Africa’s Fear of Itself: the ideology of Makwerekwere in South Africa

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ABSTRACT Since the collapse of apartheid, the figure of Makwerekwere has been constructed and deployed in South Africa to render Africans from outside the borders orderable as the nation’s bogeyman. Waves of violence against Makwerekwere have characterised South Africa since then, the largest of which broke out in May 2008 in the Johannesburg shantytown of Alexander. It quickly spread throughout the country. The militants were black citizens who exclusively targeted African foreign nationals, with some witnesses reporting grotesque scenes of sadistic behaviour. So far these violent spurts have been described as xenophobia, overlooking the history of colonial group relations in South Africa. From the perspective of this article, the history of colonial group relations cannot be overlooked, for the relations between citizens and non-citizens are extended shadows of this history. I argue that, rather than rushing to characterise these relations as xenophobia, we should factor in the history of colonial group relations and the extent to which the post-apartheid ideology of Makwerekwere and South Africa’s ‘we-image’ vis-à-vis the rest of Africa may bear the imprints of this history.

Half a century ago Fanon wrote of the ‘black man’ as ‘a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety’ among whites.1 Today it is fair assessment to suggest that Africans are phobogenic unto themselves, that Africa is a stimulus to its own anxiety. Africa’s fear of itself is exemplified by the loathing of black foreign nationals in South Africa—peculiarly by the nation’s ex-victims of apartheid—which is increasingly becoming a fundamental component of South Africa’s collective identification and public culture. Since the collapse of apartheid, the phantom of Makwerekwere has been constructed and deployed in and through public discourse to render Africans from outside the borders orderable as the nation’s bogeyman. Waves of violence against Makwerekwere have been rocking South Africa since 1994. The largest and best known broke out in May 2008 in a Johannesburg shantytown of Alexandra. It quickly spread throughout the country. The militants were black citizens who exclusively targeted African foreign nationals, with some witnesses reporting grotesque scenes of sadistic behaviour.2 How did victims of...
apartheid become victimisers with such violent gushing of ire almost exclusively against Africans? This is the central concern of the article.

According to Danso and McDonald, South African xenophobia amounts to violent harassment of immigrants from other countries in Africa, killing ‘tens, if not thousands’. In a study of West African nationals in Johannesburg, a Nigerian national is quoted saying, it is hatred of ‘blacks against blacks’ in which white foreigners are seen as tourists and black foreigners as ‘makwerekwere’. A joint statement by the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) indicates that the victimisation of black South Africans is being replaced by the victimisation of African foreigners, noting that not only are more and more citizens becoming more xenophobic but they also perceive ‘almost exclusively black foreigners’ as directly responsible for rising unemployment and violent crime. On 18 April 1997 a Mail and Guardian article headlined ‘Searching for a guilty Nigerian’ reported activities of the South African Narcotics Bureau policemen, describing how they ‘celebrated a colleague’s birthday by endeavouring to arrest as many Nigerians as possible in the Hillbrow area’. Generally studies on South African xenophobia agree that African foreign nationals are more likely than other nationalities to be victims of physical violence. A study of xenophobia on the University of Johannesburg campus made similar revelations. A Turkish student notes that both black and white South Africans equate the word ‘foreigner’ with ‘black foreigner’, which in turn is given ‘all different negative connotations’. A Dutch student agrees, pointing out that not only do black South Africans loathe ‘black nationalities’ but also ‘show a lot of respect to white people, because to them they are the creators of wealth’. A recent study found that in South Africa’s tourism industry ‘tourist’ is a ‘whites only’ category; African foreign nationals are personae non gratae.

Method and sources

This article is part of a larger study that involved 10 months of fieldwork, from October 2006 to August 2007, which comprised participant observation, group and individualised interviews, informal conversations, and other data sources (see below). The site of fieldwork was the inner city of Johannesburg, particularly the neighbourhoods of Hillbrow and Yeoville. Johannesburg is an ideal location for a project of this kind for several reasons. First, its mining industry has for generations attracted large numbers of migrant workers from neighbouring countries, particularly Mozambique, Malawi and Lesotho. On the one hand, these migrants have crystallised in different national groupings, forming a specific power figuration with each other. On the other hand, these various groupings are interlocked in an established–outsider figuration with the citizenry. Second, virtually all members of the established and outsider groups have no visible skin colour or socioeconomic status differences. In many cases, they share ancestries, traditions and languages. This means that members of one group,
notably members of the establishment of the citizenry, engage in the narcissism of minor differences to blame and stigmatise members of other groups, particularly members of the weaker groups. Third, since the early 1990s Johannesburg has seen explosions of aggression and violence by members of the citizenry against members of outsider groups. The latest incidents of violence occurred in May 2008, killing over 60 (reported) foreign nationals, injuring over 600 and displacing over 30 000. It is noteworthy that, although this latest spurt of violence was nationwide, Johannesburg was the centre-stage. As the media reported, the violence began from Johannesburg and spread like wild fire across the country. Again, in this case elements of the narcissism of minor differences animated the violence.

In addition, there is a literature on attitudes towards foreign nationals in South Africa, out of which I draw on five sources: 1) reports on human rights of foreign nationals produced by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the SAHRC; 2) official statements by politicians; 3) surveys on attitudes to immigrants and immigration conducted under SAMP auspices; 4) the electronic media and press articles; and 5) dissertations and other academic writings.

**Beyond xenophobia**

Several theses have been put forward to explain what is construed as xenophobia in South Africa. Thus, for example, Morris proposes the scapegoat thesis, according to which the loathing of foreign nationals—eg blaming them for social ills such as crime, unemployment and the spread of HIV/AIDS—is the manifestation of frustration by poor and unemployed citizens. Similarly, Tshitereke’s relative deprivation thesis contends that dissatisfaction and frustration with the inadequacy and slowness of redressing the inequalities of apartheid are leading the deprived masses to turn against foreigners: ‘This is the ideal situation for a phenomenon like xenophobia to take root and flourish’.

Morris also proposes the isolation thesis, contending that the hostility towards foreign nationals issues from the prolonged seclusion of South Africans, particularly blacks, which precluded contact not simply with the world beyond Africa but with Africa itself. The demise of apartheid ended the seclusion, opened the borders, and subjected citizens to overwhelming exposure to the world. Xenophobic sentiments and attitudes issue from sudden and intense exposure to strangers.

A popular ‘biocultural theory’ has been put forward, placing the uneven loathing of African foreign nationals squarely on their alleged visible otherness: ‘The biocultural hypothesis locates xenophobia at the level of visible difference, or otherness, ie in terms of physical biological factors and cultural differences exhibited by African foreigners in the country’. By claiming that the Congolese and Nigerian nationals ‘are easily identifiable as the Other’, Morris is also a proponent of this argument. ‘Because of their physical features, their bearing, their clothing style and their inability to speak one of the indigenous languages’, he writes, ‘they are in general clearly
distinct and local residents are easily able to pick them out and scapegoat them.\textsuperscript{16}

Harris suggests an explanation that situates xenophobia within the apartheid/post-apartheid transitional period, wherein broad social institutions such as the media produced negative representations of Africa and African foreigners.\textsuperscript{17} These representations are congruent with the state’s criminalisation of African foreign nationals as ‘illegals’, ‘illegal aliens’, ‘illegal immigrants’, ‘criminals’ and ‘drug traffickers’, most notably by the South African Police Service and the Department of Home Affairs.

Neocosmos proposes an elaborate explanation that locates anti-African xenophobia within South African nationalism.\textsuperscript{18} ‘Poverty can only account for the powerlessness, frustration and desperation of the perpetrators, but not for their target’, he writes. ‘Why [are] not Whites or the rich or for that matter White foreigners in South Africa targeted instead?’.\textsuperscript{19} He argues that it is because of the anti-rural and pro-urban character of South African nationalism, which during the apartheid era ruralised and devalued black lives, on the one hand, whilst urbanising and valuing white lives, on the other. The post-apartheid state simply shifted this rural/urban binary opposition to Africa/South Africa, such that Africa is perceived as rural and backward and South Africa as urban and modern. This is also aided by the urban-centred imagination of nationality and citizenship among freedom fighters, which ultimately led to the belief in citizenship as autochthony.

There are grains of truth in these explanations but, alas, with Neocosmos’ exception, they only scratch the surface of the problem. None of them, including Neocosmos’ thesis, begins to appreciate the elephant in the room: the psychosocial dynamics of group relations at work in this process. One might ask: how did it come to pass that in the imagination of an African nation, Africa and Africans represent the negativity of Otherness? The lack of appreciation of the socio-emotional dynamics of group relations, notably the imprints on ‘behaviour and feelings and social character’\textsuperscript{20} of the history of white supremacy and violence leaves a lot to be desired in South African xenophobia literature. This article seeks to bring these historical, psychosocial dynamics of collectivities into the theorisation of South African Afrophobia.

Before I do so, however, I would like to discuss my theoretical framework, which draws on Fanonian and Eliasian theorisation of group dynamics to deconstruct what has hitherto been framed as xenophobia in South Africa.

**Dynamics of colonial group relations**

A discussion of antagonistic relations between groups of people that resemble each other, as is the case under consideration here, should take into account the socio-emotional dynamics of the groups in question. In his theory of the established and the outsiders, Elias speaks about one crucial feature of relations of this type, namely that the established often imagine the physical aspect of the outsiders as marks of their inferiority, thus setting them apart as fundamentally different. It is part of a ‘collective fantasy evolved by the
established group’. On the one hand, the established portray themselves with positive physical attributes as a sign of their superiority: ‘Almost everywhere members of established groups and, even more, those of groups aspiring to form the establishment, take pride in being cleaner, literally and figuratively, than the outsider groups’. And given the inferior and often inhumane conditions in which the outsiders are forced to live, the established are ‘probably quite often right’. This also speaks to the fear of pollution often prevalent among the established groups: ‘The widespread feeling among the established groups that contact with members of an outsider group contaminates refers to contamination with anomy and with dirt rolled into one.’ And where the power differentials are great, with correspondingly great oppression, ‘outsider groups are often held to be filthy and hardly human’. The wonder and the power of stigmatisation of outsiders by the established consists in the magical transubstantiation of establishment fantasy into flesh:

> The social stigma that its members attach to the outsider group transforms itself in their imagination into material stigma—it is reified. It appears as something objective, something implanted upon outsiders by nature or the gods. In that way the stigmatising group is excluded from any blame: it is not we, such fantasy implies, who have put a stigma on these people, but the powers that made the world—they have put the sign on these people to mark them off as inferior or bad people.

With time, such asymmetric power dynamics produce in the weaker groups what Elias called ‘identification with established’ groups, wherein members of the former measure their personal and collective self-worth according to the social standards of the latter. As a result, members of the weaker groups develop self-contempt that often manifests itself in self-destructive behaviour, including contempt and destruction of those who resemble them the most. South African xenophobia contains characteristic features of collective Afrophobic self-contempt. It is symptomatic of the painful socio-emotional imprints of apartheid power asymmetries that produced a colonised self among blacks, to which I now turn.

**Colonized (Afrophobic) self**

In order to put South Africans’ display of hostility towards other Africans in perspective, it is helpful to examine the imprints of colonial established–outsider relations on South Africa’s ‘we-image’, and to see how in turn this ‘we-image’ tilts the ‘we–they’ balance, where ‘we’ is South Africa and ‘they’ is Africa. Fanon provides analytical tools for such an exercise.

According to Fanon, the distorted we-images among the colonised are a direct outcome of colonial established–outsider relations. Fanon observed this distorted collective identification among his fellow Antilleans, who were colonised comprehensively to the point of negating the whole of their heritage. He writes: ‘The Antillean does not think of himself as a black man; he thinks of himself as a white man... The Negro lives in Africa. Subjectively, intellectually, the Antillean conducts himself like a white
man.'26 Similarly, longer than elsewhere in Africa, in South Africa one was born into, and became part of, a colonising figuration, constituted through the everyday comings and goings of colonialism, born of a colonial birth, living a colonial life, and dying a colonial death. Within such circumstance, the we-image of the colonised South Africans was distorted. Du Bois made a similar point: ‘Say to a people: “The one virtue is to be white,” and the people rush to the inevitable conclusion, “Kill the nigger!”’27 The almost exclusive loathing of African foreign nationals in South Africa suggests that, to a lesser or greater extent, South Africans—their social relations, their interdependencies, their attitudes towards life, their habitus, their personality structure, their collective conscious and unconscious, and their emotions—bear the imprints of colonial/apartheid relations. Among African countries South Africa is unique in that it is the place where the doctrine of white supremacy was meticulously systematised and implemented to the smallest detail of the mundane for the longest period of time.28 Cole’s The House of Bandage bears glaring witness:

The infectious spread of apartheid into the smallest detail of daily living made South Africa a land of signs ... to the African the signs are nothing but oppressive. They are always there, wherever he turns, to remind him that he is inferior. They shout at him that he is unfit to mingle, unworthy to enter through a certain door or to do business at a certain corner. And always the separate facilities for the blacks are poor. The lines are long. The busses and trains are jam-packed because they run so infrequently.29

These signs littering the landscapes mundanely represented colonised South Africans as ‘the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul’.30 They imposed group disgrace on black childhood—the most malleable phase of life—and adulthood alike longer than elsewhere in Africa. By the time the colonised reached adulthood, these constant reminders of group disgrace had dealt heavy blows to their ‘we-image’. Given the ‘open personality of human beings’,31 we can assume that to a greater or lesser extent the disgrace of blackness penetrated the soul and social habitus of blacks.

Colonial social unconscious

Hopper puts forward an understanding of the social unconscious that is relevant in this context. The social unconscious, he writes, consists of social ‘arrangements [that] are not perceived (not ‘known’), and if perceived not acknowledged (‘denied’), and if acknowledged, not taken as problematic (‘given’), and if taken as problematic, not considered with an optimal degree of detachment and objectivity’.32 Further, social unconscious is not random, strictly speaking, but ‘structured like language’ (to use Lacan’s dictum).33 In the colonial context Afrophobia and white supremacy structured the formation not only of the social conscious but also of the unconscious of South Africa, or ‘the sum of prejudices, myths [and] collective attitudes of a given group’—in other words, the stock of commonsense knowledge and
mundane methods of reasoning which structure people’s lives without necessarily being reflected upon.

An appreciation of the crystallisation of the South African social unconscious, and of the social habitus that goes along with it, which underlie the current anti-African orientation, requires an appreciation of what it meant to be a South African in Africa. On this score Adedeji makes the forceful observation that historically South Africa has set itself apart from Africa, seeing itself as ‘a European outpost’, very much like other white-settler societies, bent on either eradicating or subjugating the natives.\textsuperscript{35} This meant that, following the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, citizenship and nationality were ‘Whites Only’ categories. Colonial writings bear witness to the fact, as Oswin wrote at the time, that it was ‘no exaggeration to say that the majority of South Africans feel an almost physical revulsion against anything that puts a native or a person of colour on their level’.\textsuperscript{36} In the social unconscious ‘South African’ and whiteness became synonyms, whereas blackness symbolised ‘evil, sin, wretchedness, death, war, famine’.\textsuperscript{37} Such social unconscious enabled the colonised to idealise themselves in the image of the coloniser—a fantasy that finds expression in the ideology of South African exceptionalism, out of which is born the bizarre idea, among others, that South Africans have lighter skin complexions than Africans from the greater continent. First highlighted by Mamdani and recently by Neocosmos,\textsuperscript{38} South African exceptionalism is a ‘dominant arrogant’ public discourse according to which ‘South Africa is somehow more akin to a Southern European or Latin American country given its relative levels of industrialization, and now increasingly of liberal democracy’.\textsuperscript{39} This attitude predates the post-apartheid era. Lazarus’ revelations on this question are particularly instructive. Recalling the mentality of the white establishment of which he was part, he writes: ‘For most whites in South Africa, of course, South Africa was not really in Africa at all. It was a “Western” society that just happened, accidentally and inconsequentially, if irritatingly, to be situated at the foot of the dark continent’.\textsuperscript{40} Lazarus remarks how this attitude characterised not only pro-apartheid forces but also ironically the anti-apartheid forces and scholars:

Even within the anti-apartheid movement, a dangerous and inexcusable ignorance about Africa was quite widespread. This ignorance was premised not, obviously, on difference but on categorical \textit{differentiation}… South African commentators … tended always ‘to regard the country as sui generic and somehow able to evade the pressures experienced by the rest of Africa … the insularity, the provincialism, the inward directedness, the self-obsession of so much South African scholarship, including left-wing scholarship, and including that by South African scholars living abroad, in exile or by choice. The conventional wisdom has been that South Africa would be able to solve the problems of development (and maldevelopment or underdevelopment) experienced by other African states, rather than to fall victim to them; to control its own fate; to write its own scripts rather than find itself written into ones not of its own devising.\textsuperscript{41}
This exceptionalism was not simply an ideology with which its proponents constructed their social reality *vis-à-vis* Africa back then. It was also futuristic in that, even at the time of the struggle, its proponents projected it into the future, enabling them to hope for, and dream of, an exceptionally liberated South Africa. This notion of exceptionalism is fundamental in the study of the formation of South Africa’s *we*-images towards Africa.

**Identification with the oppressor**

In relations such as those between blacks and whites in apartheid South Africa, where the asymmetric power is too great, weaker groups ‘measure themselves with the yardstick of their oppressors’. As Du Bois tells us, such power differentials deny the weak ‘true self-consciousness’ allowing them instead the ‘peculiar sensation . . . this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’. And once the ideals of the oppressor become the aspirations of the oppressed, the oppressed has become a cultural clone of the oppressor. From this vantage point we can hypothesise that, to a greater or lesser extent, the ex-oppressed in South Africa have taken on the character of their ex-oppressor.

Identification with the oppressor goes hand in hand with self-destruction, and both are facets of the colonised self. As Fanon writes: ‘I am a white man. For unconsciously I distrust what is black in me, that is, the whole of my being’. In self-loathing, the self-loathers also loathe those who resemble them the most. Oppression debilitates the psyche of the oppressed, which ‘leads eventually to depression or expressions of anger and self-hate, which by the processes of symmetric logic can as easily be directed at others in the vicinity who are like me and therefore are the same as me’. Aversion to those who resemble the self externalises self-contempt, and projects negativity of self accrued through generations of vilification to the other. From this point of view African foreign nationals are feared, hated and distrusted not because they are different but because they resemble the former victims of apartheid, which typifies narcissism of minor differences.

**Makwerekwere: fantasy of the foreign body**

How do the socio-emotional dynamics of colonial group relations in South Africa as discussed above, ie colonial (Afrophobic) self, colonial social unconscious, identification with the oppressor, ‘we-image’ of exceptionalism/superiority, inform the relations between South Africans and African foreign nationals after apartheid? I suggest looking at how South Africans select their object of hate, ‘the foreigner’ or *Makwerekwere*.

In South Africa’s imagination, the word ‘foreigner’ is an emotionally charged signifier for African foreign national or *Makwerekwere*, whereby African bodies become ‘literal “texts” on which . . . some of [the] most graphic and scrutable messages’ of aversion are written. Bodily looks, movements, sounds and smells are legible as evidence of imagined citizenship.
and foreignness. Deviation from bodily ideals of citizenship or conformity to fantasies of strangeness warrants strip searches, arrests, detentions, deportations, humiliation, tortures, rapes, muggings, killings, etc. As Harris points out:

Reading physical features as signifiers of foreignness offers a valuable framework for understanding the significance of these features in xenophobic actions. Biological–cultural markers are significant in generating xenophobia because they point out whom to target, ie they indicate which particular group of foreigners the South African public dislikes and initiates violent practice against.48

The SAHRC reported that illegal immigrants were identified through profiling of skin colour, language, hairstyle and manner of dress.49 Bodies are viewed as nation-building blocks that are subjected to an ongoing patriotic process of selection. The bodies caught on the sieve are rejected, labelled coarse and strange, and denied belonging and usefulness. They must not infiltrate South African social spaces. If they do, they must be hunted down and destroyed or removed. Either way national social spaces must be free from undesirable bodies. This appears to be an ideal of the South African nation and state. Curiously, as I indicated at the outset, although all social groups hold these assumptions, black South Africans are the most ardent, rigorous and vigorous in deploying them.

The looks

Two groups, one of African foreign nationals, and the other of police officers, in Johannesburg, confirmed the identification methods that media and human rights groups had been reporting for over a decade. As one participating foreign national noted: ‘They pay too much attention on outward appearance of the person. If they don’t like the way you look, they create problems for you. They arrest you only for your looks because they think you have foreign looks’.50

The size and configuration of the body are often scrutinised, because in the imagination of the citizenry foreigners bear physical features that are distinctively strange. Body parts are examined, graded and coded. When asked how they identified foreigners, the police officers replied: ‘It’s very easy. People from Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon and places like that have big noses, big lips, and round heads’.51 Physical self-presentation is put under scrutiny, graded and coded, eg in terms of dress style and haircuts. Another participating foreign national indicated: ‘They use language and the way you look, also the dress code . . . because people from Congo, from Nigeria . . . you can see how they dress’.52

Attention is also paid to the shades of skin colour. The idea that foreigners are ‘too dark’ or ‘too black’ is part of the collective South African fantastic imagination. So is the idea that ‘they dress funny’. Criminals also deploy this method to select their victims, since lives of African foreign nationals are devalued, and consequently crime and violence against them are culturally
acceptable. Lucky Dube was killed because the killers mistook the South African reggae star for a Nigerian. The killers had the nerve to say this to the court. Did they hope to elicit public sympathy with this excuse? Did they believe killing Makwerekwere was culturally acceptable? Where do these beliefs come from? With a few exceptions, the South African public displayed no moral indignation. According to the HRW report, ‘Dress and hair are [also] handicaps in the context of rife street crime’ (emphasis added). HRW also found that detainees at Lindela Repatriation Camp had been arrested because the arresting police officers felt their victims bore features of strangeness: ‘Suspected undocumented migrants are identified by the authorities through unreliable means such as complexion, accent, or inoculation marks. We documented cases of persons who claimed they were arrested for being too black, having a foreign name, or in one case, walking like a Mozambican’ (emphasis added). Similarly, in 1996, Minaar and Hough reported that the internal tracing units of the South African Police Service relied on people’s physical appearance in determining citizenship, nationality and illegality. In 2001 the SAHRC memo entitled ‘Teacher Assaulted for Being too Dark’ condemned the police methods of determining citizenship: ‘Their criteria for judging whether or not a person is a citizen, are highly questionable as it appears that one’s skin colour and dress sense serves as the basis for assessing one’s legal status within South Africa’. As recently as 2008 a student was arrested because the police concluded, after briefly looking at him, that his body was not light-skinned enough to be South African. ‘They took one look at me and said I was too dark to be South African’, he told reporters. The reporter’s indignation shows the irony and absurdity of these methods: ‘It is self-evident that no one ever has been or will ever be deported from South Africa for being “too White”’. The performances

In the South African imagination, indigenous bodies are expected to produce authentic native sound patterns. In contrast, nothing but incompetence and lack of authenticity in this regard is expected of foreign bodies. Thus language and accent are crucial signifiers of imagined nativity and strangeness. Where one is suspected of being a stranger, the gatekeepers of South African social spaces—state agents and civilians—initiate communication in a Nguni or Sotho language. When and where the suspect fails to produce Nguni or Sotho sound patterns, the gatekeeper changes his/her demeanour instantly, changes communication from his/her native language to English, and addresses the suspect impolitely and indignantly: ‘Where is your passport?’; ‘What do you want in South Africa?’; ‘Why don’t you go back to your country?’ I had a personal experience of this in Johannesburg on three different occasions. This has often been the case with state agents and civilians. As a Nigerian national explained:

Once you speak their language they immediately know you are one of them. Once I was drinking in a bar and this South African man was speaking in Zulu
to me. I felt so bad because I could not reply in Zulu, when he noticed that I am not South African his reactions towards me changed. He was no longer friendly as he initially seemed.  

As a rule it matters little whether the presumed foreigner is in South Africa legally or illegally. Either way the hatred is as intense. Furthermore, although the ability to speak an indigenous language is absolutely necessary, in itself it is an insufficient signifier of nativity. The accent must carry the sound of authentic nativity. Thus, where the alleged foreigner speaks the indigenous language, the accent is subject to scrutiny. The accent tests must be passed on the spot. In 1996 Minaar and Hough reported that the South African Police Service engaged in this practice:

In trying to establish whether a suspect is an illegal or not, members of the internal tracing units focus on a number of aspects. One of these is language: accent, the pronunciation of certain words (such as Zulu for ‘elbow’, or ‘buttonhole’ or the name of a meerkat). Some are asked what nationality they are and if they reply ‘Sud’ African this is a dead give-away for a Mozambican, while Malawians tend to pronounce the letter ‘r’ as ‘errow’. 

According to Minaar and Hough’s study, Lesotho nationals were frequently harassed and arrested because they ‘speak slightly different Sesotho’. However, speaking the language and mastering accents are often not sufficient signifiers of nativity. Additional testing is often required, in which case the suspects must state, to the satisfaction of the inquisitive police officer, their native village, about which they are also quizzed thoroughly—eg ‘Who’s the village chief?’; ‘What’s the name of the village primary school and who’s the principal?; ‘What’s the village high school and who’s the principal?’ A Zimbabwean refugee reported being subjected to such scrutiny:

The other day they [the police] stopped me and asked for ID. They talked to me in Zulu. If you can’t speak Zulu or Tswana they think you’re illegal. But I speak Zulu very well because I’m Ndebele. So they said, ‘Can I see your ID?’ I told them I left my ID at home. They didn’t believe me. I have South African ID but I avoid carrying it around because I know if they find me they will tear it off. So I leave it at home. So they asked me, ‘Where is your home town?’ I told them I was from Newcastle. They asked me for the names of primary school, secondary school, the principals, the chiefs and all that shit.

The smells

In the South African imagination, African foreign bodies emit foul odours. African foreign nationals are perceived as lacking appreciation of technologies of smell, ‘technologies of self’, through which subjects cultivate themselves into culturally agreeable and docile bodies. As one such technology, deodorant aids individuals in producing themselves as pleasantly smelling bodies. In the discourse of the citizenry typical African foreign
bodies are positioned as non-users of this technology, as primitive and lacking a culture of good smells. According to Harris, the Internal Tracing Unit of the South African Police Service adopted *sniffing out methods* to identify their suspects and victims. In my interviews policemen in Johannesburg claimed they could identify the ‘illegals’ through their smell. ‘It’s easy to smell these people’, said one. The rest agreed. When asked how, they all shrugged in visible expression of disgust: ‘Agh . . . Ba nuka la bantu!’ (‘Yuck . . . These people stink!’). This belief appears to be part of South African received wisdom. For instance, despite being married to a Nigerian national, a South African woman held this belief. ‘These people smell terribly, to tell you the truth’, she said. Then she added: ‘I don’t know why they smell so bad. They don’t use cosmetics. I don’t know whether it’s their nature, where they come from’.

The deodorant and smell are thus markers of group as well as individual identity, mediating the ‘we–they’ differentiation between citizens and non-citizens. On the one hand, deodorant and pleasant smells are markers of one’s membership in the establishment of citizens. They represent the ‘we-images’ and ‘we-ideals’ of citizenship and nationality. On the other hand, non-usage of deodorant and foul smells are proof of the Others’ outsider position, to which citizens assigned them in the first place.

**The violence of May 2008**

The violence of May 2008 was neither random nor isolated; neither the first nor the last, I am afraid. It was a salient manifestation of a broadly and deeply entrenched disdain of black foreign nationals. Within this broader national trend there have been numerous outbreaks of violence since 1994. These outbreaks have kept research and human rights organisations busy, such as the Forced Migration Studies Programme, Southern African Migration Project, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, HRW and South African Human Rights Commission. To these organisations, to the victims of these outbreaks, and to those who pay close attention to anti-foreign sentiments, attitudes and practices in South Africa, May 2008 was not surprising. The violence of the ideology of *Makwerekwere* is an everyday problem.

The structural characteristics of all the violent outbreaks, including May 2008, were the same: the aggressors were black insiders and they blamed their victims for crime, unemployment, the spread of HIV and patronisation of local women. The victims were black outsiders and black insiders perceived as black outsiders. State officials were in denial (refusing to acknowledge the problem, let alone its breadth and depth) and, as usual, state institutions (police and armed forces) and officials were slow to respond. The significant difference between May 2008 and the previous outbreaks of violence was magnitude. To put the violence of May 2008 in perspective, let us consider well known violent outbreaks since 1994 reported in the media and chronicled by the International Organization for Migration:

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December 1994. In Alexandra, Gauteng, armed youth gangs destroy foreign-owned homes and property and demand that foreigners be removed from the area.

September 1998. In Johannesburg, Gauteng, two Senegalese and a Mozambican are thrown from a moving train by a group of individuals returning from a rally at which migrants and refugees were blamed for the levels of unemployment, crime and AIDS in South Africa.

October 2000. In Zandspruit, Gauteng, fighting breaks out between South African and Zimbabwean residents.

August 2005. In Bothaville, Free State, Zimbabwean and Somali refugees are beaten.

December 2005. In Olievenhoutbosch, Gauteng, groups of South Africans chase foreign Africans living in the township of Choba’s informal settlement from their shacks, shops and businesses.

July 2006. In Knysna, Western Cape, Somali shop owners in a township outside Knysna are chased out of the area and at least 30 spaza shops are damaged.

August 2006. In Cape Town, Western Cape, during a period of just over a month, between 20 and 30 Somalis are killed in townships surrounding Cape Town.

February 2007. In Motherwell, Eastern Cape, violence triggered by the accidental shooting of a young South African man (by a Somali shop owner) results in the looting of over 100 Somali-owned shops in a 24-hour period.

May 2007. In Ipelegeng Township, North West, shops owned by Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Somali and Ethiopian nationals are attacked, looted and in some cases torched.

September 2007. In Delmas, Mpumalanga, after a service-delivery protest by residents, 41 shops owned and staffed by non-nationals are attacked and looted. One death and two serious injuries are reported, and 40 non-nationals take refuge at mosques and with friends.

October 2007. In Mooiplaas, Gauteng, after a clash between a Zimbabwean and a South African family went awry, the local population retaliated by attacking the migrant community, killing two people, brutally injuring 18 and looting 111 shops.

January 2008. In Duncan Village, Eastern Cape, two Somalis are found burned to death in their shop. Police later arrest seven people in connection with the incident after finding them in possession of property belonging to the deceased.

January 2008. In Jeffrey’s Bay, Eastern Cape, after a Somali shop owner allegedly shoots dead a suspected thief, a crowd of residents attacks Somali-owned shops, and many Somali nationals seek shelter at the police station.

January 2008. In Soshanguve, Gauteng, a foreign national is burned to death, three others killed, 10 seriously injured and 60 shops looted after residents apprehend the suspects and attack foreign residents in retaliation for the alleged robbery of a local store by four non-nationals.
Subsequently, residents call for foreigners to leave, and many non-nationals flee the area.

- January 2008. In Albert Park, KwaZulu-Natal, the community forum holds a meeting to address the issue of non-nationals living among them, during which the community indicates that they want foreign nationals living in the area to leave.

- February 2008. In Laudium, Gauteng, at a community meeting in the informal settlement of Itireleng some members encourage residents to chase non-nationals out of the area. Violent clashes take place. Shacks and shops belonging to non-nationals are burned and looted.

- February 2008. In Valhalla Park, Western Cape, residents of Valhalla Park forcefully evict at least five Somali shop owners from the area, injuring three people after having apparently ‘warned’ the shop owners to leave three months before.

- May 2008. In Alexandra, Johannesburg, an armed mob breaks into foreigners’ shacks, evicting them, looting and/or appropriating their homes, and raping women. The violence spreads across the country and continues for two weeks. Violence begins on 11 May. However, President Mbeki condemns the violence only 16 days later on 26 May.69

As usual, the ANC government’s initial reaction was to bury its head in the sand, claiming that a ‘third force’ trying to tarnish the image of South Africa was behind the violence. Members of President Mbeki’s ‘administration claimed a shadowy “third force” was at work’, writes Evans. When asked, ‘they declined to say what that force was but blamed armed, drunken criminals for the violence. A spokesman said the National Intelligence Agency had joined the investigation into the causes of the attacks which erupted in the Alexandra township 11 days ago.’70 The ‘third force’ argument did not hold up to scrutiny. The aggressors were isolated local groups scattered across the country, acting without an organising and co-ordinating ‘third force’. The violence was fuelled through news images of compatriots rising up against the nation’s enemy, Makwerekwere, whom the state seemed unable to expel. Despite spatial separation, the scattered local mobs appeared organised because a crowd mentality mediated through the media united them. In fact, the absence of local government—in other words, the retreat of the state from these neighbourhoods—is considered an engendering factor for the violence.71 Nationally, the retreat of the state was demonstrated by the president’s 16-day inaction as the mobs terrorised the country.

On 3 July 2008 President Mbeki spoke again against the violence. However, denial still structured his speech:

What happened during those days was not inspired by possessed nationalism, or extreme chauvinism, resulting in our communities violently expressing the hitherto unknown sentiments of mass and mindless hatred of foreigners—xenophobia ... I heard it said insistently that my people have turned or become xenophobic ... I wondered what the accusers knew about my people which I did not know ... And this I must also say—none in our society has any right to encourage or incite xenophobia by trying to explain naked criminal activity by
cloaking it in the garb of xenophobia ... None of us can be happy or satisfied with this reality.\textsuperscript{72}

It is worth pointing out here that the normalisation of violence against black foreign nationals by black nationals and the black state’s persistent pattern of denial are perhaps part of the most salient sociological questions confronting not only South Africa but also the entire continent today.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Historically competition for power, prestige and survival intensifies as differentials between the competing groups wane. In other words, as groups tend towards diminishing contrasts, especially when the means of survival are scarce, they exert on each other greater competitive pressure tending towards ruthlessness. Contempt for the others within us emanates ‘from projection of one’s dangerous impulses onto others . . . [a] mechanism [that] succeeds best when the other resembles oneself’.\textsuperscript{73} Freud called this mechanism the ‘narcissism of differences’ between groups. The course of human history suggests a pattern of groups undergoing diminishing contrasts yet engaging in one-sided exaggeration of the same increasingly diminishing contrasts and tending toward ethnic cleansings. The discrimination against the Burakumin in Japan, the violence against blacks in the American South following the abolition of slavery, the violence between equals among the court nobility in France and Germany, the growth of anti-Semitism in Germany, the civil war in the Balkans, the ethnic cleansing in Rwanda, to mention a few well known cases, occurred alongside with diminishing differences between the groups involved.\textsuperscript{74} This phenomenon was uncovered in an English working class community.\textsuperscript{75} In Rwanda the Hutus had to be Tutsifed and the Tutsis Hutufied before the mobilisation of fantasy and genocide.\textsuperscript{76} Anti-Semitism grew to deadly levels as the Jews grew indistinguishably German. Accused of ‘sneaking about in disguise to hide subversive activities’, viewed as ‘parasitic vermin . . . dangerous to the body politic if not watched’, they needed to ‘be stamped out with vigilance and ideological protection’. Therefore ‘every right minded citizen has a duty to be as watchful as in the protection of individual health’.\textsuperscript{77}

Relations between South Africans and African foreign nationals are a striking case of narcissism of minor differences. Immigrants are sources of fears and anxieties the more they are imagined as invisible intruders who look and sound like citizens, and are in fact often citizens. Immigrants from the southern African region in particular assimilate easily in South Africa given the cultural and economic hegemony of the country in the region. South African languages and their respective cultures, namely Shangaan, Sotho, Tswana, Ndebele and Swazi, are spoken and practised in five other countries in the region, namely Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. This cultural and linguistic similarity renders the outsiders invisible and stimulates anxiety in the South African imagination. It signifies the enemy within, the enemy who looks like us, the enemy who is us. The destructive logic of this process is ultimately self-annihilation.
The condition of possibility for the belief of exceptionalism is a mythologisation of selective reading of history that represses internal negativities, ie apartheid and its legacy, the growing HIV/AIDS pandemic, persistent ignorance and illiteracy, growing inequality and poverty, the multiplication of shanty towns, increasing violent crime, and astonishing rates and types of rape. In this context the in-your-face display of superiority feelings towards African Others by the wretched majority is impressive: ‘We’re the richest in Africa’; ‘We’re the most powerful in Africa’; ‘We are the best in Africa’; ‘We have the best technology, best economy, best schools and universities’. The fantasy of imagined communities is clearly at work here.\(^7\)

The ignorant are wise, the poor are rich, the uneducated are educated, the weak are powerful, the losers are winners, and the vanquished are invincible. As Hage writes:

One of the most enjoyable powers of collective ‘we’ lies precisely in its capacity to make an ‘I’ experience what the ‘I’ by itself cannot possibly experience. ‘I’ can be uneducated and yet can confidently claim that ‘we are highly educated compared to the Muslims’. ‘I’ can be a peasant but can proudly boast that ‘we are a very sophisticated people’. ‘I’ can speak only in Arabic but can proudly claim ‘we have always spoken French’. Likewise ‘I’ can be poor but can note that ‘we are a rich community’. And finally in much the same way ‘I’ can be dark skinned and say ‘we are white’.\(^7\)

In the context of South African history the violent aversion towards African foreign nationals in South Africa can best be described as Afrophobia. The ideology of Makwerekwere seeks to make visible the invisible object of fear in order to eliminate it. The roots of this ideology ‘must be sought in the psychological realm of ego-weak characters who construct their identity by denigrating others … [in need of] scapegoats to externalise what cannot be sublimated’.\(^8\) The ideology of Makwerekwere externalises internal repression.

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Notes


12 Harris, ‘“Our fellow Africans make our lives hell”’.  

14 Harris, ‘“Our fellow Africans make our lives hell”’.  

16 Harris, ‘“Our fellow Africans make our lives hell”’, p 1125.

17 Harris, ‘Xenophobia’.  

19 Neocosmos, ‘The politics of fear and the fear of politics’.


22 Ibid, p xxvii.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid, pp xxiv–xxv.


26 Fanon, Black Skins, White Masks, p 148.


30 Fanon, Black Skins, White Masks, p 190.


34 Ibid, p 188.

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36 Quoted in Fanon, Black Skins, White Masks, p 88.
38 Mamdani, Citizens and Subjects; and Neocosmos, From 'Foreign Natives' to 'Native Foreigners'.
39 Neocosmos, From 'Foreign Natives' to 'Native Foreigners', p 5.
41 Ibid.
42 Elias, 'Introduction', p xxvi.
44 Fanon, Black Skins, White Masks, p 191.
48 Harris, ‘Xenophobia’.
50 Interviews, Johannesburg, March 2007.
51 Interviews, Johannesburg, March 2007.
52 Interviews, Johannesburg, March 2007.
55 Ibid.
56 Quoted in Harris, ‘Xenophobia’.
59 The Nguni languages are isi-Zulu, isi-Xhosa, isi-Swati and isi-Ndebela. The Sotho languages are seTswana, and northern and southern seSotho. South Africa has more native languages than these.
61 Quoted in Harris, ‘Xenophobia’.
62 Ibid.
65 Harris, ‘Xenophobia’.
71 Misago et al, Towards Tolerance, Law, and Dignity.
74 Blok, ‘The narcissism of minor differences’.
75 Elias & Scotson, The Established and the Outsiders.

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77 H Adam et al, Comrades in Business, p 47.

78 The fallacy of disciplinary specialisation—ie designating subjects as biology, history, sociology, psychology, etc—is a compartmentalisation of life in which it is imagined as exclusively social, or exclusively historical, or exclusively biological, or exclusively political, or exclusively psychological, and so on. In reality, however, life is at once biological, historical, political, psychological (emotional), social, etc. These disciplines grapple with interdependent facets of the human complex.


80 H Adam et al, Comrades in Business, p 38.

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