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Networks matter : the value of kinship ties in the Zimbabwean migration landscape

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Abstract

Kinship networks and other ties of goodwill and mutual reciprocity constitute a substantive influence on the migration process and exploring the extent to which they bear on the decision by migrants to select specific destinations forms the subject matter of this paper. The role of kinship networks as a form of social capital in international migration is an aspect that appears with limited nuance in the migration literature. In all its forms, migration has become an issue that needs attention and nuanced analysis of its role as a livelihood option, a strategy to fulfil vital labour needs and one that continues to shape the economy and society of the SADC¹ region in general. This paper ensues from a study conducted in two areas i.e. the Zimbabwean province of Matabeleland South and Johannesburg, South Africa in 2007. Using in depth interviews and observations the study found evidence suggesting that in the face of increased human movements across international borders kinship ties become significantly altered and amorphous, and assume a more advanced role as social capital that aids the migration process. The study concluded that kinship networks are an essential component of the decision making by migrants and there is need for more empirical evidence in understanding the dynamism and fluidity of kinship taxonomies and relations in the face of forced migration from Zimbabwe.

Key terms: migration, kinship networks, social capital

¹ Southern African Development Community

Introduction

This paper is an attempt at the recognition that among other factors influencing an individual's decision to migrate; social capital plays a significant role. Social capital² commonly refers to "the ability to secure resources by virtue of membership in social networks or larger social structures" (Portes and Landolt 2000: 532). For the current analysis, kinship networks as part of the structure of social relations that constitute social capital will assume a more prominent role. The discussion is set against the background of an increasingly mobile Zimbabwean population due to the economic and political collapse witnessed in the post 2000 period (Chikanda 2005; Chikanda 2006; Mathers and Landau 2007; Tevera and Chikanda 2009). Cross-border labour migration between South Africa and Zimbabwe dates back to the 19th century, when the South African diamond and gold mining industries were founded and the country began its trek towards a modern industrial economy (Crush 2003; Wilson 1976). Migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa has taken many forms ranging from the regulated contract labour system in the mines to the "informal, unregulated or clandestine" movements across borders (Crush 2000: 13). Crush (2003) argues that 23% of the Zimbabwean adult population have been to South Africa, 24% have parents who have been to South Africa and another 23% have grandparents who have been to South Africa.

The number of Zimbabweans living in South Africa is difficult to ascertain and most of this migration is undocumented and difficult to quantify (Crush 1997; Crush 1999; Landau 2008; Makina 2008; Solomon 2003; Vigneswaran 2007; Vigneswaran 2008). While figures of Zimbabweans in South Africa are difficult to confirm, they border around the one million mark and of this number, a significant proportion are from Matabeleland. The developmental imbalances and adverse climatic conditions have played a significant role in the movement of people from Matabeleland even before the turn of the millennium (Maphosa 2006). Hobane (1999), cited in Maphosa (2006) found that 62% of the adults in one ward of Mangwe District in Matabeleland South Province were employed in South Africa and Botswana with their remittances constituting an important source of household income. Even though these movements are not novel, I would like to draw attention to Berardo's argument that the

² For a more detailed debate on the meanings of social capital see, Serageldin and Grootaert, (2001)

migration of people in large numbers has both organising and disorganising consequences on the sending communities (Berardo 1967). The effects foster new understandings of kinship and individual identity as fluid and amorphous rather than fixed and handed down from the past or given at birth. Among other things, this paper engages in a discussion of the migration process and zeros in on the creativity and resourcefulness with which people insert themselves and somewhat shape the process into a self-reproducing system. Giddens' (1984) structuration theory and the Bourdieuan conception of social capital best espouse my inclination and angle with which I attempt to unravel the structuring properties of the migration processes and the agency with which migrants embrace them.

Migration, Social Capital and Kinship Networks

Migration is both qualitatively and quantitatively heterogeneous and its intersection with the concepts of social capital and networks is particularly intriguing. There has been a lot of scholarship on social networks and social capital in the fields of sociology, economics, development studies among others, and the overarching theme is the utility and practical usefulness of the ties that constitute capital (Dasgupta and Serageldin 2001; Etzioni 2001; Portes 1998; Portes 2000; Portes and Landolt 2000; Putnam 2001; Serageldin and Grootaert 2001). The concept of social capital systematically develops in application to individual units and small groups in the works of Bourdieu and Coleman who centre their analysis on the aptitude of individuals and small groups to reflect on the benefits of their ties with others (Portes and Landolt 2000). Bourdieu discussed the interaction between financial capital, social capital and cultural capital and argued that the three forms of capital are tradable and their development hinges on this element of fungibility as individuals need material and cultural resources to gain any significant form of social capital (Portes 2000; Portes and Landolt 2000). It is important to clarify that for the purposes of this discussion I will stick to the term kinship networks instead of the general concept of social networks. Social networks, is a cumbersome term and in as much as kinship networks are defined as part of social networks, they do not define social networks and as such they are only a part of the bigger whole of social networks. To this end, my analysis of networks is limited to kinship networks and the role that these play in the migration process. This is partly due to the observation that kinship ties are more prominent in the community of study and does not imply that they are

the only form of social capital present. I will neither attempt a definition of kinship nor discuss the different ways social science literature perceives it, but will loosely refer to those ties based on kin relations between and within a community such as Ngwana³. In this regard, kinship networks assume a dimension through which individual migrants achieve use value and for this study, I treat kinship as social capital and reflect on how it aids the migration process. Others might argue that kinship or membership of a kin group does not automatically translate to social capital as Portes and Landolt (2000) have warned. I do not seek to make this argument either but maintain that the findings of my study suggest an atomisation of kinship networks and usefulness in the migration process.

Migrant "origin specific" and "destination specific" social capital

Lewis Henry Morgan, in his *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1871) argued that members of a society might use kinship terms in the absence of biological relationship. Morgan made a distinction between descriptive and classificatory kinship, which situates broad kinship classes on the basis of imputing abstract social patterns of relationships having little or no overall relation to genetic closeness but reflect cognition about kinship (Morgan 1997). The transformation of biological fact into social reality works in part by the way in which a particular culture establishes recognized kin groups and in part by the way, in which a society comes to label relatives with respect to a target person. Recognized kin groups are established by and reflected in what are called descent rules and a culture's kinship terminology describes the labelling of relatives in a given setting. Kinship terminologies are therefore characteristically native taxonomies that vary from place to place and in many societies, human beings often reside near or with kin for a considerable period in their lives (Morgan 1997; Parkin 1997; Parkin and Stone 2004). The three major elements of kinship are rules of descent, kinship terminology, and residence rules and how these elements intersect with the process of migration is worth exploring. In the face of massive human movements, the strong bonds of cultural and cognate relations based on residence are affected and in some ways demand new forms of theorisation into different understandings. The point here is that migrants remain connected to their relatives regardless of location and it is therefore plausible

³ Ngwana is the communal area where the study referred in this paper was conducted

to suggest the notion of kinship relations that have the form of consanguinity but lack the content and localized foundation. In other words, residence rules might not be relevant to forms of international migration that allow for the exteriorization and simulation of kinship relations to a level beyond the local and based on ambient migrant communities.

It is important to note that the connection between migrants and their places of origin are a stake that the migrants continue to nurture on an ongoing basis. Migrants' maintenance of contacts with rural areas can be viewed within the framework of "origin specific capital" (Oucho 1988). At migrants' origins, rural residents often refer to urban migrants as 'our sons abroad' (Gugler and Flanagan, 1978:69) or our sons outside of the home community and to an extent consider them as temporarily resident at their destinations pending a return to the home community at some point. Various indices of the links, namely, periodic home visits, sending of remittances, return migration, burial of dead migrants and so on interpret this process. The maintenance of contacts and cultivation of kinship relations inside and outside of the areas of origin is for me, the important aspect that demonstrates the aptitude of migrants to reflect on their surroundings and maintain ties that have use value. Reflecting on Oucho's (1988) origin specific capital, I consider "destination specific capital" to capture the activities that migrants engage in at their destinations to create and maintain a form of capital. At destination areas migrants tend to coagulate into common spaces and into similar jobs as information available about job opportunities is accessed through kin networks (Banerjee 1983).

Data from interviews with migrants suggest that the individual migrant has a stake in the maintenance of both the destination specific capital and the origin specific capital. These types of social capital are not mutually exclusive but dependent on each other even though they are geographically disparate. The origin specific capital creates a structure that influences the decision of the intending migrant and heightens the potential for migration. Structure here connotes a web or system of relationships that provide resources such as information to the intending migrant concerning the happenings in their intended destination. The system of relationships, which in this instance consists of kinship networks, works as a catalyst to migration and at the same time has the capacity to restrain migration as intending migrants might cancel or postpone their trip based on the available information. The destination specific capital works as a system of support and safety net for the migrants while

away from home. This structure works in the same way as the origin specific capital as it provides the resources for continued settlement and eventual return to the home area.

Migration, Kinship networks and cultural synergies

The links between migrants and their close relatives and friends enable their activities in both South Africa and Ngwana communal area to be complementary. As discussed earlier in this paper, migrants maintain contact between their destinations and the home area and necessitate an articulation of their urban residence in South Africa and the rural home in Ngwana. Remittances of cash and consumer goods sustain the household back home and to an extent maintain the linkages that often hinge on the desire by the migrant to return home at some point. Literature on circular migration in the Southern African region documents similar processes as migrants often interpret their urban residence as temporary (Bekker 2002; Vearey, Nunez and Ingrid 2009). In this regard, migrants remain loyal to a rural economy back home while working in an urban centre outside of their home area. This kind of articulation possibly draws from the delocalization or exteriorisation of the household as some of the members maintain a presence in their absence (Portes 2003; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999). Continued communication and periodic visits to the home area sustain such a presence. The point here is that, it is common for rural households to have external or migrant heads of households and operating as spilt households with “loco” heads of households in the form of wives or grandparents.

The foregoing argument finds resonance in Maphosa’s (2006) sentiments, that the Matabeleland north and south borderlands have been home to transnational communities for a long time. The point here is that families are capable of existence in the absence of certain core members such as the spouse and children. In such circumstances, the families become transnational because they stride both familial and national boundaries as depicted in the case of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. The transnational migrants become vehicles of cultural synergization and create the convergence of the South African and Zimbabwean cultural experience. This process manifests in the adoption of certain language practices and dressing styles that migrants import to the home area and as such create practices that are

neither distinctly South African nor Zimbabwean. In a way, migrants become agents of change in the cultural practices of the home area and are to an extent responsible for the interaction between the home culture and that of their destination. This point of intersection or interaction between the migrants' foreign practices and those of the home area create a synergy that enables the intending migrants to have an idea of what to expect should they decide to migrate to South Africa.

While the process is not as simple as presented here, it is plausible to argue that the convergence of the cultural experiences alone is enough to prepare the "would be" migrants for their impending destination. The synergy created by the cultural interaction forms a network of actually existing relations with the power to act on the individual migrant in their decision-making and somewhat become part of enabling structures (Giddens 1984). This research suggests an ambivalence of sorts among the migrants, with one foot in the transient South African destination and another in the rural area, which they identify as home. Only one out of all the interviewed migrants indicated a desire to settle permanently in South Africa for the sake of his children while the remainder idealise a future return to the home area. This kind of migrant orientation ensures that there is a durable and sustained source of attraction for the intending migrants as argued earlier in this discussion.

In addition to the structuring properties generated by the interaction of destination and place of origin cultural practices it is vital to note that a large number of people in the south-western areas of Zimbabwe share historical, kinship and linguistic ties with people in South Africa and Botswana. Coupled with geographical proximity, this facilitates the movement of people from these areas to either Botswana or South Africa as kinship networks make it easy for relocation and the ability to speak a local language is important for the migrants' survival in South Africa or Botswana. The existence of these linkages enhances the movement of migrants and at the same time draws from this movement as migrants navigate this space of simultaneous cultural difference and similarity. It is the space of difference and similarity because there are elements within the two places (origin and destination) that are different and characterise the two places as such and at the same time, there are elements of similarity between the two places. The increased presence of Zimbabweans in South Africa has led to the fluidity of kinship discourses and meanings as they apply in geographically disparate

places. Apart from straddling the borders, these relations form part of a structure that creates virtual communities and feeds into a cumulative process of migration similar to chain migration (Banerjee 1983; MacDonald and MacDonald 1964). As argued earlier in this paper, these relations become a structure primarily because they are capable of influencing action and as such, can structure individual intentions in migration related decision making. In other terms, the human movement is self-reinforcing as the increased numbers lead to even more migration. It is therefore plausible to argue that forced displacements create a large number of mobile citizenry that in turn becomes a causal factor in the streaming of further migrants. This is not to say that the forces of compulsion become comatose with the cumulative effect of continued migration but they work together with enabling structures of kinship networks.

In all this, networks of friends, relatives and close acquaintances take centre stage. Other factors do not explain why and how people move to particular destinations and not others of equally high economic prowess. They also do not explain why and how people from particular places of origin have greater migration potential than others of equally poor economic performance. The explanation lies in understanding the intervening set of social relations and kinship networks organising people's lives in the discourse of migration (Berardo 1967; Bieder 1973). This observation augments the argument that kinship relations are not static and localized entities but are dynamic, ambient and transitional. According to Broude (1994), people across cultures are more likely to turn to kin than to non-kin for help and are more likely to give aid and comfort to kin than to non-kin. This makes the point that kin relationship; whether biological or social is quite significant in migrant relations and in international migration sustains both origin and destination specific capital.

Kinship ties and the economies of displacement

First time migrants often lack direct knowledge of the host country and are crucially dependent on the experience of others to guide them. Once in South Africa new migrants begin to accumulate their own information about how to enter the country, look for work, stay out of trouble and generally navigate South African culture and society. Kinship ties are instrumental in determining migrant selectivity and play a role in the success of certain forms

of enterprise that are rooted in the economy of displacement. One such enterprise is the cross-border transport business, commonly known as "ukulayitsha"⁴. The business is characteristically clandestine and client recruitment is through networks of kin and friendship and feeds into the growing mass of undocumented migrants currently residing in South Africa. The malayitsha business has been in existence for a long time and has since transformed from a small informal trade into a dynamic enterprise with its own capitalists who run fleets of vehicles dedicated to the transportation of irregular migrants. It is indeed an industry, which has transformed the lives of many, ranging from the migrants, the malayitshas themselves to the hangers on, like ompisi⁵ and omagumaguma⁶. This is not a digression from the key points of the discussion but a snapshot into the far-reaching implications generated by the complex system of movement. In other words, the kinship networks do not only generate movement but also sustain businesses and therefore provide livelihood options for some migrants.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion underlines that migration is not just an individual event but constitutes a complex system of livelihoods and social relationships with implications for the whole Ngwana community. In essence, kinship networks are an important feature of the migration decisions in the Ngwana communal area as each trip made by a member of the community adds to the social capital available to an intending migrant in the form of migrant resources, which include information about the destination and what to expect on the way. This does not however imply that every individual migrant is a useful contact for those intending to migrate but to highlight that they are a potentially useful node in the network. In all this, it is crucial to note that it is not the size of the migrant's network that matters but the strength of the network in terms of closeness and reliability of kin and associates. Both origin and destination specific networks are an important determinant of movement and the degree to which migrants adapt to the new environment. Therefore, theorising the substance of kin

⁴ Malayitsha is a term used to refer to cross-border transport operators who ferry goods and irregular migrants to and from South Africa.

⁵ Ompisi are the hangers on with a role similar to that of bus conductors and specialize in assisting irregular migrants to cross the border.

⁶ Omagumaguma are the criminals who mug irregular migrants on the way.

relationships and their translation into social capital is an important aspect in understanding how these relationships influence the migration process.

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