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Essencist X- Ray of Socio-Economic, Political, Cultural and Developmental causes of Xenophobia in South Africa: The Nigerian Experiential Impacts

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the socioeconomic, political, cultural, and developmental causes of xenophobia in South Africa, focusing on the experiences of Nigerians in the twenty-first century. Drawing on Essencism, the African philosophical framework developed by Samuel Asuquo Ekanem, the study investigates how human identity, moral consciousness, social values, and institutional responsibility relate to xenophobic attitudes and violence. An Essencist X-ray is defined here as a critical inquiry into the ethical, conceptual, and structural conditions underlying a social problem. The paper considers how apartheid's enduring inequalities, unemployment, poverty, and competition for economic opportunities may intensify resentment against migrants, while political mobilisation and institutional failures can turn legitimate grievances into exclusionary hostility. It examines governance and migrant-protection challenges in South Africa and Nigeria, and analyses national stereotypes without confusing individual criminal conduct with collective responsibility. The discussion engages philosophical perspectives on colonialism, identity, and responsibility, including the work of Frantz Fanon and Emmanuel Levinas. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, non-empirical approach based on philosophical analysis, hermeneutical interpretation, and documentary review of scholarly literature, institutional reports, and historical accounts. It argues that xenophobia undermines social justice and Pan-African solidarity. The paper recommends accountable institutions, equitable development, responsible political leadership, moral education, stronger Nigeria–South Africa cooperation, improved migrant protection, evidence-based responses to crime, and an Afro-communitarian ethic of hospitality and shared responsibility. These measures can help advance the African Union's Agenda 2063.

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Introduction

The beginning of the twenty-first century renewed hopes that African states would deepen continental integration, solidarity and self-determination, goals reflected in the African Union's Agenda 2063 (African Union Commission, 2015). Yet recurring xenophobic violence in South Africa has exposed tensions between Pan-African ideals and the realities of national belonging. In May 2008, attacks

against foreign nationals and perceived outsiders resulted in 62 deaths and the displacement of tens of thousands of people; estimates of displacement commonly range from about 80,000 to more than 100,000 (South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2010). During the 2015 violence, seven people died, including South African citizens, and thousands of foreign nationals were displaced (In September 2019, renewed violence involved killings, looting, arson, and displacement; the South African government reported 12 deaths, although Human Rights Watch documented concerns that the toll may have been higher (Human Rights Watch, 2020). These episodes affected migrants from several countries. The available evidence does not justify claiming that Nigerians were disproportionately targeted compared with all other migrant groups; this paper therefore examines Nigerian experiences without ranking their suffering above that of other affected communities.

Xenophobia cannot be explained fairly by presenting South Africans only as perpetrators and migrants only as victims. South Africa continues to face deep inequality, unemployment, poverty, inadequate services, housing pressures, and frustration over the pace of post-apartheid transformation. These conditions are real and deserve serious political attention. Research on xenophobic violence also points to local political mobilisation, competition over resources, rumours, and failures of protection and accountability as factors that can turn grievances into attacks on foreign nationals (Landau, 2011). Such conditions help explain the context of violence but do not justify it. Nor should allegations of crime be dismissed automatically: some individuals and networks have been implicated in criminal activity, including drug trafficking. These cases require evidence-based investigation and individual accountability, not collective blame against Nigerians or any other nationality.

This paper applies Essencism, the African philosophical framework developed by Samuel Asuquo Ekanem, to examine the ethical, conceptual, and structural conditions that sustain xenophobia. In this study, an “Essencist X-ray” means a critical inquiry that moves from visible events to underlying assumptions about human dignity, identity, moral responsibility, social development, and institutional justice. The paper treats this approach as an interpretive framework, not as a substitute for empirical evidence. It assesses its claims by asking whether the framework explains documented patterns, engages counter-evidence, distinguishes structural causes from moral judgments, and offers conclusions consistent with the sources examined (Ekanem, 2005). The analysis also adopts a mirror perspective. Nigeria’s governance challenges, unemployment, insecurity, and limited opportunities form part of the context in which some Nigerians seek livelihoods abroad. An honest Pan-African ethic must also examine Nigeria’s treatment of foreign nationals and apply the same standards of dignity and non-discrimination to migrants within Nigeria. This comparison does not excuse xenophobia in South Africa; rather, it makes the ethical argument consistent across national borders. The paper therefore examines the socioeconomic, political, cultural, and developmental dimensions of xenophobia, its implications for Nigerians and other migrants, and the possibilities for a response grounded in justice, accountability, and African solidarity. (Ekanem, 2005)

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, non-empirical design combining philosophical analysis, hermeneutical interpretation, and documentary review. No original interviews or fieldwork are claimed. The documentary material comprises published scholarly books and articles, institutional reports, human-rights documentation, and African Union policy documents relevant to xenophobia, migration, social inequality, African philosophy, and continental integration. Sources are interpreted in relation to the paper’s central questions: what conditions contribute to xenophobic violence; how are migrants represented and treated; and what ethical and institutional responsibilities follow from these findings? Philosophical analysis is used to examine the coherence of arguments about identity, dignity, responsibility, and justice. Hermeneutical interpretation situates philosophical concepts within their original intellectual contexts and applies them cautiously to the South African case. Documentary claims are treated as evidence reported by their authors or institutions, not as findings generated by this paper. The study’s limitations are that it does not provide original interview data, a new statistical dataset, or a comprehensive comparison of all migrant groups. Its conclusions are therefore conceptual and interpretive rather than claims of new empirical measurement.

Essencist Framework and Criteria of Evaluation

In this paper, Essencism is used as a philosophical approach that emphasizes the essential dimensions of human development and the relationship between physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual, social, and cultural life. Ekanem’s writings provide the principal basis for applying the framework to education, human development, and African social questions (Ekanem, 2018a). The present application makes three claims:

first, that xenophobia should be examined beyond its immediate incidents to include its ethical and institutional conditions; second, that national identity cannot legitimately erase the dignity of individual persons; and third, that development should be evaluated by its effects on human capacities and social relations, not economic indicators alone. These are the paper's interpretive propositions and should not be mistaken for independently established empirical laws. The framework is assessed against four criteria. Explanatory adequacy asks whether it accounts for documented economic, political, cultural, and institutional factors rather than reducing xenophobia to moral failure alone. Evidence-responsiveness asks whether its interpretations align with credible reports and are revised when evidence complicates the argument. Conceptual clarity requires distinctions between individual wrongdoing and collective blame, between explaining violence and justifying it, and between citizenship rights and universal human dignity. Practical relevance asks whether the framework supports realistic measures such as fair law enforcement, accountable governance, migrant protection, and inclusive development. Evidence of persistent structural causes, variation across places and periods, and cases where communities resist xenophobic mobilisation must be considered alongside evidence of prejudice and violence. This approach allows Essencism to function as a critical framework open to evaluation rather than a conclusion assumed in advance. (Ekanem, 2018b).

Beyond Empirical Explanations toward a Philosophy of Causation

Every enduring social phenomenon demands explanation at multiple levels of analysis. While empirical investigation identifies observable conditions under which events occur, philosophy interrogates the deeper principles that render such events intelligible. Xenophobia in contemporary South Africa exemplifies this distinction. Political scientists emphasize governance failures; economists identify unemployment and inequality; sociologists examine social exclusion and migration; psychologists analyse prejudice and fear. Each perspective contributes valuable insights, yet none, independently considered, fully explains why societies repeatedly transform vulnerable fellow Africans into objects of hostility. The central philosophical question is therefore not simply what causes xenophobia, but why these causes acquire moral legitimacy within public consciousness. Poverty alone does not inevitably produce hatred. Unemployment does not logically require violence against migrants. Economic inequality does not necessarily culminate in exclusionary nationalism. Between structural conditions and collective violence lies the sphere of human interpretation, ethical judgment and political imagination. Within this interpretive sphere, philosophy performs its indispensable task. Aristotle distinguishes between material, efficient, formal and final causes, arguing that complete explanation requires attention to multiple dimensions of causality rather than isolated factors (Aristotle, 1999, Book II). Applying this insight to xenophobia reveals that unemployment, migration or inequality constitute only material conditions. The formal causes lie in ideological constructions of identity; the efficient causes include political manipulation and institutional failures; while the final causes concern the social and political purposes served by excluding vulnerable populations. Consequently, xenophobia must be understood as a multidimensional philosophical phenomenon in which economic structures, political institutions, historical consciousness, cultural narratives and ethical reasoning interact to produce exclusionary practices. Reducing the phenomenon to any single variable obscures its complexity and weakens prospects for durable solutions. This paper therefore argues that the socio-economic, political, cultural and developmental causes of xenophobia should not be interpreted as independent explanatory variables but as interconnected manifestations of a deeper crisis of African moral consciousness.

Socio-Economic Inequality and the Philosophy of Structural Injustice

Among the explanations most frequently advanced for xenophobic violence is South Africa's persistent socio-economic inequality. Despite remarkable constitutional achievements following the end of apartheid, the country continues to experience exceptionally high unemployment, significant disparities in wealth distribution, widespread poverty and uneven access to housing, education, healthcare and public services. These conditions generate understandable frustration, particularly among young people whose expectations of democratic transformation remain unfulfilled. Yet philosophy immediately raises a critical question. Why should socio-economic deprivation produce hostility toward migrants rather than collective action directed at transforming the structural conditions responsible for deprivation? This question exposes the limitations of purely economic explanations. Poverty may explain frustration, but frustration alone cannot explain its object. Violence requires interpretation. Human beings must first identify whom they believe is responsible for their

suffering before collective aggression becomes possible. Karl Marx correctly observed that material conditions profoundly shape social consciousness (Capital, Vol. I 125–133). Economic structures influence political institutions, legal arrangements and ideological formations. However, Marx also recognized that ruling ideas frequently obscure the true origins of exploitation. False consciousness redirects attention away from structural inequalities toward superficial antagonisms. Within the South African context, migrants frequently become victims of precisely this ideological displacement. Structural failures involving unemployment, corruption, unequal educational opportunities, inadequate industrial expansion and ineffective economic planning are reinterpreted as consequences of immigration. The result is what may appropriately be described as misdirected causality, whereby complex institutional problems are attributed to politically vulnerable communities. John Rawls' theory of justice provides a powerful philosophical critique of this reasoning. Rawls argues that social institutions should distribute opportunities according to principles that impartial rational persons would choose behind a "veil of ignorance" (Rawls, 1999). Under such conditions, individuals would reject social arrangements permitting arbitrary discrimination based upon nationality because no one could guarantee belonging to the privileged group. Consequently, structural inequality cannot morally justify xenophobia. On the contrary, inequality imposes greater responsibilities upon governments to pursue distributive justice while protecting vulnerable populations from becoming scapegoats for institutional shortcomings. From an African philosophical perspective, inequality assumes additional ethical significance. Ubuntu insists that communal flourishing constitutes the measure of authentic development. Persistent deprivation therefore represents not merely economic failure but ethical failure because it weakens the relational foundations of society. Yet Ubuntu simultaneously rejects violence against innocent persons as a response to injustice. Community cannot be restored through exclusion. Essencism develops this argument further by distinguishing between material scarcity and moral scarcity. Material scarcity concerns limited economic resources, whereas moral scarcity refers to the absence of justice, ethical leadership, rational public discourse, and civic responsibility. Societies experiencing material poverty may nevertheless preserve social cohesion where moral resources remain strong. Conversely, economically prosperous societies may descend into violence when moral consciousness deteriorates. Xenophobia demonstrates the interaction between these two forms of scarcity. Economic difficulties become politically explosive only after moral consciousness has weakened sufficiently to permit fellow Africans to be interpreted as legitimate objects of exclusion.

Unemployment, Human Dignity and the Crisis of Development

Unemployment occupies a central position within public discussions of xenophobia because migrants are frequently accused of "taking jobs" from citizens. This argument appears intuitively persuasive, particularly where labour markets remain highly competitive. However, philosophical analysis reveals several conceptual difficulties. First, employment is not a naturally occurring resource whose distribution migrants independently determine. Labour markets are structured through governmental policies, educational systems, industrial development, technological innovation, entrepreneurial activity, and macroeconomic conditions. To attribute unemployment primarily to migrants, therefore, oversimplifies highly complex economic processes. Second, unemployment possesses ethical significance extending beyond income deprivation. Hegel argues that labour contributes fundamentally to human self-realization because productive activity enables individuals to transform both themselves and their environment (Hegel 1977). Meaningful work therefore constitutes an important dimension of human dignity. Where unemployment becomes widespread, citizens naturally experience frustration, diminished self-worth, and political dissatisfaction. These experiences are genuine and deserve serious governmental attention. Nevertheless, they cannot ethically justify violence against migrants whose participation within labour markets frequently reflects entrepreneurial initiative, educational attainment, specialized skills, or willingness to undertake economic risks. Amartya Sen's capability approach further illuminates this issue. Development, Sen argues, consists not merely in increasing national income but in expanding people's substantive freedoms to pursue lives they have reason to value (1999). Employment contributes to such freedoms because it enables individuals to exercise capabilities essential for human flourishing. Migrants likewise pursue these capabilities. Nigerians establishing businesses in South Africa seek the same opportunities for meaningful existence that South African citizens do. Philosophically, their aspirations are not fundamentally different. Both groups participate in the universal human search for dignity through productive activity. The ethical challenge therefore concerns institutional design rather than interpersonal hostility. Governments bear primary responsibility for creating economic conditions capable of expanding opportunities for all residents. Migrants cannot reasonably be expected to compensate for deficiencies in national employment policies.

Essencism interprets unemployment through the broader concept of developmental justice. Genuine development requires social arrangements that enable every person, citizen and lawful migrant alike, to realize his or her essential capacities within conditions of justice and mutual respect. Development policies failing to create such opportunities inevitably generate social tensions susceptible to political manipulation (U.S. Department of State, 2010). Accordingly, unemployment should be addressed through inclusive economic planning, investment in education and innovation, industrial diversification, entrepreneurship support, regional economic cooperation, and accountable governance. Xenophobia offers neither employment nor development. It merely diverts public attention from the structural reforms genuinely required for sustainable prosperity. The Nigerian experience demonstrates this conclusion with particular clarity. Nigerian entrepreneurs have contributed significantly to commerce, education, information technology, healthcare, entertainment, and professional services within South Africa. Nevertheless, systemic hostility and violence against foreign nationals illustrate how socio-economic frustrations are frequently misdirected toward migrants rather than structural failures (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Their presence illustrates that migration frequently generates employment and economic dynamism rather than simply intensifying competition. Philosophical integrity therefore demands empirical nuance rather than ideological generalization. The challenge confronting Africa is not whether migrants should exist but whether political communities possess sufficient ethical maturity to manage diversity through justice instead of fear. Until that question is answered affirmatively, socio-economic difficulties will continue to provide fertile ground for exclusionary politics rather than cooperative development.

Political Causes: Governance, Populism, and the Ethics of State Responsibility

Among the structural causes of xenophobia, political governance occupies a uniquely significant position because the State possesses both the institutional authority to protect human dignity and the capacity to shape public consciousness. Consequently, recurring xenophobic violence raises profound philosophical questions concerning the nature of political responsibility, democratic legitimacy, constitutional morality, and the ethical obligations of government toward all persons residing within its jurisdiction. Political philosophy has consistently maintained that the legitimacy of government is measured not merely by its possession of power but by the justice with which that power is exercised. From Plato's conception of the philosopher-king to Aristotle's doctrine of the common good, from Locke's social contract to Rawls' theory of justice, political authority derives moral legitimacy only when directed toward the protection of human dignity and the promotion of equitable social order. Aristotle argues that the state exists "for the sake of the good life" rather than mere survival (2013). Government therefore possesses an ethical vocation extending beyond administrative efficiency. It must cultivate conditions under which citizens develop virtue while ensuring justice for all members of the political community. Where governments fail to discharge these responsibilities, political frustration gradually accumulates and seeks alternative objects of expression. South Africa's democratic institutions emerged from one of history's most remarkable struggles for justice. Nevertheless, persistent unemployment, corruption, inequality, inadequate public service delivery, housing shortages, and declining public confidence have generated widespread dissatisfaction. Philosophy requires careful distinction between the legitimacy of these grievances and the legitimacy of responses to them. Citizens may possess genuine reasons for criticizing governmental performance without possessing moral justification for directing hostility toward innocent migrants. This distinction becomes especially important when political elites consciously or unconsciously redirect public dissatisfaction toward foreigners. Populist political rhetoric frequently constructs migrants as convenient explanations for structural failures whose actual origins lie within governmental institutions. Such narratives simplify complex socio-economic realities into emotionally persuasive but philosophically deficient explanations.

Hannah Arendt warns that politics becomes morally dangerous whenever governments encourage the transformation of vulnerable minorities into symbolic enemies responsible for collective misfortune (Arendt 1998). Although contemporary South Africa differs fundamentally from totalitarian regimes, Arendt's philosophical insight remains highly relevant. The normalization of exclusionary political discourse gradually erodes the ethical restraints protecting vulnerable communities. Michel Foucault similarly demonstrates that political power operates not only through coercive institutions but also through the production of public discourse (1980). Political language shapes social perception by defining categories of legitimacy, belonging, threat, and exclusion.

Consequently, governmental silence regarding xenophobic narratives may prove almost as damaging as explicit endorsement because silence frequently permits prejudice to acquire apparent legitimacy. From the perspective of African political philosophy, governance possesses fundamentally communal obligations.

Political authority exists to preserve harmony, justice, and collective flourishing rather than merely maintaining territorial sovereignty. Ubuntu conceives leadership as ethical stewardship directed toward reconciliation and social cohesion. Xenophobic violence therefore reflects not merely failures of individual morality but deficiencies in ethical governance itself. Essencism deepens this analysis by introducing the concept of developmental governance. Political authority should be evaluated according to the extent to which institutions facilitate the realization of humanity's essential capacities through justice, transparency, accountability, and inclusive development. Governments that permit vulnerable populations to become scapegoats for institutional shortcomings ultimately undermine both democratic legitimacy and sustainable development. Accordingly, xenophobia should be understood as a political failure before it becomes merely a policing problem. Security interventions may suppress immediate violence, but enduring solutions require governments capable of cultivating constitutional morality, combating corruption, expanding economic opportunities, strengthening civic education, and promoting a Pan-African political consciousness grounded in justice rather than exclusion.

Cultural Causes: Identity, Nationalism, and the Philosophy of Belonging

Culture constitutes one of humanity's most significant achievements because it provides shared meanings through which communities interpret existence, construct identity, and organize social relationships. Yet culture also possesses the capacity to generate exclusion whenever identity becomes defined against perceived outsiders. Xenophobia therefore raises one of the oldest questions in philosophy: What does it mean to belong? Belonging is neither exclusively biological nor exclusively political. It is fundamentally existential. Human beings seek recognition within communities that affirm their dignity and provide moral orientation. Charles Taylor argues that identity develops dialogically through relationships of recognition rather than isolated self-definition (Taylor 1994). Consequently, cultural exclusion threatens not merely social participation but the very conditions under which individuals construct meaningful identities. South Africa's post-apartheid society embodies multiple intersecting identities involving ethnicity, language, nationality, race, class, religion, and regional affiliation. While such diversity enriches democratic life, it also creates opportunities for exclusionary narratives whenever cultural differences become interpreted as political threats. The philosophical challenge lies in distinguishing identity from identitarianism. Identity acknowledges historical and cultural particularity without denying universal human dignity. Identitarianism transforms particular identities into exclusive moral categories determining who deserves recognition and protection. Kwame Anthony Appiah's cosmopolitan philosophy offers significant insight into this distinction. Appiah argues that individuals may legitimately cherish local identities while simultaneously recognizing ethical obligations extending beyond national boundaries (Cosmopolitanism xvii–xxv). Cultural attachment therefore need not produce xenophobia. On the contrary, mature identities become strengthened rather than weakened through respectful engagement with difference. Unfortunately, exclusionary nationalism frequently obscures this possibility. National identity becomes interpreted as a scarce resource allegedly threatened by migration. Foreign Africans consequently appear not as contributors to cultural plurality but as competitors for symbolic ownership of the nation. Benedict Anderson's conception of nations as "imagined communities" further illuminates this phenomenon (Anderson 2006). National communities exist because citizens collectively imagine themselves belonging to common historical narratives. These narratives possess enormous ethical significance because they determine who is perceived as "one of us" and who becomes "the other." The Nigerian experience demonstrates how quickly such narratives become distorted. Despite centuries of shared African history and Nigeria's substantial contribution to South Africa's liberation, contemporary public discourse sometimes reconstructs Nigerians as culturally alien rather than historically connected partners. This reconstruction illustrates the fragility of collective memory where historical education fails to sustain Pan-African consciousness. Ubuntu challenges such exclusion by grounding identity within relational existence. A person becomes fully human through participation in communities characterized by hospitality, reciprocity, compassion, and mutual respect. Hospitality is therefore not peripheral to African ethics but constitutive of authentic humanity itself. Essencism extends Ubuntu by distinguishing between essential identity and accidental identity. Essential identity derives from humanity's intrinsic dignity, whereas accidental identities include nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, profession, or political affiliation. These accidental identities enrich human diversity but cannot legitimately override essential equality. Xenophobia occurs precisely when accidental identities assume greater moral significance than essential humanity. Educational institutions therefore possess extraordinary responsibility for reconstructing cultural consciousness. Philosophy, history, literature, religious studies, and civic education should cultivate appreciation of Africa's shared intellectual heritage while simultaneously

encouraging critical examination of stereotypes, prejudice, and exclusionary nationalism. Without such educational transformation, cultural diversity remains vulnerable to political manipulation.

Developmental Causes: Xenophobia, African Integration, and the Crisis of Continental Development

Perhaps the most neglected dimension of xenophobia concerns its implications for African development. Development is frequently measured through economic indicators including gross domestic product, industrial output, employment rates, technological innovation, and infrastructural expansion. While these indicators remain indispensable, they cannot adequately capture the ethical conditions necessary for sustainable human flourishing. Amartya Sen correctly argues that development fundamentally concerns the expansion of human capabilities rather than merely increasing economic production (1999). Development therefore requires freedom, participation, security, education, health, and opportunities enabling individuals to pursue meaningful lives. Xenophobia directly undermines each of these developmental conditions. Violence against migrants discourages entrepreneurship by increasing investment risk. Labour mobility declines where professionals fear persecution. Academic collaboration weakens as universities become less attractive to international scholars. Tourism suffers because insecurity damages national reputation. Diplomatic tensions complicate regional cooperation. Innovation declines where diverse talents cannot interact freely. From a philosophical standpoint, these consequences reveal that development depends fundamentally upon ethics. Markets require trust. Innovation requires openness. Cooperation requires recognition. None of these conditions can flourish where exclusion becomes normalized. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents one of the most ambitious developmental projects in Africa's history. Its success presupposes the movement of goods, services, investments, professionals, entrepreneurs, researchers, and students across national boundaries. Xenophobia therefore attacks not merely individual migrants but the philosophical foundations of continental integration itself. Kwame Nkrumah anticipated this challenge decades earlier when he argued that Africa's political fragmentation would inevitably weaken its developmental capacity (Nkrumah 1963). Contemporary xenophobia confirms his insight. Fragmentation now extends beyond political institutions into moral consciousness itself. Continental integration cannot succeed where psychological borders prove more rigid than territorial frontiers. Development philosophy further teaches that social trust constitutes an indispensable form of capital. Francis Fukuyama argues that prosperous societies depend upon generalized trust enabling cooperation among strangers (Trust 26–35). Although Fukuyama writes primarily within broader comparative political theory, his insight possesses particular relevance for Africa. Regional development requires trust extending beyond immediate ethnic and national affiliations.

Essencism introduces the concept of ethical development, arguing that genuine progress emerges through the harmonious integration of economic prosperity, institutional justice, moral education, historical consciousness, environmental sustainability, scientific advancement, and communal solidarity. Economic growth detached from ethical development remains fundamentally unstable because it neglects the human relationships upon which all productive activity ultimately depends. Consequently, xenophobia should be recognized as an anti-developmental ideology. It diminishes human capital by excluding skilled professionals, discourages entrepreneurship, weakens continental markets, disrupts educational exchange, fragments diplomatic relations, and erodes the ethical foundations of regional cooperation. Far from protecting national prosperity, xenophobia systematically undermines the very developmental aspirations it claims to defend. The philosophical lesson is therefore unmistakable. Africa's developmental future depends not only upon technological modernization or economic reform but also upon cultivating a continental ethical consciousness grounded in justice, reciprocal recognition, Pan-African solidarity, Ubuntu, and Essencism. Only societies capable of recognizing every African as a participant in a shared moral and developmental destiny can realize the transformative promise embodied in Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area.

Consequences of Xenophobia for Nigeria, South Africa, and African Economic Integration: A Philosophical Evaluation

The Ethical Cost of Xenophobia beyond Violence

The consequences of xenophobia extend far beyond the immediate destruction of lives and property. While public discourse frequently emphasizes fatalities, injuries, displacement, and economic losses, these represent only the visible manifestations of a much deeper philosophical crisis. Violence against fellow Africans simultaneously undermines moral consciousness, weakens democratic legitimacy, fragments

continental solidarity, distorts historical memory, and obstructs Africa's developmental aspirations. Xenophobia is therefore not merely a humanitarian problem but a comprehensive ethical failure whose implications reverberate across political institutions, economic systems, cultural identities, and philosophical understandings of human coexistence. The principal argument advanced in this section is that xenophobia produces consequences that are simultaneously ontological, ethical, epistemological, political, diplomatic, economic, developmental, cultural, and civilizational. These dimensions cannot be adequately understood through empirical observation alone because they concern the normative foundations upon which African societies construct justice, citizenship, solidarity, and collective identity.

Philosophy has consistently maintained that human actions generate consequences extending beyond their immediate occurrence. Aristotle argues that every deliberate action contributes to the formation of moral character (1999). Communities likewise develop collective moral character through repeated social practices. Where violence becomes normalized, societies gradually cultivate dispositions incompatible with justice, compassion, and democratic citizenship. Accordingly, the significance of xenophobia lies not merely in what it destroys physically but in what it gradually transforms ethically. Every attack upon fellow Africans weakens the moral architecture necessary for continental cooperation. Every act of exclusion diminishes Africa's capacity to realize the ideals embodied in Pan-Africanism, the African Renaissance, Agenda 2063, and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Essencism interprets these consequences through the concept of essential interdependence. Human communities exist within networks of reciprocal moral, economic, political, and cultural relationships. Injury inflicted upon one component of this network inevitably reverberates throughout the entire system. Consequently, xenophobia directed against Nigerians ultimately harms South Africa itself, just as it simultaneously weakens Africa's collective developmental future.

Consequences for Nigeria: Human Dignity, National Identity, and the Ethics of International Responsibility

The first and most immediate consequences of xenophobic violence are experienced by Nigerians residing in South Africa. These consequences extend well beyond physical injury. They affect fundamental dimensions of human existence, including dignity, security, identity, psychological well-being, economic opportunity, and moral recognition. Immanuel Kant insists that every rational person possesses intrinsic worth that can never legitimately be subordinated to political convenience or social prejudice (Kant 2012). Violence against Nigerians therefore represents more than criminal misconduct; it constitutes an assault upon the moral principle of human dignity itself. Victims are deprived not merely of property but of the security necessary for meaningful human existence. Existential philosophy further illuminates this experience. Martin Heidegger argues that human beings inhabit the world through relationships of belonging, familiarity, and shared existence (Heidegger 2008). Xenophobia violently interrupts these existential structures by transforming ordinary social spaces into environments characterized by fear, uncertainty, and alienation. Everyday activities working, trading, studying, worshipping, or simply walking through neighbourhoods become accompanied by persistent anxiety regarding personal safety. From an African philosophical perspective, the consequences are even more profound. Ubuntu conceives humanity as fundamentally relational. Violence directed against Nigerians therefore ruptures relationships through which communal existence acquires meaning. Victims experience not merely social exclusion but ethical abandonment by communities expected to embody African solidarity.

The psychological consequences should not be underestimated. Repeated exposure to threats, discrimination, and insecurity generates trauma extending beyond individual victims to families, children, and wider diasporic communities. Fear discourages social participation, weakens entrepreneurial confidence, reduces educational aspirations, and undermines trust in democratic institutions. Economically, Nigerians have suffered extensive destruction of businesses, commercial investments, residential property, and accumulated livelihoods. Many entrepreneurs who invested years establishing successful enterprises have experienced devastating losses through looting and arson. Such losses affect not only individuals but also families in Nigeria dependent upon remittances transmitted from South Africa. From the perspective of development philosophy, these consequences possess broader significance. Remittances contribute to education, healthcare, housing, entrepreneurship, and poverty reduction throughout Nigeria. Xenophobic violence therefore indirectly affects developmental opportunities extending beyond South African territory.

Diplomatically, repeated attacks generate tensions between Nigeria and South Africa. Public pressure within Nigeria frequently demands stronger governmental responses, including diplomatic protests, economic retaliation, or reconsideration of bilateral cooperation. While successive governments have

generally pursued dialogue rather than confrontation, recurring violence inevitably erodes mutual confidence. Philosophically, these diplomatic tensions illustrate Hans Jonas' principle of responsibility. States possess ethical obligations extending beyond narrow national interests because political decisions influence the well-being of persons residing within broader international communities (Jonas 1984). Failure adequately to protect foreign nationals consequently weakens the moral credibility of democratic governance. Nigeria also experiences symbolic consequences. Having played one of the most significant roles in supporting South Africa's liberation struggle, Nigerians understandably perceive xenophobic violence as historical betrayal. This perception affects collective memory and public attitudes toward future continental cooperation. Nevertheless, philosophical reflection requires caution against reciprocal resentment. The ethical failures of particular individuals or groups cannot legitimately justify generalized hostility toward an entire nation. Just as South Africans should not judge Nigerians collectively according to isolated criminal behaviour, Nigerians should similarly distinguish between perpetrators of violence and the broader South African population, many of whom have consistently condemned xenophobia and actively assisted victims. This distinction reflects one of philosophy's oldest principles: justice requires individual rather than collective responsibility.

Consequences for South Africa: Moral Legitimacy, Democratic Credibility, and the Crisis of the Rainbow Nation

If xenophobia inflicts profound harm upon Nigerians, its consequences for South Africa may prove even more significant because they directly affect the ethical foundations of the democratic state itself. South Africa's transition from apartheid remains internationally celebrated as an extraordinary triumph of reconciliation, constitutionalism, and democratic inclusion. Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu inspired global admiration precisely because they demonstrated that societies emerging from systematic injustice could reject revenge in favour of reconciliation and shared humanity. Recurring xenophobic violence introduces a disturbing contradiction into this historical narrative. The constitutional promise of equality becomes philosophically weakened whenever fellow Africans experience repeated exclusion, discrimination, or violence. Democracy derives legitimacy not only from elections but from consistent protection of human dignity irrespective of nationality. Consequently, every xenophobic attack raises questions concerning the relationship between constitutional ideals and lived political reality. Jean-Jacques Rousseau argues that legitimate political authority depends upon the general will directed toward the common good rather than sectional interests (1968). Xenophobia contradicts this principle because it sacrifices justice for vulnerable minorities in response to transient political frustrations. Such sacrifice undermines the ethical unity necessary for democratic legitimacy. Internationally, recurring xenophobic incidents damage South Africa's moral authority within Africa and beyond. A nation historically celebrated as the symbol of successful reconciliation risks becoming associated with intolerance toward fellow Africans. This reputational transformation carries significant diplomatic implications affecting foreign investment, regional leadership, educational cooperation, tourism, and international partnerships.

Economically, South Africa likewise suffers substantial losses. Migrant entrepreneurs contribute employment, taxation, commercial innovation, consumer choice, and investment. Violence discourages future entrepreneurial activity while simultaneously increasing insurance costs, reducing investor confidence, disrupting local markets, and damaging commercial infrastructure. Equally significant are the consequences for civic culture. Hannah Arendt observes that political communities preserve freedom through habits of public responsibility and mutual respect (Arendt 1998). Where violence becomes normalized against vulnerable groups, these civic habits gradually deteriorate. Citizens become increasingly tolerant of exclusion, thereby weakening democratic culture itself. Essencism interprets this process as a decline in ethical civilization. Civilizations should be evaluated not merely according to technological sophistication or constitutional design but according to their capacity to recognize and protect essential human dignity. Xenophobia therefore represents civilizational regression because it elevates fear above justice, prejudice above rationality, and exclusion above solidarity. Most importantly, xenophobia threatens South Africa's historic identity as the "Rainbow Nation." That metaphor symbolizes unity within diversity, reconciliation after oppression, and hope for inclusive democracy. Persistent violence against fellow Africans contradicts these aspirations by narrowing rather than expanding the moral community envisioned during democratic transition. The preservation of South Africa's democratic legacy therefore requires more than effective policing. It requires sustained philosophical reconstruction of public consciousness through education, historical remembrance, civic ethics, constitutional morality, and Pan-African solidarity. Only such

transformation can reconcile democratic ideals with social reality and restore the ethical credibility upon which the nation's international leadership ultimately depends.

Consequences for African Economic Integration: Xenophobia and the Philosophical Contradictions of AfCFTA

Perhaps no consequence of xenophobia is more strategically significant than its impact on the project of African economic integration. The establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents one of the most ambitious political and economic initiatives in the history of modern Africa. It seeks not merely to liberalize trade but to create a continent characterized by economic interdependence, labour mobility, industrial cooperation, technological innovation, and sustainable development. At its philosophical core, however, AfCFTA presupposes something far more fundamental than commercial exchange it presupposes trust among African peoples. Trust is not an economic variable alone; it is an ethical condition of civilization. Every market transaction, diplomatic agreement, educational exchange, scientific collaboration, and entrepreneurial partnership presupposes confidence that persons and institutions will act according to norms of justice, reciprocity, and mutual respect. Xenophobia systematically erodes these ethical foundations. Adam Smith observed that commerce flourishes where confidence exists among participants because economic life depends upon predictable social relationships (*The Wealth of Nations* I.2). Modern development theory reinforces this insight by emphasizing that investment, innovation, and entrepreneurship require environments characterized by security and legal certainty. Where foreign African entrepreneurs fear violence, arbitrary discrimination, or destruction of property, rational economic behaviour inevitably becomes constrained. The Nigerian experience vividly illustrates this contradiction. Nigerian entrepreneurs have invested significantly in commerce, telecommunications, banking, education, entertainment, professional services, hospitality, and small-scale manufacturing within South Africa. Their participation demonstrates that migration often contributes to wealth creation rather than merely intensifying economic competition. Yet repeated xenophobic attacks undermine these contributions by creating uncertainty regarding personal safety and commercial sustainability.

The philosophical contradiction is therefore unmistakable. Africa simultaneously advocates free movement of goods, capital, and services while tolerating hostility toward the very persons whose mobility is indispensable for realizing continental integration. Such inconsistency exposes a profound divergence between institutional aspirations and ethical consciousness. Kwame Nkrumah anticipated this dilemma when he argued that political fragmentation would ultimately weaken Africa's economic development because isolated national interests cannot adequately address continental challenges (Nkrumah 1963). Contemporary xenophobia demonstrates that fragmentation has expanded beyond state institutions into the moral imagination itself. Continental integration cannot succeed where psychological borders remain stronger than geographical frontiers. From the standpoint of political philosophy, AfCFTA should be understood not merely as an economic treaty but as an ethical project requiring reciprocal recognition among African peoples. Economic cooperation presupposes moral cooperation. Consequently, xenophobia is fundamentally incompatible with the philosophical foundations of continental integration. Essencism strengthens this conclusion through the concept of developmental solidarity. Development is never exclusively national because contemporary economies operate through networks of regional and global interdependence. Every African entrepreneur, scholar, physician, engineer, artist, investor, or student contributes not merely to individual prosperity but to the realization of Africa's collective developmental potential. Violence directed against such individuals therefore diminishes the continent's shared capacity for innovation, productivity, and sustainable progress. Accordingly, xenophobia should be recognized as an anti-developmental ideology whose long-term economic costs substantially exceed its immediate political motivations. It undermines precisely those conditions necessary for achieving the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the broader vision of an economically integrated and globally competitive Africa.

Diplomatic and Geopolitical Consequences: The Ethics of International Responsibility.

The diplomatic consequences of xenophobia extend well beyond bilateral relations between Nigeria and South Africa. They raise fundamental questions concerning the ethical foundations of interstate responsibility within Africa and the moral credibility of continental institutions established to promote unity, peace, and development. International relations have frequently been interpreted through realist assumptions emphasizing national interest, strategic competition, and power politics. While realism captures important dimensions of interstate behaviour, it proves insufficient for explaining Africa's liberation struggles and subsequent integration projects. Nigeria's support for South Africa during the anti-apartheid

era cannot be reduced to narrow geopolitical calculations. It reflected a normative commitment to Pan-African justice grounded in shared historical responsibility. Hans Jonas argues that responsibility expands in proportion to one's capacity to influence the well-being of others (Jonas 1984). Applied to international relations, this principle suggests that African states possess obligations extending beyond territorial sovereignty because their policies directly affect the lives of fellow Africans. Protection of migrants therefore becomes not merely a domestic administrative matter but an ethical responsibility arising from continental interdependence. Repeated xenophobic attacks inevitably strain diplomatic relations. Public opinion within Nigeria has frequently demanded stronger governmental responses, including formal protests, economic measures, or reassessment of bilateral cooperation. South African authorities, conversely, have emphasized law enforcement and diplomatic dialogue while condemning violence. Although both governments have generally sought peaceful engagement, the persistence of attacks continually erodes mutual trust. Diplomatic trust resembles interpersonal trust in one crucial respect: once repeatedly undermined, it becomes increasingly difficult to restore. States may continue formal cooperation while privately questioning one another's commitment to shared values. Such deterioration weakens regional organizations including the African Union, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), whose effectiveness depends upon confidence among member states. From the perspective of African political philosophy, interstate relations should embody the communal ethics underlying Pan-Africanism rather than merely reproducing the competitive logic inherited from colonial geopolitics. Xenophobia therefore threatens more than diplomatic protocol. It challenges the moral architecture through which Africa seeks to construct its future.

Philosophical Consequences for Pan-Africanism, Ubuntu, and African Humanism

Among the most profound consequences of xenophobia is its challenge to the philosophical traditions that have historically inspired African unity. Pan-Africanism, Ubuntu, African Humanism, and related traditions emerged from the conviction that Africa's liberation required solidarity transcending colonial boundaries. Xenophobia appears to contradict this foundational conviction by redefining fellow Africans as outsiders rather than partners in a common historical enterprise. Pan-Africanism has never been merely a political programme. It is fundamentally a moral philosophy affirming that Africa's diverse peoples share interconnected destinies shaped by common histories of colonialism, exploitation, resistance, and aspiration. Thinkers such as Edward Blyden, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Nelson Mandela consistently emphasized that political independence without continental solidarity would remain incomplete. The Nigerian experience exposes the fragility of this vision where historical consciousness declines. Nigeria's extensive sacrifices during South Africa's liberation struggle represented Pan-Africanism in practice rather than theory. Xenophobic violence therefore acquires symbolic significance because it appears to negate one of the most important ethical achievements in modern African history.

Ubuntu similarly suffers profound philosophical challenges. The principle that "a person is a person through other persons" presupposes openness toward human relationships grounded in mutual dignity, compassion, and reciprocity. Xenophobia reverses this ethical orientation by transforming fellow Africans into objects of suspicion and exclusion. The violence directed against migrants therefore represents not simply a violation of Ubuntu but its practical negation. African Humanism likewise affirms the intrinsic worth of every person irrespective of ethnic, religious, or national differences.

This tradition insists that humanity constitutes the primary criterion of moral judgment. National identity remains important, but it cannot supersede universal human dignity. Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of the other provides valuable philosophical support for these African traditions. Levinas argues that ethics originates in the encounter with another person's vulnerability, which imposes responsibility prior to calculation of personal advantage (Levinas 1969). Xenophobia fundamentally rejects this ethical insight by interpreting vulnerability as danger rather than moral appeal. Consequently, the philosophical crisis produced by xenophobia extends beyond migration policy. It concerns the future of African moral thought itself. If Pan-Africanism, Ubuntu, and African Humanism cannot effectively shape contemporary political consciousness, then Africa risks possessing rich philosophical traditions whose practical influence steadily diminishes. Essencism responds to this challenge by proposing a synthesis of these traditions within a broader ontological framework. Humanity's essential nature establishes the ultimate foundation of justice, while historical reciprocity, democratic responsibility, and developmental solidarity provide the practical means through which this essential humanity is realized in political life. In this way, Essencism seeks not merely to criticize xenophobia but to reconstruct the philosophical consciousness necessary for overcoming it. The Nigerian experience thus becomes more than a bilateral historical episode. It emerges as a decisive

philosophical test of whether Africa can transform the ideals of Pan-Africanism, Ubuntu, and African Humanism from commemorative rhetoric into enduring ethical practice. The answer to this question will significantly determine the moral trajectory of the African continent throughout the twenty-first century.

An Essencist Evaluation of the Future of African Unity and Continental Humanism

The philosophical analyses undertaken throughout this study converge upon a single conclusion: xenophobia represents one of the greatest ethical and developmental contradictions confronting twenty-first-century Africa. It is neither merely an immigration problem nor solely a consequence of unemployment, poverty, criminality, or weak governance. Rather, it is fundamentally a crisis of African consciousness, a crisis arising from the disjunction between political liberation and moral transformation. Consequently, any enduring solution must transcend administrative, economic, or legal reforms and proceed toward the reconstruction of the ethical foundations of African civilization. The central contention of this paper has been that the Nigerian experience in South Africa provides a unique philosophical lens through which the broader challenges of African unity may be critically interrogated. Nigeria's historical sacrifices during the anti-apartheid struggle symbolized the highest ideals of Pan-African solidarity, historical reciprocity, and continental responsibility. The subsequent xenophobic attacks against Nigerians therefore reveal a tragic paradox: a continent liberated through solidarity now increasingly risks fragmentation through exclusion. This contradiction demonstrates that political independence, while historically indispensable, remains morally incomplete unless accompanied by sustained ethical education, historical consciousness, and democratic responsibility. From the standpoint of classical philosophy, Aristotle's conception of justice reminds us that every political community exists for the realization of the common good (1996). Xenophobia subverts this objective by replacing distributive justice with collective prejudice and by permitting innocent persons to bear responsibility for structural failures that originate elsewhere. Kant's categorical imperative similarly establishes that every human being possesses intrinsic dignity that cannot legitimately be sacrificed for political convenience or economic frustration (Kant 2012). Levinas deepens this insight by insisting that ethical responsibility begins with recognition of the vulnerability of the Other (Levinas 1969). Violence against fellow Africans therefore represents not merely political failure but a profound denial of humanity itself. African philosophy reinforces these universal principles through Ubuntu, Pan-Africanism, and African Humanism. Ubuntu affirms that humanity is relational; Pan-Africanism asserts that Africa's liberation and development are inseparable from continental solidarity; African Humanism maintains that the intrinsic worth of the person precedes political or national distinctions.

Xenophobia negates each of these philosophical traditions because it substitutes fear for fraternity, exclusion for hospitality, and suspicion for mutual recognition. It is at this point that Essencism offers its most significant theoretical contribution. Essencism begins from the ontological proposition that every human being possesses an intrinsic essence that transcends nationality, ethnicity, race, language, religion, gender, and every other accidental characteristic. This shared essence constitutes the universal foundation of dignity, justice, and moral obligation. Consequently, political communities should organize their institutions, educational systems, economic policies, and diplomatic relations in ways that promote the realization of this essential humanity rather than the protection of exclusionary identities. Within this framework, the future of African unity depends upon five interconnected philosophical imperatives. First, Africa must cultivate essential recognition, whereby every African is acknowledged primarily as a bearer of human dignity before being identified by nationality or ethnicity. Such recognition transforms coexistence from mere political tolerance into genuine ethical solidarity. Second, Africa must recover historical consciousness. Collective memory concerning the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles should become a permanent component of educational curricula and civic formation. Historical gratitude is not sentimental nostalgia; it is an ethical resource that sustains reciprocity and continental responsibility. Third, African democracies must embrace ethical citizenship. Constitutional democracy should be understood not merely as electoral participation but as a moral commitment to justice, inclusion, accountability, and the protection of vulnerable persons irrespective of national origin. Fourth, governments must pursue developmental justice by addressing the structural conditions that frequently generate xenophobic tensions, including unemployment, inequality, corruption, inadequate education, and poverty. Migrants should never become substitutes for governmental accountability. Finally, Africa must embrace continental humanism, a philosophical orientation integrating Pan-Africanism, Ubuntu, African Humanism, and Essencism into a coherent ethical vision capable of guiding continental integration under Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Continental integration cannot be sustained by economic agreements alone; it requires a corresponding moral community founded upon reciprocal trust, justice, and shared destiny.

The Nigerian experience therefore offers Africa an enduring philosophical lesson. It demonstrates that nations, like individuals, are judged not merely by the prosperity they achieve or the constitutions they enact, but by the manner in which they recognize and protect the dignity of others. The true measure of African civilization will ultimately be determined not by its mineral wealth, technological advancement, or geopolitical influence, but by its capacity to transform historical solidarity into enduring ethical practice. Accordingly, the future of Africa depends upon replacing the politics of exclusion with the ethics of coexistence, the logic of fear with the rationality of justice, and fragmented nationalism with an integrated continental humanism. Only through such philosophical reconstruction can Africa fulfil the moral promise of its liberation and secure a peaceful, prosperous, and genuinely united future.

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the phenomenon of xenophobia and intra-African conflicts through a philosophical analysis of the Nigerian experience in South Africa. Departing from purely sociological, economic, and political explanations, the study has argued that xenophobia is fundamentally an ethical, ontological, epistemological, developmental, and political crisis rooted in the failure to reconcile democratic citizenship with African solidarity. It has demonstrated that recurring attacks against Nigerians cannot be adequately understood without reference to the historical role played by Nigeria in the liberation of South Africa, the ethical demands of historical reciprocity, and the broader philosophical ideals of justice, recognition, and Pan-Africanism. The analysis has further established that the causes of xenophobia are multidimensional, encompassing socio-economic inequalities, unemployment, weak governance, exclusionary nationalism, cultural misrepresentation, historical amnesia, and developmental failures. Yet these structural conditions become socially destructive only when accompanied by a crisis of moral consciousness that permits fellow Africans to be perceived as threats rather than partners in a shared historical and developmental project. Xenophobia therefore represents not simply a failure of public policy but a failure of philosophical imagination. The paper has also demonstrated that the consequences of xenophobia extend beyond individual victims to encompass diplomatic relations, regional stability, continental economic integration, democratic legitimacy, and the credibility of African philosophical traditions such as Ubuntu and Pan-Africanism. Violence directed against Nigerians weakens Nigeria–South Africa relations, undermines investor confidence, disrupts labour mobility, discourages entrepreneurship, erodes trust necessary for AfCFTA, and compromises Africa's aspiration toward continental unity under Agenda 2063. Through the theoretical lens of Essencism, this study has advanced the argument that sustainable peace and development require the recognition of humanity's essential dignity as the primary foundation of political organization. Nationality, ethnicity, race, language, and religion remain important dimensions of cultural identity but cannot legitimately supersede the ontological equality of all human beings. The future of Africa therefore depends upon reconstructing ethical consciousness through philosophical education, historical remembrance, democratic responsibility, developmental justice, and continental humanism. Ultimately, the Nigerian lessons in South Africa remind the African continent that political liberation without moral transformation remains incomplete. The struggle against colonialism and apartheid achieved territorial freedom; the struggle against xenophobia must achieve ethical freedom. Only when Africans consistently recognize one another as equal participants in a common moral destiny will the ideals of Pan-Africanism, Ubuntu, democracy, and sustainable development attain their fullest realization. In this sense, overcoming xenophobia is not merely a political necessity but a philosophical imperative for the twenty-first-century African Renaissance.

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