"Xenophobia and its Implications for Social Order in Africa": A Rejoinder to Lanre-Abass and Oguh

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Abstract

Xenophobia is a topical issue in contemporary discourses. Questions have been raised on how to solve this menace. For example, different writers and scholars have made efforts to provide solutions to the problem. In this rejoinder, I will engage with Bolatito Lanre-Abass and Matthew Oguh in their paper published in Filosofia Theoretica vol. 5, No. 1 January – June, 2016. These scholars share their views concerning xenophobia in Africa. However, in their attempt to find a solution to the problem, certain arguments and terms were used, which I find unconvincing. I will, therefore, raise three objections to the work: (1) conception of xenophobia (2) tolerance as the solution and (3) the idea of the "other" as used by the authors in the work. I will propose a different solution to xenophobia in Africa, which involves internalizing certain ethical principles.

Keywords: Xenophobia, Tolerance, Other, Social Order, Ethics, Africa.

Introduction

Conflicts seem to be a recurring decimal in Africa both between various countries and within some of the countries that make up the continent (GYONG, 2007). Eddy Iji describes conflicts as "co-existential inevitabilities and imperatives, contradictions, paradoxes, organic ingredients of human development" (2007, 50). There are many causes of conflict, some minor, some major. Innocent Asouzu sees "the ambivalence of human interest as a major source of conflicts and the root of all forms of corruption, ruthlessness, thoughtlessness, murders, godfather politics, money bags politics, confusion, mutual suspicion and injustice" (2003, 32). It is important to say that conflict is part of life. Although conflict may come with devastating effects if not handled with care, it can also be a catalyst for development and peace. "Heraclitus, an ancient Greek philosopher postulated that conflict is the very condition of life and that things come into being and remain in existence through conflict" (OMOREGBE 1990, 76).

Responding to conflict situations often generates violence in some cases as a solution to the problem, especially in an existential situation that requires change. This change may metamorphose into a revolutionary change that can be found in family life, industrial relation, class conflicts, gender, racial and ethicalconflicts. Uchegbue Christian (2000, 56) argues that "the demand for change is so much tied-up with the idea of violence today that, when we hear of

revolutionary theology, revolutionary Christianity, revolutionary students movements, revolutionary freedom movements, revolutionary women liberation movements," we understand that such movements often resort to violent actions.

The above scenario shows that the tendency to solve social problems arising from fear of oppression, domination and other forms of social injustice using violence is becoming widespread in contemporary times. Xenophobic action or violence fits into the situation mentioned above. It is an ethnocentric outburst wrongly used as a solution to a socio-political problem. For some, xenophobia could be akin to violence in the interest of a particular ethnoterritorial nationality group and against another. According to Siamak Khtarni, "ethnoterritorial violence consists of illegal, armed attacks causing destruction of lives and properties perpetrated by small, more or less clandestine, anti-status quo groups, attracting the attention of an audience much wider than the immediate targets of attacks" (1992, 41).

It is important to state that xenophobia is violence and not mere discrimination, as posited by Lanre-Abass and Oguh, in their paper. It is a special kind of violence because it is directed at strangers or foreigners, different from religious violence, student's violence or civil uprising violence that usually grows from peaceful protests. In any case, violence, to a larger degree, has negative consequences, this may be why Alistair Kee, says that from whatever angle one looks at violence, it can never be neutral but simply an evil phenomenon. Accordingly, he defines violence as "excessive unrestrained or unjustifiable force" (1975, 34).

Although, many writers see xenophobia as a problem of many roots, this paper looks at it as an ethical problem that requires an ethical solution. As said earlier, this paper is objecting to Lanre-Abass and Oguh submission on xenophobia as discrimination. It also objects to how they used the term "other" in the wording of their arguments. Finally, it objects to their recommendation of tolerance as the solution. . I will delve into my arguments in the next section.

A Critical Look at Lanre-Abass and Oguh's Postulations on Xenophobia
In this section, this paper raises objections to certain claims made by the authors , in terms of their conception of xenophobia, the use of the term "other" and tolerance as the solution to xenophobia. Let us look at them in this order.

Conception of Xenophobia
Lanre-Abass and Oguh defined xenophobia from the etymological angle, as a term derived from two Greek words namely, "xeno" meaning, foreigner and "phobos" meaning fear (2016, 31). Further, they described xenophobia as an attitudinal orientation of hostility against non-natives in a given population. However, Ojedokun Olu, while citing the South African Human Right Commission (SAHRC), describes xenophobia as the deep dislike of non-nationals of a recipient state (2015, 169). The [Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English], defines xenophobia as "a strong feeling of dislike and fear of people from other countries" (2001, 1385). For Hagensen Like, xenophobia means fear of guests or strangers or foreigners. He further claims that it may be applied to any fear of

someone who is different from us, and hostility towards outsiders is often a reaction to fears (2014, 1). The above sources offer standard conceptualizations of xenophobia.

My first objection is that the authors created unnecessary confusion in their conceptualization of xenophobia, using terminologies best suited for racism, ethnicism and similar vices. A close examination of these standard conceptualizations of xenophobia shows that terms such as 'discrimination' and 'segregation' were not used. However, on page 30 of their paper, Lanre-Abass and Oguh claim that xenophobia means discrimination and segregation and went further to list various forms of discrimination, such as social discrimination, gender discrimination, economic discrimination, ethnic discrimination as forms of xenophobia (2016, 30). I argue that this amounts to a serious digression and unnecessary confusion in their analysis of the concept of xenophobia.

The [Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English] defines discrimination as "the practice of treating somebody or a particular group in society less fairly than others" (2001, 332). Also, the same dictionary defines "segregation" as "the act or policy of separating people of different races, religions or sexes and treating them differently" (2001, 1066).

From the Dictionary definition of the two terms above, one can see that xenophobia may not be out rightly linked with discrimination and segregation, as Lanre-Abass and Oguh claim. According to them, "A basic plague that befalls some contemporary African societies is the monster called Xenophobia, which has as its features, discrimination and segregation" (2016, 30). "It also has segregation as one of its features" (LANRE-ABASS and OGUH 2016, 30). This claim invariably means xenophobia can be used interchangeably with, say, racism, where the two terms belong. Although one can argue that xenophobes are ethnic jingoist, their main agenda is not discrimination or segregation but hate, violence and expulsion of outsiders. Thus, the authors' claim that "features of xenophobia manifest themselves through different channels, such as social discrimination, gender discrimination, economic discrimination and even ethnic discrimination…," (LANRE-ABASS and OGUH 2016, 30) is erroneous and misleading. For one, it is unclear how xenophobia manifests as gender-based discrimination, among others.

I also observe that the definition of xenophobia given by Lanre-Abass and Oguh, is too broad, as it allows ideas not captured by the concept to be part of its definition, and this could be misleading. For example, humans live with various issues of unfairness in society. Some women experience discrimination from men. In most Islamic countries, this kind of discrimination is common. Even within atomistic units like families, some parents are unfair in their treatment of some of their children. In political circle, unfairness and nepotism are obvious vices. Take Nigeria as an example, during Muhammadu Buhari presidency, some ethnic groups, like the Igbo were clearly discriminated against. Now, do we call these experiences xenophobia following Lanre-Abass and Oguh's use of discrimination to define xenophobia? The answer is capital NO. Therefore, our submission is that discrimination is selectively done to individual members of a

class, while xenophobia is collectively done to a race or group and comes with violence. To this end, Lanre-Abass and Oguh definition of xenophobia is misplaced.

The "Other" and "Otherness"
The authors' use of these terms "other and "otherness" is confusing and makes one feel that they confuse the exact place of the words in human affairs. In the first place, Lanre-Abass and Oguh used "Other" and "Otherness" as if they are the creation of humans, but this is not true. They claim that "otherness" is now used as an alternative to "orderliness". For instance, in their abstract, they write "This paper examines xenophobia as a menace showing at the same time that this discriminatory practice bifurcates societies by creating a dichotomy amidst the various occupants of the society, thereby giving room for "otherness" rather than "orderliness" (2016, 30). Here the inference one gets is that "otherness is a human invention. The second thing that one infers is that "otherness" could be used to replace "orderliness". However, on page 32, they give a different picture of the "other", this time, presenting it as if the "other" is already there. As they put it, "Consequently, there is a social connection between the way man thinks and how they relate with "other" as they tend to give room for their cultural cognition as well as ethnicity in the formation of the knowledge about the "other"". Thus, from the above, it is obvious that the authors are playing with those terms and, by so doing, creating linguistic confusion.

Having exposed the above, I shall, in a few lines below, show why the authors' use of such words might be inappropriate and misleading. In the first place, they are telling us that xenophobia gives room for "otherness" and not "orderliness". There is a misunderstanding of what the "other" or otherness" means. The word "other" is an important word in philosophy, specifically in existentialism, but the authors did not conceptualize and contextualize it adequately in their exposition.

The "other" is one basic tenet of existentialism that underlies a human being's relationship with his fellow humans. In existentialism, a human is seen as a being with others, that is, the existence of an individual implies the existence of the other since it is not possible for him to exist without the other. The existence of the "other" is not by inference, as claimed by George Berkeley, but it is part of the conscious exercise of the self, our own existence. "A human discovers himself as a being in the world and as a being with others" (SARTRE 1943, 339). Let us explain this further. For Sartre, the other is relevant to any action that a man takes. Whatever choice, decision or action someone takes, he must consider the perspective of the other, without which such action would be devoid of authentic life. He is of the view that every choice a man makes, he does not only choose for himself but for humanity. This is the idea of Sartre's inter-subjectivity.

From the above, one can understand that the idea of the "other" is already there and not something that one can create or force to exist, as Lanre-Abass and Oguh claim. It must be understood that "other" and "order" are not and cannot be used as alternatives, because one begets the other one. For instance, the existence

of the "otherness" leads to the emergence of "orderliness", that is, if an individual human person understands and respects the existence of the "other" person, and also holds the view that he lives because the "other" lives too, it would lead to harmony within the society which will then bring "orderliness". So, "orderliness" is a product of "otherness" but not an alternative to it. Thus, xenophobia does not create "otherness" as the authors claim, but it is "otherness" that can eliminate xenophobia by one striking an understanding with the "other," which is an indispensable partner in existence.

Tolerance as a Solution to Xenophobia
To resolve xenophobia, Lanre-Abass and Oguh proffered tolerance as a solution to this problem. Here, I am raising an objection that shows that xenophobia is not a matter of lack of tolerance.

According to Lanre-Abass and Oguh, "Thomas Lickona defines tolerance as "the ability to accept the values and beliefs of others". They also presented article one of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as follows; "Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world" culture, our form of expression and ways of being human. Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is a moral duty. It is also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance the [sic] virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the cultures of war by the cultures of peace" (see LANRE-ABASS and OGUH 2016, 37).

Before analyzing the above definition, let us see what the dictionary says: The [Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English] defines tolerance as "the willingness to accept or tolerate somebody or something especially opinions or behaviour that you may not agree with, or people who are not like you" (HORNBY 2001, 1260).

First, this (UNESCO) declaration was made in 1995. This is many years back, but key words in that definition, such as harmony, peace, duty, culture, political and legal requirements are catchy. The question is, if tolerance has such characteristics, why then do we still have violence? Again, it is pertinent to note that xenophobia in South Africa came many years after that declaration. However, tolerance cannot be the solution to xenophobia because it can only function within a willing mind. A mind that is unwilling to tolerate may simply pretend to do so, and when people are depressed, anything can happen, hence the inability of tolerance to arrest violent situations. Lickona's definition is even more problematic, it talks about the ability to accept other peoples' beliefs and values. Acceptance may not be the right word to use because one may become a convert if he or she accepts other cultures and values. The right thing is that one should allow others to practice or exhibit their values and cultural beliefs as long as such do not infringe on the rights of the indigenous people.

This paper is saying that Lanre-Abass and Oguh submission that tolerance is the solution to xenophobia cannot be tenable because tolerance cannot be internalized or or made a universal law. It is a subjective experience, which anyone can manipulate.   Existential situation or condition can easily change, and when things become unbearable, tolerance can fizzle out, leading to a

recurrence of the same problem. We have several instances to support this claim. The conflict between Isreal and Palestine, South Africa – between Indegenes and settler-Europeans during the Apartheid era, Muslims and Christians in most countries of the world, the Arab spring phenomenon, and recently the Kenya civilian uprising and that of other countries, show that tolerance cannot give a lasting solution to any conflict, including xenophobia.

Ethical Orientation as a better Strategy

Since, as I argued above, the solution to xenophobia cannot be found in 'tolerance,' what other ideas do we have? I would like to argue that transforming the minds of xenophobes and the citizens of African countries affected by the menace through the inculcation of ethical principles has more promise. To this end, the ethical theory of "Altruism" becomes imperative. My reason is that altruism has a strong affinity with traditional African ethics and ways of life (see ASOUZU 2023, CHIMAKONAM 2023). The tenet of altruism could be seen in Olatunji Oyeshile who cites John S. Mbiti, as stating "it is only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people" (2006, 109). This position is strengthened by Akinsola Akinwowo cited by thus Oyeshile: "what we need then to sustain the will-to associate in addition to the constitution, includes, internalized appreciation of the worth of human life individualized in our fellow countrymen, appreciation of the worth of other ethnic groups, other town people, other state" (2006, 116).

Simply, 'Altruism' is the capacity to promote the welfare of others, and opposed to egoism" (SOCCIO, 2007, 369). In a similar way, altruism is defined as "a moral ideal, so that the more a person allows himself to be guided by altruism regard for the interest of the other people- the more moral he becomes" (OMOREGBE 1993, 126). Onyebuchi Eze also locates altruism in Ubuntu ethics, which is an aspect of African philosophy. According to him, "a person is a person through other people, strikes an affirmation of one's humanity through recognition of an "other" in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative inter-subjected formation in which the other becomes a mirrow but only a mirrow of my subjectivity" (2010, 190).

I earlier argued that the use of the 'other' or otherness" by Lanre-Abass and Oguh is misplaced as far as the issue of xenophobia is concerned. We can then conclude by saying that 'Altruism' is an ethical theory concerned about the other individual rather than the self. It is basically directed at producing happiness for others, and posits that the moral goals of every human being ought to be the good and well-being of others. This is a better strategy against xenophobia.

Declaration

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