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# violent ‘othering’

Story by Adrian Hadland

Photos by Rob Rees

In the first few days of the xenophobic violence in May, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa’s statutory social science and humanities research body, was contacted following a meeting of the African National Congress’s national executive committee. There was a desperate need for information, for data that would somehow explain why the devastating violence had not only taken root, but was escalating and spreading. Why now? Why such violence? Why in informal settlements? Why mainly in Gauteng? And what could be done to stop this from happening again?

These were the questions that perplexed policy makers, government, civil society and the media too. In a rapid, two-week study of four townships, during which a series of focus groups were conducted among affected people, the HSRC’s democracy and governance unit tried to provide some early, preliminary answers (which can be accessed on [www.hsrc.ac.za](http://www.hsrc.ac.za)).

But rather than dwell on the specifics of the report, its methodology or its recommendations, I would like here to focus on the media and, in particular, on the phrase that has served as the peg on which to hang the latest round of violence: “xenophobia”.

At the outset, I must say I don’t think there is any justification, on the evidence collected during the study, that the media is in some way complicit in the violence. That really would be a case of shooting the messenger. There is certainly no evidence, as Ian Glenn points out here in *RJR*, that the tabloid press exacerbated tensions to a greater degree than the mainstream media. Not a single person interviewed in Alexandra, Mamelodi, Tembisa or in Imizamo Yethu even mentioned a tabloid poster, headline or story.

What is striking is that while many media outlets devoted a great deal of energy to covering the xenophobia story, throwing up a whole range of possible causes and triggers, nobody took the time to take a broader view, to look at the total picture.

This is probably inevitable, given the competitiveness of the South African media and its enduring reluctance to quote other media organisations. This leads to a silo-style outlook in which the big picture falls prey to groups of news teams chasing their own deadlines and stories. If one does look at the bigger picture, the patterns both of similarity and of difference are intriguing and add greater import to the essentially symbiotic relationship that should exist between the media and the analysts and academics who make their livelihood observing the observers.

In considering the media coverage at the height of the violence, some trends become evident. A number of explanations for the outbreak were raised with differing levels of credibility and social scientific validity. These range from explanations which suggest external manipulation through a “third force”, criminal instigation, a dislike and fear of foreign Africans, to poverty and the competition for scarce resources in poor communities.

What is clear from a preliminary analysis of media reports is that “xenophobia” is far too oversimplified to adequately describe what happened. One induna from Madala Hostel in Alexandra told the *Mail&Guardian*: “South Africans have come out to express themselves

against over-crowding and the loss of jobs because of the growing number of foreigners. It’s not a Zulu matter, it’s for all South Africans.”

In this account, “foreigner” has an ethno-linguistic dimension (“Zulu”), which spoke to allegations that some attacks were being spearheaded by Zulu-speaking community members.

Another story in the same newspaper quoted a South African citizen of Zimbabwean origin, who had resided in South Africa for 18 years, recalling being accosted by community members who said: “He should go. He is a Kalanga.” Kalanga is a tribe found in southern Zimbabwe and the north of Botswana.

A similar observation was made in the same newspaper where this time a South African-born woman was accused of being a Zimbabwean, after which a mob destroyed and looted the Radium hostel where she resided with her son in Jeppestown, Johannesburg.

A report in *Business Day* also noted that four South African women, camped at the Diepsloot police station and who, between them, spoke isiTsonga, seVenda and sePedi, stated that a group of isiZulu speakers had told them to leave their shacks and go back to Venda or Giyani.

A recent report carried by *Independent Online* (29 May 2008) citing fieldworkers and residents in some of Cape Town’s poorest communities, noted that foreign migrants into the city were not the only grouping within these communities vulnerable to attack. They specifically cited the distinction between established residents and newer domestic economic migrants arriving from the Eastern Cape: “Many of us who come from the Eastern Cape have a job already waiting for us. In that case, it’s because a relative organised it for you before... but those who have been in the Western Cape for a long time get jealous if they haven’t found work, even though they are also from the Eastern Cape from before. When I came here, I didn’t get a warm welcome.”

References such as these pose a clear challenge to the “xenophobia” identity of these attacks, which at their most simple counterposes the foreigner and the indigenous, by introducing dynamic notions of ethnicity, indigeneity and even citizenship.

Indeed even the origins of the foreign migrants being targeted were not limited to those from other African countries, where this included the looting of Pakistani-owned shops in Diepsloot and Chinese-operated shops in Du Noon, Cape Town ([www.iol.co.za](http://www.iol.co.za), 15 May 2008; SABC News, 23 May 2008).

These observations complicate documented cases of conflict between black South Africans and Africans of other nationalities based largely on economic competition, and again obscures the search for consistent drivers of the current violence.

If the very nature of the xenophobia that allegedly underpins the recent spate of violence is so complex and perhaps has more to do with “othering” than with nationality, then one gains some sense of how difficult it is going to be to understand, let alone fix, the problem.

