of these different groups however, they are marked by huge disparities in resources and opportunities and are highly racialised. From a socio-political perspective arising from South Africa's national history, the legacy of apartheid is a society that is deeply fragmented and divided. Pattman (2007) in his article, *The significance students attach to race at the University of KwaZulu-Natal* notes that despite the UKZN merger, race continues to be an important marker of student identities and group affiliations.

These time-space relations are a major factor in the constitution of societies according to Gregory (1994). Giddens (1984) advances that people not only make histories but also make geographies. This is useful in transitional societies that are charting different courses from processes such as colonisation and apartheid in the case of South Africa. In these regions, the history and geography of the place are essential to understanding political, social and economic changes occurring there. It is against this backdrop therefore that foreign students of African origin immersed themselves in a new different South African context.

The term foreign has however increasingly acquired negative connotations in the South African context. The issue of foreignness has been a source of much tension between a group of largely black South African students and foreign students of African origin. South African students feel deprived and invoke their South African citizenship in the wake of competition from foreign students for local resources in order to make ends meet. The situation is further problematised by the promotion of equity in terms of race to which the South African government has committed itself which is seen as open to abuse by foreign students of African origin who stand to gain from its undifferentiated use. Of great significance is the reality that these students are better equipped since they were spared the Bantu education and can therefore compete on merit for undergraduate, postgraduate and staff positions (see Ramphela 1999). The frustration of the South Africans who were excluded from the formal South African educational system under the apartheid system when they perceive a group of foreign nationals as a threat with regards to the opportunities they fought for, is understandable.

Foreign students of African origin are however not a homogenous

group since they come from different countries such as those in Anglophone and Francophone Africa. Language barriers especially for those from Francophone Africa, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC hereafter), ensure that they do not get the same job opportunities as those from Anglophone Africa. Further, despite the opportunity structures in place such as the UKZN Graduate scholarship offering fee remission for postgraduate students and the opportunity to be tutor or contract lecturer, foreign students also felt constrained as foreign nationals in terms of accessing other opportunities which were available to local students. The foreign African students were keenly aware that they were foreign nationals due to lack of access to other scholarships and lower remuneration rates at their work places. The negotiation of being of a foreign African national in a South African tertiary institution was further problematized by the phenomenon of xenophobia¹. Xenophobia is typically defined as the ‘dislike’, ‘hatred or fear of foreigners’ (Harris 2002: 169). Importantly, however, as Harris (2002: 170) correctly emphasises, xenophobia is ‘not just an attitude as the standard definition of the phenomenon implies, it is also an action.

The findings of this article are based on a qualitative study which sought to examine the discursive and social practices through which the foreign students of African origin come to perceive South African gender norms and how these new gender norms either challenged or supported their own gender norms. In conducting in-depth interviews over a period of one year from March 2008 to March 2009, I used open-ended questions to enable the students to reflect on and give detailed accounts and perceptions of the myriad contradictions and complexities of their experiences of renegotiating the new geopolitical and social context in South Africa. The study sample comprised of twenty two foreign African students (both men and women) hailing from Kenya, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda,

¹ Xenophobia is derived from the Greek words *xenos* (foreign) and *phobos* (fear) and can be defined as the attitudes, prejudices and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons based on the perceptions that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity (UNHCR, International Labour Organisation and International Organisation for Migration, 2001).

Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia.

The study employed social identity theory to examine the ways in which foreign African students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal constructed and modified their social identities in relation to the identities of other groups in the South African context. Social identity is the individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups (Hogg & Vaughan 2002). This can be distinguished from the notion of personal identity, which refers to self-knowledge that derives from the individual's unique attributes. An important aspect of this theory is that it recognises that different social groups vary in terms of the power and status they have in society. Social identities are always constructed and modified in relation to the identities of other groups: mainstream and subordinate, proximal and spatially distant (see Dolby & Cornbleth 2001). Social identities are in motion in multiple ways, not only in relation to other groups and their enactment of selves but also in relation to the dynamics of geographic place. Social identity theory enabled me to examine how foreign students of African origin negotiated the complex geopolitical and social context in South Africa.

Varying Shades of Perceived Xenophobia

With the advent of democracy, the legacies of the apartheid system combined with new forms of discrimination, such as xenophobia toward African refugees and immigrants, have played out through the country's period of political transition. A national survey on South African attitudes on immigration in 1997 revealed that South Africans were more hostile to immigration than citizens of any other country for which comparable data was available. Foreign African nationals are perceived by local South Africans as an economic threat and as people who have come to take their employment opportunities (Crush 2008).

At the time of conducting this research, xenophobia had reached unprecedented proportions in South Africa with violent attacks against foreign African nationals in May 2008 in Gauteng Province. Xenophobic attacks against foreign nationals were also reported in the Western Cape Province immediately after the FIFA 2010 World Cup. Xenophobic prejudice is manifested in various ways and is sometimes subtle and

sometimes obvious. Given the background of hostilities by local South Africans towards other African nationals, any form of discrimination against these foreign African nationals is perceived as being tinged with xenophobia.

According to the foreign African students, one of the ways in which they experienced xenophobia was when local students and sometimes staff members would speak to them in local languages such as isiZulu. The fact that they not did speak isiZulu created a gap between them and the black South African students and they had to contend with being called names such as *Makwerekwere*².

Even whilst carrying out their work duties foreign African students contended with being misunderstood. Norah from Cameroon gave an example of how a misunderstanding ensued between her and a student in a tutorial while they were discussing factors affecting migration to South Africa. According to Norah the misunderstanding may have occurred on the basis that she was a foreign national and seemed to be insinuating that South Africans had HIV/AIDS. The discussion was centered on factors leading to migration in South Africa and how the broad based pyramid³ was increasing. When HIV/ AIDS emerged as a factor that could lead to the decrease of the pyramid, the student interpreted this to mean that Norah as a foreign national was insinuating that it was only South Africans who had HIV/AIDS. Norah on her part expressed that the student may have been of the opinion that it was foreign nationals who were responsible for the transmission of HIV/AIDS to South Africans. This situation is indicative of the tensions existing between foreign African students and local South African students due to the perceived hostilities of local black South Africans towards foreign African nationals.

Another area of contention was in the documentary requirements at the level of admission and registration. While foreign students of African

² The word *Kwerekwere* is a derogatory word denoting one who cannot speak or understand the speaker's language.

³ A population pyramid with a broad base suggests a population with a relatively high birth- rate or a high volume of migration. A decrease in the pyramid may be occasioned by fluctuations in the number of births or volumes of migration or a rise in the number of deaths as a result of war or epidemics such as HIV/AIDS.

origin acknowledged that they did not expect to get the same treatment as local students since they were not South African citizens, they felt that the requirements expected of them were very stringent. These requirements were in various forms such as the payment of the International student levy for foreign students of African origin alongside students from Europe and America who students felt were more financially endowed.

The distinction between foreign African students and local South African students also appeared to have taken a new dimension at the UKZN Human Resources department as is amplified in the following excerpt by Koffie from the DRC:

To me I understand I'm a foreign student and I don't expect to be treated as a local. What makes me now look at it is when South Africans own the African identity. They now differentiate between foreign and African. It is obvious I'm a foreign national. The only problem that I have with it is when the African identity is given to a South African and you call me foreign because I'm not South African. On my side I don't know what the idea behind it is and when you come give me another identity I have a problem with that (Koffie, DRC).

Koffie was referring to the race section in the UKZN remuneration forms from the Human resources department where a distinction was made between 'foreigner' and 'African' in the race section. While this may not have presented a problem for foreign students from outside Africa, it was problematic for foreign African students. The term 'foreigner' in this case is used as a distinct category and serves to exclude the foreign students of African origin from identifying themselves as African and confines the African identity to 'black' South Africans. This presents a paradox in the sense that on the one hand there is an assertion by South Africans of Africanness in order to differentiate the new identity from the erstwhile white South African identity. On the other hand, a sense of South African exceptionalism promotes nationalist chauvinistic tendencies, ostensibly targeting foreigner Africans (see Thakur 2011) as explained in a subsequent section.

At the State level, there has been increasing stringent immigration controls from the department of Home Affairs in terms of the following: study permits, visa acquisition and renewal and repatriation requirements.

These requirements are understandable but the only challenge is that visa renewals frequently happen at the end of the year when students are in the last stages of writing their examinations or their theses in a bid to meet the submission deadlines. Koffie from the DRC, decried the bureaucratic process involved in acquiring a study permit and expressed that the International Students Office should be more pro-active in assisting foreign students to renew their study permits

I think in South Africa, it is not the policies that have much of a problem though there needs to be some changes. I would say mostly it is the attitude of the personnel. For example you can go to home Affairs and spend the whole day waiting for visa renewal. You can even be told to come back on another day. I think the processes need to be made easier. I think the international student's office needs to have foreigners in their staff because it is only a foreigner who will understand foreign students. The staff members there are South Africans and you can even ask them which counter you go to renew your visa and they would not know (Koffie, DRC).

Some of these processes are administrative on the part of South African institutions to ensure immigration control and ensure that local South Africans are not denied opportunities due to them as citizens. These stringent processes and requirements are however perceived as being punitive and as governed by xenophobia by foreign African students.

Sentiments on Xenophobia and the Philosophy of Ubuntu

In terms of social interactions, most students expressed that black South Africans were largely hostile to their presence which was contrary to the experience in their home countries where people were open and hospitable to foreign nationals. This can be observed from the following data excerpts:

As Malawians we are very friendly to foreigners. It was instilled in us by the former president Levi Mwanawasa that when a foreigner comes we must ask where they are from, where they want to go,

Being a Foreign Student in a South African Tertiary Institution

what can we do for you and all that. That is why Malawi is called the warm heart of Africa because it is really warm (Purity from Malawi).

It is here that they treat foreigners differently. At home we welcome foreigners and treat them very well. It is so strange here that people treat foreigners differently and these are people who come once in a while and so you should treat them in a way that they come more often. South Africans and especially the blacks make us not want to stay here (Norah from Cameroon).

The hostility of South Africans towards foreign African nationals was baffling to many of the foreign African students who found it contrary to the *ubuntu* philosophy which South Africans purported to embrace. In the words of the South African Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu a person with *ubuntu* is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such a person is open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole (Panse 2006).

The foreign African students further felt that South Africans exhibited a sense of superiority towards them. Maina from Kenya and Koffie from the DRC expounded on this in the following manner:

Being a foreigner is disadvantageous because there is a very negative perception about foreigners especially amongst the black locals. There is this perception of superiority here where South Africans keep asking you, ‘You come from Africa?’ I think that is quite negative. Most of them are very negative and that is why I say that this is a hostile environment (Maina from Kenya).

South Africans – I don’t know whether it’s because of being exposed or it’s their type of society that makes them consider that they are no longer Africans. As much as they keep on saying *Ubuntu*- they don’t have it (Koffie from the DRC).

The sentiments from the above excerpts concur with Crush (2008), who

advances that the rise in xenophobia in the 1990's cannot be isolated from the country's apartheid past of racial and class segregation and attitudes of uniqueness and superiority towards the rest of Africa. Even though spatially located in Africa, the Apartheid regime had consciously situated itself ideologically, temporally and dispositionally in the western, white world. Fanon (1990) identifies xenophobia as a form of fragile sense of national consciousness by the national bourgeoisie to mimic its western counterpart.

Xenophobia or Afrophobia?

The use of the term xenophobia may imply that all foreigners in South Africa are likely to be mistreated. However in the South African context, xenophobia is not directed at just anyone. It is largely directed at people of colour. This means that the mistreatment is more directed to their being black rather than being foreign. Gqola (2008) in fact argues that the predominant nature of the violence directed against foreigners in South Africa in May 2008 was more than simply a case of xenophobia. It was also negrophobic in character (Gqola 2008; Fanon 1990). Fanon (1990) describes this kind of violence as often directed at the self or at the self as reflected in the 'Other'. In explaining Afrophobia, Gordon (1997) has explained that in black gang wars, black people re-enact white violence against each other as a result of internalized self-hatred due to issues of hunger, hopelessness, and poverty. While poverty triggers violence, mental colonisation has been said to be at the heart of Afrophobia.

Olomide and Kabila from the DRC in concurrence with this position highlighted that it was not just that South Africans were hostile to foreign Africans but that it was not unusual for Africans to be hostile to one another. Olomide and Kabila reflected on their experiences back home in the DRC and expressed that the principles of *ubuntu* were no longer practiced by Africans and the mention of *ubuntu* was a just a matter of rhetoric. Olomide from the DRC said that he was undaunted by xenophobia since he was still at home in Africa and that xenophobia in South Africa was not much different from the situation back home in the DRC.

The DRC has experienced war due to a number of complex reasons including conflicts over basic resources such as water, access and control over rich minerals and other resources as well as various political agendas.

The five year war which involved the armies of five other countries, officially ended in 2003 and democratic elections were held in 2006. However, the fighting involving a plethora of armed groups continues, especially in the east of this mineral-rich country. The fighting in North Kivu, eastern DRC, has forced tens of thousands of refugees to flee their homes. Olomide who sees himself as more of an African than a Congolese takes the issue of African hostility against fellow Africans as a phenomenon that goes beyond the confines of South Africa. Kabila also from the DRC took it a step further by advancing the following:

When I consider the war in the DRC and the xenophobia in South Africa, I do not think that as Africans we love each other, the philosophy of *ubuntu* is a lie. People do not practice it they just speak about it (Kabila, DRC).

Clearly, violent attacks against fellow Africans has to do with unequal distribution of resources. While the anger of the disenfranchised is legitimate it needs to be directed to the oppressive government and the wealthy elite. Afrophobia can then only be dealt with by ending hunger, homelessness and redistribution of wealth.

The Gender Dimension of Xenophobia

Migrants are, by their very status as foreigners vulnerable to xenophobia and in the case of the South African context Afrophobia. Violence against foreign nationals and violence against women are two forms of violence that are internationally condemned but are normalised in ways in which the South African society interacts with minority and vulnerable groups. Foreign women in South Africa therefore face a double jeopardy since they are at the intersection of these two groups that are so vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and violence. The women students interviewed expressed their vulnerability in South Africa in that they could be more easily taken advantage of and even be raped as compared to their male counterparts. Sexual violence is well documented in South Africa as a means to control and punish women. While it may be argued that this is applicable to all women in South Africa, in a country where sexual violence is pervasive in everyday life, it is difficult

to distinguish between rapes motivated by xenophobic attitudes from those perpetrated because the general atmosphere of violence and lawlessness has allowed for it. In both cases, foreign African women students face a form of violence because of their gender.

Men's experiences of xenophobia however highlighted different gender dynamics. Men expressed that they experienced xenophobia not only because they were perceived as coming to take away opportunities from the South Africans but also because they were taking the South African women as well. This is illustrated by the excerpts below:

The South Africans are xenophobic especially to men. I think they (foreign men) are better to women. There tends to be this notion amongst ladies that they like foreign guys. Maybe they tend to be inquisitive and they tend to think that we are much better than South African guys in terms of handling situations such as treating them better in relationships (Zebedee, Zimbabwe).

The men are ... I have heard from others, they tend not to be too open to foreigners. I have heard that South African women like going out with foreign men because they are more kind and they know how to treat a woman (James, Cameroon).

From the excerpts, it appears that it is South African men who were xenophobic towards foreign African men because of the perception that these men treated women better than South African men. While this generated hostility from African men in South Africa and has been cited as a factor in contributing to their xenophobic attitude, foreign men asserted that they treated women with greater respect than Zulu men. They constructed Zulu men as deeply patriarchal and disrespectful of women. It is interesting to note that foreign African men described Zulu men as deeply patriarchal while they were also from patriarchal backgrounds and were unwilling to give up the patriarchal privilege that accorded power and prestige to men. Constructing themselves as less patriarchal could have been a way of re-asserting their perceived superiority over Zulu men.

South African men were portrayed as less progressive than the South African women who were the ones supporting the men and the families.

Apartheid policies in many forms directly impacted on family cohesion and reinforced the destructive influences that urbanisation and industrialisation had on the family. Thus, one consequence of the legacy of apartheid is the high number of single parent families, resulting largely from pregnancy outside marriage and from divorce. As a large proportion of the nation's children grow up in female-headed households with little financial support, the African family in South Africa has continued to suffer considerably greater disintegration than families have in the rest of the continent (Preston-White 1993).

The notion that South African women are more attracted to foreign African men exemplifies an intriguing facet of South African women by amplifying the little studied phenomena of xenophilia. Xenophilia is the love for the foreign national that is also part and parcel of the encounter between foreign Africans and locals (see Sichone 2008). Sichone(2008) further shows that friendships and marriages between foreign men and South African serve to sustain male migrants and promote re-Africanisation, as some of the migrants teach their South African partners to cook dishes from central and West Africa. South African women are said to be attracted to foreign African men based on the perception that they treated women better and were less prone to violence. This attraction may also be due to the fact that they were foreign, new, spoke a strange language and they expressed their love in new ways. This then served to elevate the foreign African men in the eyes of South African women while they were vilified in the eyes of African men from South Africa.

Conclusions

This article has provided a nuanced analysis of the complexities experienced by foreign African students at UKZN as a result of immersing themselves in a new context in South Africa. Various shades of xenophobia as perceived by the students were explored alongside the specificity of xenophobia in the South African context. Sevenzo (2010) has advanced that xenophobia in South Africa has emerged potently in form of 'Afro-phobia'. According to Thakur (2011), the xenophobic discourse has the same notions about 'Black Africa' as its predecessor regime under Apartheid propagated and hence the hatred for the African 'other'. While focus continues to be directed at South

Africans' hostility towards foreigners, this study has shown how African foreigners on the other hand perceive South Africans and especially the Zulus in a negative light and in many ways seek to show their superiority over them. This struggle for superiority is encapsulated by the insights of two students from the conflict ridden DRC who now question whether the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is a reality in Africa. Of great significance was that it was the foreign African men who sought to establish dominance over the Zulu men and women in general.

The article has further examined the intersectionality of xenophobia by highlighting the double jeopardy faced by foreign African women in the form of violence as foreign nationals and violence as women. On the part of the men the study revealed that while they faced hostility from South African men there were opportunities of hospitality from South African women in the form of relationships and marriage under the little mentioned phenomenon of xenophilia. Clearly, the reaction towards African nationals by South Africans is nuanced and complex. Xenophobia in the South African context is diverse and as advanced by Thakur (2011) its understanding calls for an intervention that aims to understand the difficulties experienced particularly by the marginalised in South African society, not only through the present, but also through the past. This understanding in turn needs to be examined in terms of how it influences South Africans' responses to African foreigners and the rights of the latter in South Africa.

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