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Mis-taken identity

Being and not being Asian, African and British

Karim Murji

This article offers an auto/biographical approach to understanding the links between transnational migration, citizenship and identity. It explores the relationship between fixed and fluid identities in the lives of migrants through consideration of a puzzle about essentialised identities in the form of 'roots' against more plastic identities in the form of 'routes'. Both the appeal of and some problems with this dichotomy are discussed. Drawing on personal and familial auto/biography, the paper delves into the identities of East African Asians and their capacity to both be and not be African, Asian or British at different times and places. The key argument is that felt and ascribed identities operate in uneven ways that are not reducible to matters of personal choice or structural determination. The context of the discussion and the examples used are intended to underline the key intervention this article aims to make – the enduring significance of being racially or ethnically marked as Asian as the process by which identity is, or can be, reduced into a singular form.

While both migration and identity have been explored through various literary, historical and biographical means, the range of the diasporas that have been covered in these ways remains uneven and partial. While that is perhaps inevitable, in this article I try to utilise such resources to offer an additional strand to explorations of transnational migration, citizenship and identity. My approach draws upon some elements of auto/biography to illuminate aspects of being both 'inside' and 'outside' particular identities and nations. It also raises questions about sameness and difference and of these as changeable and not fixed relationships. In developing this view, I am not denying the power of racialisation – particularly through legislation and the enforcement power of nation states – to exclude 'others'; indeed I say more about racialisation in the article. Nor do I underestimate the role of factors such as poverty and inequality in determining the life chances of migrants. It just happens that the focus of my efforts here is oriented towards different ends. That end is a question about the relationship between fixed and fluid identities in the lives of migrants. I explore a puzzle about essentialised identities in the form of 'roots' against more plastic identities in the form of 'routes'. The appeal of the latter is precisely that it undermines and rejects the certainties of fixed identity positions and this is valuable when racial and ethnic marking has been so prominent in migration policy and debate in Britain and across Europe (Small and Solomos, 2006). At its worst, this has aimed to keep out or restrict the entry of various 'undesirable'

groups cast as racially or culturally other. In other guises, it has aimed to assimilate or integrate migrants, in more or less coercive ways. In the UK, discussions about 'Britishness'¹ and national identity have often framed questions about who belongs, and on what terms. For example, in 2007 a government Commission on Integration and Cohesion in Britain suggested that migrants might be required to learn English as a condition of citizenship.

The relationship between *ascribed* fixed and *felt* fluid identities in the lives of migrants is also related to questions of attachment and belonging. Exploring this in the context of my own life, I draw upon a literary expression of the idea of being 'in between' in the form of a recent novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, by the Canadian South Asian writer M. G. Vassanji.² The particular identity under consideration here is that of people regarded as (and calling themselves) 'East African Asians', though this itself requires clarification. This community (in the loosest sense of that word) has found itself able to inhabit all and none of the three identities signalled in my subtitle – sometimes simultaneously. The relationship between these identity positions is what my discussion seeks to shed light on through some personal examples. In using the notion of 'mis-taken' identities, I am referring to the many ways in which identities are assumed (in both the given and taken senses of the word), rather than suggesting any belief in a true, singular or essential identity. My aim is to highlight a view of identities that are 'pushed' and 'pulled' in different directions. These directions or tendencies are ones over which we have control, but only to some degree. In this sense, my discussion is related to the famous Du Boisian notion of double consciousness, though with more emphasis on seeing oneself through the eyes of others than on an inner psychodynamic conflict.

The reflections or vignettes used are drawn from notes and jottings made about events in the last few years that struck me as memorable and odd. These were written down as close to the event as possible, either immediately or soon thereafter. However, in one case I mention an event that occurred in my childhood, so I cannot claim that it is anything other than a distant recollection. In both cases, in narrating some events in my life I am not claiming to be able to see myself transparently or as an undivided subject. I accept that there are difficulties in representing oneself autobiographically, as well as seeming to speak 'on behalf of' family members (Skultans, 2000). The stories we tell about ourselves, as well as how we tell them, are aspects of self-creation and contain

1. It is important to acknowledge that British identity is itself divided and contains many internal national and regional tensions, though there is not the space to discuss this here.

2. This book won the Giller Prize in Canada. It was published there in 2003. Page references throughout are to the 2005 paperback edition.

defences and partialities, of which we may not be wholly aware. While we ‘write our-selves’ and can feel ourselves being ‘at home’ in personal narratives – both of which undermine notions of fixity (Rapport and Dawson, 1998) – I maintain that such creation does not occur independently of social divisions that can ‘place’ or shape our lives and possibilities; nor does it occur outside the social and political circumstances in which lives are lived. Aspects of my individual biography do, I think, reflect aspects of the story of a community, though it would be my wish to suggest that there are multiple, and perhaps contradictory, histories of East African Asians to be told.

Roots or routes?

...we remained that enigma, the Asians of Africa
(Vassanji, 2005, 171)

A good way to begin a discussion about fixed and mobile identities is through a puzzle about routes and roots. The established way of looking at the relationship between them is to set them as opposites. Despite their similar sound, the appeal of the dominant approach to roots/routes is that they connote very different senses of identity and belonging. The British South Asian theatre director Jatinder Verma illustrates this when asked whether the epic play *Journey to the West* was an attempt to identify his roots. He said:

It depends how you’re spelling the word ... I prefer to think of it as r-o-u-t-e-s. Roots lead backwards. Routes are more progressive, leading you to make connections with others. I’m not interested in the particular village in India where my grandfather came from. My identity is located on the road. East Africans are a real conundrum for modern anthropologists because, in some ways, we represent the future, beyond ethnicity. In a truer sense, we are world citizens. I know people who are moving on again, to America. It’s as if, having taken the first step out of India, our people are perpetually on the move. (quoted in Arnot, 2002)

Verma’s comment about routes is important because it questions the view that there is a fixed relationship between place, identity and culture. Routes, rather than roots, emphasise that identity and belonging are formed from the experience of real and imagined journeys and connections. These link people, places and histories in ways that resist the easy categorisation of Britain with white people, or Africa simply with black people. Indeed as he and I are both ‘Asian’ in some way, such easy connections are likely to be unpalatable to us. I also share some of his sense of ambivalence about identity, though I question the claim about ‘world citizens’ later.

The strength of the approach of counter-posing routes to roots is temporally derived in that the former are regarded as dynamic and forward-looking, while the latter are thought to be static and historical (Woodward, 2003). Roots seem to be about blood and belonging. When proclaimed by far right nationalist groups, roots emphasise origins, crudely summed up in the claim 'we were here first'. Sometimes they are linked to quasi-organic metaphors of identity based in land, or soil, with all the bloody consequences that such imagined essentialisms have had in recent years in Rwanda or the former Yugoslavia. However, roots have a wider appeal, for instance when adopted by Afrocentric movements that seek to tie identities back to a place of origin and the forced removal from that land through slavery. Alex Haley's popular book and 1970s' TV series *Roots* is criticised by some for feeding Afrocentric ideologies more concerned with slavery and finding a 'true' identity in Africa, rather than living in the here and now. Thus, in Gilroy's (1993) memorable terms, roots are about 'where you're from', whereas routes bring out the movements and flows – cultural, geographical and emotional – that make up 'where you're at'. The past/present tense captures precisely the temporality of roots as something we 'go back to' or seek to 'rediscover'.

Against this background, it is not hard to see the appeal of routes as a basis for identity and belonging. As Verma suggests, there are multiple connections between Britain and East Africa that undercut constructed claims about who is 'indigenous' to – or 'rooted' in – Britain. It therefore works well against exclusionary views that attempt to place migrants and minorities as 'invaders' coming from 'outside' into 'our' space and who should go back to where(ever) 'they' came from. The stress on routes identifies the (often long-standing) connections between 'them' and 'us', between what seems to be 'near' and 'far', and the ways in which identities are not static but fluid and subject to reinscription. Verma pitches that identity as one 'beyond ethnicity', though national, ethnic/racial, religious, gender and class identities could all be involved.

I do not argue with most of this, indeed I have used it with students to make the basic point above. Routes look forward and roots are both backward and illusory in the sense that they try to sustain a quasi-essentialist approach to identity. Hence, identities based on routes are more open, or more plastic, than the apparent fixities and certainties of identities founded on roots. This is obviously appealing in relation to race/ethnicity where notions of fixed and immutable identity have been prominent. Racialisation – understood as a process of race-making that seeks to solidify difference – underscores this perspective. However, while using routes against roots usefully breaks down distinctions between 'us' and 'them', 'insiders' and 'outsiders' and 'near' and 'far', it simul-

taneously sets up a number of other dichotomies between looking forward/backward, progressive/regressive, fluidity/fixity – as well as the ‘lightness’ of the present compared to ‘weightiness’ of the past – that are, I think, problematic. For this reason, I take the view that the distinction between them has been overstated and that there is a need to explore how routes and roots interconnect and intersect in the context of different experiences of migration and belonging (cf. Rapport and Dawson, 1998).

At this point, an example will help to illustrate my argument. A few months ago I went to renew my passport. As the counter clerk at the post office checked it, he pointed to my place of birth on the form and asked, ‘Where is this?’ Because UK passports list only the place and not the country of birth, I have become used to being questioned by immigration and customs officials in what I have taken to be a cursory check to establish the veracity of my identity. In this context, I assumed that was his reason for asking and I replied that it was in Tanzania. Yet the reaction was not the usual lack of interest, but a comment. The clerk said, ‘Yes, I thought so. I come from Kunguta’ (a nearby village).³ This encounter strikes me as notable only because my place of birth is a small and obscure place in southern Tanzania that I recall as a village of a few streets and houses, although it was officially classed as a township. Being reminded of it more than three decades after leaving Tanzania by a chance encounter based on going to one clerk’s window out of many in a post office is an interesting personal experience. However, in sociological and biographical terms does it connect me to my roots or my routes? In a relatively brief exchange, it is hard to pin down the clerk’s meaning and intention. Nonetheless, I think it is fair to argue that for him (and me) it meant both and not either/or. That is, we could both acknowledge our roots in a place ‘far away’ as well as our routes, or the ways in which we found ourselves in similar places many years later. The journeys or routes that brought us into proximity have been shaped by historical and political links between colony and metropolis – the existence of which can be puzzling for migrants who find themselves regarded as other. This kind of exchange and experience could characterise the life experiences of many migrants. My key point, though, is that it does not help to see these kinds of experiences in terms of notions of looking forwards (routes) or backwards (roots), or as an acclamation of either fixed or fluid identities. Simultaneously, our shared histories imply and contain both roots and routes. My position in what follows is not to reverse the dichotomy between them but to suggest an that auto/biographical approach complicates the dis-

3. This is the place where my maternal grandparents and some of their children were born, though I do not recall having heard of it before.

inction and makes it hard to take at face value, whatever its wider theoretical and political utility may be.

I think this corrective matters because it raises a conundrum about the relationship between supposedly 'rootless' mobile citizens whose mixed historical and cultural heritage and 'routes' mark them as a kind of 'citizens of the world', rather than of particular countries. This is an appealing, fluid and perhaps cosmopolitan way to think about identities in which East African Asians are, seemingly, people regularly on the move and able to make a home in different places in the world. They are exemplars of routes and not people 'rooted' in either South Asia or East Africa whose migratory experiences shape identities formed 'on the road', formed by movements across continents and of identification with more than one place. Their geographies of belonging do not operate on a national scale that limits and ties the idea of belonging to nation states. Instead, there is a quasi-hybrid, diasporic and transnational sense of belonging and identity. This contains elements of Indian, East African and British cultures, formed out of the historical and cultural connections between these parts of the world. Their migration from India to East Africa and then on to Britain led Bhachu (1985) to refer to them as 'twice migrants'. Continuing mobility is evident in Bhachu's (1995) designation of those who moved on from Europe to North America as 'thrice migrants'. The earlier phases of this occurred some time before the age of mass migration in the early and mid-twentieth century (Castles and Miller, 2003).

The issues that I have been exploring throw up at least three problems with migrant identifications. First, the idea of East African Asians as exemplars of transnational migrants overlooks (or at least it plays down) the extent to which Asians had been 'Africanised' in East Africa, sometimes through inter-marriage (especially in the early twentieth century when migrants to East Africa were mainly men) or through land and business ownership. There was also intermixture in the form of culture and cuisine in ways that could fit the Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia. There are traces of this in novels, for example in the cross-over words between Swahili and Indian languages, as well as the sense of yearning of the main character in Vassanji's (2005) novel, who says at one point, 'I told myself how desperately I loved this country that somehow could not quite accept me' (2005, 354). While it is unclear how far East African Asians felt 'African', there is, as I suggest in the next section, some room for doubt as to how 'Asian' they/we were. If this is correct, a double name (East African Asian) may be quite distinct from a felt sense of double consciousness (as both African and Asian).

Second, and as a corollary, there were – and perhaps still are – emotional ties between land and people (sometimes expressed as ‘long-distance nationalism’) and a real sense of pain and loss at leaving the countries of their birth, either voluntarily or through expulsion. When Vikram Lall meets some old school friends in London, he observes that ‘Kenya was in their hearts, they would never become British’ (Vassanji, 2005, 346). Similarly, it is notable that the British journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (1995) writes about wanting to return to her birthplace in Uganda, or at least to be buried there (for other traces see Mukta, 2002). Third, however ‘Westernised’ East African Asians may now be – and distant from their place of origin culturally and geographically – it is impossible to overlook the struggle they/we had to become physically part of the West. I say more about this in the next section.

One name, two places, three orientations

We have been Africans for three generations
(Vassanji, 2005, 16)

To be called, or to regard oneself as being, an East African Asian is a seemingly anomalous category, connecting people from two different continents, long before similar terms such as ‘African American’ became current. Although it is relatively grounded in relation to one part (that is, the East) of one continent it is vague and loose in relation to the other continent, when the more specific South Asian would be more appropriate. Indeed, this is obvious the phrase regularly used in the US and elsewhere, though ‘Asian’ continues to function as the umbrella word in the UK. Yet no one ever refers to or thinks in terms of a group of a people who might be called East African South Asians. For reasons I touch on later about being or not being African, the converse seems more unlikely. Even that still encompasses diverse and heterogeneous communities in terms of religion, class, geography, etc. While internal divisions between the communities have been exposed, the blanket designation of East African Asian persists. The label does not lend itself to easy identification with official ethnic categories, such as the ones in the census. In completing the UK census form in 2001, I found myself unable to tick any of the ethnicity boxes offered, since I do not think I can possibly be Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi, which are the South Asian categories available (on the US Census see Nobles, 2000). Nor, for reasons that I touch on below, can I see myself as African/Black African and thus the only choice left is to tick the ‘any other ethnic group’ box. The relation-

ship between designation, identity and belonging is therefore an uncertain one, as reflected in the subtitle of this article (cf. Rattansi, 2005).⁴ In setting out this position, I am not of course claiming that these are bounded identities. Indeed, it is the very fluidity of these states of being/not being that I aim to highlight.

In Britain, the migratory and cultural experiences of East African Asians have been examined in a number of ways by 'insiders' who were born in East Africa, including academic works in anthropology and sociology (see Bhachu, 1985; Brah, 1996; Mukta, 2002), as well as a burgeoning South Asian diaspora literature. Most of these works, whether fiction or non-fiction, are studies of families and communities, often set against a backdrop of the political and geographic forces that shape lives. It is significant that many of these works are by women, because they draw attention to the fact that migration debates frequently mask its highly gendered nature and the ways in which gender divisions shape identities and communities. Thus Bhachu's (2004) recent description of 'sewing and stitching cultures' usefully combines an account of clothing and fashion on the one hand with an awareness of how women help culturally to 'bind' migrant and diasporic communities.

My own 'route' into family history began relatively recently. A few years ago I went to a family reunion in Toronto, Canada, the first event of its type in my family. The family tree booklet produced for this event charted the numerous offspring of the seven children of my great-grandfather who migrated from western India to East Africa in the late nineteenth century and moved back and forth a few times for the next two decades. Some of his children were born in India, with others born in what was then German East Africa and then became Tanganyika (and, following independence, Tanzania), a series of routes that affirm Verma's claim about 'world citizens'. Nonetheless, despite originally having a multiple identity – East African Asian – my sense is that all my relatives now see themselves as settled in the West and as having singular identities, not hyphenated identities such as 'Asian-British' or 'Asian-Canadian'. Despite our South Asian 'roots', I would contend that it is the place that is the most remote for all of us, geographically and emotionally. Many of my relatives have never been to India or Asia, and when or if any of them ever speak of return (though this is not common) it is to East Africa they refer. Thus although we might call ourselves Asian, or be seen as such, it is an imagined and diasporic identity that conceals a good deal about the histories and geographies of movement, settlement and identity.

4. My subtitle is similar to Rattansi's title (2005), though my focus is quite different to his discussion of UK political and policy debates.

When I was growing up and for most of my life, I understood ‘East Africa’ to refer to the three countries and former British colonies of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania (though it is now common to hear Somalians described as East Africans) and indeed, there were aspirations that the three countries could form a political confederation. In the UK, Kenya and Uganda have featured prominently in media and popular knowledge about race, identity and immigration since the 1960s – most famously in the ‘crisis’ of the late 1960s when many Kenyan Asians were caught up in a media and political scrum about their right and ability to enter Britain as citizens of the UK and its colonies. The ‘backlash’ against this is linked to the famous image of London dockers proclaiming ‘Enoch was right’, a reference to the then recent speech by the late politician Enoch Powell which has come to be known as his ‘rivers of blood’ speech. In turn, this prompted the Labour government of the 1960s to restrict immigration in 1968 (Small and Solomos, 2006). Yet the Ugandan Asians who in 1972 were expelled by the dictator Idi Amin from the country in which they had been born (see Alibhai-Brown, 1995) soon overtook this outcry against immigration and immigrants. Thus, when I have told people I was born in East Africa, the commonest reaction has been to associate me with Uganda and the expulsion of Asians in the early 1970s. While such designation demonstrated awareness of political conflicts ‘far away’, it is another form of ‘mis-taken’ identity. Furthermore, since my family began migrating to the West in the early 1960s, it is not always easy to explain that there are quite different histories of East African Asians, other than the predominant Keynan/Ugandan ones.

What East African Asians have in common – being born in Africa but possessing a South Asian ethnic appearance (for want of a better term) – has made the dual identity hard to sustain in some respects. There are other, subtler, ways in which Asians are excluded from Africa. During ‘Africa Year’ in Britain in 2005, a host of African events were showcased across the arts and major cultural institutions such as the British Museum and the BBC. Yet the Africa represented there contained no trace, as far as I could see, of an ‘Asian Africa’.⁵ The apparent paradox of looking Asian but feeling some greater sense of connection to Africa is based on more than my own impressions and can also be found in the works of East African Asian writers cited in this article. It is also apparent in another medium. In Britain a popular BBC TV series, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, invites celebrities to trace their family genealogy. One episode in 2006 featured the film director Gurinder Chadha, the director of *Bend it Like Beckham*

5. This is not absolute and I have seen examples of events and exhibitions that use photographs and oral history to chart the movement of East African Asians to the UK. However, these small-scale and local events do not possess the reach or power of the BBC or the British Museum.

and *Bride and Prejudice*. She began by going to Kenya to trace some of her relatives before going to India to look at the earlier generations. Revealingly, during her trip to India, she describes it as a foreign country or culture, an observation that is never made of her time in Africa. In other words, it is possible for 'Asians' to feel more at home or comfortable in a continent with which they are associated much less than in the one from which their/our identification is commonly derived.

The African connection occurs in other ways too. In the mid-1990s I came across *The Book of Secrets* (Vassanji, 1995), which I picked up knowing nothing of the author or the book but bought because it had a map of East Africa on the inside pages. This turned out to be the first 'diasporic' novel in which I could locate my own biography, unlike Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which is more commonly evoked. Largely, that is because it is a story of a community in which I belong and a landscape I can vaguely recognise. *The Book of Secrets* depicts an 'Indian' Tanzania from the early years of the twentieth-century colonialism through to the late 1980s. This range means that it also charts the scattering of East African Asians, mainly to London, and thereby it provides a map of migration and social change. Yet continuity as much as change is a theme of the book, in generational, cultural and communal forms, and it can be read as a novel about belonging to and separation from a land, a people and a community in various guises.⁶ There is another, smaller, reason for my feeling a connection to this book. As I read it I could never have guessed that, albeit only in passing and very briefly, the book mentions my great-grandfather by name. In charting the development of the Asian community in East Africa, he is cited as a member of an increasingly affluent community, in an example of Vassanji's usual style of mixing real and fictional figures in his books. Yet even here, representation and identity are not straightforward. Vassanji says that although he became prosperous, my great-grandfather started out by selling peanuts on the street. I do not know whether this is accurate, but I do recall that one of my aunts angrily denounced the book because, she said, her grandfather had never sold peanuts, let alone made his money from doing so. It was not a reaction that invited further discussion so I assume the reason for the strength of this reaction is a feeling that it was a slight on his status.

In spite of feeling this connection to Africa and its evidence in cultural terms such as cuisine and the mixture of languages, the ability to claim some kind of African identity remains in question. Evidence of this is apparent in Alibhai-Brown's (1995) autobiography, which presents Asians in the usual interstitial

6. For a commentary, see Jones (1998).

position between the dominant white Europeans and the subordinate black Africans. That there was resentment towards Asians is not in doubt, as their expulsion from Uganda demonstrates.⁷ Vassanji's (2005) novel also touches on this, for instance in the exchange between Vikram Lall's mother and her daughter. When she fears that her daughter might marry a black African man, the mother says, 'There's nothing wrong with being an African or Asian or European. But they can't mix. It doesn't work'. The daughter's assertion that 'I too am an African' (Vassanji, 2005, 206) falls on stony ground. Later on, in an exchange with a government minister who suggests that Asians could 'return' to India, Vikram retorts "we people", as you call us, don't have a place anywhere, not even where we call home' (Vassanji, 2005, 342).

My own experience of this occurred in a different context. When I met some Afrocentric people, I said that I too was from Africa. I think I meant this simply as a physical fact, not a statement of political or cultural identity. Yet the reaction to this was that I could not possibly be African (or 'Afrikan' as some prefer to spell it to demonstrate their political ideology). An 'Asian' appearance could not be accommodated within a transnational African identity because, for these people, being African was a state of mind rather than a statement of fact about one's country or continent of birth. I learnt from this experience that some of those proclaiming African identities and roots had never been to Africa (equally, at that time, I had never set foot in Asia, yet I could be 'placed' there). This outlook shares a curious affinity with racist views of British identities that seek to deny that people born in Britain can or do belong to it. In this view, national and ethnic identity is argued to be a learnt and acquired state of mind, rather than a given physical fact, a view clearly apparent in the sentiments of the so-called 'new racism'. What that always obscured, in the same way that Afrocentrics do, is why – apart from an irreducible and essentialised cultural alterity – only some people can seemingly learn and acquire the characteristics of national belonging, while others are apparently forever excluded from it.

The underlying view – that how individuals find their own identities is more important than their roots (understood, in this context, as a place of birth) – exposes a problem in the celebratory and uncritical appreciation of diaspora and diasporic cultures, where a view of 'sameness in dispersal' has obscured internal class and status divisions (Ang, 2001). It shows that 'routes' are not necessarily forward-looking. I do not complain about the fact that people may need to express group solidarity and proclaim a common sense of identity. Nor

7. Resentment towards Asians of the Indian diaspora has also been evident in the communal violence in Fiji and in Malaysia in the past decade.

do I challenge the routes by which they get there. In an academic context, however, my point is that when routes are used in this exclusionary way, it is hard to see what is progressive about them.

The converse of not being African is also some uncertainty about being Asian. For most of my life my reaction to being asked whether I was from the Indian subcontinent (or told that I was) was to maintain that I had never been further east than Holland. Yet I was taken aback when a shopkeeper asked me, 'Are you Indian?' This was a surprise, not only because it was the first time I had ever been to India or Asia. My immediate reaction was to say that I was British, which itself felt odd given the resistances to claiming Britishness in Britain itself. A friend pointed out that the questioner probably guessed that I was not really Indian but intended it as a question about my roots, i.e. from where in India my family or I came originally. Although my family speaks a dialect of Gujarati, I can recall almost no sense of us ever thinking of ourselves as 'Indian' or hailing from India 'originally'. In the 1970s when we went to places like Southall, the so-called 'little India' neighbourhood of west London, there was certainly pleasure in discovering some foods that had been familiar back in East Africa. But I do not recall there ever being a moment when anyone felt – or said they felt – a moment of recognition such as Vikram Lall's (Indian) mother feeling herself to be back in India, when they first visit Mombasa in Kenya. Yet for the Kenyan-born Vikram himself, 'India was always fantasyland to me. To this day, I have never visited my dada's birthplace' (Vassanji, 2005, 21).⁸ I think the sense of disconnection is evident more widely also. After my first trip to India in the late 1990s, I asked my grandmother from where in India her parents or grandparents came. Her reaction was surprise about why I would want to know this or be interested in it. My view of this was that India/South Asia felt as remote to her (she was also born in East Africa) as it did to me. In this sense, our routes to – but also our roots in – East Africa had far surpassed our origins in India.

Yet 'Indian' roots can be 'brought back' into the present. On my second visit to India, I learnt that I could probably qualify for a certificate as either a 'non-resident Indian' (NRI) or a 'person of Indian origin' (PIO). These terms date from some time in the 1970s and their invention illustrates the ways in which a diaspora is, or might be, brought closer, or even 'home', in emotional and economic terms. This process of drawing-in or binding Indians from 'outside' the nation state takes both economic and cultural forms, in terms of encouraging inward investment while celebrating the success of Indians abroad in fashion, cuisine, literature, theatre and films (Chattarji, 2006). Thus, however, 'distant'

8. I believe this reflects Vassanji's own experience and the fact that, having settled in North America for most of his life, he describes himself as an 'Afro-American'.

the connection between India and my East African relatives is, we could all find ourselves (re?)claiming an 'Indian' or Asian aspect of our identity that I think few of us feel.

The converse of not being accepted as African is of course to be seen as Asian and very explicitly as not British in the form of a tyranny of appearances. I went to a large comprehensive school in London and remember very little racial abuse despite the context of the 1970s. However, one instance that I do recall was when some of my school friends and I walked through a park to the bus stop from where we went our separate ways. On this occasion, a few white boys shouted out 'Paki' – one of the most powerful markers of otherness at the time – and stood in front of us in a threatening manner. I said to them that I was not from Pakistan. I think that – in what strikes me now as a curious early appeal to my routes – I was conveying to them that I could not be a 'Paki' because I had no association with the country to which the term was linked. As this then turned into a question about where I was from, the issue of race and racial abuse seemed not to concern the white boys any more, or at least they did not pursue the issue. Nonetheless, this recollection of being racialised brings home to me the strangeness of being regarded as 'other', in spite of the fact that I shared a common language and, to some extent, a common history.⁹

This instance of Britishness denied brings me to my final point about the process by which East African Asians came to the UK. After India gained independence in 1947, its distant expatriates such as East African Asians (though many of them had never set foot in India) were encouraged to settle in the countries they lived in. However, a significant number chose for both economic and political reasons not to take the citizenship of countries they lived in. Following independence in East Africa in the early 1960s, East African Asians with links to the UK found themselves in an odd situation such that they could not be citizens of India, nor could they fully belong to Britain. After 1947, they had been classed as British subjects who were citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies. This issue began to matter when successive British Immigration Acts from 1962 onwards made it more difficult for such groups to migrate to and settle in Britain, and contributed directly to the Kenyan Asians 'crisis' of 1968. At one level, this account affirms Verma's view of East African Asians as mobile 'world citizens', whose roots in the place were, if not shallow, at least transplantable. But what that fashionable claim for 'routes' overlooks is the struggle that East African Asians faced to be physically admitted to the UK and the ways in which doors were closed to later migrants. Many of those turned to Canada

9. For a broader analysis of young people's experiences of 'remembered racialisation', see Phoenix (2005).

instead and since that is where many of my relatives ended up, it – rather than the UK – was the obvious location for a family reunion.

Conclusion

The discussion in this article has sought to offer some insights into the multiple paradoxes of looking Asian but feeling some greater connection with Africa or Britain, or of being African but being excluded from it, or being legally British but taken as other in racial or cultural terms. I do not suggest that any of these is the true or only position; rather I have tried to illustrate how it is possible to be pushed and pulled from each and all of them in cultural, emotional and legal senses. The preference for routes over roots looks as though it offers a way of dealing with this paradox because it highlights the connections between places and people. The stories told in this article – and the context they are set in – do support a picture of fluid and always and already mixed identities, in ways that avoid the easy categorisation of Asians, Africans and/or Europeans with any one place. In spite of the appeal of this way of looking at identities, I have presented a picture of identities as shifting in odd and unexpected ways between the fluid and the categorical. For this reason, I have suggested that fixity (roots) and mobility (routes) act as pointers only and, when treated as a dichotomy, do not help that much in understanding the relationship between felt and imposed identities. East African Asians can adopt singular and multiple identities but their/our choices around these are only partly self-made, as the auto/biographical examples I have used are intended to suggest. This approach therefore signals the need to consider how routes become ‘rooted’ and vice versa.

I have drawn freely on extracts from Vassanji’s (2005) novel. In my reading of that book, it uses the notion of being in-between in several ways – being both of South Asia and of East Africa, the interstitial position of Asians between the (white) Europeans and the (black) Africans and the era or period between colonialism and independence. I think the variety of forms of being ‘in-between’ is important because it highlights, as this article has aimed to, multiple forms of identity and belonging. The border crossings that this highlights are valuable because it exposes how artificial borders and boundaries can be. But, in line with my general view that we need to avoid either/or approaches, I need to add that in-between can be an uncomfortable place to be (indeed this is what Vassanji’s novel suggests). In terms of citizenship, it suggests that transnational migrants with multiple identifications to more than one place might feel culturally at home in the West, yet be regarded as legally undesirable. The paradox, as

I have aimed to highlight, is that the constructed but far-reaching social division of ethnic/racial difference (and its association with national identities) produces singularities of identity that can be hard to shake off no matter how much we may aspire to live free of any fixity.

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