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From Bounded to Flexible Citizenship: Lessons from Africa

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ABSTRACT *This paper draws on a recently published study on xenophobia in Southern Africa to discuss the hierarchies and inequalities that underpin citizenship. Paradoxically, national citizenship and its emphasis on large-scale, assimilationist and bounded belonging are facing their greatest challenge from their inherent contradictions and closures, and from an upsurge in rights claims and the politics of recognition and representation by small-scale communities claiming autochthony at a historical juncture where the rhetoric highlights flexible mobility, postmodern flux and discontinuity. In Africa as elsewhere, accelerated mobility and increased uncertainty are generating mounting tensions fuelled by autonomy-seeking difference. Such ever decreasing circles of inclusion demonstrate that no amount of questioning by immigrants immersed in the reality of flexible mobility seems adequate to de-essentialize the growing global fixation with an “authentic” place called home. Thus trapped in cosmopolitan spaces in a context where states and their hierarchy of “privileged” citizens believe in the coercive illusion of fixed and bounded locations, immigrants, diasporas, ethnic minorities and others who straddle borders are bound to feel like travellers in permanent transit. This calls for scholarship, politics and policies informed by historical immigration patterns and their benefits for recipient communities. The paper argues in favour of greater scholarly and political attention on the success stories of forging new relationships of understanding between citizens and subjects that are suggestive of new, more flexible, negotiated, cosmopolitan and popular forms of citizenship, with the emphasis on inclusion, conviviality and the celebration of difference.*

Introduction

Drawing on a recently published study on citizenship and xenophobia in South Africa and Botswana (Nyamnjuh, 2006), this article discusses how belonging is variously construed, claimed and contested. As modern centres of accumulation in a continent of sharp downturns and uncertainties, South Africa and Botswana suggest that globalization and citizenship are highly hierarchical and inegalitarian processes, affecting individuals and communities differently as informed by race, ethnicity, class, gender and geography. Paradoxically, national citizenship and its emphasis on large-scale, assimilationist and bounded belonging are facing their greatest challenge from their inherent contradictions and closures, and from an upsurge in rights claims and the politics of recognition and

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representation by small-scale communities claiming autochthony at a historical juncture where the rhetoric highlights flexible mobility, postmodern flux and discontinuity. Everywhere accelerated mobility and increased uncertainty are generating mounting tensions fuelled by autonomy-seeking difference. These dynamics play into the hands of reactionary forces eager to cash in politically and ideologically on such mobility by posing as the legitimate champions of the interests of their unsettled nationals or ethnic kin, as evident in the case of xenophobia in South Africa and Botswana. Given the skewed distribution of the benefits of their relative economic success, both countries are pregnant with disaffected nationals who, in conjunction with the state, direct their resentment against immigrants and ethnic minorities as the easiest and most obvious targets, whom they often project as the cause of social ills. Linking migration and belonging to crime, and increasingly to terrorism, makes certain kinds of mobility by certain kinds of people from certain kinds of places a most contentious political issue within many states.

The predicament of migrants, racial and ethnic “others” in a world where globalization seems to bring about or exacerbate the obsession with boundaries and belonging is all too obvious. Even when legal rights are extended to migrants, racial and ethnic minorities, they have not always been able to claim them because they are denied the social membership in local and national communities on which claiming such rights is contingent (Basok, 2004). The cultural and social rights of migrants and other minorities cannot be adequately provided for by a nation-state-based or by an individual-based conception of rights and citizenship alone, in contexts where social relationships and social membership with “recognized” others are key to any meaningful rights or citizenship claims. Seen as not quite belonging even when they have lived most of their lives in their host “nation-states”, migrants (or those with the wrong race, ethnicity or geography) feel more and more vulnerable to the growing popularity of the extreme right and of anti-immigration and racial or ethnic purity politics and the policies of various states. Such threats of insecurity push even third-generation migrants to look for a mythical essence in a “homeland” elsewhere. Notions and identities of “authenticity”, “indigeneity” and “purity” are thus imposed upon and claimed by even the most cosmopolitan of immigrants, who are always expected to return to their Bethlehems (dead or alive) and be counted, even when their umbilical cords are firmly linked to diasporic spaces (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 2000). Cosmopolitanism as “a deterritorialized mode of belonging”, defined more by relationships with others than by “spatialized” and “essentialized” landscapes, seems confined to rhetoric, making it difficult in reality to feel at home away from home (Englund, 2004a; Nyamnjoh, 2005a). No amount of questioning by scholars, human rights advocates and immigrants immersed in the reality of flexible mobility seems adequate to de-essentialize the growing global fixation with an “authentic” place called home. Thus trapped in cosmopolitan spaces in a context where states and their hierarchy of “privileged” citizens believe in the coercive illusion of fixed and bounded locations, immigrants, diasporas, ethnic minorities and others who straddle borders are bound to feel like travellers in permanent transit. But these xenophobic manifestations ignore historical immigration patterns and their benefits for recipient states. They also ignore the success stories of forging new relationships of understanding between citizens and subjects that are suggestive of new, more flexible, negotiated, cosmopolitan and popular forms of citizenship, with the emphasis on inclusion, conviviality and the celebration of difference.

The Limits of Bounded Citizenship

In the age of accelerated mobility and clamours for greater cultural, economic, social and political recognition, the ills of bounded citizenship are all too obvious. In the case of South Africa and Botswana, hierarchies and dichotomies in citizenship and belonging structured on race, ethnicity, class, gender and geography have readily played into the hands of opportunistic capital and politicians to the detriment of human rights, entitlements and dignity. In both cases, a narrow focus on legal and political citizenship has resulted in citizens without meaningful economic and cultural representation, who in turn have tended to scapegoat ethnic minorities and foreigners, the *Makwerekwere*¹ in particular, instead of seeking justice from multinational capital and the elite few who benefit under global capitalism. The common reference in both countries to the backwardness of other African societies thus serves to occlude the marked economic differences between whites (and/or Asians) and blacks in general, and among citizens. In both instances, the cultivation of a conviviality seemingly so important to manage racial relationships has found its limits in the structuring of the reception of strangers—a reception that is racialized and ethnicized in ways that would be intolerable to relationships among bona fide citizens. By focusing narrowly on race and geography, the immigration services, the state, the media and the general public have been overly critical of black migrants from the rest of Africa, while remaining overly generous towards white migrants from Europe, often regardless of the potential benefits or burdens of the migrants in question to the host country. Again, if there are prospects for a global citizenship in mobility within the current narrow framework of the “nation-state”, whites are more likely to benefit than are blacks, not only because of their greater economic power but also because of their race and geography. In both South Africa and Botswana, ethnicity and ethnic citizenship (spearheaded by the Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party of Chief Buthelezi for South Africa, and the Society for the Promotion of Ikalanga Language elite association of the Kalanga for Botswana) have added a significant dimension to clamours for recognition and representation.

The focus on the vulnerable bottom-of-the-ladder *Makwerekwere* as a most urgent immigration problem in both countries has had the effect of reiterating this bottom rung as the proper place for black labour. As Simone (2001) has aptly argued, faced with a reality that black migrants bring with them the capacities for informal trade honed over generations—a livelihood hitherto largely unfamiliar to blacks in South Africa and Botswana—black South Africans can defer such recognition by compartmentalizing their feelings about strangers in racialized terms. A racialized splitting of immigrants thus ensures that non-African migrants may be accorded a status of respect and admiration, while Africans are vilified as *Makwerekwere*. As this splitting in some ways mirrors the long-term fragmentation of space, economy and culture engineered by apartheid, it is in the very gaps and interstices of urban economies that *Makwerekwere* have usually managed to piece together some livelihood. While a practice of splitting may make their situations highly precarious, its residual topographies are then the very site where some kind of ongoing presence has been consolidated. At the same time, the resentment demonstrated toward *Makwerekwere* permits black South Africans to ward off the feeling that the long struggle for democracy has not improved their economic and cultural lives, and that the nation-state they fought to claim might at the very least have the instrumental value of making a crucial difference between them and backward others.

However, as Mbongeni Ngema's song on Indian privilege demonstrates, while black South Africans invoke the nation-state as an instrument for marking an essential difference between themselves and *Makwerekwere*, they may question whether Indian South Africans are sufficiently South African, and determine to what extent claiming autochthony *vis-à-vis* the Indian community constitutes a more salient and marketable identity in a context of competing uncertainties (Nyamnjoh, 2006, pp. 28–81).

The discussion on South Africa thus goes a long way towards arguing the salience of a notion of flexible citizenship as something inherent in the very viability of South Africa as a country. For, as Simone (2001, pp. 157–162) has pointed out, what is largely kept from view in most discussions of South Africa's reaction to migration is the degree to which the engagement of Johannesburg as the country's primary commercial centre, by a wide range of African actors—migrants, businesspersons, academics, sojourners, NGOs—has substantially increased as the South African presence in the rest of the continent has itself broadened. Through a combination of greater centralization of regional services, the domination of regional inward investment, and the continued elaboration of unconventional circuits of resource flows, South Africa has maintained a strong comparative advantage in terms of the costs of moving money, goods and people across enlarged spaces of operation. This makes Johannesburg a centre not only for a formal regional economy but also for a variety of other "real" economies at different scales and degrees of legality. The elaboration of a more sophisticated formal trading, service and financial infrastructure has its counterparts in a more invisible, "informalized" one. The latter is composed of highly diverse economic activities and actors at widely divergent scales and capacities, often drawing upon illegal goods, the illicit exchange of conventional goods and services, and the mobilization of diverse actors, some of whom are marginalized from more formal activities. Thus the very economic foundations of citizenship themselves would seem to require large degrees of definitional flexibility.

This paper thus seek to emphasize the importance of comprehensively putting race, ethnicity, class, gender and geography into the equation of understanding globalization, mobility, citizenship and xenophobia. Simply by asking a few questions on these concepts, our understanding of their merits and limitations can be greatly enhanced. The popular rhetoric around globalization, for example, is all about free flows of factors of production and consumer goods, regardless of attempts by states to control or confine them. Labour being often racialized, ethnicized, gendered and informed by class and geography, the study on which this paper draws sought to enquire: just how true is such rhetoric of flexible mobility, equality of citizenship and opportunity across racial, ethnic, class, gender and geographical divides? Does a female black Zimbabwean maid or cross-border trader, for instance, stand an equal chance of mobility and of being accepted by immigration authorities into South Africa or Botswana as her female white Zimbabwean compatriot farmer? The study tells us that such equality is more in the rhetoric than in the practice, and that globalization and its promise of global citizenship are more like a bazaar to which multitudes are invited but few rewarded. The Zimbabwean maids are driven into illegality because they are rejected at the borders, only to be exploited first as *Makwerekwere* and then as women, while their white counterparts are formally accepted into South Africa and Botswana on the basis of race and class, even if to lose out eventually to fellow whites who are male with the same credentials. A hierarchy of humanity informed by race, ethnicity, gender and geography is there to ensure that only a minute few shall qualify even when all and sundry have been invited to participate and belong.

On women in particular, the study highlights a universal tendency to immobilize them in domestic work even when, like maids, they are physically most mobile within and between borders. While men are free to seek employment and pursue possibilities outside of the home, women are generally tamed and contained by domestic chores. They can only graduate fully or temporarily from this situation by compounding the subjection of other, less well-placed women. Maids and madams may both be subordinate to men, but they are not equal in power, dignity and entitlements. While madams may sometimes feel treated as maids by the men in their lives, it is not often that maids feel treated as madams. The price of women's freedom to work outside of the home or to claim real or symbolic equality to men often comes down to the further debasement of their humanity as women and to internal conflicts that are generated among them as a social category. Race, class, socio-economic status and geography largely determine which women may qualify to be co-opted by men into the public sphere to further the debasement of fellow women. Madams and maids, though united by their femininity, are divided by their respective realities of citizenship and subjection, primarily but not exclusively by class, with race, ethnicity and geography also remaining important factors. Intensified globalization is bringing together as madams and maids career-oriented, upper-middle-class women of wealthy nations and striving, adventurous women from crumbling poverty, to reproduce various hierarchies informed by power and wealth. Unfortunately, while most national constitutions promote and protect the rights of women as "independent citizens", they are silent over the rights of women as "dependent citizens", or as victims of the injustice of collective exclusion. Thus, who qualifies for citizenship and who among citizens can effectively claim entitlements determine to a large extent the women who shall serve—or be served. In certain cases, citizenship also determines who shall be lucky enough to become a maid (Nyamnjoh, 2006, pp. 113–227).

Few foreign maids qualify to benefit from "token" recognition by the constitution, a situation that leaves migrant maids very vulnerable to serious abuse. Although foreign maids may use their mobility to engineer positions of autonomy *vis-à-vis* families, households and local economies in their home countries, they do at the same time become embodiments of the vulnerabilities of those same countries within the global economy, thereby subjecting themselves to the whims and caprice of opportunistic employers who are all too conscious of this position of weakness. The fear of deportation and consequently of reprisals or rejection by relations back home make maids reluctant to claim their rights and dignity, preferring to bargain away their humanity in the silence of zombiehood. Among the many factors propelling the international migration of maids are the poor economic prospects in the countries of origin. The threat of destitution in Zimbabwe, for example, pushes women to undertake risky journeys to Botswana and South Africa, often leaving behind husbands and children, in search of important sources of income, and indirectly prolonging the life of the government and state that have failed them. The remittances provided by these women are sometimes the only life support for entire families, who otherwise would be demonstrating daily against the failures of the state to deliver basic subsistence (Nyamnjoh, 2006, pp. 142–205).

Maids endure severe hardships in their status as maids and as women. Globally, the trafficking in women to work as maids is a booming business. Migrants of various social and professional backgrounds from countries enduring sharp economic downturns are desperate for any employment to make ends meet and support families and friends back home. As more and more women in the developed world (and in other centres

of accumulation such as South Africa and Botswana) seek full-time employment within a context of poor welfare provisions and state facilities for childcare, the demand for maids from the underdeveloped economies is on the rise. Married women from poorer countries (or poorer regions of the same country), who would ordinarily be madams in their own right and locality, are increasingly forced by economic downturns to migrate to richer regions in search of income. In certain cases, a maid in town or abroad might herself be compelled to hire a maid or rely on the labour of unpaid family members in her home village to take care of the children she has left behind. This permits them to circumvent and at the same time reproduce their micro- and macro-level marginalities. Such complexities occasioned by globalization call for theoretical appreciation of the shifting meanings of love and money and fluid boundaries between maids and madams. They point, as well, to a need for more nuanced understanding of citizenship and belonging.

Although employers want more cheap migrant labour, they are determined to strip those they employ of personhood and dignity. Most governments, while increasingly recognizing the social and economic importance of female migrant domestic workers, enact policies that allow only a minimum scope for individual or collective agency among them. Skilled or unskilled, immigrants tend to be exploited and treated as labour zombies by employers keen to take advantage of their precarious state to pay them slave wages and circumvent labour laws. Often the immigrants are totally dependent on those who recruit them, who may be their only access to employment, and perhaps their only contact in the host country, and who arranged their travel documents and who keep their passports. The maids are forced to live in, so they can be compelled to do everything, sometimes in most degrading ways. The lack of job description serves as a licence for dehumanization of the migrant maids, trapped by the invisibility of the private sphere and the limitations of bounded citizenship.

This shabby and dehumanizing treatment is directly related to the problematic nation-bound conception of citizenship, in a context where globalization has meant greater dislocation, mobility, cosmopolitanism, integration and interdependence of a type that challenges conventional notions of belonging and citizenship. By denying rights to non-citizens whose labour they need, states like South Africa, Botswana and other centres of accumulation are able to resolve a “potential conflict between the rights of two groups of citizens (men and middle-class women) to participate in the public sphere ... without requiring restructuring of the public and private” (Anderson, 2000, pp. 195–196; see also Anthias, 2002, p. 26). The study this paper draws on provides ethnographic evidence of how maids as nationals and as immigrants occupy the bottom rungs of the ladder of social visibility. It attempts to show, even more significantly, how differentiation between maids as citizens and maids as immigrants forestalls any possibility of common action by maids against their devaluation. Thus, although disadvantaged by both class and gender, the citizenship of national maids is used to further institutionalize social inequalities and silences over the rights of their foreign counterparts (Nyamnjoh, 2006, pp. 206–227).

Implementing the narrowly legalistic and bounded regime of citizenship on which all of these inequalities and injustices are founded, as the study of South Africa and Botswana demonstrates, is, as I have argued elsewhere, like trying to force onto the body of a full-figured person, rich in all the cultural indicators of health Africans are familiar with, a dress made to fit the slim, de-fleshed Hollywood consumer model of a Barbie-doll entertainment icon. But instead of blaming the tiny dress or its designer, the tradition has been to fault the popular body or the popular ideal of beauty, for emphasizing too much

bulk, for parading the wrong sizes, for just not being the right thing. Not often are the experience and expertise of the designer or dressmaker questioned, nor his/her audacity to assume that the parochial cultural palates that inform his/her peculiar sense of beauty should play God in the lives of regions and cultures where different criteria of beauty and the good life obtain. This insensitivity is akin to the behaviour of a Lilliputian undertaker who would rather trim a corpse than expand his/her coffin to accommodate a man-mountain, or a carpenter whose only tool is a huge hammer and to whom every problem is a nail (Nyamnjoh, 2005b, pp. 25–29).

Challenge to Scholarship

Mainstream scholarship is yet to capture these contradictions, contestations and possibilities with the nuances they deserve. Especially in Africa, where problematic expectations of modernity (Ferguson, 1999; Moore, 2005) have engendered technicized, disembedded, depoliticized and sanitized approaches to “development” as a unilinear process of routinized, standardized, calculable and predictable practices (Ferguson, 1990), the tendency has been to de-emphasize small-scale “ethnic” in favour of large-scale “civic” citizenship, whose juridico-political basis is uncritically assumed to be more inclusive than the cultural basis of ethnic citizenship (Mamdani, 1996, 2000). The mistake has been to focus analysis almost exclusively upon institutional and constitutional arrangements, thereby downplaying the hierarchies and relationships of inclusion and exclusion informed by race, ethnicity, class, gender and geography that determine accessibility to citizenship in real terms (Alubo, 2004; Englund & Nyamnjoh, 2004; Harnischfeger, 2004; Nyamnjoh, 2005b, 2006). There has been too much focus on “rights talk” and its “emancipatory rhetoric”, and too little attention accorded the contexts, meanings and practices that make citizenship possible for some and a far-fetched dream for most (Englund, 2000, 2004b, 2006; Moore, 2005). Sociological and anthropological accounts, such as provided in this study, indicate that far from passing away, ethnic or cultural citizenship has actually won itself more disciples, not least from among scholars themselves, who are no longer simply keen on being civic citizens but also on claiming ethnic and cultural subjection over and beyond what the state and nation have to offer (Nnoli, 1998; Werbner & Gaitskell, 2002; Halsteen, 2004; Werbner, 2004; Nyamnjoh, 2006).

Such essentialist and rigid articulation of belonging makes of everyone a slave of the past in a world pregnant with mobility. To those who truly believe in a universal civilization and citizenship, such an obligation to “the past can only cause pain” (Naipaul, 1979, pp. 147–148; Nyamnjoh, 2005a). And repeated reminders that they do not quite belong can only drive even third-generation diasporas to revisit, albeit reluctantly in certain cases, the autochthony they thought their forebears had left behind when they migrated. What this tells us is that even the most articulate opponents of “ethnic” or “cultural” citizenship in scholarship and in principle do consciously or inadvertently yield to expectations of authenticity or autochthony, and comb national, regional and international corridors of power and resources discreetly or overtly seeking political, economic and cultural empowerment for their “autochthonous” regions and communities. National identity or citizenship is far from being an uncontested equalizer, as it is experienced generally as an inadequacy badly in need of complementarity, or simply an occasion to revitalize essential identities and exclusionary pursuits of belonging.

The history of difficulty at implementing rigid notions of the “nation-state” and “citizenship” in Africa attests to the gross inadequacy of a narrow and rigid juridico-political regime of rights and entitlements in a context where individuals and communities are questioning the Western monopoly over “freedom of imagination” and challenging themselves to think of “new forms of the modern community” and “new forms of the modern state” (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 13). The challenge is clearly to harken to the sociology and anthropology of individuals and communities at work in laboratories that experiment with different configurations, as they seek a broader, more flexible regime of citizenship. Here meaningful cultural, political, economic recognition and representation could be negotiated for individuals and groups regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender and geography.

Flexible Citizenship as the Way Forward

Now that even “civic citizenship” is proving to be anything but an inclusive and satisfactory solution for even its foremost proponents, driving both nationals and non-nationals, settlers and natives, ethnic strangers and ethnic citizens to rediscover fundamental and chauvinistic identities, the citizenship debate is back in full force. Throughout the world civic citizenship is facing hard times, as multitudes (ranging from women’s movements to diasporas through youth movements and cultural communities big and small) clamour for inclusion by challenging the myopia implicit in the conservative juridico-political rhetoric and practices of nation-states.

In Africa, youth movements are involved in renegotiation of the exclusionary bases of citizenship that have fuelled conflicts over belonging and representation (Chachage & Kanyinga, 2003; Pratten, 2004; Rashid, 2004; Sall, 2004; Honwana & De Boeck, 2005). Women’s movements are equally active throughout the continent, challenging the indicators of citizenship narrowly informed by the privileged bases of Western and African masculinities (Dow, 1995; Imam *et al.*, 1997; Selolwane, 1998; Abdullah, 2002). There is a clear need to reconceptualize citizenship in ways that create political, cultural, social and economic space for excluded nationals and non-nationals alike, as individuals and collectivities. Such inclusion is best guaranteed by a flexible citizenship unbounded by race, ethnicity, class, gender or geography, and that is both conscious and critical of hierarchies that make a mockery of the juridico-political regime of citizenship provided by the coercive illusion of the “nation-state”. In this flexible citizenship, space should be created for its articulation at different levels, from the most global to the most local or autochthonous, from the ethnic to the civic, and from the individual to the collective. Just as cultural, economic and social citizenship are as valid as juridico-political citizenship, so collective, group or community citizenship is as valid as individual citizenship, to be claimed at every level, from the most small-scale local to the most mega-scale global level. The emphasis should be on the freedom of individuals and communities to negotiate inclusion, opt out and opt in with total flexibility of belonging in consonance with their realities as repertoires, melting pots or straddlers of various identity margins.

It is evident that such flexible citizenship is incompatible with the prevalent illusion that the nation-state is the only political unit permitted to confer citizenship in the modern world. Nor is it compatible with a regime of rights and entitlements that is narrowly focused on yet another illusion—“the autonomous individual” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999). The price of perpetuating these illusions has been the proliferation of ultra-nationalism,

chauvinism, racism and xenophobia that have consciously denied the fragmented, multinational and heterogeneous cultural realities of most so-called “nation-states”. The tendency has been for the citizenship thus inspired to assume the stature of a giant compressor of, especially, cultural differences. Almost everywhere, this narrow model has cherished hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, class, gender and geography, which have tended to impose on perceived inferior others the decisions made by those who see themselves as more authentic or more deserving of citizenship. The citizenship that hails from such a celebration of insensitivities is clearly not a model for a future of larger mobility and increased claims for rights, recognition and representation by its individual and collective victims.

Note

¹ *Makwerekwere* means different things in different contexts, but as used in South Africa and Botswana, it means not only a black person who cannot demonstrate mastery of local South African languages, but also one who hails from a country assumed to be economically and culturally backward in relation to South Africa. With reference to civilization, the *Makwerekwere* would qualify as the “homo caudatus”, “tail-men”, “cavemen”, “primitives”, “savages”, “barbarians” or “hottentots” of modern times, those who inspired these nomenclatures in Southern Africa attempting to graduate from naked savagery into the realm of citizenship. In terms of skin pigmentation, the racial hierarchy of humanity under apartheid comes into play, as *Makwerekwere* are usually believed to be the darkest of the dark-skinned, and to be less enlightened even when more educated than the lighter-skinned South African and Batswana blacks. *Makwerekwere* are also thought to come from distant locations in the remotest corners of the “Heart of Darkness” north of the Limpopo, about which South Africans and Batswana in their modernity know little, and are generally not interested to discover, except to continue the “civilizing mission” begun by European missionaries and colonialists in Southern Africa in the seventeenth century.

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