

Xenophobia in South Africa: The Personal Account of a Sweet-footed African

This is an excerpt from *A Sweet Footed African: James Jibraeel Alhaji*
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I am a Cameroonian immigrant. I live in Cape Town. I have been in South Africa for almost 20 years. When some years ago there were outbreaks of violence here and there in South Africa against black immigrants from other African countries – those usually referred in most *makwerekwere* –, many journalists, along with academics and students came knocking to interview me. The questions they asked, however deep they tried to be, always left me thirsty and hungry, wishing they had gone this way or that way, explored this or that theme, dug deep, or followed a particular line of enquiry to a crescendo that did not always serve the purpose of overly simplifying the issues or my situation.

They would stop only when I was warming up to a serious conversation, warming up with surging questions of my own. I detested the tendency to see us, a priori, as a problem and the resistance, even by those who should know better, to see the extent to which we were more of a solution than an encumbrance.

Sometimes I followed the accounts of their interviews with me and other immigrants on radio or as articles in newspapers and on blogs. Although I have never read the more scholarly accounts in theses and dissertations written by students, or in books and journal articles by interested academics posing as migration experts, I have often wondered why very few of them have ever treated me as if I had a life prior to my arrival in South Africa.

Few want to know how I came to be here. They imagine and impose a reason on me for coming to this country, often in contradiction to what I tell them if they bother to ask. And, even as they are interested in my life in South Africa, their questions often leave me perplexed as to why they frame things in such terms as not to do justice to the fullness of my life

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and experiences as an immigrant in their beloved country. Many suppose that I am here to stay, that I would do everything to remain in South Africa, and that the country I come from is not worthy of modern human life, which is why – they suppose rather than ask me – I am running away, and have taken refuge – illegally, they love to insist – in South Africa, in my desperate quest for greener pastures. Nothing I say, or wish I could say in the interest of nuance, seems to matter in the face of such arrogant and admittedly, it must be said, ignorant accounts.

My frustrations with what I read and hear have pushed me to the conclusion that South Africans would perhaps understand and relate with much more accommodation if they were to get to know us, *amakwerekwere*, in our wholeness as human beings – as people composed of flesh and blood, people shaped and humbled by the highs and lows, whims and caprices of human existence – and not simply as statistics of inconvenience or as odd strings of phrases, often quoted out of context, to illustrate news stories by journalists in a hurry to meet deadlines. Sometimes the impression is strong in me, very strong indeed, that some are reluctant to allow such a thing as reality to stand in the way of a good story. Sensationalism craved to the detriment of the complex messiness and intricate interconnections of the everyday lives of South Africans and *amakwerekwere* in urban South Africa.

As I say, I haven't read anything academic, not being one myself, so I don't know how better or worse off they are

from journalists, in how they, in their scholarliness, capture our lives and predicaments as black African immigrants in South Africa. Whether or not they are less obsessed with documenting how best the South African state and people could control the influx of undesired immigrants flocking in like locusts to dissipate their industrialised economy – the leading economy in Africa, as they often stress, refusing as much as possible to give giant competitors like Nigeria (poised to overtake South Africa to become the leading economy in Africa in a few years) the slimmest of chances –, spread dangerous diseases and enshrine crime, chaos and foreboding, such academic accounts, like their counterparts furnished by journalists and mouthpieces of the various shades of the Rainbow, stand to benefit from more profound knowledge of *amakwerekwere* as flesh and blood steeped in histories, both personal and collective. If the intention and determination of the chroniclers of daily life in South Africa are to control *amakwerekwere* – real or imagined – what can a fly like me do to stop an almighty bulldozer elephant pregnant with zeal? But I believe that by contributing this very modest and personal account in as detailed a manner as possible, the elephants of South Africa are likely to find substance in it to make informed decisions vis-à-vis this strange species of flies they call *amakwerekwere*.

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