

## **XENOPHOBIC THREAT TO NIGERIANS ABROAD – HOW RELEVANT IS THE CONCEPT OF “AFROCENTRISM”?**

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**Abstract.** *The subject of this article is the relevance of Afrocentrism in the view of xenophobic threat to Nigerians abroad. The Afrocentrism in Nigeria's foreign policy had been successful in both decolonization of Africa and the fight against apartheid in South Africa. However, the attacks on Nigerians abroad continue to question the price that Nigeria has paid in human, capital and material resources in ensuring peace on the continent. The fusion between policy and practice in the articulation and implementation of Nigeria's foreign policy (often at the expense of its own people) reflects the sacrifices the country has made in its dedication to the continent. The study reveals that the history of Nigeria-Africa relations can be viewed in the light of conflict, cooperation, and competition. The study concludes that the Federal government should come up with policies that would change the current narrative in favour of Nigeria's national interest vis-a-vis protecting its citizens abroad. It further recommends a number of measures to be taken, such as: sensitization campaign (Nigeria's missions abroad, in collaboration with the appropriate government agencies of the host country in the hotspot areas in Africa, should periodically carry out sensitization programmes); setting up and strengthening (where it already exists) early warning signal system; using soft power/public diplomacy; using art diplomacy/cultural diplomacy; practicing overseas investment/economic nationalism to protect the country's economy; prioritizing Nigeria's foreign policy on regional concern.*

**Keyword:** *Afrocentrism, xenophobia, Nigeria, South Africa, foreign relations*

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### **Introduction**

The chequered history of Nigeria-Africa relations can be viewed in the light of the 3 Cs – conflict, cooperation and, competition [3, 22]. At the end of apartheid, cooperation was restored between the democratic government of South Africa and Nigeria, followed by another confrontation during the killing of the Ogoni 9 and competition of leadership on the continent visibly during the nomination and election of the AU Commission chairperson in 2012, the continent voted along regional lines. South Africa received its overwhelming support from the South African Development Community (SADC) region, while Jean Ping, the Gabonese candidate, received his support from the ECOWAS region [17, p. 3, 22]. Another incident of competition was in Ivory Coast. Nigeria had mounted a diplomatic campaign, backed by the United States, the United Nations, and European powers, combining financial sanctions and the threat of military action to dislodge Laurent Gbagbo, the defeated presidential incumbent, to yield power, while South Africa pressed for a power-sharing agreement that would preserve a role for Gbagbo in Ivory Coast's government [6].

With an appraisal of Nigeria's role on the continent despite the contemporary 3 Cs in Nigeria-Africa relations, successful Nigerian post-colonial administrations firmly placed the liberation of Africa as the centerpiece of their foreign policies. This manifested in their vigorous fight for the decolonisation of Africa and, in particular, the liberation of all people of Southern Africa [1, p.5]. It also rendered financial assistance to Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Tanzania and Namibia which were constantly harassed by South Africa.

The Afrocentrism in Nigeria's foreign policy had been successful in both decolonization of Africa and the fight against apartheid in South Africa. However, the attacks on Nigerians in South Africa continue to question the price that Nigeria has paid in human, capital and material resources in ensuring peace on the continent. Hence, pertinent questions that deserve attention in this paper include: why are Nigerians and Nigeria treated with iron fist in host countries? With the current economic and security challenges being faced by Nigeria, how relevant is the concept of "Afrocentrism"? What policies do the Nigeria government need to handle or address in order to halt the proliferation of xenophobic attacks and threats against Nigerians abroad?

### **Literature Review**

Gambari [10], Agbu, Okereke, Wapmuk and Adeniyi [4], Dauda, Muritala & Ahmad, Mohammad Zaki Bin & Keling, Mohammad Faisol [7] argued that Nigeria's foreign policy since independence has undergone series of changes – with exception to its principles, which remain the same. While Cilliers, Schunemann, and Moyer [5], Ogunnubi and Isike [20], Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike [21], and Ogunnubi [19] concentrated their search towards whether Nigeria deserves to be addressed as hegemon through its designated role by its foreign policy on African matters. According to Osuntokun [24, p.1], Nigeria's foreign policy during the First Republic was founded on constructive Pan-Africanism. This was the pattern of Nigerian foreign policy during the First Republic before it was changed from constructive Pan-Africanism to concentricism. Idahosa, Stephen & Adebayo, Kafilat [13] argued that “the idea of Africa being the centrepiece of Nigeria's foreign policy is premised on the understanding that Nigeria's engagement in the international system will be looked at through the binoculars of Africa”. According to the analysis of Eziolisa, Peter Okwudili [8], Ikedinachi Ayodele et. al. [15], and Idahosa, Stephen & Adebayo, Kafilat [13], the enunciation of the philosophical origins of Afrocentrism in Nigeria's foreign policy thought was a concept coined by the Adedeji Report “Africa as centrepiece”. Dauda, Muritala & Ahmad, Mohammad Zaki Bin & Keling, Mohammad Faisol [7] posit that “the benefit of Nigeria's Afrocentric policy has enormously assisted the country's image internationally”. According to Oshewolo, S. A. [23], the exploits and sacrifices in the pursuit of the policy notwithstanding, Nigeria has had to endure some disappointments and inconveniences.

### **Xenophobic Attacks and Nigeria's Role in Africa**

On the 21st of March, 1960, South Africa police shot dead 72 blacks and left 184 injured in the Sharpeville massacre. This incident before Nigeria's independence marked the beginning of Nigeria's confrontational engagement with Apartheid South Africa and decolonization of the continent (“emphasis mine”) [9, 26, 6]. Following the 'political flag' independence of Nigeria from Britain on October 01, 1960, the government of Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa pursued an Afrocentric foreign policy, which made the country commit itself to the decolonisation of territories on the African continent and the eradication of racial discrimination and domination.

Nigeria effectively made itself a frontline state, even though it was not in the Southern African region. Its efforts eventually resulted in the liberation of the region [18, p. 58, 25, p. 318]. Not only did Nigeria contribute immensely to the OAU's African Liberation Coordination Committee, but it also provided direct financial, material, military and moral support to the nationalist liberation movements in Southern Africa [1, p.18]. While pursuing decolonization of the African continent, Nigeria also embarked on other programs such as the OAU-backed Lagos Plan of Action for the Development of Africa (1980–2000), aimed primarily at increasing Africa's self-sufficiency. Additionally, Nigeria's prominent role in conflict resolution in West Africa was without doubt evident in its successful operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone, where it not only contributed troops but also almost single-handedly funded the operations.

The fusion between policy and practice in the articulation and implementation of Nigeria's foreign policy (often at the expense of its own people) reflects the sacrifices the country has made in its dedication to the continent. Driven largely by altruistic concerns about the sociopolitical and economic challenges facing the continent, Nigeria's Afrocentric policy has often been criticized at home for relegating Nigerians to the background in pursuit of continental advancement. Accordingly, Nigerian foreign policy endeavors supported and funded the de-legitimization of the white minority rule in South Africa, Angola and a plethora of other countries especially through liberation movements [27].

The increase in threats to Nigerians and attacks on their properties and businesses in South Africa continue to question the relevance of the concept of "Afrocentrism" as well as present a new dynamic of threat to Nigerians abroad. This includes threats to our diaspora financial and professional strength, as well as new threat to peace, security and stability on the African continent if not checked. For example, in South Africa, the manner in which xenophobic attacks have been carried out, varies. African immigrants (Nigerians inclusive) have been beaten with a club, hacked to death with a machete, stabbed with a knife, shot at close range with a loaded gun, stoned to death, set ablaze. Their businesses, homes and personal effects are not spared in these barbaric attacks. They are usually looted, destroyed/burnt to ashes and stolen respectively [16, 2, 9, 6]. They are accused of dealing in drugs, etc. This has in no doubt questioned the success of Afrocentrism and how relevant it is in Nigeria's foreign policy in the fight against Apartheid, decolonization and ensuring peace and stability on the African continent. The exploits and sacrifices in the pursuit of the Afrocentric policy notwithstanding, Nigeria has had to endure some disappointments and inconveniences. Going forward, this many contends that the philosophies underlying the policy must be reconsidered. In the uncertain world of diplomacy, where empathy and benevolence are not always rewarded, Nigeria must embrace a dynamic agenda in its foreign policy calculations towards Africa.

Following the examination of the relationship between Africa centeredness of Nigeria's foreign policy and the recurring xenophobic attacks on Nigerians. The paper argues that Nigeria's utilization of her human and material resources for the greater good of African states has not been rewarding. The recipient states of this generosity commemorate said generosity with ingratitude and thus create the imperative for foreign policy review [27].

### **Nigeria's External Relations: The Imperative for Paradigm Shift and Possible Policy Review**

From the foregoing, it is not in the argument that Nigeria made and continues to make tremendous sacrifices to the liberation and wellbeing of Africa. However, several years down

the line after the total liberation of Africa and Nigeria's continuous show of love afterwards, Nigeria and her citizens have been regularly humiliated and held in complete disdain [27].

The xenophobic attacks exposed severe fault lines in the Nigeria-South Africa relationship, exacerbated by the electioneering through hate speech and xenophobic utterances at the expense of non-nationals, where some political leaders blame migrants for poor service delivery [11]. That migrants are responsible for poor service delivery is not true, and the statements could only create tensions between migrants and locals, says Amir Sheikh, a spokesman for the African Diaspora Forum (ADF), a local migrant group [11].

Consequently, it is expected that there be a possible review of policy to re-evaluate South Africa as a reliable ally in the face of the xenophobic attacks against Nigerians and other Africans. As Ukaogo et. al. puts it, "Nigeria should strike a balance between afro-centrism and autochthonous challenges so evident in today's Nigeria" [27]. This should force policymakers to suggest readjustment to Nigeria's regional strategy. If considered, South Africa may no longer be a pivotal state, however the Southern African region and its countries would remain a pivotal region as a bulwark against xenophobic attacks targeted at Africans and for economic security and relations. While Nigeria seeks to repair its once strong partnership with South Africa, increasingly, the economic security and stability of the region requires a more active and engaged Nigeria approach not only with South Africa, but also with Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zambia, etc. for the benefit of Nigeria.

Undeniably, Nigeria holds historical leverage on countries in the Southern Africa region. As opined by Dr. Haroun, quoting General Olusegun Obasanjo, the former Head of State during the liberation struggle, "Nigeria never shy away from its responsibility in championing the establishment of an effective coordinating military headquarters, which trained and equipped the liberation movements of the Southern African countries, and thereby gave them the teeth to bite to victory [12].

Nigeria cannot remain fixated on the concept of "Afrocentrism" in pursuit of her foreign policy without a dynamic change if national interests such as addressing economic recession, attracting foreign investment and combating domestic security problems are of any relevance [27].

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Nigeria has indisputably experienced the good, bad and ugly in its diplomatic, trade, defence and socio-cultural relations over the years. Currently, as it was in recent past, the scapegoating of Nigerians in targeted attacks on African immigrants has had and will continue to have negative impact on the longstanding relations between countries in question if not addressed. Thus, necessity is upon the Federal government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to do the needful and respond to the new dynamics by coming up with policies that would change the current narrative in favour of Nigeria's national interest vis-a-vis protecting its citizens abroad. This could include policies on how to handle the contemporary situation in South Africa and to forestall future similar xenophobic attacks or threat to Nigerians and their properties abroad. Failure to avert, prevent and address this could lead to the proliferation of xenophobic attacks on Nigerians in the continent in the nearest and distant future. In light of the foregoing, I wish to recommend as follows:

- i. Sensitization campaign: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (through Nigeria's Missions abroad) in collaboration, with the appropriate government agencies of the host country in the hotspot areas in Africa, to periodically carry out sensitization programme to sensitize its nationals, especially the locals and leaders, on immigrants, addressing the stereotyping of illegal migrants as criminals, as well as the danger in the use of derogatory words. Together with the Nigerian Missions abroad to periodically engage Nigerians living abroad in

sensitization programmes on the need to obey the laws of the host country, protecting the image of Nigeria, and on the dangers of engaging in illicit acts;

ii. Setting up and strengthening (where it already exists) early warning signal system. The system will monitor conflict triggers or catalysts, i.e. communities that are prone to anti-foreigner violence. With this mechanism in place, imminent attacks on foreign nationals would be reported to security forces and the necessary institutions mandated to act and accordingly, prevented. It is imperative to note that the Federal Government should ensure that Embassies are well funded, so that the officers therein can penetrate the communities to boost their information gathering;

iii. Soft Power/Public Diplomacy: using education as a viable tool. The Foreign Service Academy (FSA) can be used as an educational instrument to share, train and impact our ideas on young Africans. It's pertinent to note that the child born in 1993/1994 at the end of Apartheid, will be 28 years old in 2021. Similarly, a child born in 1975 in Angola will be 46 years old in 2021. These are the young diplomats in their various missions abroad, and, unarguably, they also occupy some leadership, businesses and decision-making positions in their respective countries. They may certainly not be privy to what countries like Nigeria did for them. To this effect, it will be of Nigeria's interest to use the FSA in training selected diplomats and young leaders in Africa on a short-term basis. This will provide the needed opportunity for Nigeria to bring and impact its ideas on the need for African unity and on what countries, especially Nigeria, have sacrificed to achieve decolonization, as well as peace and stability in Africa, to young African diplomats/leaders. This could positively affect governmental policies towards Africans in host countries;

iv. Art Diplomacy (Cultural Diplomacy): Nigeria's movie industry needs to collaborate with the movie industries of South Africa and other African countries in producing movies about peaceful co-existence and educating citizens on roles played by Nigeria and other countries in the fight against Apartheid, decolonization, and ensuring peace and stability in Africa. This includes musical artists collaborating with their counterparts in other Africa countries to produce songs on peaceful co-existence and educating citizens on roles played by Nigeria and other countries in ensuring peace and stability;

v. Overseas Investment/Economic Nationalism to protect the country's economy: Foreign policy documents should be redefined to extending domestic resources towards mobilizing external resources and potentials for advancing citizens' welfare, so that all financial assistance in the region would have the potency for regenerating higher returns for internal economic prosperity;

vi. Prioritization of Nigeria's foreign policy on regional concern: The policy of good neighborliness should extend to responsible welfare provider for citizens, i.e. it should promote domestic economic development that will enhance the quality of life in Nigeria.

vii. Readjustment to Nigeria's regional strategy: Nigeria could readjust its regional strategy in the Southern African region, especially by increasing her economic security cooperation with other countries in the region, with a view to address the challenge of xenophobic attacks targeted at Africans.

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## КСЕНОФОБИЯ ПО ОТНОШЕНИЮ К НИГЕРИЙЦАМ ЗА РУБЕЖОМ: НАСКОЛЬКО АКТУАЛЬНА КОНЦЕПЦИЯ «АФРОЦЕНТРИЗМА»?

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***Аннотация.** Предметом данной статьи является актуальность афроцентризма в свете ксенофобной угрозы нигерийцам за рубежом. Афроцентризм во внешней политике Нигерии привел к успеху как в деколонизации Африки, так и в борьбе с апартеидом в Южной Африке. Однако нападения на нигерийцев за границей по-прежнему ставят под сомнение цену, которую Нигерия заплатила человеческими и материальными ресурсами для обеспечения мира на континенте. Сочетание политики и практики в формулировании и реализации внешней политики Нигерии (часто за счет собственного народа) выражается в жертвах, принесенных страной в ее приверженности континенту. Исследование показывает, что историю отношений Нигерии и Африки можно рассматривать в свете конфликта, сотрудничества и конкуренции. В исследовании делается вывод о том, что федеральному правительству следует сосредоточиться на политике, которая изменит текущую концепцию в пользу национальных интересов Нигерии в контексте защиты своих граждан за рубежом. В нем также предлагается ряд мер: информационная кампания (миссии Нигерии за рубежом в сотрудничестве с соответствующими правительственными учреждениями принимающей страны в районах горячих точек в Африке должны время от времени проводить информационные программы); создание и усиление (там, где они уже существуют) систем раннего предупреждения; использование мягкой силы/публичной дипломатии, дипломатии искусства, культурной дипломатии; осуществление зарубежных инвестиций/экономического национализма для защиты экономики страны; приоритизация внешней политики Нигерии по региональным вопросам.*

***Ключевые слова:** афроцентризм, ксенофобия, Нигерия, Южная Африка, международные отношения*

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