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Reclamation of the Social Construction of “Bantuness”: The Politics of Identity and Xenophobia.

I would like to extend my words of appreciation to Prof. Kumalo, and the school of Religion, Philosophy and Classics for your kind invitation to have me on this beautiful campus of Pietermaritzburg. Prof Kumalo has been a brother to me, an academic sparring partner, and has helped me construct ideas and see the world from different set of lenses. Brother, I enjoy being around you and family.

My appreciations go as well to Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development Research, especially to Rev Joey and to all the staff for your radical hospitality.

I also thank all of you who are here this afternoon, faculty, students and members of the community at large. I take this opportunity to thank as well Dr. Vanessa Govender who has flown with me all the way from Johannesburg. To you all, thanks for being here to rationalize with me in one of the pressing issues facing South Africa today, Xenophobia and in particular Afro-phobia. Please allow me to suggest that we take few seconds to remember Emmanuel Sithole and with him all the victims of Afro-phobia in this country and around the world.

I am Dr. Mafuta. I am an American, born in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I am a Bantu and I am a kwere kwere, or may be to be politically correct, I'd better say that I was once called a “Kwere Kwere” in South Africa.

Friends, I use “Kwere Kwere” in its dense meaning of fear and rejection of the “other.” Kwere Kwere connotes the dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion in the social construction of South African Identity.

Think about this. In 1992, two years before the transition of power to the Democratic South Africa, I was a student at Wits University in Johannesburg and I was living at Braamfontein Center, which is a University residence. By at large, my South African roommate, Hope Mabaso and I were getting along well. Of course, I didn't agree all the time with what he was doing. Neither did he agree with me in every way. But at least I thought we were friends.

One day, out of the blue, Hope came back from his home in Jabavu, Soweto, and was angry at me for some reasons. I couldn't figure out what was going on. As far as I know, I didn't recall making any advance to his girlfriend or did something to put him in that state of mind.

Yet he was very angry at me. Looking at me in the eyes, he said these grinning words “you Congolese come here in our country, you take our girlfriends, you take our jobs, you take our bursaries, why don't you go back home to your own country and live there? Friends, Does this sound familiar?

This is my roommate, a university student. We have known each other for over a year. Yet, in his mind, I was “the other” who did not belong to the South African collective identity. I was a

typification, Kwere Kwere, a foreigner, “the other “who should have been excluded in the South African collective social identity.

Although my roommate’s words did not turn to physical violence, yet, there was in him anger, rejection, fear of the other that could turn and do turn to the level of violence we saw in 2008 and again this year. The same anger creates as well an anti-immigrant sentiment that is softly perpetuated in board rooms and Institutions of higher education around the country.

Having experienced and observed all of the above, I argue that to tackle Xenophobia and in particular Afro-phobia (because most of the violence has been perpetuated towards Africans who are from north of Limpopo), in the post-apartheid, post –colonial south Africa, one has to deconstruct the pathological “Bantuness” that Apartheid invented with its politics of inclusion and exclusion and re-appropriate it as a new.

In this endeavour, churches in South Africa have the moral imperative to proclaim the ethics of love, reconciliation and forgiveness. Churches should mobilize their prophetic expediency, “Thou said the Lord “and remind South Africa as a whole that to one much is given, much is expected. South Africa is a regional power and it should not relinquish to its moral responsibility.

Let me start by putting things within the historical perspective of the construction of the South African collective identity.

By all accounts, despite the great vision of the founding fathers of the south African National Congress which later became the ANC, John Dube, Salomon Plaatje, Pixley Seme, Walter Rubusana and many others, who envisioned a collective identity for all South Africans, and those who live in it, the construction of the south African identity has been on the politics of inclusion and exclusion.

In 1910, for example, when the Union of South Africa was created, it was a nation built on the grounds of racial exclusion and inclusion with competing national projects for white and blacks.¹ Afrikaner leaders such as Louis Botha and Jan Smuts wanted a nation comprised exclusively of Afrikaners and English. Blacks were excluded.²

Other Afrikaner leaders such as Malan and Hertzog, from their part, wanted an exclusive nation of Afrikaners only. In fact, in 1913 both Malan and Hertzog formed the National Party that they claimed “represented the interests of a distinct Afrikaner nation.”³

This policy of exclusion and inclusion prompted black leaders to seek an alternative of their own. Yet, they too were divided on how to build it. While the ANC promoted a non-racial, non-exclusive nation, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) was of the belief that South Africans belonged only to the African people. To the PAC, “the multi-racial character of the South African nation was a contributing factor to the denigration of African identity and promoted a European heritage and tradition”.⁴

When the National Party came to power in 1948, they wasted no time to legislate the politics of inclusion and exclusion. They called it “separate development.” What this entailed was to create racial and ethnic typifications with pathological connotations. They used what was known as “the pencil test “to create racial typifications, Blacks, coloured, Indians and whites. Because they

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Fatton, 1986

couldn't call blacks "Afrikans", a typification that could have jeopardized their own naming as "Afrikaners" They called blacks at times as "Bantu".

Bantu had come to represent a racial category of people who lived in the periphery; Bantu incarnated the very referential of Apartheid as a social and racial class that was divinely predetermined to serve the white master. To this aim, they invented Bantu laws, Bantu education and many forms of pathological connotation to Bantu.

Bantu didn't represent a people from which the Ngunis came from. Bantu didn't represent a people who migrated around one thousand BC from lake Thad and later from the basin of the democratic republic of the Congo south to the actual Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, and south Africa, carrying the very same DNA and speaking over 500 different languages. Scholars such Alexis Kagame, in the "*Philosophie Bantu Comparee*;" Joseph Greenburg, in "*Languages of Africa*;" Guthrie in "*Bantu Origins: A tentative new Hypothesis*," Jared Diamond in his well acclaimed book, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies*, those scholars bring to light the commonality of the Bantu people, their culture, languages and traditions.

They all agree that there was migratory movement from North to South for the Bantu in the search of better pasture. They all agree that similarity in languages was the common thread among these people.

Do you know for example that the Zulu words "mpe Zulu" have the same meaning in Kikongo, one of the languages spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Mpe Zulu in Zulu and "Zulu" in Kikongo connote the same idea of a distant cosmos.

Bantu carries an affluent tradition, culture and cosmogony that in the eyes of the Afrikaners were not existent. To the Afrikaners, Bantu was a typification that fitted their narrative of inclusion and exclusion. They twisted it and turned it pathological to the point it was a shame to be called a Bantu.

With the politics of inclusion and exclusion that lasted 50 years, when the Government of National Unity (GNU) came to power in 1994, they were preoccupied with building a single overarching national identity where racial and ethnic group identities would have weakened or receded all together.

They wanted "a political symbol of unity among the diverse people of South Africa."⁵ They coined it, "a rainbow nation."⁶ They organized government campaigns such as "*Simunye*" (we are one) and "*Masakhane*" (working together) to promote the "rainbow nation." Yet this endeavour turned out to be an uphill battle that in the eyes of many observers, failed to materialize.⁷

What transpires, however, in the current and post- apartheid South Africa, is a trend whereby one doesn't need to pursue, at any cost, the singularity of an overarching national identity. Rather allow multiple identities to emerge as typifications or particularizations of the collective national identity.

⁵ Valerie Moller, Helga Dickow, Mari Harris, South Africa's "Rainbow People," National Pride and Happiness, Rhodes University, Grahamstown.

⁶ It is believed that Bishop Desmond Tutu was the first to use the term when he preached in the town of Tromso, Norway on Dec 5, 1991. In his sermon he said, "At home in South Africa I have sometimes said in big meetings where you have black and white together: Raise your hands!" Then I've said: "Move your hands," and I've said: "look at your hands- different colours representing different people. You are the rainbow people of God." And God, remember the rainbow people in the Bible is the sign of peace. The rainbow is the sign of prosperity. We want peace, prosperity and justice and we can have it when all people of God, the rainbow people of God, work together.

⁷ M.F Ramutsidela, National Identity in South Africa: The search for Harmony, *Geo Journal*, Vol 3, No1 (Sept 1997), pp99-110

In other words, sub-group identities/typifications such as race or ethnicity in South Africa have been all along processes of the superordinate/overarching national identity, and had never receded or weakened. What the current and post-apartheid South Africa gives them, however, is a second look, a new optic that might have escaped the eyes of many identity construction observers.

Thus, a new society is emerging whereby more and more South Africans identify themselves with their racial and ethnic background while at the same time claim a national identity. In this new society, racial assertions such as Afrikaner, Coloured, Black, Indians and for that sake “Bantu” no longer signify antagonistic social positions as they once did under Apartheid.⁸

The writings of emerging South African scholars such as Ivor Chipkin, Zimitri Erasmus, Kate Philip, Sarah Nuttall, Achilles Mbembe, and Abulkader Ayob represent this new trend of thoughts.

These scholars argue that the creation of the democratic South Africa at the time of globalization and information technology forces one to take into account the multiplicity of identities and to re-imagine the notion of belonging.

They observe a trend into which a collective consciousness of belonging transcends nation states, thus leading citizens to claim multiple identities within the configuration of imagined communities. Ivor Chipkin, for example, in his quest to delineate a South African identity asks a problematic question, “Do South Africans Exist?”⁹ By this question, Chipkin challenges the very essence of the South African nationalism and the quest for belonging in the broader sense of African nationalism.

Chipkin argues that identity is constructed in the political imagination of communities through nationalist struggles. National identity, to him, is an elusive concept that might or might not be central in determining a sense of belonging. Therefore, he wonders whether it is even necessary to spend time constructing an overarching identity in South Africa when people have lost sense of what really brings them together.

Following Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, Chipkin suggests, however, that the essence of democratic values in *liberte*, *egalite* and *fraternite*, is conducive to the emergence of a nation as single entity where citizens could claim a collective consciousness that unites them, a feeling of belonging as opposed to a legal boundary.¹⁰

In his work on social mobility in the city of Roodepoort, Johannesburg, Chipkin gives an empirical plausibility in arguing that the post-colonial, post-Apartheid South Africa creates an environment where identity formation is being constructed no longer on bonds of inclusion and exclusion but on what he calls “common world.”¹¹

In this sense, social categories of race or ethnicities do not dissipate. But what has changed, according to Chipkin, is the assertion of being “Afrikaner,” or “Coloured,” or Black, or “Indian.” Those assertions no longer signify antagonistic social positions as they once did under Apartheid.¹² A new society is emerging in the present post-Apartheid South Africa, not in the sense of non-racial per se, but a new imagined community that is yet to be defined.

⁸ Chipkin, “Middle Class in Roodepoort,” 83

⁹ Chipkin, *Do South Africans Exist? Nationalism, Democracy and the Identity of “the people,”* 2.

¹⁰ Ibid, 13.

¹¹ Chipkin, “Middle Class in Roodepoort, Capitalism and Social Change in South Africa,” 83.

¹² Ibid.

Parallel to Chipkin, Erasmus, in her efforts to counter the racialization category of the stratified South Africa, recommends that South Africans move beyond race categories by acknowledging race as normative and not as pathological. According to her, this acknowledgement allows one to move beyond denial and victimhood towards what she calls “ownership of complicity with racialized relations of power.”¹³

Erasmus argues that one cannot ignore or leave behind race categories, or become reductionist by embracing fatalistically racialized identities. One, however, should engage race and acknowledge the woundedness (shame, anger, guilt, hurt, humiliation, betrayal, fear, resentment) that comes with it.¹⁴ Erasmus urges that racial identities be understood as relational rather than hierarchical. To do this, she contends, requires an internal challenge and compassion to understand one’s inner individual racism and that of others.

Erasmus is adamant that the post-colonial, post-Apartheid era mitigates racialized identities that Apartheid invented. But to move beyond the yoke of race, and construct racial identities as relational one should have the courage to confront it head on.¹⁵ Churches certainly play a non-negligible role in this endeavour. They have the ability to foster an ethical environment where love, justice, reconciliation and care can deconstruct power imbalances in the society.

This new optic in the construction of the South African collective identity suggests to me that in order to curb afro-phobia, we need to de-apartheid our mind, we need to re-appropriate Bantuness and acknowledge it as normative.

In other words, what I do not recommend is that Bantu be reclaimed or be re-appropriated on the grounds of common humanity (we are all humans) or on the grounds of “Africaness” (we are all Africans), not even on the grounds of Ubuntu, while all of this have values but I suggest that we re-appropriate Bantuness on the grounds of what I call “Philia- delphos” brotherhood or brotherness. This makes more sense to me and brings us closer as brothers and sisters who have the same origin and the same DNA.

In this sense, someone who is, for example, from Mozambique, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Angola, Thad, the Congo, Nigeria, this person carries the very same DNA of *Bantuness* with his South African brothers and sisters. Unless, I turn to a monster to murder my own brother, until then I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper.

Don’t misunderstand me, I get the economics of sharing scarce resources, I get the calculus of competition, I get the politics of legal and illegal immigrations , I get the politics discourse of politicians who claimed that south Africa hasn’t done much to explain the role others countries played during the *a luta continua* (struggle) ,

But I believe beyond these technicalities, beyond those rhetoric, the construction of South African collective identity should be on the regime of a common world, not on the inclusion and exclusion. Unless we reclaim our Bantuness and turn it to healthy connotation, we run the risk seven years down the road to face the very same afro-phobia that we are experiencing today.

In the USA, where I have been living the last 20 years, there are 12 million undocumented immigrants. One would think that the mighty USA with its military power and technology could curve the influx of illegal immigrants, yet immigration has always been a night mare for both

¹³ Erasmus, “Undoing the Yoke of “Race” in *Religion and Society*, 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 89.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 92.

democrats and republicans administrations. South Africa is not unique in the influx of immigrants. But South Africa and for that matter African countries are peculiar in their tendency to turn to extreme violence as a way of addressing the “kwere kwere” syndrome.

I believe when the moral compass of the society is threatened, churches have the divine order to mobilize its prophetic expediency and proclaim a gospel of acceptance, tolerance and love. Churches should not be caught up in the lethargic state of mind and sit on the side walk while brothers and sisters are killing each other.

Paul Verryn, might be a controversial figure in the South African religious politics, or even be considered as the villain, but I think his actions to open the church and offer radical hospitality to thousands of tyranny –torn Zimbabwe when no one else in South Africa would protect them, speak louder than any church statement or marches.

Krista’s book, “Sanctuary: How an Inner-City Church spilled onto a Sidewalk” gives a poignant testimony on how we can get caught up in the complexities of city council legislations, church laws and disciplines while those in need are right there in our door steps.

The fear of “the other”, the rejection of the other, the anger towards the other who we think should not be included in the South African collective identity could only be overcome when we re-appropriate our Bantuness and when we love out loud. Violence does not cast our fear, but love eradicates hate.

I wanted to stay away from the biblical narrative, but I couldn’t resist these beautiful words of John.

In I John 4: 16-20.

This is not an emotive love, this is not a sentimental love or happy feeling love, this is love under which we based our social ethic of moral action and moral engagement, this is love that prompts us to do right because we know it is right. This is love that says, I love you not because of what it means to you but it means to me. This is love that brings personal intimacy with “the other” and cast out fear.

This is the kind of love that overcomes hate, prejudice, fear and ignorance. This is the kind of love we need in South Africa.

May we be open up to it.

I thank you for your prompt attention.