

“I don’t have a community”

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Abstract

Ethnic fabric of the Tanzanian society is a product of several internal and external factors; migration and colonialism being two of the most impactful milestones. Providing for a significant transnational movement of people and cultures; migration and colonialism have played a key role in shaping the inter-ethnic relations in Tanzania. This paper addresses how present day youth reiterate historically rooted expressions of ethnicity; dynamics of boundary drawings; and processes of negotiating ethnic differences. By focusing on the South Asian communities in Tanzania, I argue that, community centres provide a basis for reinstating ethnic boundaries between African and non-African youth in Tanzania.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Boundaries, South-Asian Community, Pluralism

Introduction

In this paper I address youth experience and expression of ethnicity in everyday life by tracing how migration and colonialism have played a significant role in shaping the ethnic relations in present day Tanzania. Migration has notably led to the emergence of plural society; whereas colonialism has further institutionalised this plurality into hierarchical structures; more specifically in the provision of and access to social services such as education. I argue that the ethnic classification which that the present day youth inherently practice, are deeply rooted in the colonial categorisation of social groups. I particularly focus on the formation of South Asian ‘communities’ and how the present day communities endorse ethnic classifications once institutionalised by the colonial hierarchical structures. My argument draws from an ethnographical study among secondary school youth in Tanzania using the theory of ethnic boundaries (Barth, 1994) and Grounded Theory analysis (Strauss, 1987). In this paper, I describe general observations in the field and I discuss excerpts from

‘group talks’ conducted with students. Casual conversations with high school youth served as an entry point into the subject of my research and into identifying analytical categories in the field. I found that ethnic classifications in secondary schools occur on the basis of race, community and tribe whereby race and community emerge as strong ethnic boundary markers. Thus, I demonstrate how South Asian youth reiterate community ethos in their daily lives; and particularly in interacting with other ethnic groups. In the following sections, I first analyse the historical development of ethnic labels and their implications in Tanzania. Next, I discuss the current situation in secondary schools where ethnic differentiation is prominent among students, particularly during extra-curricular activities

Becoming a community

Prior to the European interventions, the Africans on the mainland identified themselves on the basis of kinship and language groups. The German authorities divided Africans into the categories of “tribes”. In places where there were no tribes, the colonial officials assigned tribes to societies living in the same geographical proximity (Iliffe, 1979:329). Similarly they grouped all non-Europeans, as “natives”. Thus the ‘native’ group included various African tribes, Arabs, South Asians and Balouch. When the British took over Tanganyika in 1919 they classified South Asians as ‘non-native British subjects with higher social and economic status as compared to Arabs and Africans.

In the meantime, the South Asians had formed their separate ‘communities’ amongst themselves. These communities marked the boundaries between South Asians and other groups namely Europeans, Arabs, Balouch and Africans. These communities also marked the boundaries among South Asians of different religion, language, ancestral background and caste. The ‘community’ here constitutes an in-group, formed on the basis of religion, religious denomination, and place of origin in India or caste. The South Asians from various in-groups labelled themselves as a ‘community’ in its English form, whatever the language actually spoken” (Morris, 1956; Baumann, 1996).

The community became to the South Asians, what tribe was to local Africans. Also, the term community came to be used at another level; as an overall term for all South Asian communities. Whereas Africans or

'outsiders' see one 'Asian community'; the Asians see several communities and communities within communities, that can be classified according to religion, sect, caste and regional or territorial affiliation to the 'homeland'-(real or assumed). For example the demotic meaning of a 'Muslim religious community' would more than often end up in examples of South Asian (religious) communities such as Ismaili, Bohora, Ithnaasheri, Ahmaddiya and Sunni. For a Hindu, the community could mean Hindu community in one context, and in the other it could refer to one of the many castes within the larger Hindu community in Tanzania. "The approximate number of South Asians in Tanzania in 2009 was 50,000, in the following categories 7000 Bohoras; 4250 Ismailis; 15,000 Sunnis; 1200 Ithnaasheri (9000 in Dar es Salaam); 1400 Hindus (7000 in Dar es Salaam); and 700 Goans"(Bapumia, 2012:13). The most common Indian languages spoken among South Asians include Gujarati, Kutchhi, Punjabi and Hindustani. The majority of South Asians communicate in Gujarati or Kutchhi across communities. The Goans speak Konkani and English amongst themselves and English and/or Swahili with others. A first time visitor to Tanzania is more likely to find it difficult to understand when a Gujarati, Kutchhi, Punjabi or Urdu speaker says 'community' in her/his conversation. The Urdu speaking South Asians refer to themselves as *jamaat*, Gujarati and Kutchhi speakers use the term *naat or jaat*. Nevertheless, all Community members casually use the English term 'community' in their conversations. It is merely a matter of context to decipher whether one is referring to all South Asians or a specific community.

It is certainly not an exaggeration to say that the community is part and parcel of an individual from cradle to coffin. The community is the core provider of basic social services for its members. This again goes back to the British administration which encouraged South Asians to establish their own schools and hospitals (Brennan, Burton, and Lawi, 2007; Iliffe, 1979). Each community also established its own centres operating as places of worship but also as social centres.

After independence, the Tanzania Citizenship Act of "provided that all citizens of the United Kingdom, its colonies, and British-protected persons born in Tanganyika (including persons of Asian, Arab, and European origins) and who had at least one parent born in the territory prior to independence would automatically become citizens of Tanganyika"(Heilman, 1998:374). As a result the majority of the Europeans left the country, a large number of the South Asians and Arabs opted for Tanzanian citizenship. By 1967 The Arusha declaration came into practice through villagisation, 'Africanisation' and nationalisation. These policies demanded complete compliance to the principles of *Ujamaa*. For example, Brennan (2012) mentions that Africans appalled South Asian flight attendants wearing saris on flights to Karachi and Bombay; also complained about the broadcasting of Hindustani programmes on national radio; and the South Asians' failure to fluently speak Swahili, the national language(Brennan, 2012:177–180). As a result, South Asian clubs changed their names "from Goan Institute to Dar es Salaam institute; Hindu Sports club to Upanga sports club; Patel Brotherhood to Dar es Salaam brotherhood"(Brennan, 2012:181). However these clubs are until today predominantly South Asian and continue to serve the specific 'communities' that own them.

Meanwhile, those South Asians, who could afford to buy properties, sought to contribute in the nation building by investing their capital into constructing buildings. However, following the nationalisation policy, all private properties were confiscated by the state, to be run under the auspices of National Housing Corporation. The former owners continued to live in the same houses they owned, now as tenants of the NHC. To-date one can observe such change of ownership on the walls of old buildings in the city centre; where the names of the former owners stand side by side with the NHC logo.

Nagar (1997) shows that the Hindu community in Dar es Salaam went through a significant change in its size and composition due to the following episodes: the Zanzibar revolution in 1964, the nationalisation policy of businesses after 1967, and the Building Act of 1971. As a result, the upper and middle class Hindus migrated to the United Kingdom, and the working and lower class Hindus relocated from Zanzibar to Dar es Salaam and other parts of mainland. "Whereas the Brahman, Jain, Lohana,

Vaanza and Vanand communities each declined in size as a result of this exodus, most of the other castes were augmented from being almost non-existent, these castes of manual labourers became the largest Hindu castes in Dar es salaam and clustered in the predominantly lower-class and racially mixed neighbourhood of Kariakoo” away from the city centre where most of the upper class Hindus of Dar es Salaam resided (Nagar, 1997:711–712).The social boundaries between Africans and the lower-caste Hindus South Asians still continued to remain in place, despite the spatial boundaries getting dissolved.

Meanwhile, the socialist government considered ethnic labels as markers of division and obstacles for national unity, hence disband all tribal societies. Here I question the act of banning the tribal association, but allowing the South Asian communities to flourish. Bharati (1972) argues that this discrepancy derives from the fact that the South Asian communities were formed according to religion and/or religious denominations. For example among the Muslim one could find Ithnaasheri, Dawoodi-Bohora, Sunni, and Ismaili community (Bharati, 1972:20–35)each having their own registered community. Since Nyerere’s government allowed for freedom of religion, the South Asian communities were granted registration as ‘religious’ organisations. It is still questionable how Nyerere’s socialist government overlooked the parallel effect of these communities. Brennan (2012) reasons that the government had neither the will nor the ability to adjudicate internal disputes arising in private spheres of the ‘tightly knit Indian [South Asian] communities’(Brennan, 2012:183–184). This further flares my contest, since the same argument applies to several African tribes. If a small social group of less than one percentage of the total population was too much to manage for the then socialist state; how was the state willing to take responsibilities of the cultural nurturing of over one hundred tribes, each with their own language and sets of norms and beliefs? Evidently, the *Ujamaa* ‘brotherhood’ demanded from the Africans to let go of their ancestral identities in the name of becoming one nation. I cannot withhold my scepticism against such noble intentions- without comparing it to the forged clustering of the African kinship groups into ‘tribes’.

Nonetheless, a rather convincing argument is that, banning tribal associations was a move to curb potential danger these associations posed

to the national ethos of unity and solidarity and Nyerere’s efforts to create and maintain one nation. Yet by allowing non-African/ non-tribal groups to handle their affairs on their own, the state has condoned in-group exclusivity among South Asian communities vis-à-vis African majority. Ironically, this too poses a threat to national integration.

The shift from a single-party socialist state to multi-party in the 1990’s went along with major economic and social changes which provoked discussions on ethnicity in the public spheres. Political debates on ethnic differentiations were rampant, parallel to ethnic boundaries being downplayed in the cultural realm. Privatisation and trade liberalisation was at its peak when Tanzania officially denounced socialism. And set forth to sell its many parastatals (Aminzade, 2013; Gray, 2013; Kaiser, 1996; Liviga, 2009). Racially motivated debates emerged regarding who should buy these state owned corporations. These debates introduced yet another ethnic label – *Uzawa*, meaning indigenous. This was the most contested term evoking anti- [South] Asian sentiments which led to selective ethnic violence (Aminzade, 2013:354–355). Eventually the question of *Uzawa* was resolved with official guidelines defining indigenous ‘citizens’ which included South Asians who are Tanzanian citizen. In managing such contestations from the Africans, the South Asians once again turned to protect their businesses in the guise of ‘Community’ activities. Tanzania became a host to a number of private schools and hospitals. Community owned flats and business complexes.

The current Situation in Secondary schools

There are two main categories of schools in Tanzania, private and government schools. The private schools, that have a large number of South Asian students, are casually referred to as ‘*shule za wahindi*’ [‘indian schools’]. These are mostly community owned schools or those schools that are under the trusteeship of few South Asian business persons. The ‘Indian schools’ I visited had a fair mix of South Asian and African students. Moreover, the students formed friendship groups firstly on the basis of race, hence African, Arab, South Asian and Half-Caste groups; at the same time, South Asian students further divided themselves into ‘community’ specific groups. The relationship across these students groups is one that is best described in the conversation I had with Natasha, the school’s head girl. Consider the excerpt below:

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N: It is not hatred it is just lack of that something that connects people of different culture and then one party is trying to bring up that connection and the other one is not trying, so you know, you just get surprised.

N: My experience was at the "student festival", during the preparation they would ask me "why don't you go to your community?" I don't have a community [we all laugh]

F: Where are you from?

N: I am born in Dar

F: Where is home?

N: I am pare

F: Kwani hamna jumuiya ya wapare (isn't there a pare association?)

N: It's not the same

In spoken Swahili, tribal affiliation is synonymous to 'home'. The notion of 'home' in this context is much broader than an actual place of birth or a place where one lives. For most people born and raised in urban cities 'home' refers to their ancestral regional territory. It refers to a place where they go with their families to meet their grandparents and to celebrate family events. Tribal associations are informal regional groups formed to cater for social events such as weddings and funerals. My question to Natasha, regarding the Pare association, was only intended to lighten the conversation, and she equally responded with the same spirit, yet confirming that regional associations are not the same as communities. They are systematically different from 'communities', as they are not formally registered and are not categories of differentiation among African groups.

For South Asians 'communities' are the basis of ethnic classification and differentiation. Various social events organised at the community centres dominate the lives of their members. Local communities organise regular activities such as art exhibitions, public lectures, cooking competitions, quiz competitions, fashion shows and dance events often imitating what they see on the Indian television channels. The community creates 'little India' within the proximities of the community premises. Community creates an atmosphere and opportunity for its members to 'act Indian' as a way to remain connected to what they consider to be the 'home-land'.

However such efforts lead to a spill over effect in other aspects of the lives of its members, for example in school activities. One such activity is the *Student Festival*.

The school’s *Student Festival*, Natasha mentions, is an annual event comprising stage performances by students before their colleagues, parents and other official guests. Every year, close to the festival, the school administration selects an organising committee among the students and school staff. In the year I visited this particular school, the festival had already passed, however my interviewees from different ‘groups’ often referred to this event in sharing their experiences. Natasha was head of the students’ organising committee, with the majority of her committee members comprising South Asian students from different communities. She explained that her committee members often suggested activity ideas from what they saw in their communities, expecting Natasha to also share her community experience. As Natasha explained to them that she does not belong to any community, they ignored her suggestions on the grounds that she does not have any experience in organising events. Furthermore, the ‘Indian’ teachers in charge also surpassed her as head of the students committee and preferred to deal with the students directly, because they could relate with the community experience. Natasha however did not complain about the situation to higher authorities in school. Still talking on the same topic, she spoke to me about an incident where she prepared posters for the event, only to find her posters torn and placed in the trash bin. When I asked her if she tried to find out who tore the posters, Natasha insisted ‘you don’t wait to find out, you just walk away’. For Natasha, walking away seemed more reasonable compared to confronting the teacher. Presumably, she thought the teacher might not listen to her.

Another student from Natasha’s class, Otieno, narrated another incident that occurred during the preparation of the students’ festival. Their principal was talking about dance performances giving an example of a television show aired on India’s cable television. While the South Asian students understood the example their principal was giving, Otieno, Natasha and other African students had no clue about the program their principal was constantly and enthusiastically referring to. Although Indian programmes are accessible to Tanzanian viewers through private cable

operators, most subscribers of these cable services are South Asians due to the programmes being in Indian languages. Some of the programmes aired on the cable television are further reproduced in the community centres and widely discussed across communities.

Conclusion

It will certainly be naïve to assume that colonial administrative policies are direct determinants of how groups and individuals from different ethnic groups related with one another. However one can also not ignore unequal structural opportunities under which the cultural norms and practices were realised. The early migrants among the non-African minorities, such as the Arab, Balouch and South Asians were culturally different from the majority of Africans. These differences included marriage and kinship rules, dietary practices, concepts of personal hygiene, belief systems and language. Besides these cultural differences, there were also remarkable overt differences in appearance, such as the colour of the skin. In the following generations, while some minority groups exhibited a certain degree of cultural exchange, others maintained strong boundaries against cultural infiltration. The Arabs and Balouch for example adopted Swahili language as their mother tongue. By the virtue of sharing the same religion, few Muslim South Asians crossed the boundaries of race. However the notion of preserving cultural purity among minority groups superseded any efforts for large scale integration. Unlike cultural components were used as boundary markers to exclude others. For example among the South Asians the boundaries of race were used to exclude Arabs and Africans. Within the South Asian groups, the boundaries of language, religion and religious denomination were used to exclude other sub-groups within the larger South Asian community. In addition, the racially segregated neighbourhoods and schools enabled the drawing of boundaries between and within ethnic groups, hence further diminishing possibilities of ethnic integration.

After Independence, Tanzania abolished racial segregation in provision of social services, and also putting a ban on all tribal associations. With the adoption of socialist policies under the framework of *Ujamaa* tribal identities were scorned in order to strengthen the national identity under the auspices of the only political party *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* (CCM). However, the newly independent government continued to acknowledge

and support South Asian communities. These communities which were the power houses for harbouring ethno-racial differences persisted even amidst stern policies of national integration. When Tanzania loosened state control on economic production and the provision of social services, these very communities took to economic front. The cultural ‘projects’ for preserving ethnic norms and practices were complemented with economic projects through community run schools and housing schemes. Hence they re-established the trend to ethnically distinct residency and education. In addition, the improved communication and access to foreign media has contributed to the strengthening of the existing cultural ties with the former ‘homeland’ in the case of India for example. The easy access to travel abroad and networking through social media has also facilitated in creating new links, which led to the strengthening of South Asian communities. Hence this perpetuates the already existing, historically rooted ethnic differentiation in Tanzania.

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