Bruce Whitehouse

THE STRANGER'S CODE

Explaining the Persistence of Distinct Identity among West African Traders in Brazzaville, Congo

Abstract

This paper considers how and why settled stranger populations in Africa have maintained discrete identities despite longstanding economic integration into their host societies. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork in Brazzaville, Congo, it describes the dynamics regulating interactions between Congolese and the West African 'strangers' in their midst. Despite being present in Congo for generations, strangers cannot claim full citizenship there. A set of widely shared expectations about the rights and duties of these outsiders vis-à-vis their hosts, which I call the 'stranger's code', restricts strangers' participation in the city's political and social life. The paper contends that this informal behavioural code, enforced by hosts and strangers alike, shows parallels with other settled stranger populations but is also rooted in African societies' colonial history.

Introduction: Strangers in Africa

For generations, high levels of population mobility have complicated processes of identity formation and dispensation of political rights in sub-Saharan Africa. The economic success of particular 'trading minorities' – migrants and their offspring who dominate many local economies while remaining socially distinct from their host societies – has only increased the pressure on African populations and their leaders to restrict the perceived privileges of foreigners and 'strangers', including many who are native-born. In this regard, trading minorities in Africa face many of the same opportunities and constraints as those in other regions.[1]

---

1. On strangers in the African context, see: E.P. Skinner, 'Strangers in West African societies', *Africa* 33 (1963) 307-320; W.A. Shack and E.P. Skinner, *Strangers in African societies* (Berkeley 1979); P. Geschiere, *The perils of belonging: Autochthony, citizenship and exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago 2009). African trading minorities face many of the same opportunities and constraints as those in other regions; see E. Bonacich, 'A theory of middleman minorities', *American Sociological Review* 38 (1973) 583-594; A. Chua, *World on fire:*

The issue of strangers is by no means new in African societies. Widespread migrations both before and after the onset of European colonization in the nineteenth century have reshaped societies in every region of the African continent. Whether to seek wage labour, avoid repressive forced labour and taxation, or start new lives following the abolition of African institutions of slavery, colonial subjects were highly mobile, and migration remains a vital aspect of livelihood strategies throughout contemporary Africa.[2] Yet local approaches to questions of citizenship and belonging often fail to reflect this mobility. Those defined as strangers are not solely migrants but often migrants' descendants, who even after several generations residing in the host society continue to be identified (and, in some cases, to identify themselves) as outsiders.

What accounts for the enduring distinctiveness of settled strangers in Africa? How and why have these populations maintained discrete social and cultural identities despite longstanding economic integration into their host societies? Do they cling to distinctive identities to safeguard their economic privileges, or is their separateness thrust upon them by the exclusionary practices of host populations? To examine these questions, I consider the case of one trading minority group originating from the West African Sahel region (especially what are today Mali, Guinea and Senegal) and living in Brazzaville, capital city of the Republic of Congo. Using published and archival documents as well as data from fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mali and Congo (conducted on three separate trips between 2002 and 2006),[3] I trace this group's historical genesis and its interactions with the larger host society into the present day.[4] This lays the groundwork for a discussion of what I label the 'stranger's code', the tacit rules governing host-stranger interactions in this setting. I do not claim that Brazzaville's West Africans are representative of all settled stranger or trading minority groups. Nonetheless, I believe their example offers insights into the lives of settled strangers,
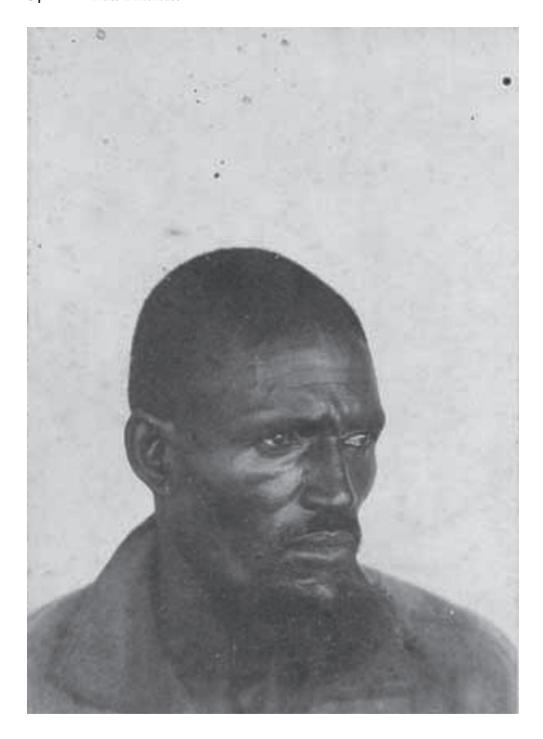

How exporting free market democracy breeds ethnic hatred and global instability (New York 2003).

2. Notable recent research on African migrations includes: P. Curtin, 'Africa and global patterns of migration', in W. Gungwu (ed.), *Global history and migrations* (Boulder 1997) 63-94; F. Manchuelle, *Willing migrants: Soninke labour diasporas, 1848-1960* (Athens 1997); M. de Bruijn, R. van Dijk and D. Foeken, *Mobile Africa: Changing patterns of movement in Africa and beyond* (Leiden 2001).

3. Fieldwork methods included participant observation and semi-structured interviews which one Malian research assistant and I conducted with over 160 migrants, migrants' descendants and returned migrants in both countries, as well as a survey of 279 Congolese university students in Brazzaville. Interviews were conducted in either the French or Bamanan languages.

4. For a more expansive analysis of West African transnationalism in Brazzaville, see B. Whitehouse, *Migrants and strangers in an African city: Exile, dignity, belonging* (Bloomington 2012).

Ill. 1 Sergeant Malamine Camara (from Bibliothèque Nationale de France, http://www.brazza.culture.fr/fr/missions/malamine_ic01.htm).

and particularly their delicate relationship with their hosts, especially in contemporary African societies. It is my contention that the set of constraints facing African trading minorities – including limited political freedoms and restricted public expression – bears the particular imprint of postcolonial politics on the continent.

Strangers past and present

Brazzaville was founded in the early 1880s by French explorer Savorgnan de Brazza, who claimed the territory on the right bank of the Congo River for France. The very first residents of Brazza's colonial outpost were three so-called *laptots*, colonial auxiliary troops recruited along Africa's west coast. These included two Senegalese and one Gabonese, assigned to guard the site while Brazza continued his expedition downriver. Theirs was a crucial mission, since Henry Morton Stanley, working for Belgium's King Leopold II, was already in the region aiming to acquire land for a future Belgian colony. On two occasions in 1881 and 1882, Senegalese Sergeant Malamine Camara and his small detachment rebuffed Stanley's attempts to drive them out. Sergeant Camara became a trusted assistant to Brazza in France's new Equatorial African territory, but died in November 1885 of an infection he had contracted in Brazzaville.[5]

As France explored and colonized the region, West African manpower was essential at every step. West Africans, already experienced from working on French infrastructure projects in Senegal, provided skilled labour for the construction of railways and telegraph systems. West African soldiers constituted the military backbone of all French endeavours. By 1897, French military presence in the French Congo consisted of 630 West African troops led by just 15 white officers; seven years later, there were only 100 French administrators in the French Congo, fewer than half of them based outside Brazzaville. Until conscription became standard during the First World War, West Africans volunteered for two-year contracts that were quite lucrative by local standards. Many had prior mercantile experience in their home region, and once their contracts were finished, they often stayed on in Congo or Gabon to take up independent commerce or to work for one of the European trading posts along the coast. Already in 1899, West Africans owned three of

---

5.   On the participation of West African personnel in the European exploration of the Congo Basin, see H.M. Stanley, *The Congo and the founding of its free state: A story of work and exploration* (London 1885); C. de Chavannes, 'Le sergent sénégalais Malamine', *Annales de l'Académie des Sciences Coloniales* 3 (1929) 159-187; C. de Chavannes, *Avec Brazza: Souvenirs de la mission de l'Ouest Africaine (mars 1883 – janvier 1886)* (Paris 1935).

Brazzaville's six retail businesses.[6] Thus what began as a colonial 'auxiliary diaspora' quickly transformed into a 'commercial diaspora'[7] such that by the early decades of the twentieth century, West Africans in Congo were occupied primarily in private enterprise rather than the colonial public sector.

What did these migrants seek in Congo? Whether through colonial service or independent commerce or some combination of the two, their main goal was acquiring wealth with which to compete for status in their home communities. Migration from West Africa to the Congo Basin was for them a 'strategy of extraversion', a means of mobilizing resources derived from the unequal relationship between colonized African societies and their external environment. These migrants used French colonial service to gain access not only to salaries but also to other rewards on the African continent. Entrée to the Congo Basin, in the beginning provided exclusively by the Europeans, soon became a means for individuals and families in the western Sahel to acquire wealth and prestige: some migrants used their earnings to buy slaves and land in their communities of origin, while others expanded their existing commercial networks into previously undeveloped markets.[8] Far from simply occupying a void left by the colonizer, they actively carved out a commercial space within which to operate in Central Africa, one that at times interfered with colonial interests.

Over the years West Africans in Brazzaville have formed a multiethnic yet cohesive community of strangers, united around their shared Islamic religion and heavily clustered in the neighbourhoods of Poto-Poto[9] and Moungali, where they continue to dominate the retail sale of imported goods including clothing, electronics, and auto parts. The longstanding presence of a small

---

6. West Africans' role in European colonization of the Congo is documented in: H. Brunschwig, *Brazza explorateur: Les traités Makoko, 1880-1882* (Paris 1972); C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'French colonization in Africa to 1920: Administration and economic development', in L.H. Gann and P. Duignan (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa, 1870-1960*, vol. 1 (London 1969) 165-198; C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires, 1889-1930* (Paris 2001); F. Manchuelle, unpublished dissertation, 'Background to black African emigration to France: The labour migrations of the Soninke, 1848-1987', Department of History, University of California, Santa Barbara (1987). A reference to West African entrepreneurs in Brazzaville in 1899 is found in C.D. Gondola, *Villes miroirs: Migrations et identités urbaines à Kinshasa et Brazzaville, 1930-1970* (Paris 1996), 37.

7. See the typology of diasporas developed by R. Cohen, *Global diasporas: An introduction* (Seattle 1997), 84.

8. On strategies of extraversion, see J.-F. Bayart, *The state in Africa: The politics of the belly* (New York 1993); J.-F. Bayart, 'Africa in the world: A history of extraversion', *African Affairs* 99 (2000) 217-67. See also Manchuelle, *Willing migrants* on competition for status among West African migrants.

9. The name of this neighbourhood comes from the Bamanan language, spoken in what is today Mali, and designates the watery mud which proliferates in this low-lying area during rainy seasons.

number of West African families in these districts has been complemented by the continued influx of new arrivals, such that truly 'settled strangers' (i.e., those whose grandparents or great-grandparents first settled there) are only a minority of the West African population, which is dominated by first- or second-generation migrants. Most members of this community, irrespective of their generation, maintain strong ties with their ancestral homes and kin in Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and elsewhere in the western Sahel. While the practice of sending Brazzaville-born children 'home' for long periods has long been common among West African parents, some migrants' children and grandchildren have grown up exclusively in Congo.[10] These latter offspring automatically acquire official Congolese nationality, and many hold no other citizenship. Hence, Brazzaville's West African community today is a heterogeneous blend of settled strangers and new immigrants, of the transnationally mobile and the locally rooted.

This heterogeneity is overlooked by native Congolese,[11] who frequently cast all West Africans in their country as recent immigrants whose primary loyalties lie elsewhere. There is considerable mistrust among Congolese regarding the West Africans in their midst, sometimes taking the form of xenophobic discourse and actions.[12] 'Take the case of West Africans who are born in Congo and who have Congolese nationality', one Congolese politician told a Brazzaville newspaper. 'We all know that they live according to their nationalities of origin. For example, there are Malians who live like Malians and act like Malians. And yet they are Congolese [by citizenship].... These are people who in their mentality, in their soul, are not Congolese'.[13]

Given such scepticism from Congo's *classe politique*, it is not surprising that Congolese-born West Africans, despite the formal Congolese citizenship they hold, face constant challenges in asserting their claims to belonging in Congo. A few have been able to negotiate these challenges and achieve some degree of 'identity integration' into Congolese society – obtaining civil service jobs and marrying native Congolese. Most, however, have responded by positioning themselves firmly within the West African community, and by cultivating connections to and 'vicarious memories' of their ancestral

---

10. Modes of migrant childrearing are described in B. Whitehouse, 'Transnational childrearing and the preservation of transnational identity in Brazzaville, Congo', *Global Networks* 9 (2009) 82-99.

11. Throughout this paper, I use the term 'native Congolese' to designate Congolese-born individuals with no Sahelian West African ancestry.

12. I document host-stranger tensions in Brazzaville in 'Discrimination, despoliation and irreconcilable difference: Host-immigrant tensions in Brazzaville, Congo', *Africa Spectrum* 1 (2009) 39-59.

13. *La Semaine Africaine*, 'Alphonse Ngatsé, président du C.n.l.d: 'Il faut réviser les conditions d'accès à la nationalité congolaise', 3024 (7 September 2010) 3.

homelands.[14] One young woman, the granddaughter of Malian immigrants, insisted she did not feel in any way split between Congolese and Malian cultures, describing herself as '100 per cent Malian' – even though she had never set foot in Mali, nor even lived outside Congo. She constructed her and her family's presence in Congo as temporary: 'I wish that we should all return *au pays*, all of us, one day', she said in an interview. 'It's good for us, it's advantageous. No, it's our country. Here we're foreigners.... Sooner or later, we'll always return'.[15] For her, going 'home' to Mali was a desirable but delayed outcome. She was married to the son of a wealthy Malian trader in Poto-Poto and was willing to keep her plans for 'return' on hiatus, perhaps indefinitely, while raising their children.

Why do these settled strangers cling to their imagined homelands, even when they lack realistic prospects of definitively moving there? What keeps many of them from developing deeper attachments to their host countries? The forms of discrimination that West Africans in Brazzaville face clearly influence their orientations in this regard. Other factors implicating West African strangers as much as their Congolese hosts, however, are also at play.

Enforcing strangerhood: The stranger's code

In 2002 I spoke to a returned migrant in rural Mali who had lived and worked in eight different African countries (not including Mali) over a 20-year period. He described the difference between being at home in the fatherland (*faso* in the Bamanan language) and being abroad (*tunga*): 'This is your *faso,* you are known here. If you go abroad, even if you find wealth, they will tell you that you are a stranger. Even a child can disrespect you, and you can say nothing. That's what being a stranger is'.[16] This migrant's statement encapsulated three common notions among my informants in both Mali and Congo about the condition of being a stranger and occupying a foreign space (*tunga*). First, it is equivalent to being socially unknown. Second, it entails losing many of the most basic entitlements, such as the respect of one's juniors. Finally, it cannot be effaced by economic success.

Shared ideas about the condition of strangerhood, working in conjunction with the hostility expressed by Congolese toward West Africans, have generated over many years a set of unwritten rules governing the conduct of stran-

14. On 'vicarious memory' see M. Chamberlain and S. Leydesdorff, 'Transnational families: memories and narratives', *Global Networks* 4 (2009) 227-41.

15. Interview with 'Fanta' (pseudonym), 24 December 2005 in Brazzaville, recorded and translated by author.

16. Interview with 'Mamadou' (pseudonym), Koulikoro region of Mali, 28 July 2002, recorded and translated by author.

gers in Brazzaville, which I call the stranger's code. This code is understood and enforced by hosts and strangers alike, and consists of four main rules.

1) Do not get involved in host-country politics

For strangers, the political affairs of the host community and country constitute the ultimate taboo. The political sphere in this case encompasses multiple areas: party politics and electoral competition, to be sure, but also the state bureaucracy and the related informal networks overseeing the distribution of resources and patronage within Congolese society; this is politics in the sense of 'who gets what, when and how'.[17] The taboo applies to immigrants and their descendants alike, who generally have not succeeded in throwing off the mantle of strangerhood. Bonacich describes in all trading minorities 'a tendency to avoid involvement in local politics except in affairs that directly affect their group'.[18]

Strangers are strongly discouraged from giving the appearance of involvement in the politics of their host community or country. This informal prohibition holds for domestic migrants and their descendants as well as for cross-border migrants, and has in fact become more powerful since the spread of electoral politics in the early 1990s.[19] Strangers should avoid even expressing opinions on politically sensitive topics. In July 2005, 15 Congolese officials went on trial in Brazzaville over their alleged involvement in the disappearance of hundreds of young returning refugees in the 1999 'Beach affair', so named because the disappeared men were supposedly taken into custody at Brazzaville's river port facility known as *le Beach*. This trial, which lasted for weeks, was broadcast live in its entirety on Congolese television; viewers were riveted by the sight of some of the highest-ranking figures in the state security apparatus (including the head of the national police, the interior minister, and the inspector-general of the armed forces), normally secretive men, being questioned publicly over the matter. Brazzaville residents spent hours tuning into the trial. Banzumana, a first-generation immigrant from Mali working at a home electronics store, had to change the channels of his display TV sets to Kinshasa stations during the trial, otherwise the live courtroom spectacle would clog the doors with onlookers and prevent paying customers from entering.

Banzumana recounted that during the Beach trial Congolese routinely approached him at work wanting to know why he was not showing the trial; he said they often tried to sound out his opinions on the case. He made a point, however, of not commenting on the trial, at least when speaking with

17. H.D. Lasswell, *World politics and personal insecurity* (New York 1965), 3.
18. E. Bonacich, 'A theory of middleman minorities', 586.
19. See P. Geschiere, *The perils of belonging*.

Ill. 2 Members of Brazzaville's Malian community at a welcoming reception for Mali's first lady, July 2005 (photo by author).

Congolese. He thought some of his interlocutors were government officials trying to lure him into a political debate – thus causing him to transgress the bounds his strangerhood imposed on him. Strangers clearly perceive a bright line separating everyday life in the host country from sensitive political areas, and merely by talking about the latter, they risk stepping over that line.[20] The morning before the presiding panel of judges in the Beach trial was to hand down its verdict, West African merchants shuttered their shops, fearful that members of the security forces would go on a looting spree and target their businesses if any of the accused was found guilty. In the end, the court acquitted all 15 defendants.

Strangers, at least those who are native-born, may participate to some degree in government. They may pursue careers in the Congolese civil service, but they face a kind of 'glass ceiling' that limits their prospects for pro-

---

20. Similar incidents of immigrant workers being jailed and ultimately deported from Côte d'Ivoire, simply for expressing political opinions or asking for better working conditions, are recounted in D. Gary-Tounkara, *Migrants soudanais/maliens et conscience ivoirienne: Les étrangers en Côte d'Ivoire (1903-1980)* (Paris 2008) 226-233.

motion above a certain level. Strangers generally lack strong networks within the Congolese state apparatus, leaving them diminished prospects for career advancement. No descendents of West African migrants had been named cabinet ministers, for example, since Ange Diawara, a charismatic leader of Congo's Marxist revolution, was captured and executed in the early 1970s. Strangers are also absent from the Congolese military, which historically has been dominated by the ethnic group of the president in power.

Despite West Africans' efforts to steer clear of host-country politics, many Congolese remain wary of these strangers' political influence in their society. Congolese university students whom I polled were divided on the matter: given the statement 'West Africans are overly involved in Congolese internal politics', 108 students agreed while 98 disagreed, and another 66 had no opinion. Considering their central role in the nation's economy, West Africans face an especially difficult task in convincing their hosts that they are fulfilling their obligation as foreigners not to overstep their bounds.

2) Do not flaunt your wealth

West Africans and other African foreigners in Brazzaville must not to engage in conspicuous consumption or appear to raise themselves too high above their Congolese hosts. One Brazzaville-born West African man linked Congolese verbal harassment of strangers, and particularly the common epithet *wara* used for West Africans, to conspicuous consumption. 'If [Congolese] see you well-dressed or riding in a car, *wara* it's a way to insult you. Even if you have something, a nice house or car, people from here will see that with a bad eye', he told me.[21] Strangers must keep a low profile to avoid arousing host-population resentment. They must not engage in ostentatious behaviours that might arouse the hostility of the majority.[22]

West Africans in the Congo Basin have learned this lesson the hard way. In Kinshasa during the 1960s, their community began to face rising levels of intolerance and allegations of criminal activity, especially diamond smuggling. A small number of immigrants apparently involved in illicit activities spoiled the atmosphere for the rest of the community, a fact that still touched a raw nerve for many West Africans who had lived in Kinshasa at the time. Some of my informants who remembered the time reproached their juniors, claiming they had not learned to be discreet with the wealth they were earning and thereby broke the tacit rule against drawing undue attention to their group. Tensions were such that in 1962 Mali had to relocate its Kinshasa embassy – then its sole diplomatic mission in the region – to Brazzaville. 'If

---

21. Interview with 'Sekou' (pseudonym), 6 April 2005, Brazzaville, recorded and translated by author.
22. See Chua, *World on fire*, 282.

you're rich, and you have some money, you have cars, can the [Congolese] people accept you? Can they be in good faith with you? No, they'll be unpleasant.... the young people were displaying themselves too much', declared a man who had worked for the embassy at the time.[23] Between 1964 and 1971 the government of Congo-Kinshasa organized no less than five waves of expulsions, each targeting West Africans (sometimes with other foreign populations) and each more sweeping than the last.[24]

The stranger's taboo against flamboyance may be linked to the fact that public displays of wealth have been defined since Congo's independence as a privilege of the country's political elite. The first Congolese president, Fulbert Youlou, helped solidify a political culture during the early 1960s in which 'practices of ostentation expressing the abuse of power' became a defining characteristic of Congolese leaders.[25] Political patrons are expected to indulge in conspicuous consumption and to flaunt their privilege as a means of setting themselves above the masses. This demonstrates their capacity to perform their roles well by commanding vast amounts of wealth for redistribution within their patronage networks. Strangers must not seem to compete with their hosts in this regard. For a stranger to show off his economic advantages in such a context not only risks upsetting the host society's precarious social balance, but also contravenes the first commandment of the stranger's code – keeping out of host-country politics.

3) Do not proselytize to members of the host population

In the popular imagination of most Brazzaville residents, to be West African is to be Muslim and vice-versa. Nearly all the city's West African immigrants are Muslim, and through their distinctive dress and public demeanour they constitute a 'visible minority' distinct from the host population. They have constructed dozens of mosques, both large and small, throughout the city, especially in the neighbourhoods of Poto-Poto and Moungali where most

---

23. Interview with 'Moussa' (pseudonym), 30 June 2005, Brazzaville, recorded and translated by author. See also F. Manchuelle, 'Background to black African emigration to France', 455; S. Bredeloup, *La Diams'pora du fleuve Sénégal: Sociologie des migrations africaines* (Paris 2007) 156.

24. On migrant expulsions in postcolonial African history, see S. Bredeloup, 'L'aventure contemporaine des diamantaires sénégalais', *Politique Africaine* 56 (1994) 77-93; C.D. Gondola 'Bisso na Bisso: Entre Congolais à Kinshasa, ca. 1930-1964', in: C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, O. Goerg, I. Mandé, and F. Rajaonah (eds.), *Être étranger et migrant en Afrique au xxe siècle: Enjeux identitaires et modes d'insertion*, vol. 2 (Paris 2003), 77-96.

25. Arrogance has been identified as 'one of the attributes of the Congolese political elite': initially based on the educational distinctions of a privileged few, this prerogative soon came to be justified by purely political privileges. See P. Moukoko, *Dictionnaire générale du Congo-Brazzaville* (Paris 1999) 39.

West Africans live. Five times daily, these mosques fill with throngs of worshippers. In Brazzaville, where Islamic practice served as a marker of difference and boundary maintenance, I found the level of religiosity among Brazzaville's West Africans significantly higher than in their communities of origin. Despite these immigrants' religious devotion, however, I never saw West Africans make any effort to win their Congolese neighbours over to their faith or even express an intent to do so. Although Congo is home to a few thousand native converts to Islam, Congolese are overwhelmingly Christian.

Near the midpoint of my fieldwork in Brazzaville, a dozen proselytizers belonging to the transnational Islamic movement *Tablīghī Jamāʿat* came to town and spent a few weeks preaching in local mosques.[26] Most were Saudis, even though the movement is banned in Saudi Arabia. When they spoke after evening prayers at Poto-Poto's *Masjid al-Sunna* ('Sunni mosque'), some two hundred mostly West African Muslims gathered to listen. While one of the Tablighis preached to the group in Arabic and a West African translated into Bamanan and Soninke for the audience, I chatted with the only member of the group who spoke a little English. (None of them spoke French, let alone any African languages.) This young man said that he and his fellow missionaries spent four months annually on international *daʿwa* (Islamic proselytising) tours, and he had already been on *daʿwa* missions to Jordan, Malawi, and South Africa. Group members lived in spartan conditions while on these missions, sleeping in mosques, cooking their own meals and preaching God's word primarily to Muslim audiences whom they exhorted to adopt a more rigorous observation of the tenets of their faith.

The night after the Tablighis' first appearance, they returned and again drew a large audience. This time, however, following the evening's lesson, the group leader invited volunteers to join their mission as it continued to other countries. There was a pause after the interpreter finished translating the leader's request, as audience members looked around to see whether anyone would come forward. Eventually two men raised their hands and the meeting broke up. I later asked two West Africans what they thought of the Tablighis' invitation. Both men were quite devout, yet neither thought it reasonable for anyone to expect him to abandon his family and business to join a group of Arabs on a *daʿwa* tour. One said he did not recognize the two men who had volunteered; they were probably Congolese converts, he added dismissively,

---

26. The *Tablīgh Jamāʿat* is an apolitical organization founded in India in the 1920s aiming to bring about a global Islamic society through the reformation of individual conduct; see B. Metcalf, 'Living Hadith in the Tablighi Jamaʿat', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52 (1993) 584-608, and M. Janson, 'Roaming about for god's sake: The upsurge of the *Tabligh Jamaʿat* in the Gambia', *The Journal of Religion in Africa*, 35 (2005) 450-481. The group is banned in Saudi Arabia: see G. Kepel, *Les banlieues de l'Islam: Naissance d'une religion en France* (Paris 1987).

who were not serious about spreading the message of Islam and were merely looking for a way to get out of the country.

In hindsight, this episode embodied much of what I came to understand about the practice of Islam in Brazzaville and the influence it had on host-stranger relations there. West Africans were eager to hear the missionaries' message, and Islam is at the core of West African identity in Congo, yet the actual activity of spreading the faith there was something my West African friends took to be none of their business. Their religious life, as with so many other aspects of their community in Brazzaville, was extremely introverted, and deliberately steered away from matters that might bring them into tension with the host population. Friday sermons generally dealt with such topics as proper prayer, only rarely mentioning the behaviour of *kafiriw* (unbelievers). Naturally, these lessons shunned political topics altogether.

By contrast, native Congolese Muslims tend to have a much more extraverted outlook on what it means to be Muslim. Issues of *IQRA*, the Islamic Council of Congo's newsletter published between 2001 and 2004, provide a glimpse of this global perspective on Islamic identity. Their pages contain editorials on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the invasion of Iraq and the 'war on terror', alongside articles on Islamic conduct dealing with subjects from women's dress to fasting to the permissibility of photography and videography. It is Congolese rather than West African Muslims who represent the public face of Islam within Congolese society. The delegation that visited Congo's President Denis Sassou N'Guesso in the wake of September 11, 2001 to express the local Muslim community's solidarity with the government in the 'struggle against terrorism toward the triumph of the values of peace' was led by Al Hajj Abubakar Nguelouoli, an employee of the Congolese foreign ministry who had studied in Saudi Arabia.[27] The chairman of the Islamic Council (a native Congolese) hosts a weekly television broadcast on Islam and speaks about Congolese Muslim affairs in the Congolese media. Explaining the faith and proselytizing in Congo is the domain of *Congolese* Muslims. It is emphatically not the concern of the African strangers already settled in the country, who constitute the vast majority of Congo's Muslim population.

4) *Do not protest violations of your rights*

As in many African cities, power outages are a constant nuisance in Brazzaville. During my twelve months of fieldwork there, electricity was cut for several hours each day, and some outages lasted for weeks. The longest outage in my section of Poto-Poto endured for 35 days, apparently caused by

27. *IQRA: Bulletin Mensuel Islamique de Formation et d'Informations Générales* (unpublished news bulletin of Congo's National Islamic Council), 'Une délégation du Conseil National Islamique à la Présidence', 7 (October 2001) 4.

a transformer that caught fire. A visiting Congolese acquaintance asserted that the state electric company's slow response to the outage must have been due to Poto-Poto's high concentration of strangers, who were unwilling to complain or press authorities for a quick resolution. At that time, Brazzaville households paid a flat fee for electricity, irrespective of how much they consumed. Our neighbours knew the electric company would charge its usual fee for the month even when there was no electricity at all, and would disconnect customers promptly for non-payment. No one, however, mobilized to demand better service.

Many West Africans in Poto-Poto suspected that people in other (less immigrant-populated) neighbourhoods did not have to pay during extended blackouts. This suspicion fit into a wider pattern of belief, which held that immigrants routinely had to shoulder burdens Congolese did not. One might think of such burdens as 'stranger penalties': they included paying extra for goods and services, enduring harassment by police and soldiers, and especially paying bribes to public officials. West Africans assumed, moreover, that they were powerless to avoid or seek redress for these penalties.

Jakaliya was a Malian trader in his seventies who had lived abroad since 1956, mostly in Central African countries. He had worked as an ambulant vendor and clandestine gem buyer in Congo-Kinshasa and Zambia, but left that business after one of his companions was shot and killed in the bush by a Zambian army patrol hunting for smugglers. He came to Brazzaville and sold shoes in the market. He and his wife had nine children, all of them grown when I met him in 2003. Jakaliya told me he wanted to return to Mali but lacked the means to do so; his sons were abroad and could not help him, and he had been unable to get back his *cautionnement*, a large deposit he had paid to the Congolese government. In Mali, a man his age would be an established patriarch ruling over a large household with an army of grandchildren at his disposal; in Brazzaville he was just a marginal figure in a dingy rented room, barely able to make ends meet.

A BBC World Service radio producer to whom I described Jakaliya's situation offered to run a segment on corruption in Congo and expected that officials might be shamed into returning his money to him. Jakaliya, however, would not consider receiving the aid of outsiders in the matter. He clearly believed such an intervention would not help, or might even have negative consequences. When pressed, the old man admitted he had never actually gone to the commerce ministry to ask for his *cautionnement* back; he had simply been told by other West Africans that he wouldn't get it if he tried.

Jakaliya's unwillingness to defend his own interests was not surprising, as West African immigrants seldom protested violations of their rights. Their tolerance of abuse did have its limits: the arbitrary killing of a West African by a policeman in December 2005 resulted in a three-day commercial strike. Routine violations such as exactions, unlawful arrest, imposition of arbitrary

fees and bribes, and the withholding of deposits, however, were considered unavoidable, or at least not worth raising trouble over. They were just the price one paid for being a stranger.

Some believe that immigrants' reluctance to protest stemmed from their lack of education. Illiterate people cannot assert and defend their rights, according to this argument, because they do not understand them. A Malian consular official articulated this notion in an interview:

> These are illiterate people, they don't know how to read or write, they don't know their responsibilities or rights as citizens. And they're afraid, because they find themselves on foreign soil and they are very wary, very afraid. So they aren't people who will struggle [for their rights]. Very often in cases like that, they prefer to give a little money so that they'll be left alone, that's their mentality! That's how it is. These aren't citizens who know their rights; they're illiterates who come directly from the village. It's not part of their culture.[28]

Such condescension toward the less educated is typical of educated African officials, who overstate illiteracy's role in contributing to this passivity. Jakaliya, while unable to read French, knew that the Congolese government was officially supposed to refund his deposits, yet he had not sought their return. For him, the very fact of being on foreign soil meant any attempt to exercise his rights would be futile at best, and at worst could bring negative repercussions upon him and his community. This notion was widely shared by West Africans in Brazzaville, irrespective of their level of education.

Indeed, Jakaliya was not alone in forfeiting his deposits with the government. A Congolese commerce ministry employee told me the deposit known as the *cautionnement*, then worth one million CFA francs (more than US$2000), was meant to prevent entrepreneurs from running up debts and leaving the country. Officially, the *cautionnement* was refundable to entrepreneurs once they closed their business and proved they had no outstanding debts or unpaid taxes. The employee added, however, that the number of West Africans claiming such refunds was 'insignificant'.

There are clearly bureaucratic obstacles for foreign entrepreneurs who wish to recover their deposits, and the tenuous rule of law in Congolese commercial affairs means that many business owners have difficulty obtaining documents to show their debts and taxes are paid up. Most West Africans, however, gave up their deposits to the government without a struggle. Not only was there no mobilization to press for the refund of this money to those eligible for it, but apparently few if any individuals had even asked to get it back. Consequently, a policy not likely intended as a means of extracting rents

---

28. Interview with 'Ousmane' (pseudonym), 16 November 2005, Consulate General of Mali, Brazzaville, recorded and translated by author.

from foreign merchants eventually came to be practiced and understood by all parties involved as precisely that. The same is true of the *caution de rapatriement*, the repatriation deposit, meant to ensure that foreign entrepreneurs like Jakaliya are not stranded in the country; none of my West African informants expected to collect theirs when the time came to pack their bags and leave the country.

The stranger's code requires immigrants and their descendants to give up their rights, believing they have no alternative and can never expect the same freedoms they would enjoy back home. Since justice is unattainable, they feel the only way to resolve a conflict with their hosts is to pay a stranger penalty. No matter what documents they acquire, they remain subject to the predations of rent-seeking officials and multiple other forms of exactions as long they are resigned to these abuses. Rather than exercising the 'politics of recognition' that has been commonplace in African societies since the 1990s,[29] they opt for what one could call a 'politics of invisibility', keeping a low profile and hoping for the best. It is for this reason that I do not describe the stranger's code as an imposition upon strangers by their hosts: strangers must accept its rules and participate in its enforcement. In short, the stranger's code could not function without their complicity. They surrender their rights, not because they are always compelled to do so, but because they share with their hosts an understanding of the relationship between identity, place, and belonging – an understanding shaped by decades of colonial and post-colonial history.

Exile knows no dignity

Should they choose to defend their interests *en masse* – by collectively refusing to pay bribes, refusing to be cheated out of their due and refusing to put up with abuse – West Africans in Brazzaville could guarantee greater respect for their rights. Taking such a stand, however, would be unseemly, a breach of their unwritten agreement as strangers not to 'rock the boat' in the host country. The stranger's code compels them to refrain from any activity that might unsettle the tenuous balance between hosts and immigrants. This includes not only political engagement and conspicuous consumption, but also anything that might draw unwanted scrutiny to the strangers' presence and their ostensibly subordinate role in the host society. In exchange for permission to stay in a land constructed as 'belonging' to someone else, strangers feel obliged to keep a low profile and adopt a certain public modesty. I believe the notion among my informants that honour and dignity are highly place-bound, that the value of an individual cannot be appreciated on foreign soil,

---

29. On the 'politics of recognition' in African societies, see H. Englund and F.B. Nyamnjoh, *Rights and the politics of recognition in Africa* (London 2004).

only adds to their willingness to abide by the stranger's code and to suffer indignities while living abroad. This notion, encapsulated in the Bamanan proverb 'Exile knows no dignity' (*Tunga tè dambe don*), has fostered a process that has been dubbed 'oppositional florescence', in which migrants and hosts alike strategically select cultural markers that heighten perceived differences rather than commonalities between their groups. This process forecloses the possibility of cultural integration for all but a select few settled strangers.[30]

If the logic underlying such essentialist identity constructions appears to be cultural, their coalescence has been an eminently historical process. That is to say, identity has not always been as place-bound as it is today in many parts of the African continent. What has distinguished most African societies until quite recently was a relative *lack* of concern for place-based forms of identification and sovereignty. For Kopytoff, African societies were actually characterized by 'indifference to a permanent attachment to a particular place'.[31] Since the support of followers was far more valuable than property, leaders accessed status and power primarily through kin and social networks rather than geographic space. 'Where people are wealth and power, competition takes the form of competition over people', state Kopytoff and Miers.[32] 'Wealth in people', in other words, meant more to Africans than 'wealth in things', including land, although the two were obviously interchangeable to some degree. Many leaders practiced highly *inclusive* politics, seeking to expand their followings by attracting as many people into their groups as possible. The degree of assimilation of course varied widely between groups, and not all incorporated outsiders could attain the status of full citizens in each society. Neither, however, did they remain consistently marginalized as strangers: this seems to be a recent phenomenon in many African societies.[33]

Scholars have linked the supremacy of place-bound identities on the continent to the establishment of European colonial rule. Some research in this regard focuses on the political sphere: policies such as British indirect rule and the French *politique des races* were designed to facilitate control of subject populations by identifying 'true natives' in each locality and recognizing (or,

---

30. Constructions of dignity and place are discussed in B. Whitehouse, *Migrants and strangers in an African city*; 'oppositional florescence' is discussed in J.H. Roth, *Brokered homeland: Japanese Brazilian migrants in Japan* (Ithaca 2002), 140-142.

31. 'The internal African frontier: The making of African political culture', in: I. Kopytoff (ed.), *The African frontier: The reproduction of traditional African societies* (Bloomington 1987) 22.

32. 'African "slavery" as an institution of marginality', in: S. Miers and I. Kopytoff (eds.), *Slavery in Africa: Historical and anthropological perspectives* (Madison 1977) 39.

33. On the phenomenon of 'wealth in people' see J. Guyer, 'Wealth in people, wealth in things – Introduction', *Journal of African History* 36 (1995) 83-90; on the historical dynamics of strangerhood, see Shack and Skinner, *Strangers in African societies*; P. Geschiere, *The perils of belonging*.

as often as not, reconstituting) native political structures through which colonial authorities could exercise power. In their bid to control unruly and itinerant populations, colonizers categorized their African subjects into discrete, stable political units ('tribes') based on presumed ties of autochthony and ethnicity, assigning each a territorial homeland, codifying a body of 'customary laws' for its administration, and installing an authoritarian chief to rule over it. This explanation, most thoroughly elaborated by Mahmood Mamdani, casts the colonial-era reformulation of native political authority as a case of 'invented tradition' granting Africa's new generation of so-called customary rulers unprecedented powers to allocate land, collect rents, and exclude strangers.[34]

A second line of analysis concentrates on the colonial economic sphere, specifically the commodification of African economies and the introduction of cash crops. The advent of commercialized agriculture in the colonies transformed the relationship between people and land by boosting demand for labour and farm plots. Land became a potential source of wealth for both the people who cultivated it and the customary rulers who had sovereignty over it. Rights to land were acquired through complex processes of negotiation between farmers (both kin and strangers), elders and chiefs. Land commercialization gave chiefs an incentive to expand the category of 'stranger', since they could extract rents from strangers but not native farmers.[35]

The process of postcolonial African state formation also helped harden boundaries between hosts and strangers. In many countries, the inclusive era of nation building that prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s, with its emphasis on civic citizenship and universal rights, has been succeeded by an era of state decentralization and formal (if not substantive) democratization, dynamics which since the early 1990s have operated in tandem with neoliberal economic reforms. In the context of diminishing state resources and increasing competition for votes, politicians have learned to deploy discourses of indigeneity to their advantage, disqualifying rivals or their supporters from participation in the electoral process based on their allegedly exogenous origins. Belonging is, in Geschiere's words, 'a choice weapon for manipulating elections'.[36] The inauguration of formally democratic regimes has thus accompanied the *de facto* and sometimes *de jure* exclusion of whole populations from political representation. The process of crafting modern African nations

---

34. See T. Ranger, 'The invention of tradition in colonial Africa', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge 1983) 211-262; M. Mamdani, *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism* (Princeton 1996).

35. See S. Berry, *Chiefs know their boundaries: Essays on property, power, and the past in Asante, 1986-1996* (Portsmouth 2001).

36. Geschiere, *The perils of belonging*, 52.

has in this manner entailed a parallel creation of strangers whose rights and whose very future in the new political dispensation are highly uncertain.[37]

Conclusions: History's role

The evidence reviewed here strongly suggests that the informal conventions restricting the rights of settled West African strangers in Brazzaville came into being as part of a long-term historical dynamic in many colonial and post-colonial African societies. This dynamic has favoured the increasing impor-tance of place and indigeneity in the apportionment of political and economic privileges. Among the strangers I study, even individuals who have spent their entire lives in Congo, and whose grandparents migrated there from other parts of the continent, are insecure in their ability to claim full citizenship rights – despite the fact that they possess legal Congolese citizenship. Nor is their case unusual: in many African countries, informal institutions of ethnic citizen-ship based on criteria of perceived autochthony have supplanted formal insti-tutions of civic citizenship, leaving strangers second-class citizens at best.[38]

The case of Brazzaville's West African population indicates that the role of settled strangers in general, and trading minorities in particular, cannot be understood without paying significant attention to the role of history, particularly colonialism and processes of postcolonial nation-building. In this regard, the West African experience of strangerhood in Congo may dif-fer significantly from the experiences of settled strangers outside the Afri-can continent. Where the state is weak and the rule of law precarious, as in many African countries today, the burden of strangerhood is likely to be heavy and accompanied by a sense of what I have elsewhere called 'existential insecurity'.[39] Where the state can more effectively guarantee basic rights, as in many European and Asian countries, strangerhood may be less fraught with danger. Africa's strangers may be settled, but they have been unable to become natives. This fact is not solely attributable to discriminatory practices by their hosts; it implicates the strangers themselves, who espouse essential-ist understandings of identity that cast rights as inherently place-bound. In Brazzaville and elsewhere on the continent, meaningful citizenship remains off-limits for immigrants and their descendants. These settlers will not become natives in the foreseeable future.

---

37. S. Dorman, D. Hammett and P. Nugent (eds.), *Making nations, creating strangers: States and citizenship in Africa* (Leiden 2007).
38. B. Manby, *Struggles for citizenship in Africa* (New York 2009).
39. B. Whitehouse, 'Migrants et insécurité existentielle: Le cas de Brazzaville', *Hommes et Migrations* 1279 (2009) 80-87.

About the author

Bruce Whitehouse (1971) is assistant professor of anthropology at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, United States, where he is also associated with the Global Studies and Africana Studies programs. He has studied dynamics including transnationalism, migration, fertility and infertility, and marriage in the Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Mali. His book *Migrants and Strangers in an African City: Exile, Dignity, Belonging* was published by Indiana University Press in 2012.

E-mail: bruce.whitehouse@lehigh.edu/