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Reimagining belonging: The quest of Africans for relational belonging and the Australian requirement of integration

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the challenges African refugees face in achieving a sense of belonging in Australia, largely as a result of the negation of their traditional experiences by modernist states both in Africa and Australia. In Australia, the dream of belonging to a new community is constrained by what I call the ethnicisation of civic belonging, a process whereby legal frameworks around residency and citizenship become beholden to the Eurocentric interpretation of 'Australian values.' This can be seen in citizenship exams that test a refugee's adherence to such values, and often results in broader social pressure to assimilate in order to belong. The paper seeks to challenge and reimagine current attempts to integrate African refugees into Australian society by considering African notions of belonging, using the importance of personhood and relationship with nature as important examples. The paper then considers how state violence towards communal belonging in Africa contributes to displacement and the quest for belonging to a new community. African refugees have lost their physical belonging which constituted their relationship to land, ancestors and communities, and are in search of reconstituting belonging in new places. The paper argues that refugees will continue to live in a constant struggle to achieve belonging unless they are seen not simply as vulnerable beings who seek protection but also as active agents who bring new perspectives that enrich diverse ways of being and belonging to Australia.

Keywords: belonging; relational belonging; citizenship; African refugees.

Introduction

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.
— Simone Weil (qtd. in Malkki, 1992:24)

The Australian Government recently proposed a bill to amend the 2007 Citizenship Act for "strengthening the test for citizenship" (Parliament of Australia, 2017). According to Prime Minister Turnbull, "we need to ensure that our citizenship test enables applicants to demonstrate how they have integrated into and engaged with our Australian community, so that they're part of the community" (Office of the Prime Minister of Australia, 2017). The proposed bill came with the rise of right-wing nationalism and populism, where anxieties associated with economic insecurity and cultural change are often framed through the politics of identity (Dean, Bell, and Vakhitova, 2016; Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Australian civic society groups and activists made submissions that were critical of the government's plan (CHRE, 2017; Refugee Council of Australia, 2017). These criticisms emphasised that the proposed amendment would have unjust outcomes, especially in relation to vulnerable refugees that need Australia's protection the most. Their submissions also suggested that the proposal would have the effect of negating the emotional sense of belonging refugees aspire to develop in Australia by putting cognitive skills as a prerequisite for belonging to the Australian community. While the proposed bill did not pass initially, politicians and the media continue to discuss what is perceived to be the importance of citizenship tests and other measures through which immigrants and refugees can have their 'Australianness' verified. In order to secure a place or belong in Australia, one must adhere to the mythical 'Australian values.' This paper seeks to add an important dimension to the argument by focusing on the importance of African experiences and perspectives of belonging to African refugees in Australia. In doing so, it first shows how the current discourse on citizenship in Australia excludes diverse ways of belonging by implicating civic institutions with a Euro/ethnocentric interpretation of Australian values (Offord, Kerruish, Garbutt, Wessell, and Kirsten, 2015). It also shows the dehumanising effect of this process on the African sense of belonging. Later, it shows how African refugees understand belonging based on their traditional experiences and how their sense of belonging is negated before and after settlement.

The ethnicisation of civic belonging

Social and civil belonging in Australia has long been ethnicised and the notion of testing one's adherence to 'Australian values' is by no means new. For example, despite being the indigenous people of the country, Aboriginal Australians have continually been required to 'prove' that they adhere to white Australian values in order to belong to their own country. The assimilation policy of the 1950s and 60s provides a clear case study. Paul Hasluck, Minister for Territories with responsibility for Aboriginal affairs between 1951 and 1963, promoted the idea that "Aborigines 'at all stages of progress from the primitive to the fully civilised' would eventually come to 'live like us'" (qtd. in Haebich,

2000:764). His vision of assimilation was that Aboriginals and migrants alike would "'[turn their] back on the past'" and move towards:

> An affluent, classless, monocultural society: the poor would forget their former privations; migrants would forget Europe; and the Aborigines would forget their past. In return, all would enjoy the 'Australian way of life.' (Qtd. in Haebich, 2000:764)

Government pamphlets published in the 50s and 60s presented propaganda images of Aboriginal people living the suburban dream in small nuclear families. Some encouraged white Australians to help Aboriginal people assimilate, while others targeted Aboriginal people by presenting the white Australian way of life as the key to social success and belonging (see Haebich, 2000:763-775). The violence of the Stolen Generation, where children were forcibly taken from their parents and raised in state institutions or adopted by white families, was publicly presented as a further step towards assimilation for Aboriginal Australians. Haebich details the way in which the media published numerous articles featuring happy children in foster care, adopted households, or on holiday programs, where the success of assimilation would be in, as one adoptive parent said, "bring[ing] [the children] into the homes of white people so that they could be thoroughly acclimatised" (qtd. in 2000:794). As with African refugees today, the key to belonging was contingent on being "acclimatised" to the dominant white culture.

Research suggests that the key to belonging is significantly more complicated. The ways refugees develop a sense of belonging in Australia have been understood based on two important concepts. Firstly, according to Fozdar and Hartley (2013), the sense of belonging to Australia is viewed in terms of achieving civic rights and responsibilities. This sense of belonging, which is sometimes referred to as civic, is nurtured through institutions that provide support services to refugees. Often, refugees manifest a strong sense of civic belonging and are grateful for the services and support that they receive from institutions. The second aspect of belonging, which is regarded highly by most Australians, "places a high value on the affective connection between compatriots" (Fozdar and Hartley, 2013:128). Fozdar and Hartley argue that refugees' emotional connection to the land and the people is often constrained by experiences with the mainstream population and cultural differences. African refugees in particular expressed their sense of belonging to the mainstream population as "aspirational, something to be achieved overtime" (139). As one participant noted, "Australians never treat us badly but they rarely accept us as their own people" (137).

The above distinction between civic and ethno-belonging offers two important insights in relation to the proposed change to the Citizenship Act. Firstly, the requirement to pass a test on Australian values dismisses the significance and relevance of African perspectives and traditional experiences as important ways of belonging to Australia. This paper will analyse the African sense of belonging and its relevance to the lives of refugees in the next section. Secondly, the newly proposed citizenship bill will have the effect of blurring the distinction between ethno-belonging and civic belonging by making cultural tests a requirement for achieving civic belonging. Under the proposed bill, ethno-belonging, which was seen as too difficult to be achieved by many refugees due to cultural differences between the majority white Australian culture and the culture of the refugees, could become the most dominant means of achieving civic belonging. For example, the

requirement of proficiency in the English language, although more relevant to ethno-belonging than civic duty, has now become a legal requirement for citizenship under the proposed bill. Malcolm Turnbull justified the requirement in terms of economic and social goals, stating that "we all know that the key to successful integration into the Australian community, to economic success and every success—social success—in becoming part of the community is being able to speak English" (Office of the Prime Minister of Australia, 2017). In addition to proficient English, the citizenship test would require refugees to prove their integration by showing their connection to the community, by not having a criminal record or prolonged dependency on welfare, and by showing their employment history, income and tax. The above requirements present *Homo Economicus* as the good and desirable citizen. It also presents those who fail to meet these requirements as less human and unworthy of civic rights.

The dehumanising effect of the citizenship requirement can be seen from the fact that the proposed document seems to hijack 'universal' moral and legal principles as uniquely Australian values that can be used to objectively test the eligibility of outsiders. Under the proposed bill, refugees would be required to integrate into a set of values such as democratic beliefs, equality, and freedom that are internationally regarded as universal human entitlements (UN, 1948). States who signed human rights treaties have assumed the responsibility to implement these rights and to provide protection to individuals irrespective of nationality or citizenship (HRC, 1986). In other words, these international norms are not the duty of individuals towards states, they are the duties of states towards individuals. There are two consequences of requiring refugees to be tested for values that are regarded as 'universal' and 'inalienable' from human beings. First, it contradicts the claim of civic institutions to be neutral and objective. Under the pretence of universal ideals of equality, freedom and fairness, the proposed bill reconstitutes the rites of civic belonging according to cultural, linguistic, ideological and economic factors that reflect ethno-nationalism. This is a form of "ethnonationalism masquerading as civic nationalism" (Fozdar and Low, 2015). The application of these white Australian values in civic institutions can also be seen as the culturisation of citizenship:

> By the culturalization of citizenship, we try to capture a process by which culture (emotions, feelings, norms and values, and symbols and traditions, including religion) has come to play a central role in the debate on what it means to be a citizen, either as an alternative or in addition to political, judicial and social citizenship (Tonkens and Duyvendak, 2016:3).

It can also undermine cultural and cognitive diversity as the basis of multiculturalism. Secondly, it also has a dehumanising effect on the identity of refugees. Dehumanisation occurs when people are objectified with labels that are classified as sub-human, resulting in the justification of moral disengagement from them (Bain, Vaes, and Leyens, 2014). As Geertz argues, human beings cannot become fully human without their culture: "our ideas, our values, our acts, even our emotions, are, like our nervous system itself, cultural products" (1973:49). The negation of the culture of refugees leads to the reduction of their existence into "the abstract nakedness of being human" (Arendt, 1979:287), a form of vulnerability that make refugees feel as though "nobody here knows who I am" (299).

As can be seen, the current discourse on citizenship poses various challenges for refugees to achieve a sense of belonging in Australia. For civil belonging to be contingent on

linguistic, social, cultural, ideological and economic tests, the opportunity for refugees to achieve belonging on the basis of what they know and experienced through their own cultures becomes significantly reduced. In order to belong, one must prove one's adherence to ethnocentric values that are erroneously cast as inalienable 'human' values, thereby further relegating the refugee's culture and experience to the realm of the inhuman. To become a refugee primarily means to lose the connection between one's accumulated experience from tradition and the geographical and social context that makes those experiences meaningful. This means, refugees need belonging in order to flourish as equal citizens in their new country, as they no longer have the means to achieve it in their home country. As Malkki (1995) argued, this loss does not lead to either the abandonment of collective identity among the refugees or the dynamism of the culture of the refugees. In Australia, the effort of Africans to use their tradition to develop their sense of belonging needs to be acknowledged and supported (Babatunde-Sowole, Power, Jackson, Davidson, and DiGiacomo, 2016; Mackenzie, Mwamba, and Mphande, 2015). It is therefore important to acknowledge that the meaning of belonging should go beyond the current discourse of citizenship.

Belonging from the perspective of African traditions

It should be clear from the outset that there is no singular notion of African belonging. Concepts of belonging from African perspectives cannot be exhaustively known or presented in one paper. However, it is possible and indeed necessary to explore how African refugees understand and feel belonging. In order to understand how African refugees experience and negotiate the complexities of belonging in Australia, it is vital that we move away from the idea that belonging is assured simply by becoming a citizen of the state or passing a values test. African traditions and historical experiences provide proper insights into the meaning of belonging for African refugees. The history of colonialism in Africa further complicates how one considers African notions of belonging. The European social contract theory that presents the state of nature as the original position from where individuals emerge to become members of a civilised society is historically irrelevant to Africans due to the fact that state formation occurred through slavery and colonialism. In other words, Africans did not wilfully surrender their freedom to a state that they created in order to protect their lives and liberty; they were controlled by the colonial and neo-colonial state largely for the sake of exploitation. The institutions of slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonialism were created and maintained through violence. Therefore, a proper understanding of African senses of belonging should be taken from culture, from communal values and traditional ways of life that have been silenced by local and global power interests.

The consideration of the African culture as a source of belonging requires an important qualification. Due to the long history of colonial and neo-colonial experiences, one can identify three characteristics of the various cultures in Africa. Based on the low to high level of western influences, one can observe mimicry, hybridity and tradition (Bhabha, 1994; Ferguson, 2002). Mimicry represents cultural forms imitated from western culture; hybridity refers to the mixture of mimicry and local tradition; and tradition refers to the common way of life of the majority based on customs, religions, and history. While no essentialist distinction is possible among these three forms, it is possible to notice that

mimicry and hybridity are predominantly elite-based cultures whereas tradition represents the residual and commonly practiced culture of the majority (Woldeyes, 2013, 2017). It is therefore important to remember that the meaning of belonging sketched below is based on the traditional conception rather than that of western mimicry which is the basis of elite culture in Africa.

Within African traditions, the concept of belonging refers to a way of coming into existence as a communal being. Here, the rites of integration and verification do not make sense because those who exist in the community already belong, and those who belong cannot be regarded as unfit or outside of the community. This notion of belonging can be inferred from the African concepts of personhood, obligation and relationship with community and nature. One of the common examples of African notions of personhood is the concept of Ubuntu, which recognises the humanity of the self through the humanity of the other. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu states, Ubuntu "speaks about the essence of being human: that my humanity is caught up in your humanity because we say a person is a person through other persons. I am a person because I belong" (Tutu, 1998:xiii). In other words, belonging is *a priori* to the individual: a person comes into being human knowing the world and him/herself through belonging to the community. Senghor provides more insight into the intimate connection that characterises this African sense of belonging as a way of melting oneself into the being of the other:

> The Negro African sympathizes, abandons his personality to become identified with the Other, dies to be reborn in the Other. He does not assimilate; he is assimilated. He lives a common life with the Other; it is a long caress in the night, an embrace of joined bodies, the act of love. (1964:72-73)

The fundamental point here is that nothing exists between being and belonging. There are no impersonal institutions that verify, manage and control the way individuals exist or belong to the society. Belonging involves the creation of unity with a community that includes the living, the living dead (ancestors), the living but not yet born, nature and spirits. The individual belongs to a community *personally* through and with other persons, and by the performance of rituals and the observance of traditional duties that involve other members of the community together. As Menkiti noted, "in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated, static quality of rationality, will, or memory" (1984:172). We may refer to this as *relational belonging*: a process of becoming *one* with a world that can be lived and enjoyed only through the pursuit of communal ideals. All things—the dead and the living, animals and plants, bodies and spirits, heaven and earth—complement one another, supporting a sacred universe in which a person is a mere element in how things fit together in the world. This notion of belonging presents a notion of personhood embodied in networks of relations with society and nature. Maintaining belonging is equivalent to maintaining one's humanity, which may include the fulfilment of traditional obligations.

Obligation is how belonging is practiced in daily life. It involves the living of one's identity through the fulfilment of communal expectations. Individuals feel an intimate sense of obligation to a wide range of subjects because, as Mbiti notes,

> Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: I am, because we are and since we are, therefore I am. (1970:108)

Obligation as a necessity for belonging entails the observance of communal responsibilities as a way of life. In many African traditions, this responsibility includes reverence to nature, ancestors and life. No obligation means having no belonging. That means traditional obligations are not imposed duties from a higher authority, they are key attributes of sociability and being-in-the-world (Mbiti, 1970).

One example of showing this conception of obligation and belonging is to look into the Bantu traditional view that all things are forces. Kagame divided these forces into four categories: Muntu, Kintu, Hantu and Kantu (Jahn, 1961). Muntu includes all forces endowed with intelligence: God, spirits, the dead, human beings and certain trees. The second category, Kintu, encompasses forces that include plants, animals, minerals, and the like. Hantu represents time and space, and Kantu represents modalities such as beauty, laughter and so on. The common letters *ntu* that appear in each of the four categories represents the universal force or Being which exists as the manifestation of the four categories. Ntu, the universal force, is not an independent being located outside or in isolation from the rest. It is the spiritual force that is common in everything. This conception presents nature not as a dead matter devoid of personhood and values but as a force that manifests God himself. As Mbiti notes,

> Man sees in the universe not only the imprint but the reflections of God; and whether that image is marred or clearly focused and defined, it is nevertheless an image of God, the only image known in traditional African societies. (1970:48)

Belonging involves a sacred view and a harmonious relationship with nature. The Dogon myth of creation views the earth as a mother that gives birth to creation thorough her conjugal love with the sky spirit. This sanctification of nature suggests a sense of place that is central to belonging: place is not devoid of meaning. It is the embodiment of life, knowledge and spirit. It is where all occurrences take place.

> Nature in the broadest sense of the word is not an empty impersonal object of phenomena: it is filled with religious significance. Man gives life even where natural objects and phenomena have no biological life. God is seen in and behind these objects and phenomena: they are His creation, they manifest Him, they symbolize His being and presence. The invisible world is symbolised or manifested by these visible and concrete phenomena and objects of nature. The invisible world presses hard upon the visible: one speaks of the other, and African peoples 'see' that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world. This is one of the most fundamental religious heritages of African people. (Mbiti, 1970:56)

This view of nature is important in offering the human being a sense of purpose and direction in the world. Place is not a physical property that can be owned by individuals; it is not an entity to be mastered and controlled by human beings. Place is the expression of God's image; as some African Muslim refugees would say, "Everywhere is Allah's

place" (McMichael, 2002). That means no individual or group can claim an exclusive title or impose a normative value or rule upon it. Instead, place is the source of values. It presents human beings with certain normative demands that they should obey in order to live a harmonious life. This view is different from the view of a detached individual that seeks to control nature in order to create a civilisation of its own. No civilisation can be owned in exclusion of others and no achievement can be regarded as a personal achievement. In this African conception of belonging, a person can say "I belong to that place", not "that place belongs to me" or "that is my civilisation or my country." As the common African saying goes, "I conceive that land belongs to a vast family of which many are dead, few are living and countless members are still unborn" (qtd. in Njoh, 2006:9).

The view of nature and place as sacred is not just unique to Africa. Indigenous Australians have a well-established tradition based on deep connection with land and nature. "Rock, tree, river, hill, animal, human—all were formed of the same substance by the Ancestors who continue to live in land, water, sky" (Kwaymullina, 2016: 12). Human beings live in harmony with Ancestors and nature following The Dreaming that encompasses the philosophical, spiritual and cultural basis of Aboriginal life (Isaacs, 2006). The view of personhood embodied in nature has been part of most southern perspectives too. For example, Zhang Zai's Confucian teaching, "that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I regard as my nature," suggests that the goal of life was to live in harmony with nature, not to master and control it (Chan, 1963:497). Similarly, the view of nature as PachaMama, a living mother of creation, has gained increasing acceptance, including legal recognition, in Bolivia (Vidal, 2011). In the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador (2008), Article 71 and 72 guarantees nature the right to life and restoration. In western tradition too, Merchant shows that the traditional view of nature was a sacred female that was venerated through various rituals. She argues that this view changed since the industrial revolution, resulting in what she calls the "death of nature" (1980).

This "visibility of values" outside the mind of the individual, on people, nature and places, has important implications on belonging. It challenges the anthropocentric view that human beings are the sole sources of values. As Bilgrami (2016) argues, it allows us to derive values not from our desires, fears, moral sentiments or state of mind, but from creating a relationship with nature and human beings, from acting as practical agents. For Africa, the sanctity of nature imposes upon human beings the obligation to live in harmony with everything that has life. As Makumba argues, "human existence was understood to be in harmony with itself when it was in harmony with nature and with the realm of the divine" (2007:170).

The African way of relational belonging which supports persons embodied in nature and community has been a basis of authority in cultural and social life. Traditional chiefs are obeyed to the extent that they also followed the traditional customs that were set by the ancestors and tradition. Their power was predictable and limited by local traditions. For example, they were allowed to accumulate wealth, often in the form of gifts, in order to distribute it back to the community as providers (Chabal, 2009). Therefore, their power was built on the basis of reciprocity and the tradition of sharing (Mpansu, 1986). Persons contribute to their traditional leaders in order to enable them to carry out their traditional duties. The leaders were obeyed not because they were feared but because they were

respected; their power was proportional to their authority. Success was measured not by individual accumulation but by generosity, by the ability to provide for the living and please the dead.

Although the loss of belonging is unthinkable, as a person cannot exist without belonging to the community, the sense of harmony in relationships with nature and society could be lost or strained due to the violation of traditional obligations. Persons who cause harm to others or violate the sacred rules of the community would undergo a process of punishment, sacrifice or reconciliation that aims at restoring harmony.

> In our African understanding, we set great store by communal peace and harmony. Anything that subverts this harmony is injurious, not just to the community, but to all of us, and therefore forgiveness is an absolute necessity for continued human existence (Tutu, 1998:xiii).

The relational belonging explored above suggests the frames of references and experiences African refugees have in relation to belonging. Belonging is a communal way of life, a way of being a person through one's relationship with others, including nature.

The loss and struggle for belonging in Africa

The loss and the struggle to maintain belonging has been the most enduring experience of the majority of Africans in modern history. From the sixteenth to the twentieth century, colonialism was practiced through the movement of slaves, resources, indentured labourers, colonial administrators, the creation of markets, farms, settlements, religious conversions and other related activities. In Europe, the most obvious outcome of this process was the birth and growth of capitalism and industry (Loomba, 2005:23). But in Africa, it created the African state as a foreign transplant that was and continues to be contemptuous to Africans' communal traditions and relational belonging.

Clearly, colonialism was violent against the African sense of relational belonging. It introduced a new logic of power relationships by removing the sources of authority from traditional belonging and obligation to a foreign colonising power. It instituted a new model of rule by creating a state that operates based on imposed values. Ranger (1983) argues there were two important assumptions Europeans held that enabled them to achieve this. Firstly, they believed that some Africans could be trained to rule on their behalf. Secondly, they believed that it was imperative to redefine the traditional relationship between local leaders and the people by creating new logics of hierarchy and command structures. On the basis of this model, the African state emerged as part of the colonising structure that sought to transform traditional identities, economies and beliefs into European constructs (Mudimbe, 1988). This approach defined progress as a matter of conversion from tradition to modernity, from agrarian life to urban life, from local languages to European languages, from barbarism to civilisation. By defining the means and end of progress outside the experience and culture of the people, the colonial system engendered a *principle of disharmony*: an imposed set of rules that contradict relational belonging with institutional goals, for the purpose of achieving dominance over the populace. State officials who replaced the traditional chiefs started to collect taxes and

exploit natural resources without following the traditional obligation to distribute back to the people. These institutions continue to suppress, disregard or manipulate local traditions for the sake of power and, according to Englebert (1997), the African state in this sense is "neither African nor a state."

The British divide and rule policy is a typical example of how the principle of disharmony was put into effect. In 1917, a British official stated, "the spirit of nationality, or perhaps it would be more correct to say, of tribe, should be cultivated and nowhere can this be done with better chance of success than in Britain East Africa and Uganda" (qtd. in Vail 1989:13). The plan included the writing of African elastic and voluntary traditions as inelastic, non-porous, distinct tribes; the creation of curriculum that emphasised ethnic identities of students, and the creation of different denominations in adjacent places. In short, African politics inherited the turning of traditions into ethnicities from colonialism (Vail, 1989).

The African independence movement was inspired by the desire to replace ethnic-based colonial rule with 'modern' nationalism based on African traditional ideals. Julies Nyrere's Ujamma and self-reliance, Senghor's philosophy of Negritude, Nkrhuma's idea of conscientism and the Pan-African movement are just a few examples of the many initiatives that tried to end the ideological and material dependency of the African state on western constructs. Practical steps were undertaken to implement some of these ideas. For example, between 1960-61, successive conferences were held to Africanise the education system and move away from the current western system where Africans would graduate "knowing nothing about their history and society" (UNESCO, 1961, 1962). Another example is the initiatives of the African State Building Agenda, whereby the creation of strong institutions was regarded as a precondition for Africa's progress. Many states borrowed significantly in order to implement these programs. All of these attempts later failed mainly due to the economic dependency of the African states on western powers. The financial crises of the 1960s and 70s added more fuel to the fire. African states were forced to borrow more in order to service their debts. In the 1980s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) introduced the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) which required the new African states to introduce neoliberal policies that crippled the new African state's ability to deliver services to the people (Ferguson, 2006). The African independence movement was left to the service of corrupt elite interests. Important studies on the creation of show how this process led to the re-emergence of colonial ethnic-based politics (Ekeh, 1975; Vail, 1989). Ethnicity and tribalism became a new political tool in the hands of corrupt officials.

The above discussion is important to distinguish between ethnicity as the basis of African politics and communalism as a traditional way of life. Most literature considers African traditions based on the ethnicist categories that were invented by the political processes of the twentieth century. Ethnicity operates through a process that excludes the majority from politics by turning traditional obligations into political patronage and clientelism (Ekeh, 1975). Henderson showed that African civil wars are not caused by traditional identities and cultures, but are the result of political elites who manipulate those identities (2008). The basis of relational belonging is left to anthropological, philosophical and cultural studies with few reflections on its relevance to modern political life.

The above contextual analysis shows that the struggle of African refugees over belonging starts from their own country of origin. As the state is not considered credible, people make efforts to maintain their relational belonging by fulfilling their traditional obligations using opportunities available to them, including through the formal channels of the state. The state, partly due to its limited capacity to expand 'modernisation' to the rural masses, and partly due to its own power interest to exploit traditional belongings, tends to leave traditions as they are unless their destruction is required for larger advantages to the ruling elite. This has important implications for refugees. Firstly, the dominant form of belonging in Africa remains communal, despite variations in how this is lived and interpreted across diverse communities. Africans maintain their communities through their traditional obligations that give them a sense of identity, security and purpose. This does not necessarily mean that the African life is antagonistic to modernist values or that there is strict demarcation between modernity and tradition. To the level that cultures are able to encounter with one another, there are always emergent practices and meanings. Africans, too, incorporate new ideas into their traditions. But this does not necessarily mean that the entire traditional life can be washed out by the incorporation of modernist outlooks and cultures, especially when the possibility of such incorporation is limited by a lack of strong institutions that facilitate modernisation processes in Africa. Without considering African traditions as pure, static and antagonistic to modernism and accepting the possible existence of contradictions and change, it is still possible to argue that communal traditions persist as important sources of identity and belonging. As Mbiti maintains:

> Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament. (1970:2)

The state's disregard of communal or relational belonging has other consequences. Since traditional communities do not have political power, they remain defenceless in the face of violent external disruptions. For example, during the international food crisis in 2008, land grabbing in Africa led to the dispossession of millions of rural farmers from their land (MacFarquhardec, 2010; Rahmato, 2011). The forced removal of communities from their traditional holdings is often carried out in the name of development (Dell'Angeloa, D'odorico, Rulli, and Marchand, 2017). Other factors, such as famine, civil war, political prosecution and epidemics, could also cause temporary or permanent displacement and migration. When people become refugees, the loss of land breaks their physical and social relationship with their land, environment and community. The life of a refugee is a quest to repair the breakdown of traditional life in a new way.

Refugee life as the loss and quest for belonging

The breakdown of traditional life in Africa has been carried out through colonial and neo-colonial violence (Mbembe, 2001). Similar to how Jonathan Lear (2006) analysed the lives of the Crow tribe in the United States following the destruction of their way of life, it is possible to note that communities that are uprooted from their places lose their sense of belonging which was constructed based on the intimate relationship they had with their community and nature. The farmers no longer have a land to harvest, the children no longer keep the cattle, the elders no longer meet under a tree to consult their ancestors about the coming harvest, the healers no longer have access to their secret medicine, and the priests no longer perform sacrifices or pray for the coming of rain. Even if these activities are done in exile, there is a breakdown between the traditional purposes for which they were done and the new purpose for which they are being performed now. It is not easy to understand what to do with one's traditional beliefs, experiences and skills, or how and for what purpose to transmit beliefs, languages and stories to children when a traditional way of life ceases to exist. As Lear observed, "what we have in this case is not the unfortunate occurrence, not even a devastating occurrence like a holocaust, it is a breakdown of the field in which occurrences occur" (2006:9).

The heaviest cost of being a refugee is, therefore, the loss of the context in which life is lived in a traditional way. Malkki (1995) recognises the tragic effect of uprootedness and displacement but rejects the tendency not to go farther. People move with their memories and experiences. In her study, she showed how refugees from the same place may construct their sense of identity differently depending on how they belong to the new place. The desire to belong to a new place and community of persons is the major dream of refugees, and it is an act of human agency that should not be controlled by institutions alone. A study conducted to assess how successful settlement is measured by the Australian government and refugees seems to affirm this point. While the government often measures successful settlement in terms of economic wellbeing and level of personal independence, refugees value community connectedness, interdependence and personal happiness as highly important indicators of successful settlement in Australia (Australian Survey Research, 2011). The refugees' emphasis on connectedness and community, rather than independence and financial autonomy, should not be seen as a desire to live the African traditional way of life in Australia *as it is*. Refugees know that the traditional way of life is lost. Rather, it should be seen as a hope that *a traditional way of creating a new way of life* is possible (Lear, 2006). If we were to reimagine citizenship and asylum in this way, it could allow refugees to invent new purposes for their traditional beliefs and experiences. Such an approach could not only allow refugees to invent new meanings that would help them achieve their desire for connectivity and community, it would also enrich the diversity and inclusivity of Australia and avoid the alienation of refugees from mainstream society.

Conclusion

African refugees came from a world that has been politically dominated by a system that serves the interest of westernised elites and their proxies. Despite their desire to belong

to modernity as experienced by local traditions, the colonial and neo-colonial character of African states essentialise traditional identities and exploit them to advance their own power interests. Refugees come with a well-developed tradition and experience that could nurture their ability to adapt into a new environment as long as their efforts to do so are not hampered by imposed cultural, ideological and linguistic rules and practices. Currently, the requirements of proving integration to the community, linguistic competence and allegiance to Australian values pose enormous challenges for African refugees who come from "the darker side of modernity" (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). These rites of belonging do not take into account the cultural experiences and aspirations of African refugees. They are imposed and administered through governmental institutions that classify people as Australians and non-Australians, or insiders and outsiders. The boundary between the insider and the outsider is often drawn on the body of refugees who are seen in terms of their skin colour and the culture of the region or country they came from. The meanings of these characteristics are determined based on the values of the dominant culture rather than that of refugees, and imposed upon the latter as key determinants of their identity. In Australia, imposed identity is "informed by Australia's concern over border protection, nationalism, and sovereignty" (Moloney, 2007:78). As refugees do not have the power to ignore the externally agreed perception and meaning of their identity, they live responding and reacting under this *imposed identity*. The impact of imposed identity is often expressed in terms of objectification, submission, alienation, unemployment and suffering. As Dussel noted, "the Being of others is alienated when they are displaced from their own center and made to revolve around the center of a totality alien to them" (2003:53). This sense of alienation and suffering has been researched in relation to mental illness, depression and other issues (Fleay, Rezai, and Hartley, 2015; Nesdale, Rooney, and Smith, 1997; Tilbury, 2007).

The African sense of relational belonging introduces a possible insight to rethink the role of institutions in testing the identity of those who aspire to belong to Australia. A human relationship is what refugees aspire to achieve. Institutions could facilitate this important human need but it is also important that we stop seeing them as neutral, especially when they function according to ideological or nationalistic frameworks. To make belonging meaningful to all identities and cultures, institutional processes should be informed by a genuine dialogue that aims to include diverse cultures and civilisations. The search for belonging should be based on mechanisms that affirm rather than negate refugees' ways of relating to the world.

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