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Black South African intellectuals went from pan-Africanism to insular afrophobia

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The rise of afrophobia in South Africa obscures the Apartheid-era intellectual history that connected with anticolonial nationalist ideologies and struggles elsewhere in the continent. But what is the extent today of a South African exceptionalism? Moses E. Ochonu explores contradictions in the country simultaneously facing towards and away from Africa, and how this feeds an afrophobic rhetoric with violent consequences.

Contrary to popular assumptions, South Africa's afrophobia, a **distinct iteration** of xenophobia, is a recent phenomenon and a departure from the arc of South African intellectual history. Before and during the Apartheid era, the most consequential Black South African ideas were Africa-facing. And yet, since 1994, South Africa has been wracked by **several incidents** of afrophobic violence, most recently occurring in 2020.

In my recent **article**, I historicise South African afrophobia, analysing it in both local and African continental contexts. A **survey** of Black South African nationalist intellectuals shows that they drew upon and contributed to the pan-African ideas circulating in Africa and its diaspora from the early to the mid-twentieth century. Black intellectuals also connected to the anticolonial nationalist ideologies and struggles being implemented and debated in Africa and the diaspora.

Major Black South African thinkers such as Magesa Fuze, Pixely Ka Isaka Seme and, later, Anton Lembede, Jordan Ngubane and others embraced a pan-African outlook out of necessity. They needed to adopt a cosmopolitan pan-African political worldview that connected to the ideological and anticolonial fervour in the rest of the continent. Unlike other African colonial settings where there was an existing colonial nation-state, South Africa was **conceived as a state** for Whites only. The absence of a national frame of reference compelled Black South African intellectuals to develop a nationalist aspiration that rejected both White supremacy and Black nativism, with pan-Africanism a clear alternative.

The implementation of Apartheid in the 1950s and beyond only intensified the determination of Black South African elites to look north of the Limpopo River for inspiration and solidarity. However, even in the pre-Apartheid and Apartheid periods, contradictions between the pan-African and domestic political struggles were visible. **Some Black intellectuals** rejected pan-Africanism altogether and instead constructed their identities and politics in terms of their engagement with the British Empire and the legal openings it afforded them for seeking rights and protections.

Furthermore, local struggles against the burdens of South Africa's settler colonialism, and later Apartheid, made a consistent pan-African commitment difficult for Black activists. Using segregationist rhetoric and policies, Apartheid ideologues worked to isolate Black South Africans from the rest of the continent, fearing that other Africans would radicalise them. While White supremacist schemes of isolation did not succeed fully, over time they created in some Black South African intellectuals a sense of South African political exceptionalism that has persisted to date, informing some of the current afrophobia.

It did not help that, elsewhere in the continent, countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Uganda and Ivory Coast **succumbed to afrophobia** and xenophobia before and after independence. Postcolonial intra-African conflicts undermined pan-African solidarity and deepened South Africa's isolation. They also reinforced the sense among some Black South Africans that theirs is an exceptional nation that just happens to be located in Africa's geographic borders.

The resulting image of South Africa as a besieged fortress of modernity in an allegedly backward continent persists. It fuels the determination of Black South African elites to protect their country from what they regard as the burdens and corrupting influences of African migrants and to preserve **exceptionalism's inherited façade**.

African renaissance and the ANC

In the scholarly and popular effort to understand current South African Afrophobia, this history is often ignored in favour of arguments about the self-serving political manipulations of Black politicians, especially those in the dominant African National Congress (ANC) governing party.

This explanation is unsatisfactory because, in the first place, the **most strident xenophobic voices**, such as the Zulu king, Goodwill Zwelithini, and the **notoriously nativist** Herman Mashaba, have been those excluded by the ANC from the dominant political space.

Furthermore, areas that have seen most the afrophobic attacks are neighbourhoods where the ANC has faced a backlash from a displaced opposition, such as Alexandra Township, the squatter camps on the East Rand, townships outside of Cape Town, **urban KwaZulu Natal**, Mpumalanga townships, and others, while several ANC strongholds have seen little or no such violence.

What then are the main causes of the current Afrophobia, and how do they connect to South Africa's history?

It is true that Black political leaders and intellectuals find the **scapegoating** of African 'foreigners' politically useful. But it is more productive to inquire into the ideological foundations, bureaucratic practices, and rhetorical idioms they are deploying to pursue this afrophobic agenda. The roots of the problem lay partly in Apartheid statecraft and rhetoric, which understood 'foreign' Africans only in terms of their labour. The Apartheid regime proceeded from this understanding to put in place one of the **strictest and most racist** immigration systems in the world to keep out Africans deemed a burden or a source of trouble.

Achille Mbembe has **argued** that the post-Apartheid ultra-nationalist immigration system in South Africa and the rhetoric that produced it are carryovers from the Apartheid system. The labour imperative may be gone, but the racist elements have been maintained and strengthened.

Some South African intellectuals and politicians also use afrophobia to exact historical redress or revenge for the Apartheid-era practice of recruiting token 'foreign' Africans from neighbouring countries into some South African institutions. I encountered this rhetoric of post-Apartheid redress firsthand during the 2019 **University of Texas Africa Conference**. An administrator from the University of South Africa, UNISA, who attended the conference lectured a group of us on how what the rest of Africa understood as the systematic exclusion of other Africans from South African institutions was necessary to undo and atone for that Apartheid-era practice.

The struggle of South Africans to define themselves in relation to other Africans has endured. The internalised idea of South African exceptionalism aside, Black South Africans have historically struggled to find the appropriate way to engage the rest of the continent. They moved at different times between fully-fledged pan-Africanism, situational pan-Africanism and full-blown isolationism. Former President Thabo Mbeki revived the old philosophy of **African renaissance**, but it gained little traction and was dismantled when he left office. African renaissance, moreover, papered over the simultaneous rise of Afrophobia, which doomed it.

More crucially, African renaissance was conceived strategically as a platform to harness African goodwill towards South Africa's continental and global aspirations and not as a genuine effort to promote Africa's collective revival. A bigger problem is that the Black South African political elite perceives South Africa's relations with the rest of the continent in purely utilitarian terms: what Africa can do for South Africa. There is hardly a reciprocal articulation of what South Africa can do for Africa. Nor is there an appreciation of what Africa has already done for South Africa.

The ambivalence of simultaneously facing towards and away from Africa has created a contradictory situation in which even as South African progressive voices speak of continental solidarity, many Black South Africans, as Political Scientist Adekeye Adebajo puts it, **talk about the rest of the continent** as though they are not Africans. Afrophobia, as a political rhetoric and a program of violent retribution, thrives in this contradiction.

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Moses E. Ochonu is Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair in History and Professor of African History at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA. He is the author of several books including 'Colonial Meltdown: Northern Nigeria in the Great Depression' and the editor of 'Entrepreneurship in Africa: A Historical Approach'. He was a two-time winner of the fellowship of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and a Harry Frank Guggenheim fellow.