



## Reclaiming Mobility: A Pan-Africanist Approach to Migration

*For Africa as a whole we want our peoples to have the right to move, settle, work and live without visas or passports from Cape Town to Cairo. As steady progress is being made at regional level it makes this Pan African dimension inevitable ... It just means that they are free to do so if they wish without any security or police always harassing them as 'foreigners'. (Raheem 2006)*

When did human mobility emerge as a global problem to be prevented or contained? If mobility is intrinsic to the survival of human beings, then constraints on mobility can be equated to the denial of the right to life. Mobility is intricately linked to freedom that is expressed in questions of who decides who moves, who is expected not to move, and under what conditions these decisions are made and movement occurs. From a Pan-Africanist perspective, how can scholars account for the disposability of African bodies as Europe-bound migrants die, amid indifference, in the Mediterranean Sea, in the long afterlife of the transatlantic middle passage? (Sharpe 2016). Pan-Africanists are drawn to Aimé Césaire's *Discourses on Colonialism* (2000), in which he refers to the 'boomerang effects' of imperialism, specifically how ideas, policies, practices and techniques of governing imperial interests flow back and forth from the colonial 'core' to the peripheries. A Pan-Africanist approach to migration begins by contextualising migration practices historically, by tracing the evolution of depictions of African migration as a problem, their origins in European modernity, the links of this migration to African enslavement, and the pseudo-science of racial hierarchies, and the era of European colonialism (Mayblin and Turner 2021).

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This approach then proposes how a Pan-Africanist understanding of migration can humanise and dignify those whose mobilities are forced or voluntary, drawing inspiration from historical moments of African independent acts of emancipatory migration. Subsequently, Pan-Africanists can assess critically the continuing relevance of the global North's understandings and governance of human mobility to explain migration in Africa and the diaspora.

### Understandings of migration are Eurocentric

The dominant language, discourse, policies, and practices with respect to African migration are Eurocentric in origin, being derived from the hegemonic philosophies of European modernity relating to the politicisation of mobility. They include the association of people with distinct spaces, and the universalisation and adoption of the European idea of the 'nation-state' as the normative political community, with its bounded territory and exclusionary concept of sov-

ereignty, nationhood and citizenship (Mbembe 2000). It is European modern society, dating from the period of European exploration and enlightenment, that has placed political limits on human mobility, with the state or the elite determining who has the right to move and under what conditions (Mayblin and Turner 2021). Historical records demonstrate that precolonial African societies had a different conceptualisation of space, with varying degrees of attachment to land, a fluidity of territorial boundaries (Asiwaju 1983; Kopytoff 1987; Mbembe 2000) and a flexibility of identity and belonging (Nyamnjoh 2017: 259). Widespread evidence exists of local and regional histories of migration and settlement across the continent prior to colonial rule.

European global capitalist expansionism between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries has been linked to unprecedented movements of people (Mbembe 2019). European 'repeopling of the world ... inaugurat[ed] a new epoch of global resettlement' (Mbembe 2019: 45). The spread of capitalism generated new forms of labour mobility, involving the enslavement, subjection, and exploitation of indigenous peoples. The dehumanisation of labour was possible through Europe's construction of hierarchies of human beings using

the Social Darwinian ideology of race. Capitalism and racialisation intersected to enable the forced migration of an estimated ten million enslaved Africans, who were transported to the Americas, and an unspecified number who went elsewhere in the world. Enslaved Africans were stripped of their humanity and commoditised to fulfill the demands of European capitalism.

### **The racialisation of human mobility**

European colonialism led to the racialisation of human mobility. Some seventeen million people emigrated from Europe to the colonies between 1814 and 1914, mainly to the USA, New Zealand, Australia and Africa (Bastos 2008; Mayblin 2021). They were fleeing poverty and famine and were encouraged to move as a strategy to establish new state territories with people of European ancestry. European migration was always accompanied by the elimination, dispossession and displacement of the indigenous people and the settlement of their lands (Bastos 2008; Mayblin and Turner 2021).

From the nineteenth century onwards the USA, Canada and Australia initiated immigration legislation to prevent the in-migration of Chinese and other Asian peoples to shore up white supremacy at its peripheries (Atkinson 2016). Whites-only migration policies remained in place in countries such as Australia until the 1970s. As with the slave trade, Europeans sought to control the mobility of non-white people in their colonies for their labour and as soldiers in colonial wars. Chinese and South Asian indentured workers were recruited through debt bondage and dispersed across the British empire.

The history of African migration within the colonial sphere, too, has been a racialised one, suffused with dehumanisation, domination and subjection. In Africa, capitalist enterprises, namely in mines and on plantations, were reliant on state-directed forced labour and the recruitment of labour migrants on long contracts. Labour migration was not a popular option for Africans but became essential to survive punitive taxation and an increasingly commoditised economy. Recruitment focused on bodies stereotyped as being suitable for hard labour and were ethnicised and gendered. Those women who challenged restrictions on their mobility and moved to urban areas found their bodies heavily policed in public spaces. These colonial patterns of migration have enduring legacies in almost all African countries.

Security considerations also led to the forced migration of Africans, many of whom were moved across colonial territories as a strategy to quell uprisings against colonial rule and significantly, as part of labour migration regimes. Over 400 people from varying British colonial territories were exiled to the Seychelles (Kothari and Wilkinson 2010), and in the late 1950s some Kenyan Mau Mau freedom fighters were forcibly moved to the south-western part of Tanganyika (Daley 1989). The legacy of such state-enforced securitised migration is that it has reinforced the view that migration management is intrinsic to political stability. Control over the mobility of colonised people became increasingly a security matter and was more extreme in white-dominated colonies.

### **European migration legislation prevails**

Even though migration management in African states has its origins in draconian colonial laws, African states have yet to pay sufficient attention to how migration legislation might be addressed in a decolonial and Pan-African way. Mamdani (1996) has shown how the colonial definition and delineation of tribes and tribal territory fixed identity to place and created new forms of belonging. Nationalist and postcolonial leaders' acceptance of the 'nation-state' as the ideal political community and of the territorial boundaries set by European colonial administrations, within which liberated postcolonial nations could be forged, ended up limiting their imaginations of alternative ways of belonging that recognised mobility as an inherent characteristic of human sociality and survival.

While independence offered the freedom to move, the barriers imposed by the new 'nation-states' prevented it. When the bounded spaces of tribal homelands were upscaled to those of the nation, a mythic European notion of national identity was promoted as a unifying factor in the struggle for self-determination. Independent states were encouraged to domesticate international laws that reified citizenship and the boundaries of the 'nation-state'. Laws governing migration between states, and the categorisation of those who moved according to the cause or purpose of their migration—as labour/economic migrants, refugees, visitors, irregulars, etc.—originated in Eurocentric understandings of the 'nation-state, belonging, citizenship and the right to move and in the European colonialism and European migration regimes that

emerged after the Second World War in the context of the Cold War (Chimni 1998). These observations of Africa's subordination and acceptance of international law are of central concern to those global South scholars who advocate Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAAIL) (Chimni 1998).

From the 1960s onwards, European visa restrictions were aimed primarily at preventing the in-migration of people from former colonies to the metropolises. Citizens from white-dominated countries have greater access to Europe and to African countries than Africans who seek to enter Europe, who have to submit to the most draconian visa processes and restrictions and be racially profiled through the use of Smart border technologies (Pailey 2016; Vukov 2016; Achiume et al 2020). Achiume's (2019) call for the recognition that African economic migration to Europe represents decolonisation in practice, or reverse colonialism, which could reform the political communities in Europe by reflecting their colonial links, is unlikely to be realised due to the prevalence of xenophobia and racism in Europe (De Genova 2016). Indeed, as Pailey (2016: npn) notes, 'we can't dismiss mobility restrictions that deliberately humiliate one group while honouring another'.

Colonial racist immigration policies were initially adopted by African states who replicated visa restrictions against Africans from neighbouring territories. The 2020 Africa Visa Openness Index report published by the Africa Development Bank (ADB) was aimed at promoting freedom of movement for 'accelerated development'. It noted that Africans could travel visa-free to only 26 per cent of African countries. Visas were required to travel to 46 per cent, although

the trend over time was downward. The quest for freedom of movement within the continent cannot be achieved as long as leaders conform to European logics of territory and of racialised mobilities.

### **African attempts to reclaim agency over migration**

Pan-African leaders in Africa have espoused the necessity of regional and continental freedom of movement. Periodically, they have articulated ambitious visions, some of which have been put into practice partially, as in the Economic Community of West African States, which has progressively removed visa requirements for citizens travelling within that region since 1979. While other regional economic unions have referenced the need for freedom of movement, such as the East African Community and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), moves towards enacting this ambition have been weak and, in some countries, non-existent. SADC's Labour Migration Action Plan 2020–2025 (LMAP), which aims at 'strengthening labour migration policies and regulatory systems for better labour migration governance', could reproduce colonial regional labour migration policies that were based on the 'thingification' of the African as 'an instrument of production' (Césaire 2000: 42).

A Pan-Africanist approach to migration questions and contextualises migration policies that emanate from the global North and articulates alternative policies that dignify Africans. At the continental level, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, established in 2018, aims to enable the free movement of people. For this to be realised, Pan-Africans will have to think independently of the mi-

gration governance structures being promoted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations International Organisation for Migration (UN IOM), whose policies are informed primarily by the needs of Europe, as in the Action Plan of the Valletta 2015 Summit on Migration with North African states. The African Union 2015 Declaration on Migration contained the elements of a progressive stance on intracontinental migration. However, its revised Migration Policy Framework for Africa (2018) and Plan of Action (2018–2027) are more aligned with the UN's Global Compact on Migration, in which external priorities predominate.

Characteristically, the international community's response to African initiatives is to provide donor funding and to shape policies in the process of collaborating in the implementation of these initiatives. Through IOM and Western government sponsorship, some African states have been able to enhance the digital technology used in migration monitoring, which includes data sharing. While this is portrayed as a win-win security strategy, it also serves to ensure that the West, in particular the European Union, can access biometric databases to track and return 'irregular' Africans entering EU territory, which is legitimated by the war on terror (IOM 2020; Brachet 2016). Pan-Africanists should question whether an EU that practises racialised mobility and has allowed thousands of Africans to die in the Mediterranean can be a force of good with respect to intracontinental migration.

Geopolitical considerations linked to humanitarian discourse and interventions govern the mobility of refugees in Africa. Here, too, policies and practices have been ra-

cialised. International refugee law was not designed with Africans or global South people in mind (Mayblin 2017). The United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention was established to address the fact of post-Second World War European refugees. With colonialism still present on the continent and racial segregation in the USA, the West did not perceive Africans as having human rights that needed to be protected (Chimni 1998).

In the 1960s, anticolonialism and Pan-Africanism led to one of the most progressive approaches to mobility on the continent, as newly independent African states were able to take a principled stance against colonial domination, allowing the in-migration of those fleeing colonial rule and providing sanctuary to liberation movements from white-dominated states. In 1963, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) set up a special committee—the OAU Liberation Committee, with a regional office in Dar es Salaam. The aim of the Committee was to harmonise the assistance provided in aid of African liberation struggles and to encourage co-operation (Biney 2018; Brankamp and Daley 2020).

Because the anticolonial struggles, as in Rwanda and Burundi in the late 1950s, and the fleeing of people to neighbouring colonial territories occurred simultaneously with the beginning of the Cold War, at that time Western states saw African refugee populations as a security threat. In 1967, a protocol to the 1951 Refugee Convention was added, which allowed for ‘humanitarian’ intervention in the newly independent states. African states were encouraged to align their laws with international ones. However, African recognition of the inapplicability of UN legislation to local contexts resulted in the drawing

up of regional legislation, the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention. But despite being Africa-owned and addressing the anticolonial struggles on the continent, the content of the OAU Convention relied heavily on the UN’s 1967 protocol (Brankamp and Daley 2020).

In the absence of local financial support for refugees, Western governments and African political elites, through the UN, have sought to control the mobility of refugee communities, depoliticising them where the political interests of the refugees and host/international community do not coincide. In 2020, Africa hosted 25 per cent of the global refugee population. As Western countries become more draconian in their approach to refugees, so have African countries. The West’s increasing anti-refugee discourse and policies have set the agenda and dictate migration policy in contemporary Africa. Since the war on terror and the 2014 Arab Spring, Europe has increased the securitisation of migration from Africa to Europe and reinforced its anti-migrant stance (Tinti 2018; Fakhoury 2016). Europe’s offshoring and outsourcing of its border work make African states complicit in its racialised restrictive policies that involve criminalisation, containment and detention - perpetuating the dehumanisation of Africans. The adoption of detention in transit countries as a preventative strategy violates the human rights of Africans seeking a better life. As Césaire (2000) notes, the ‘collective hypocrisy’ of Europe is ‘indefensible’.

Outright hostility to migrants and refugees in the global North and growing criticisms of trends in international migration and asylum policies have led to slight changes in the discourse on refugees in Africa. A more neoliberal agenda

is emerging, viewing refugees as an economic resource (Crush et al 2017), which claims to ‘challenge the narrative on African migration’ (IOM 2021). But although the UN’s Comprehensive Refugee Framework and the Global Compact on Migration emphasise multi-stakeholder solutions, refugees themselves are still positioned at the bottom of the list of powerful international and national actors. Changing the narrative on migration in Africa requires emancipatory thought at the regional level, not international interventions.

### Humanizing Mobility

Living transnationally is part of the everyday practices of Africans whose communities have been divided by colonial boundaries, even if a national consciousness has emerged in some states since independence. Nyamnjoh (2017: 258), referring to the incompleteness of this state of being where identities are not fixed but always in the making, considers Africans ‘frontier beings’, who ‘contest taken-for-granted and often institutionalised and bounded ideas and practices of being, becoming, belonging, places and space, and ‘seeking conversations with and between divides’. At the South Africa/Zimbabwe frontier, Moyo (2016) notes, the realities of the complex identities of the ‘border citizens’ who have a long history of ‘defying strict regulatory regimes’. Across the continent, border flexibility is negotiated everyday by traders; religious practitioners visiting shrines, churches, and mosques; and people attending ceremonial and family events. These everyday mobilities tend to be criminalized unless enacted via state-sanctioned avenues for mobility that formal laws uphold, and explain the need for nuanced understandings, if Africans are to live fulfilling lives as hu-

man beings. Exclusionary border practices and racialization mean that Africans residing in Europe are routinely denied visas for their Africa-based relatives to attend family functions, such as weddings and funerals. African states should not be influenced by the West to deny the right to liveable lives for the continents' citizens.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I argue that contemporary approaches to migration have to take into consideration racialised histories of migration, the universalisation of the 'nation-state' as an ideal political community and the imposition of borders and political boundaries to govern flows of people and goods. In the post-independence period, the reliance on external donor funds for managing migration has meant that the modern African state has continued to operate using these colonial logics. Pan-Africanist approaches to migration reveal how policies that have disrupted the colonial narrative have come from within Africa, notably the OAU Liberation Committee, the African Union's progressive stance on making the African diaspora the sixth region of the continent and Ghana opening citizenship to the old African diasporas. These actions signal a shift away from the national territorial focus of European concepts of belonging to one that is transnational and inclusive. A Pan-Africanist approach requires a decentring of the economic arguments for and against migration that reproduce colonial logics of subjugation and exploitation. Such thinking would involve reducing the emphasis on remittances, labour market demand, donor funding and Western humanitarian intervention. Instead, it would humanise migration by engaging with

the multiplicity of mobilities that people participate in, and should be free to undertake, within and between continents, and exploring the flexibility, sociality and conviviality that exist between communities. Such an approach would break with the continued coloniality of being to which African migrants have been subjected.

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## PUBLISHED / PUBLIÉ

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ISSN 0850 3907



COUNCIL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCE  
RESEARCH IN AFRICA  
CONSEIL POUR LE DÉVELOPPEMENT DE LA RECHERCHE  
EN SCIENCES SOCIALES EN AFRIQUE

### AFRICA DEVELOPMENT AFRIQUE ET DEVELOPPEMENT

Vol. XLV, No. 4, 2020

Papers from the  
2017 CODESRIA's Meaning-making Research Initiatives (MRI)

Articles issus des  
Initiatives de recherche pour la construction du sens (MRI) de 2017



AFRICA DEVELOPMENT

Vol. XLV, No. 4, 2020

AFRIQUE ET DEVELOPPEMENT

