

The Difference that Difference Makes: Classification, Certification and the Politics of IDs in Africa

Abstract

This lecture takes as its starting point the assertion that difference always matters. When, where and how differences are constructed and institutionalized, by whom, raises key questions about the nature of power within relationships at multiple scales and levels: not least, the relationship between states and citizens. In this lecture, I explore some of the ways in which social, political, cultural and economic categories and classifications of hierarchised differences get constructed, articulated, bureaucratized and contested within national and local regimes of certification and identification, drawing on selected African settings. I am especially interested in how the meanings and manifestations of difference shift continually and contextually, and in *what work 'difference' does* – both conceptually and empirically, explicitly and implicitly – *in the simultaneous and always relational processes of citizen making and state making.*

Introduction

I have chosen to focus this talk on difference (short-hand for *social* difference, or what Stuart Hall (1990) called '*relations of difference*'), rather than, say, *spheres of similarity*, since it is difference that has informed much of what has brought me – personally, politically and intellectually – to here and now. Difference continues to be a crucial lens for me, for thinking broadly and critically about both *social relations and structures of injustice and inequality*, and as a necessary prompt for *transformative practices* on multiple levels.

An awareness of *difference always mattering* has shaped most of the academic work I've committed myself to over the past few decades, coming to the fore even more overtly in my current collaborative research project on certifications of citizenship and the practices and politics of IDs in Africa, as I'll explain a little later.

But as I'll talk about shortly, it started early on in my life with a *consciousness* about *specific kinds of difference, and their differentiating effects*. This is a consciousness that, appropriately, one cannot un-do. With it, over the course of my life, has been a compelling and persistent need to pay attention to and understand difference in its various *lived, structural and structuring forms*. Part of this has included a need to *name* differences where and when they have mattered, and to examine both their symbolic and material significance and

implications in particular contexts, be these at individual, social, national or global scales. Inevitably, this has also meant thinking hard about the relationship between *representation*, *knowledge* and *power*. Complex and challenging stuff, for sure, and not always comfortable for myself or others, but nonetheless necessary. Silence, or the denial of differences, are not options.

Although all this might sound like I'm heading towards outlining a political manifesto, that's not my intention (or at least not quite!). What I am intending to do during the next forty-five minutes or so, is to share with you the ways in which difference has mattered in my own thinking and some of my work, what kinds of influences within critical scholarship I've valued, and why I believe a consciousness about difference matters, and should matter analytically, somehow, in all our work as academics, students, creatives, planners, policy makers, people.

What I will do first though, is to talk briefly about my own beginnings of consciousness about difference. This constitutes the *empirical grounding* I could say, for the subsequent theoretical and analytical work that would later help me articulate – more or less explicitly – how and why difference matters and how to engage with it and its diverse manifestations politically and intellectually.

I will then talk a little about some of the more significant theoretical and analytical influences that have shaped my approaches to difference, particularly drawing on feminist, Africanist and decolonial perspectives.

I will then briefly outline some of key questions around difference, and some framing ideas related to IDs and certifications of citizenship, before sharing with you a few illustrative empirical examples with which they resonate to some extent.

I will conclude with some final reiterations of why difference matters.

Beginnings of consciousness

I have been *conscious* about **both lived and structural difference** for as long as I can remember. How could I not be, as a white child growing up in a deeply racialized settler-colonial state like the former Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) – where race and class (and, more silently, gender) shaped structures, relationships and possibilities in almost every sense. How could I not be, as the Jewish grandchild of two sets of grandparents whose families had had to flee

anti-semitic pogroms in Lithuania in the 1890s, making forced immigrants out of them in turn-of-the century southern Africa, at a time when Jews, Greeks, Italians and Irish were defined as racially inferior (Goldberg 2009). A Jewish teenager whose Friday nights – spent with extended family around the Sabbath table, where blessings over the candles, bread and wine were said in Hebrew – would have seemed utterly alien to the majority of my non-Jewish school mates. In turn, how could I not be acutely conscious of the violence of politically defined ethnic, racial and religious differences when compelled to migrate at seventeen with my parents (thankfully, temporarily) to a country that wasn't mine – Israel – and witnessing there the kinds of apartheid-like conditions imposed on Palestinians that my family had long opposed in southern Africa. And how could I not be conscious of the significance of differences around gender and sexuality as a young gay adult, confronted with multiple layers of more or less subtle expressions of homophobia everywhere at the time, and needing to navigate in diverse contexts the delicate lines between visibility and invisibility.

These were just some of the early beginnings of thinking consciously about difference, both my own, and others' at a much larger scale. In my teens and twenties – those decades typical of intense and perhaps even dogmatic awareness – recognising difference everywhere, and unpacking its complex meanings and multiple effects, became even more acute. This became part of my everyday professional life in the early 1980s, when I returned to Zimbabwe after concluding my studies in the UK, and worked in the newly independent and evolving Zimbabwe state in various planning and policy-related positions.

At that time, the *discourse* of the new Zanu PF government – and to a large, if uneven extent also the *practice* of the state – was a seemingly *inclusive national project*, aimed at reversing *the racialized past* in all its symbolic and structural manifestations. Among other things, this entailed Africanising the bureaucracy, massively expanding primary education and health care services, and trying to push ahead with a land redistribution programme, constrained though it was for the first ten years by the conditions of the compromise Lancaster House constitution.

However, even in the early part of the first decade of independence, that is, in the mid-1980s, the façade of inclusive nationalism masked a treacherous project of ethno-politicide – that is, a campaign to annihilate either directly or indirectly a group of citizens associated simply through their ethnicity with a

political opposition. In an attempt to crush a regionally based opposition, ZAPU, in the mostly Ndebele-speaking rural areas of Matabeleland and Midlands provinces, Robert Mugabe unleashed the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade to conduct what's known as *Gukurahundi*. This campaign led to mass killings and unaccounted for disappearances of an estimated 20,000 people, with hundreds of thousands of others terrorised and traumatized. The legacy of this mass violence and trauma was profound and is still strongly felt in the region, and yet talking openly about Gukurahundi at times has been actively banned and at others more subtly silenced through forms of intimidation. String echoes of this kind of violence, though no longer ethnicised in this narrow way, have been meted out to political opponents of the ruling Zanu PF systematically during the past two decades. Persistently over this period, identifying openly with the opposition party, and expressing one's difference from Zanu PF loyalists, particularly but not only close to elections, has led to extreme violence at times. To a large extent, this has over-ridden any other form of possible solidarity, for example in class terms, in the face of deep impoverishment.

What I meant to illustrate with all this, perhaps somewhat crudely here, are the context-specific and shifting ways in which different kinds of differences matter at different times. So what we witness is the embracing in some periods of certain *similarities* (such as a common Zimbabwean *national* identity, felt collectively at independence), which subsequently shifts quite quickly, at least within the Zanu PF party-state if not more widely, to an emphasis on irreconcilable *differences within* (here, ethnic and party-political distinctions are key), with cataclysmic effects.

Approaching difference: feminist, Africanist and decolonial pathways

I want to turn now to some of the interweaving theoretical and analytical influences that have resonated with what I earlier referred to as *the empirical groundings of my consciousness about difference*, and which have helped – and continue to help – me engage with questions of difference especially within my academic work. Broadly speaking, and I do mean *broadly*, I would refer to these core influences as *feminist, Africanist and decolonial*, all of which resonate meaningfully with each other. Of course, I am not going to map any of these fields of thought in themselves. And notably, I do not refer to any of them in a bounded, purist sense, neither in terms of specific theorists or schools of thought as such, nor in any narrow ideological sense – though clearly there *are*

such specificities and differences within. I am by nature or inclination an *eclecticist*. That means I am naturally drawn to *interdisciplinary and relational approaches*, and to scholars and ways of thinking, that open up critical questions that help reveal empirical and analytical connections, rather than being inclined towards those that use abstract theories and models that simplify complex realities, and close-down or narrow pathways of understanding.

Feminist approaches

So, starting with feminist approaches: I became actively engaged with feminist ideas, politics and practices in the late 1970s when I lived and studied in the UK. This was a period of profound consciousness-raising for me on multiple levels, but especially in terms of the kinds of sharp analytical language about difference that was being generated. But while second-wave Northern feminism in the 1970s may have started off by emphasizing *commonalities* among diverse women in relation to men as a primary axis of distinction with respect to patriarchy, by the 1980s feminist debates shifted attention more to *differences between women*. Such shifts were a response to challenges posed by working class women, lesbians, and black, Asian and Latina feminists, both in the global North and global South, to the dominance of Northern women's movements by mostly white, middle class, heterosexual women. Race and ethnicity in particular, but also class and sexuality, became key arenas of contestation, generating an intense identity politics that – while understandable – also caused painful divisions, and undermined any easy cohesion in terms of a politics of women's liberation.

But as British feminist scholar, Louise Archer noted in a 2004 article on 're/theorising difference' in feminist research, which I shall draw upon further here: "This identity politics movement was ultimately unsustainable... and the following decade [that is, the 1990s] witnessed feminist calls to reclaim the commonalities and interconnections across social difference/s between women" (Archer 2004:460). What this led to was a recognition of *partiality*, or what others have referred to as *multiple subjectivities*, but also increasing attention to the *situatedness* (Haraway, 1988) of particular differences in particular times and places. This translated, in turn, into productive theorising around *intersectionality* – that is, recognition of *a range of simultaneous, inter-related social and structural differences* – making a politics of solidarity across and *within differences of different kinds and scales* more possible.

Such insights, and their practical implications, are not only relevant for an emancipatory politics related to women, but to everyone, in all conditions of social exclusion and injustice. But clearly, deciding whether – and if so, how – to focus on *similarities or differences* is a political question. Among the kinds of large-scale political projects this informs, is the form of nationalism and approach to nation-building of different political regimes.

Crucially though, solidarity across and within differences can only be built on an understanding of and grappling with a related *politics of representation*, which itself is underpinned by a deeper politics of knowledge and power. Among other things, this is a politics that asks the fundamental question of *who has the power and authority to name, value and validate or invalidate an Other*, and how is such authority wielded in a wider institutional and political setting. As Stuart Hall states: “every regime of representation is a regime of power” (Hall 1990: 225, cited in Archer 2004: 461).

This is central to the kinds of questions about IDs and regimes of classification, categorization and certification that are at the heart of the CERTIZENS research project that I will return to later.

But just to reiterate here, one of the important things underscored by the above-mentioned processes of contestation *among* women, both locally and globally, is the need to develop a broad sense of the *complex and dynamic empirical workings – and politics – of difference, within given arenas, in and across time and space*.

In other words, the forms and meanings of social differences, the power dynamics inherent in particular relations of difference, their symbolic, social and material implications, the ways in which differences are experienced and internalised, and the nature of the struggles they generate, are seldom even or static over time and space.

And yet they cannot simply be read as endlessly fluid and shifting. There are some kinds of differences that are more persistent and enduring, both discursively and structurally – race, class and gender being among the most obvious in many contexts. Equally there are some differences that are more or less escapable or re-definable, individually, socially, politically or institutionally.

Again drawing on Louise Archer (2004:462), she argues that “the boundaries of difference are constantly re-negotiated and in flux while broad structures of inequality remain consistent and in place”. Similarly, she notes that “social

differences are processual, contextual and active (being constantly produced and re-worked) and are thus partial and incomplete but they are also “real”, being embodied ([that is] marked/inscribed and produced through “the body”).”

What all this points to is that *understanding the dynamics of difference* requires both methodologically and theoretically rigorous empirical research and analysis of *historically situated, context-specific* formations and relations of difference and their diverse effects.

This kind of framework is not much different from what critical African Studies and Africanists are committed to, alongside decolonial scholars. So let me turn perhaps more briefly now to how both have been important for thinking about difference.

Africanist thinking, decolonial provocations

By Africanist, I mean both African scholarship and scholarship on Africa by more or less self-defined Africanist scholars, both sets of which include but aren't limited to those who consciously associate with African Studies. I am both an African and Africanist who most decidedly associates myself within the framework of critical African Studies. I was on my way to this 'identity', if I can call it that, the first time I attended an African Studies Association conference in Leeds in 1997. But at the time I had just started a PhD in Development Studies at Roskilde University, which is quite notably different from African Studies. So I would say that I really became more conscious of what it meant to adopt such a label explicitly as late as 2006, when I went to work at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala. It then became more consolidated as a core identity, and form of internalized everyday politics, since taking up my position at CAS at the beginning of 2010, and has intensified ever since!

Of course, I cannot present any such thing as a singular approach that could be called 'Africanist'. The very idea of that is obviously absurd. But what I can and will do is condense and combine a few of the key principles gleaned from others, including from some explicitly decolonial thinkers, that inform my own intellectual positioning as an Africanist within African Studies, and which have *overall* relevance for questions of difference.

Just as a brief footnote here, in terms of decoloniality: both in the interests of time, and because I see such close echoes of this kind of thinking within and through feminism and critical African Studies – even if not named directly as

such – its core ideas are integrated here. Decoloniality refers in particular to concerns with, and calls to expose, forms of epistemic ignorance, erasure and violence inherent in what decolonial Africanist scholar and fellow Zimbabwean, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, calls the persistence of global forms of coloniality, that “continue to reproduce a particular form of African subjectivity that is characterized by “deficits” and “lacks”” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014).

Returning now to what might be considered some key principles of a critical (and decolonial) African Studies, which combine ethical, theoretical and methodological elements and implications, I borrow here from some relevant Africanist scholars:

- For example, as Liberian scholar Robtel Pailey argues, the work of critical African Studies and Africanists is: “to constantly interrogate epistemological, methodological, and theoretical approaches to the study of Africa, [that] insert [...] Africa and its people at the centre of that interrogation as subjects, rather than objects” (Pailey 2016: 2)
- For Malawian historian, Paul Zeleza, it entails ensuring “the production, organisation, dissemination, and consumption of knowledges that enhance, rather than undermine, Africa’s possibilities” (Zeleza, 2006: 29).
- Similarly, for renowned Cameroonian political philosopher, Achille Mbembe, what’s at stake is countering the narratives of Africa as something of “lesser value, little importance, and poor quality”; as “incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished” (Mbembe 2015: 1-4).
- Kessi, Marks and Romogundo argue that “Decolonization...is best understood as a verb that entails a political and normative ethic and practice of resistance and intentional undoing – unlearning and dismantling unjust practices, assumptions and institutions – as well as persistent positive action to create and build alternative spaces and ways of knowing” (Kessi, Marks and Romogundo 2020:271)
- Partly echoing others, I see the practice of critical African Studies as necessarily entailing a consciousness of, and active commitment to **addressing the historical epistemic erasures and unevennesses in knowledge production** about Africa, which – as others argue for –

recognizes Africa's own multiple, generative centres of theory and knowing.

- But more generically, and more pragmatically, as my colleagues and I at CAS have discussed and collectively reiterated many times, crucially it demands **interdisciplinary and relational approaches** in both research and teaching. Intrinsic to this, is taking serious account of empirical context and interconnectedness in all their particular temporal and spatial dimensions. In some senses, one might talk here of a form of **Africanist intersectionality**. Either way, such approaches are both necessary in themselves, and in the critical challenge they pose to dangerous simplifications and stereotypes.

Of course, while many of the more general concerns with and approaches to difference generated by feminist sensibilities also apply here, inevitably African Studies is confronted with two more particular kinds of challenges around difference.

On the one hand, as a dynamically diverse continent in itself, both pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa is characterized by an abundance of interweaving differences – spatial, cultural, social, political and economic – that shape particular realities. Among these are diversities, interconnections and contestations related not least to ethnicity, race, religion, gender, class, nationality, political loyalty, and more. The key concern, here, is that despite much attention to and understanding of the particularities of such differences locally, and among scholars located in the critical social sciences and humanities including African Studies both on and off the continent, there are tendencies within normative and classic positivist sciences that repeatedly simplify patterns of difference. This has led, for example, to readings and representations of differences as *inevitably* generative of conflict and violence, and policy prescriptions and direct interventions with disastrous effects. This is despite the available evidence of complexity, diversity and change.

On the other hand, there is the challenge of addressing the reality that there are certain specific dimensions of difference shaped by what is a more or less continent-wide postcolonial context. This refers particularly to the question of race. So for example, as Jamaican-born Africanist scholar Jemima Pierre notes, “how could any postcolonial society not be structured by its legacy of race and racialization – especially when colonialism was, in the most ideological, political,

and practical way, racialized rule?” (Pierre 2013: 550) Ironically though, despite this astute observation, Pierre, among others, bemoans the fact that in much contemporary study of Africa – with the exception of southern African studies – there is an “actual *lack* of racial analysis” (ibid). Pailey (2018) notes the same within Development Studies.

What all this points to, more generally speaking, are *the dangers of simplification*. More specifically, it underscores either a lack of awareness, or capacity, or intention in much mainstream science, to *recognize* and name difference in its various manifestations, and to examine how it works, who it affects, how and why.

This brings me back to the call-out by critical Africanists and feminists alike, to acknowledge the profound responsibility we have for confronting not only the wider effects of epistemological ignorance and violence, but more directly the structures of inequality and exclusion that are founded on both historical and persistent regimes of power and hierarchies of social difference.

There is no avoiding such responsibility. As Louise Archer argues, even if one is merely a scholar rather than an activist, “the ways in which we think about, and theorize, social differences directly influence the ways in which particular groups and issues are represented and treated [for real] in the [so-called] “outside” world” (Archer 2004: 470).

But what does all this heavy thinking about difference boil down to in practice, or *as* practice?

Focusing on the difference that difference/s makes in practice (TDTDM)

What I’m suggesting in the first instance, which largely repeats what I’ve said so far, is that to think about difference is, necessarily, to *have to* think about both **context** (historical, spatial, social, political, etcetera – which establishes the why), and about **the ways** (largely the how) in which *particular forms of difference* emerge, be these externally- or internally constructed.

More pragmatically and perhaps systematically, it prompts a set of broad analytical questions, which need to be applied to specific empirical realities. These include the following:

- What kinds of dominant patterns and expressions of social difference shape a given context?

- Which kinds of particular differences become newly significant in specific historical-social-political-economic contexts, and why?
- How do the range of social differences get defined and valued, by whom, within what logics and hierarchies of value?
- In what ways do such hierarchies of value – that often rest on a particular naturalized Norm, set against deviant Others – get essentialised and institutionalized, and with what benefits and disadvantages for whom?
- How and why are particular differences reproduced, resisted, and/or self-reinforced, with what consequences?

Naturally, not all of these questions or prompts are relevant or applicable in every research or academic context. Part of them might interweave productively with other kinds of important research considerations and explorations, as has been the case with previous research projects in my past.

In an earlier version of this lecture, I had planned to talk a little about how manifestations and considerations of difference influenced or emerged from these earlier projects. But wisely, I have chosen to spare you this lengthy and unnecessary detour.

Classification, Certification and the Politics of IDs in Africa (4 pages)

Instead, I will now finally turn to questions of difference in relation to thinking about citizen classification and certification, and the politics of IDs, with reference to some selected African settings.

Let me start though with a number of *more general yet foundational statements* about national identification and registration systems and about national IDs in themselves, much of which have both shaped and been shaped by our CERTZENS project:

- While certainly not the only relevant factor, formal identification documents – and specifically national IDs – are profoundly implicated in the nature of citizenship; that is, in the particular form of relationship between differently positioned citizens and the multi-dimensional state, and in the ongoing dynamics of struggle over citizen making and state making.

- Trying to uncover and understand the relationship between national IDs and processes of citizen making and state making, requires attention to a range of inter-related levels and dimensions of national registration. Among others these include: histories, continuities and changes in the political and cultural logics, the bureaucratic modes and capacities, and the forms of materiality and technologies applied to citizen classification and certification.
- Both within and alongside formal, institutional frameworks responsible for defining, controlling and implementing national ID registration systems, are a multitude of informal and more intimate relations and practices of both citizens and bureaucrats, that – whether deliberately or not – either enhance or delay, contradict or even sabotage the seemingly non-partisan, seemingly technical process of citizen certification.
- Indeed, there is little that is neutral, non-partisan, or merely technical about citizen classification and certification processes in practice. But such processes and their diverse effects are always empirically and historically specific within particular contexts.
- Lastly, and related to this, *national* IDs or national ID systems, on one level, are fundamentally about defining and policing the boundaries of ‘the nation’ itself. In this sense, national constitutions usually provide the terms under which differences among citizens are classified and hierarchised. However, such terms are not static. Constitutional changes, driven or riven by shifting political ideologies and projects, recurrently re-shape the boundaries of national belonging, with far-reaching consequences usually for the already most marginalized.
- Yet on another more mundane level, national IDs are part of *a politics of the everyday*. Gaining access to one’s national ID, or not, entails countless encounters with state officials by the full range of ordinary and less ordinary citizens of different classes, genders, ethnicities, ages, national origins, and so on. Almost all such encounters are marked by forms of differentiated entitlement and treatment, linked to the particular kinds of difference that any given citizen visibly or invisibly manifests, and the way

in which such difference is read by any given bureaucrat. This has direct implications for both individuals and classes of people, in terms of their access to various rights and protections, to resources and services, to places and property, and to personhood and self-defined ways of being

All this might sound somewhat abstract. Yet to be sure, it is not at all so in practice, as a number of my fellow researchers within the CERTIZENS Project can easily confirm, as can the growing number of researchers now working on ID issues in Africa. But it has also been verified by my own experiences in Zimbabwe, not only in applying for my Zimbabwean national registration card and passport at different times, but also in relation to empirical research I undertook in Zimbabwe almost a decade ago. This research, in fact, constitutes a kind of origin story for CERTIZENS, in that it's what first drew my attention to IDs, and later prompted my interest and commitment to developing a much larger research project together with several partners in Denmark, Ghana and Uganda.

Mazwi: an origin story

So starting with the so-called origin story, I first started to think about ID documents in earnest around 2012/2013, while working on a previous research project on urban displacement and resettlement in the urban periphery of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, based in Matabeleland (in the region I previously referred to with respect to the Gukurahundi massacres in the mid-1980s). In brief, the research followed ethnographically the resettlement in a place called Mazwi, of two groups of recurrently displaced informally settled urban residents, commonly termed 'squatters', constituting around two hundred households in all. Most had never lived securely during their lifetimes, but for a combination of unusual factors constituting a particular political and bureaucratic conjuncture, they were allocated plots of land by the Bulawayo City Council, and were built two-roomed concrete houses by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

IDs were in no planned way part of my research. However, at a community meeting I attended in Mazwi in mid-2013, the newly settled residents were informed by the city council quite pointedly that in order to validate their ownership of their new properties, and receive their title deeds, all they needed to do was to bring their national IDs to the council's local housing office.

At the time, as I was soon to discover, more than two thirds of those resettled had no such ID documents, despite these being a right for all citizens, and the IDs in themselves not costing much if anything. On further investigation, with the help of my much valued local research partner Vusa Chirwa, I learned in more detail how much more chronic and complicated this pattern of ID-lessness was, especially, and not surprisingly, among those perpetually positioned on the urban margins.

For a start, many of the Mazwi residents, while born in Zimbabwe and having spent all their lives there, had parents who had been migrants during the colonial era from countries like Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique. Their parents had died, often leaving them without their own birth certificates – a pre-requisite for accessing a national ID card – nor with any easy way of tracing their distant relatives abroad in order to secure some kind of familial verification. Additionally, as urbanites without any rural origins within Zimbabwe, they couldn't easily find a chief or village headman to vouch for them, and in this way help them get birth certificates. Added to this, many of those who had previously had documents, had lost them at some point or other when being chased away by municipal police from illegal settlements or in some cases having their properties bulldozed or burned down.

Lastly, despite their good fortune in being allocated houses, many of the Mazwi settlers in 2013-2014 – more than a decade into Zimbabwe's persistent and punishing crisis – were among the poorest of Zimbabwe's citizens. Mazwi was largely a no-cash space, being a long distance from opportunities for piecemeal work in Bulawayo, and no apparent livelihood possibilities in Mazwi itself. For some households, even finding the few dollars needed to take the almost twenty kilometer journey to town to try and get their IDs, or birth certificates for their children, was beyond their reach. They were further discouraged by stories from those who had IDs, and who had tried to get their leases issued by the local housing officer, but had been confronted with a range of 'delaying' tactics, in the hope of extracting rent for providing services.

This combination of factors and the extremely challenging realities for a majority of Mazwi's new residents, brought into view not only the epidemic scale of the lack of IDs in Zimbabwe, echoing global trends, but also its lived effects. It also underscored the precarious relationship of certain kinds of citizens to the state systems and agencies responsible for the broader ID

registration framework, and the limited possibilities for such citizens to access the IDs to which they are constitutionally entitled.

This is by no means an unusual situation in African contexts. One of our CERTIZENS PhDs, Isaac Owusu Nsiah, is working on the position of Fulani in Ghana. Although still at an early stage, his work highlights the cultural politics of national belonging and of institutionalised exclusion that shapes Fulanis' lived citizenship in the absence of legal access to the newly introduced national ID, the Ghana Card.

Similarly, in Uganda, one part of the research project of one of our senior CERTIZENS researchers, Toke Møldrup Wolff, will be looking at the empirical realities and implications for Maragoli communities and individuals, of being one of the more than twenty ethnic minorities in Uganda excluded from constitutional recognition of their entitlement to citizenship. Although also only in the early phase of his research, through preliminary fieldwork late last year, he has already begun to trace some of the inventive if illegal tactics of Maragolis to try to circumvent such exclusion and access national IDs by other means. This is pointing to certain kinds of informalities aimed at countering the standardized bureaucratic certification and registration practices, producing what he calls 'messy formalities'.

In both the Ghana and Uganda cases, as well as in Zimbabwe, one cannot avoid acknowledging that the state is key to classifying categories and hierarchies of citizenship, not least through defining and controlling the terms of access to one of the key symbolic and material manifestations of its authority to recognise the validity of some and not others, namely the national ID card.

At the same time, African citizens in diverse, differentiated and often shifting positions, engage in a range of both disciplined and undisciplined practices, that at times may recognise the state's authority to validate them, and at others may ignore or undermine it.

In conclusion: why does talking about social difference matter?

In drawing to a close, I want to return to why paying attention to social difference matters, and specifically to what this means with respect to the politics of IDs in Africa, and elsewhere, in the present neoliberal and increasingly digitized era.

Perhaps I should have spoken earlier with respect to IDs, about some of the more recent global-level phenomena that have had significant effects, both directly and indirectly, on national registration systems in Africa, as elsewhere. Firstly, one should note that the establishment in 2015 of the Sustainable Development Goals and especially SDG 16.9, which calls, albeit somewhat vaguely, for ‘legal identity for all’, has been highly impactful in altering both the global development agenda, and in prompting greater attention by national states especially across Africa to reform or upgrade their national identification and registration systems.

Alongside SDG 16.9, the World Bank continues to intensively promote specifically digital national ID ‘solutions’ through its ID4D – or Identification for Development – programme, modelled in many ways on India’s enormous and problematic national Aadhaar system. This promotion has not only ‘manufactured consent’ around appropriate options, but in turn, generated massive funding from various sources, including from the Gates Foundation, for private sector involvement in developing and even running digitized national ID systems.

Paired with this has been the exponential growth in the expansion and sophistication of digital technologies over the past decade. The companies with such expertise not only offer, but to some extent *initiate* digital ID solutions, or make what I’m more inclined to call *digital interventions* in national ID systems.

A common effect of such digital interventions is the concentration of multiple national registration and ID systems into a single, centralised form, countering or even entirely cancelling out a range of much older, broader, decentralized spaces and forms of recognition, verification and certification of citizens. One example is Nigeria, in which there were previously around sixteen types of IDs, each collecting their own biometrics. The argument was made that to reduce this to just one centralized ID system – a process that would cost an estimated USD 1.3 billion – would ‘minimise waste’. Undoubtedly, these kinds of reforms are likely to have a range of undermining effects on various forms of local authority, changing relationships between local state actors and others in leadership positions, and their constituencies, with unknown political consequences.

At the same time, the intensification of digitisation has set in motion as-yet unprecedented scales of datafication of citizens, where some critics argue that citizen data is fast becoming the new extractive resource. There have also been

widespread critiques of the ways in which these highly centralized, de-personalised digital systems produce problematic simplifications, fixing and flattening otherwise complex, often fluid, real-life identities.

This has an eerie resonance with the changes introduced in South Africa in the early 1950s by the apartheid architects of the National Party, to the so-called population registration system. As Deborah Posel (2001) has described, this instituted a major shift from the pre-1948 context that was marked by ‘chaotic legal pluralism’ and decentralised and even personalized ‘situational judgement’ on population status and registration, open to **personal interpretation by state officials**. Using the instrument of the 1950 Population Registration Act, and claiming this was about modernization and efficiency, what it introduced instead was a far **more rigid and far reaching system** in terms of surveillance, control and organized exclusion. In addition, social – and primarily racial categories – were in fact ‘fixed for life’, with dire consequences for the majority of non-white South Africans

The overall discourse around digitalization plays squarely into legitimizing discourses of enhancing efficiency in ID production and coverage, so as to seemingly increase inclusive citizenship and access to services. But there is evidence in various contexts of such systems generating substantial, and even discriminatory exclusions instead. Indeed, legal suits have been brought forward in several countries related to a range of exclusionary effects and other ethical concerns, including in Assam in India, in Kenya, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia and Mexico.

At the same time, there is the persistent post-9/11 argument of enhancing security. Alongside all this, there is a clear push from the World Bank and others for such systems to expand financialisation, or in other words, grow markets everywhere.

Finally...

Obviously, not everything about the expansion of digitalised ID systems is bad in itself. What is problematic, however, is when such systems are being promoted – even pushed – by powerfully influential actors such as the World Bank, and when they largely ignore the evidence-based critiques presented to them. Of course, national governments are ultimately responsible for the systems they choose, but these are seldom unbiased or entirely ‘free’ choices.

But what all this confronts us with as critical scholars is a need to retain an acute conceptual and practical consciousness about the realities and implications of social differences and differentiations. With this comes a responsibility to challenge, through ethnographically deep and analytically critical scholarship, the kinds of systems that are helping to make such differences invisible while simultaneously reinforcing them.

In relation to this, I repeat from earlier Louise Archer's argument that:

“the ways in which we think about, and theorize, social differences directly influence the ways in which particular groups and issues are represented and treated [for real] in the [so-called] “outside” world” (Archer 2004: 470).

Additionally, and as a last word, I repeat what I said earlier myself: there is no avoiding such responsibility.

Thankyou

THE END

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