

## **Constructing the 'other' comes too easily to us**

*Je suis humain. Je suis Africain. Je suis Sud-Africain.* I am each of these and I am all of these. And that's all that matters. Everything else is beside the point. We are all human and we are all African and we are all South African – including those who have come to our shores to work here and to live here.

They add diversity to our society making it much richer, much more resilient, much more energetic. What a wonderful thing it is to see people in long flowing robes on our streets and to hear people prattle away in languages we do not understand – Amharic, Somali, Arabic, Fulani, Wolof, Portuguese and French.

It is important to understand why there is such brutishness in our society, such willingness to afflict harm on fellow humans, fellow Africans, fellow South Africans – that's for a later time. Right now let's stop this pervasive brutishness.

While we debate whether the severe outbreaks of violence against people whose origins are non-South African is xenophobia or Afrophobia, what is clear is the fact that people are being attacked because of perceptions that they are “not us.” They belong to a group that is an “other.”

We have allocated to them an identity different from “us” and this allows “us” to identify them as the source of our problems.

What I constantly hear is that *we must act against these foreigner criminals*. If there are individuals who are pushing drugs in our communities and in our schools then please let's be sure that we all understand that this is a crime. These drug pedlars and dealers should be arrested and imprisoned.

If there are individuals who are breaking the commercial laws of South Africa in whatever way, that is illegal and they should be imprisoned.

If there are individuals who are pimping women for sex, that is illegal and they should be imprisoned.

Why is the South African criminal-judicial system not doing this?

And yes, if there are individuals who are murderously attacking others, whomever they are and wherever they are from, then that is illegal and they should be arrested and imprisoned. And if there are individuals who are breaking into shops to loot, that is illegal and they should be arrested and sent to prison.

That then leads us to the construction of the "other" – that which makes it so easy for us to harm others. Terrifying in its simplicity and its effects is the capacity we have as humans to differentiate between "us" and "them." But it is a capacity complex in its construction, especially in situations like ours – a nation that has emerged from centuries of violent oppression, accompanied by great brutality.

But let's be clear this is not something peculiarly South African because it happens in even the most socially cohesive societies.

Between April and July 1994, just as we were celebrating our first democratic elections, about 800,000 people died in the Rwandan genocide. The majority of these were from the minority Tutsi group and moderate Hutus. Prior to the outbreak of unspeakable violence there were tensions between Tutsis and Hutus but they lived as neighbours – as they had done for generations.

This needed the definition of an “other”, different from “us” and cause of all our problems.

The horrific al-Shabaab massacre of innocent students at Garissa University College in the north east of Kenya needed this too – this definition of “other”.

How does this happen? We are all bearers of complex identities drawn from the multiple identities we are given or adopt: national citizen, provincial citizen, global citizen, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, sports code, eating habits, profession and so on.

Circumstances determine the shape and size of these complex identities and they shift and morph. We are all schizophrenic!

The borderlands between these identities are a fascinating theatre for the interplay between the identities. When I am visiting India or the UK or Denmark, I am a South African, an easy primary identity. In South Africa, I may choose to highlight the fact that I am a physicist and/or I am a male and/or I am a feminist and/or I am an atheist and so on.

And from time to time our identities are driven by common purpose. The struggle against apartheid made us all staunch human rights activists.

The brilliance of Steve Biko and others saw a generation of youth define themselves as black South Africans, irrespective of whether they were of African, "Coloured" or Indian origin.

The challenge for us as human beings in a society like ours is to ensure that these definitions of common purpose identities do not install in us the impulse to define others as lesser or as evil.

Defining the "other" comes too easily to us in South Africa. In 1947, Durban saw the outbreak of violence between people of Indian origin and Africans.

The recent outbreak of violent demonstrations in Malamulele has at its heart, a deep-seated set of tensions between Venda and Tsonga speaking people. The statues have generated a black-white discourse instead of what is good for South Africa. And so on.

The recent violence in Durban has its roots in this construction of the “other.” But we South Africans are prone to do this.

A DUT student recently said in a discussion on xenophobia that her deep fear is that anger has no preferred direction. Its target can change instantaneously. And this is the crux of the matter.

While the anger we are seeing on the streets of Durban and in South Africa now is directed at non-South African nationals, this target will change.

What vision do we have of the kind of society we want South Africa to be? What imagination do we have of the kind of society we wish to live in and would feel proud to bring our children into? Our political classes have failed us.

And so today.....*je suis Africaine*. Kwame Nkrumah once said, “*I am not an African because I was born in Africa but because Africa was born in me.*” Now we are all African. We must stop these brutal attacks.

We have manufactured an “other” and soon we shall construct others unless we subject ourselves to imagining the kind of South Africa that we can be proud of. That is a South Africa that welcomes all people because that will make us a greater nation.

***Professor Ahmed Bawa is the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of Durban University of Technology.***

