# UBUNTU AND XENOPHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICA'S INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

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## ABSTRACT

The apartheid regime in South Africa was notorious for its gratuitous display of authority in the form of brutality and human rights excesses. Those who partook in the struggle against apartheid did so in an attempt to realise fundamental human rights and a conclusion to all forms of discrimination. The end of apartheid in South Africa in early 1994, therefore, heralded a new era and, indeed, a new political and economic dispensation in which the human rights (political and economic freedoms) of all people would become paramount. The victory of the anti-apartheid forces at the end of race-based politics was characterised by joyance, hope, and expectation for many, including foreign nationals from mostly contiguous countries. Sadly, however, South Africa is today known for being a highly iniquitous country with high poverty and unemployment levels. Tolmay (2019), for instance, reported that unemployment in South Africa had stood at 29% in the first quarter thus affecting mostly young people. This treatise has as its prime motif the interrogation of the efficacy of the concept of Ubuntu in the face of widespread xenophobic violence against African migrants and their businesses in South Africa.

**KEY TERMS:** South Africa, migration, xenophobia, ubuntu, social work

This article appeared in a special issue of the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW) titled Ubuntu Social Work. The special issue focused on short articles that advanced the theory and practice of ubuntu in social work. In the special issue, these definitions were used:

- *Ubuntu refers to a collection of values and practices that black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world.*
- *Ubuntu social work refers to social work that is theoretically, pedagogically and practically grounded in ubuntu.*
- *The term ubuntu is expressed differently is several African communities and languages but all referring to the same thing. In Angola, it is known as gimuntu, Botswana (muthu), Burkina Faso (maaya), Burundi (ubuntu), Cameroon (bato), Congo (bantu), Congo Democratic Republic (bomoto/bantu), Cote d'Ivoire (maaya), Equatorial Guinea (maaya), Guinea (maaya), Gambia (maaya), Ghana (biako ye), Kenya (utu/munto/mondo), Liberia (maaya), Malawi (umunthu), Mali (maaya/hadama de ya), Mozambique (vumuntu), Namibia (omundu), Nigeria (mutunchi/iwa/agwa), Rwanda (bantu), Sierra Leonne (maaya), South Africa (ubuntu/botho), Tanzania (utu/obuntu/bumuntu), Uganda (obuntu), Zambia (umunthu/ubuntu) and Zimbabwe (hunhu/unhu/botho/ubuntu). It is also found in other Bantu countries not mentioned here.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The apartheid regime in South Africa was notorious for its gratuitous display of authority in the form of brutality and human rights excesses. Those who partook in the struggle against apartheid did so in an attempt to realise fundamental human rights and a conclusion to all forms of discrimination. The end of apartheid in South Africa in early 1994, therefore, heralded a new era and, indeed, a new political and economic dispensation in which the human rights (political and economic freedoms) of all people would become paramount. The victory of the anti-apartheid forces at the end of race-based politics was characterised by joyance, hope, and expectation for many, including foreign nationals from mostly contiguous countries. Sadly, however, South Africa is today known for being a highly iniquitous country with high poverty and unemployment levels. Tolmay (2019), for instance, reported that unemployment in South Africa had stood at 29% in the first quarter thus affecting mostly young people. This treatise has as its prime motif the interrogation of the efficacy of the concept of *Ubuntu* in the face of widespread xenophobic violence against African migrants and their businesses in South Africa.

## BACKGROUND

Despite the aforesaid challenges that the South African state is grappling with, the country continues to offer the much-needed economic attractancy to most Africans from poor nations. An Africa Check (2017) report, for example, suggested that three-quarters of international migrants in South Africa were drawn from within the African continent, represented by 68% from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and a measly 7.3% from outside the SADC region. Due to poor recordation and lack of information regarding their cadastral spread, the population of international migrants in South Africa remains unknown although recent reports indicated that the migrant population consisted of 1.64 million people or 2.82% of the 58 million population (Tolmay, 2019). Without doubt, the reported statistics hardly indicate a deluge of foreign nationals into South Africa. Still, there are serious concerns that '[no] one knows how many international migrants are in South Africa, how long they have been there, how long they stay, or what they do while they are in the country' (Landau & Segatti, 2009, p. 5). Of serious concern to several writers too has been the rampant nature of xenophobic violence in South African cities, mostly Johannesburg and Pretoria in Gauteng province and Durban in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Tolmay (2019) bemoaned the inhumane treatment of people, characterised by violence against foreign nationals and looting of their businesses in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Caprari (2019) wrote of 'another bout of xenophobic attacks, with horrifying stories and images of mayhem and violence' (para. 5). For Caprari (2019), xenophobic violence in South Africa took the form of 'barbaric old ways of lynching accompanied by looting, vandalism, intimidation and harassment, assault, and murder. Communities are divided by hostility and suspicion' (para. 6). What is unmistaken though is that xenophobic violence in South Africa has serious negative ramifications on livelihoods and lives of both citizens and non-nationals. It has been known to engender serious physical harm and destruction to property thereby undermining peaceful co-existence of all people (Caprari, 2019; Tolmay, 2019). For this reason, many have been worried about the state of Ubuntu in South Africa's international migration (Caprari, 2019; International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), 2011; Sebola, 2019; Tolmay, 2019).

### Ubuntu and the struggles of African migrants in south Africa

To appreciate the efficacy of the concept of Ubuntu in international migration to South Africa, care must be taken to decipher the challenges that African migrants are confronted with in South Africa. Though xenophobia tops the list of challenges migrants face, they encounter abuse, discrimination and are also routinely scapegoated for crime and other unlawful activities, they compete with locals for limited jobs, housing, health and educational services and grapple with social integration due to their lack of legal documentation (Bolt, 2016; Caprari, 2019; South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), n. d.; Tolmay, 2019). Ignorance regarding the protection of migrant rights heightens the challenges migrants face while children of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants struggle to access education (SAHRC, n. d.). In a bid to address the challenges migrants face in South Africa, the concept of Ubuntu which means humanity or humanness and compassion (Hankela, 2015) has been invoked in international migration discourse. It denotes brotherhood, neighbourliness, benevolence, human dignity, equal treatment and respect, solidarity, human rights, and tolerance towards outsiders (Caprari, 2019).

**Ubuntu in policy and practice**

Noting that migration has a multiplicity of causes ranging from safety and protection concerns to the search for economic and livelihood opportunities, South Africa has instituted a robust legal framework that provides migrants with fundamental rights and freedoms. In the true spirit of Ubuntu, the South African constitution does not only provide for the protection of fundamental human rights of its citizens but also makes provisions for the protection of non-nationals. As noted by the SAHRC (n. d.), '[h]uman rights are applicable to all people, therefore everyone in the country is entitled to human rights by virtue of being human' (p. 1). The SAHRC (n. d.) observed that Section 9 of the South African constitution prohibited against discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, race, colour, birth or social origin. As such, the constitution recognises that all human beings are, in essence, born free and equal in dignity and rights and thus deserve to be treated within the matrix of mutual recognition wherein all individuals interact with one another on a parity basis. In addition, South Africa is party to regional and international conventions that pay due regard to the respect and protection of human rights regardless of one's nationality. Thus, despite having restrictions placed on their freedoms, undocumented migrants ought to be treated with respect and dignity and in a humane and fair manner.

Recent media reports suggest that Ubuntu has been practiced in South African international migration even though such efforts continue to be clouded by humongous reports of xenophobic violence. For instance, the current minister of Home Affairs, Aaron Motsoaledi, has reiterated that every migrant child deserved to attend school regardless of their being undocumented (Washinyira, 2019). The South African government also took the initiative to regularise the status of non-nationals mainly from Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Angola. With their status regularised, these non-nationals can now conduct employment or study and the minister responsible indicated that the special permits issued would continue to be renewed till the reasons behind their issuance were redressed (Washinyira, 2019). In spite of criticisms levelled against some regularisation schemes such as the exclusion of new applicants and prevention of migrants from applying for permanent residence (Bimha, 2017; Ngatane, 2019; Washinyira, 2019), South Africa has demonstrated the true spirit of Ubuntu in its treatment of African migrants. Other initiatives worth noting include the IFRC Ubuntu initiative launched on October 21, 2011 in Johannesburg meant 'to address migration-related humanitarian challenges while promoting respect for diversity and social inclusion in five priority countries in Southern Africa' (IFRC, 2011, para. 1).

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

There can be no denying that xenophobic violence in South Africa is a blight on the African continent. However, xenophobia is not all there is in South Africa. There exists overwhelming evidence of Ubuntu expressed in both policy and practice. As a human rights and social justice profession, social work has a chance to demonstrate that it is indeed committed to the respect and protection of all migrants in South Africa. The silence of social workers in the wake of widespread xenophobia has been quite deafening and is cause for serious concern. Nothing suggests that migration to South Africa will dissipate anytime soon. If anything, we live in an era in which migration is increasing globally and will remain dominant for the foreseeable future. For us not to be found wanting, we should begin taking our rightful place in the world by tackling the challenges associated with migration. In doing so, we should pay rapt attention to the Ubuntu concept given its relevance to the cardinal values of human dignity and worth and social justice, which values are integral to effectual social work practice.

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