

Mobility as African Scholars: Debating South African Exceptionalism

This contribution engages with physical and social mobility in Africa. It draws on ideas about home countries and abroad. Engaging with mobility as a South African, I brings to attention an exceptionalism which often associates travel and journey more with countries known as the West – United States of America and Europe – as being abroad than within the African continent. It is no secret that South African scholars do not consider training and building productive networks as scholars in other regions of the African continent do. Moving against the grain that is obsessed with western notions of the abstract distinction between nature and culture, Nyamnjoh defines Frontier Africans as ‘those who contest taken-for-granted and often institutionalised and bounded ideas and practices of being, becoming, belonging, places and spaces’ (2015: 7). These bounded ideas include the essentialised and dual notions about being abroad and home, being a foreigner and local, being in your country and my country. To embrace being a frontier African is to understand lived realities in a universe of incompleteness and an existence that is filled with infinite possibilities.

Mobility

If mobility is as Adey (2010) states a way of life, then the physical and social mobility of Africans is best understood as an emotional, relational and social phenomenon captured in

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the complexities, contradictions and messiness of their everyday realities (Nyamnjoh 2013). Mobility enables us to make sense of the world. It is not only the physical aspects that are mobile, but also ideas, beliefs, practices, and social and material culture. At the destination, mobile social processes are reproduced and adapted on our own terms. For those seemingly immobile, encounters and interaction with mobile others transform the social and physical context (Adey 2010). However, rather than reflect frontier realities, globalisation along with identity politics of nation-states has strived to detect the difference and single out locals or insiders from foreigners or outsiders (Nyamnjoh 2006). Even when limited notions of identity exist at global and state level, through mobility and relationships among Africans negotiations, differences, and accommodation of those claiming indigeneity to a place and those arriving into the place is part of most African social formations. Being an insider or an outsider is always a work in progress, is permanently subject to renegotiation and is best understood as relational and situational. For this reason, there is a need to understand the interconnecting global and local hierarchies – be these informed by race, place, class,

culture, gender, age or otherwise – that shape connections and disconnections, and produce, reproduce and contest distinctions between insiders and outsiders as political and ideological constructs which defy empirical reality. A historical perspective is crucial towards understanding the continuities with the past that make contemporary mobilities intelligible. Those who are able to move and privilege their versions of the encounter have gone as far as determining how those claimed to be fixed can move and be visible within an established marketplace of ideas.

Privileged mobility as researchers, sometimes gives an impression that we are removed from the subjects produced so much so that we see ourselves in the images of our “masters”. For researchers, assuming a status of “master” along with the prerogative to freeze certain cultures, stunts the growth and potential of fellow (African) researchers. Taking on these limited views of African mobility continues a fight started by our ancestors. For decades, scholars from within Africa, and other previously colonised territories have radically challenged the authority and authenticity of the social and historical imaginings of their peoples, locations, and experiences from insensitive perspectives informed by an ‘epistemology of alterity’ (Mafeje 1998). Mafeje’s insistence on privileging Africans as self-knowing subjects was evident early on when he worked as

research assistant to Monica Wilson in *Langa: a study of social groups in an African township* (Wilson and Mafeje 1963). By privileging the self-definition of “homeboys” rather than “tribesmen”, he began what later became a more self-reflexive critique of alterity in *The Ideology of Tribalism* (Mafeje 1971). The negation of tribalism was not a fight by one person. Magubane (1968) was a prominent critique of the notions of alterity such as “tribe” and “tribalism”. Mafeje (1976) did not only deconstruct the conceptual and empirical assumption of the European other but rather he reflected deeply on African scholarship produced to imitate its masters. Similar to Mafeje (1976), Ugandan poet Okot p’Bitek ([1966] 1984), in his classic poem, *Song of Lawino*, stressed similar critiques about imbibing the masters’ traditions. The common problem of social and physical mobility enabled by capital materialism often included husbands making the journey from places of birth in search of education and employment in urban areas and abroad. According to the poem, Ocol returns to the place of birth after gaining an education abroad. Ocol denounces his wife as “traditional” and “primitive” for sticking to the values and social process of the land. Lawino expresses no interest in imbibing European ways of dress and behaviour such as those depicted by Clementine, Ocol’s companion abroad. For Africans in general, to stake claim to status as established mobile scholars with a taste for the finer things in life requires imitation of impatience and the frustration Europeans extended to Africans. As Mafeje (1976) states, ‘We did not know all along’ that such negation by fixing the mobility of others imbibed tensions that would exist for the future of Africa and African identities.

Mobility in Africa: South Africa is no exception

In 2018, many South Africans ignore the lessons from Mafeje and p’Bitek on the problems of a kind of social and physical mobility that is a zero-sum game in domestic negation. We seem to aspire to be the Ocols’ and Clementines’ of the 21st Century. It is a kind of mobility that makes Lawinos, not only of individuals - regardless of gender, age, and ethnicity, but nations outside South Africa, within the African continent. This uncritical bias toward the ideas informing the rise of a nation-state Africa has transformed those with weak technologies of mobility into outsiders. The idea of South African citizenship has historically been shaped by preoccupations with mobility and its regulation with yardsticks such as official status, lawfulness, and residence. Klaaren (2000) traces the current inclusive and simultaneously structurally unequal legal cultural concept of citizenship based on the official residence to the regulation of the mobility of three populations (Asian, African and European) in South Africa between 1897 and 1937. The interests of economic actors in restricting the mobility of labour and the interest of political elites in establishing and safeguarding their status and identity within their communities together motivated and influenced the regulation of mobility and, by extension, the South African concept of citizenship. Such persistent ideas of bounded notions of citizenship and problematic representations of African mobility and its continuities of representation uncritically reproduced by so-called independent African nation-states are at the core of current articulations of citizenship and belonging as a zero-sum game in South Africa and throughout the continent. The elites compounded

the ideas on who belongs and who does not by motivating arbitrary distinctions between “our” poor and poor “others”.

I do not remember a time in my life in South Africa exclusive from intimate relations with mobile Africans. The teachers and professionals include those who came from various parts of the continent. Science, maths, and technical drawing instructors came from Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Cameroon, etc. The same went for doctors and nurses working at hospitals. Some of their children went to local schools, speaking both the language of their host communities and those of their places of origin fluently. This was a time before the same people were said to carry HIV/AIDS targeting particularly local women. Somehow the local men in relationships with the women from the same countries of origin were spared. The women though were not protected from accusations about taking jobs from local South Africans. Increasingly, there was a social acceptance that Africans from within the continent took jobs away while white people and anyone else not black and African took residence with no questions asked. It was not long before the same people were accused of crime and a threat to cultural values. Sadly, this propaganda affects intellectuals and professionals in equal measure as the urban poor often depicted in media.

Tim Wu (2016) argues that intellectuals who read everything, insist on having opinions and think themselves immune to propaganda are, in fact, easy to manipulate. It is particularly propaganda supported by the media because it presents one set of distorted ‘facts’. For example, respected black South African academics at my previous university – the University of Cape Town – have been among those who

have questioned the employment of mobile African scholars in various positions as not truly affirmative in action. Yet, the same individuals are likely to have been taught at school, defended from bullies, and treated at hospitals by the same mobile Africans. While South Africa often regards its bounded citizenship an exceptional one to the rest of the African continent, differences and tensions exist throughout the continent that uses bounded nationality as a key indicator of exclusion. It comes as little surprise that accelerated mobility also increased uncertainty, often producing tensions encouraged by the autonomy-seeking difference (Nyamnjoh 2007). Even though such differences exist, it is in no small measure that media, politicians, and scholars have ignored historical immigration patterns and their benefits for recipient states. Minority ethnicity is ignored and the tendency for such studies in Africa often focuses on large-scale 'civic' citizenship, whose juridico-political basis is uncritically taken to be more inclusive than the cultural basis of ethnic citizenship (Mamdani 1996). What is missing in these narratives are 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 and the celebration of difference.

As a privileged mobile frontier African scholar, I remain grounded by the lessons of Mafeje, p'Bitek. I draw inspiration from Dibango's journey (1994) in the book *Three Kilos of Coffee*. A frontier African born in Doula, Cameroon, Dibango embodied a life of incompleteness by taking in the opportunities and experiences while at the same time giving an adapted and modified sense of Africaness to the world. Moving between Europe and Africa,

without sacrificing one for the other, Dibango created complex music crossing boundaries of the world. Although not a scholar in the conventional sense, Dibango's reflections and analysis of social mobility as relational is empirically convincing and inspiring. However, I was no different to many privileged South Africans who define their mobility as global or abroad only with western countries as symbols of progress. While I have established new relationships and been exposed to new resources as a PhD student at an American university, my networks in South Africa, Senegal, Kenya, Cameroon, Zambia and Namibia remain strong. The combination of imbibing stereotyping forms of African mobility and South Africa's mistaken exceptional mobility of global consumerism remains a problem associated with many forms of violence. To be at home or to be abroad (within Africa and beyond the continent) is not a question of location but rather of purpose and function of relationships. Adey (2010) invites us to conceptualise mobility as the vital relationship through which we live, understand and engage with a world increasingly on the move. Our very sociality, humanity, and survival depend on mobility, which is seldom a singular process, as we always tend to carry our worlds along and are confronted with mobilities of our and other worlds.

Conclusion

The paper has argued for an understanding of mobility that embraces difference and complexity by Africans in places of birth and host communities. To imbibe colonial traditions of immobile others is to rob fellow Africans of creativity and dignity that can potentially be restored as frontier beings. African scholars, in line with bounded notions of a nation-state, have not done enough to continue the fight started by our

ancestors against notions of radical alterity. The South African scholarship is not exceptionally superior to that of countries in the African continent. To be an African scholar educated across the oceans does not necessitate sacrificing connections, relations, and values with places of birth in order to achieve progress and success. Such understanding of mobility often leads to various forms of violence in Africa. To live in a world on the move is to embrace sociality, humanity, and survival that is dependent on mobility characterised by infinite possibilities.

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