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## Competing Meanings of the Diaspora: The Case of Zimbabweans in Britain

Dominic Pasura

*The diaspora literature has tended to narrow itself to the marking out and placing of boundaries at the conceptual level. While still contributing to the elaboration of the concept of diaspora, this article seeks to answer two questions. What meanings do Zimbabweans in Britain give to their diasporic condition and experience? How do such meanings influence and shape attitudes towards return to the homeland or feelings of belonging to the hostland? The article is based on multi-sited ethnography, comprising 33 in-depth interviews and participant observation in four research sites, and draws upon concepts of diaspora and transnationalism as theoretical frameworks. It examines the process by which Zimbabweans in Britain negotiate boundaries, assert meanings, interpret their own pasts, and define themselves in relation to others in the hostland. The findings suggest that, whereas the concept of diaspora typically emphasises group cohesion, Zimbabweans in Britain describe their experience in complex ways. Some depict the diaspora as reverse colonisation; some see it in terms of Babylon and Egypt metaphors; and others talk of the diaspora as wenela, an acronym referring to a labour recruitment system.*

*Keywords: Zimbabweans In Britain; Diaspora; Reverse Colonisation; Idea of Return; Remittances*

### Unpacking Diaspora

Diaspora and transnationalism are important theoretical frameworks for understanding the dynamics of international migration. As Vertovec and Cohen (1999: xiii) point out, 'One of the major changes in migration patterns is the growth in diasporic populations anchored (socially and culturally as well as physically) neither at their places of origin nor at their places of destination'. Mac Einri emphasises the same argument and regards diaspora studies as 'a decentred approach in which migration, migrants and their multi-generational societies and cultures are seen as phenomena in themselves and not simply in relation to the countries of origin and reception' (2000: 1).

Many scholars recognise the extent of conceptual slippage and the lack of theoretical clarity in the term diaspora. Tololyan (1996: 5) notes that diaspora, once a preserve for describing Jewish, Greek and Armenian dispersion, 'now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes terms like

immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic communities'. Anthias (1998: 557) describes it as a 'kind of mantra being used to describe the processes of settlement and adaptation relating to a large range of transnational migration movement...'. Authors refer to the malleability of the term diaspora, now denoting vastly different ethnic groups. For the purposes of creating some analytic order and to retain the concept's explanatory power to facilitate comparative analysis, there is a need to re-draw the boundaries around what can be called diaspora.

Safran (1991) argues that the degree of force initiating a population's dispersal tends to legislate what counts as a diaspora, semi-diaspora or non-diaspora. Only if a population faces a destroyed homeland and/or its own expulsion, and collectively experiences trauma as a result, can we talk of a diaspora. Likewise, Sheffer (2003: 9) defines an ethno-national diaspora as 'a socio-political formation, created as a result of either voluntary or forced migration, whose members regard themselves as of the same ethno-national origin and who permanently reside as minorities in one or several host countries...'. Unlike Safran (1991), Sheffer's definition encompasses both voluntary migration and forced migration as features of a diaspora. Elaborating and expanding on key characteristics developed by other theorists, Cohen (1997) identifies five types of diaspora as victim, labour, trade, imperial and cultural. The value of Cohen's work is that it makes us aware of the many ethno-national communities whose members live outside their homelands, a recurring phenomenon in this age of globalisation.

The postmodern notion of diaspora, a response both to the rigid notion of diaspora posed by classical theorists and to the perceived failures of the ethnicity and 'race' paradigms (Anthias 1998), makes no specific reference to ethnicity, a 'homeland' or a particular place of settlement but emphasises hybridity, deterritorialised identities and multiple belonging. As Al-Ali explains,

In the context of post-modern and post-colonial approaches and the increasing appeal of cultural studies, the terms 'diaspora' and 'diasporic communities' have gained new meanings and dimensions [...] more and more, it has [*sic*] been used in a metaphorical sense, referring to hybrid identity formations, arguing against reifications of ethnicity and culture and explaining cultural shifts in general (2007: 40–1).

The discussion is between a rigid categorisation of diaspora, as developed by classical diaspora theorists, that accommodates no other, and a loose classification advanced by social constructionists that admits everything of a similar nature. Where to draw the line remains a subject for intense debate. Most diaspora theorists (Cohen 1997; Safran 1991; Sheffer 2003) have been concerned with defining the origin and meaning of the term. However, this article will not focus further on the semantic questions. Instead I concentrate on the articulation, production and performance of the Zimbabwean diaspora in Britain.

### **The Zimbabwean Scattering**

In a country of 13 million people, it is estimated that between three and four million Zimbabweans across all racial, political and gendered boundaries have embarked on phases of voluntary and involuntary migration to neighbouring countries and beyond. Drawing on my PhD research (Pasura 2008a), five

overlapping phases of international migration from Zimbabwe can be identified, from the 1960s to the present. The first phase relates to the migration of black political exiles within the context of the war of liberation and labour recruitments to South Africa's gold mines. The second phase comprises the flight of white Zimbabweans prior to, and post independence in 1980. The post-independence conflict in Matebeleland precipitated people to move out of the country and this relates to the third phase. The fourth phase outlines the migration of skilled professionals from the early 1990s as a response to the shrinking economy and opportunities abroad. The fifth phase describes a considerable movement of the population after the formation of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change in 1999 and the launch of the Land Reform and Resettlement Programme II, because of the country's political violence and rapid economic decline. It is within this context of high political tension and deepening economic crisis that we have witnessed the large-scale arrival of Zimbabwean asylum-seekers, refugees, labour migrants and students in Britain. Although there are no precise figures for the number of Zimbabweans in Britain, estimates suggest that there are more than 200,000 Zimbabweans in the country (Pasura 2008a, 2008b).

### Multi-Sited Ethnography

During my multi-sited fieldwork among Zimbabweans in Britain I conducted 33 in-depth interviews over a period of 12 months from July 2005 to June 2006. The majority of respondents—18 males, 15 females—were middle-aged and married with children. In terms of ethnicity, six were white Zimbabweans; 17 were Shona and ten Ndebele. At the time of the interview, the indications were that 23 respondents were documented migrants and ten undocumented. A purposive sampling technique was used in selecting people for interview, probing differences within the diaspora in terms of race, ethnicity, gender and immigration status. In devising the research design, I paid particular attention to the varied geographical contexts of Zimbabwean migrants in Britain, finally selecting four locations—Coventry and Birmingham in the Midlands, Wigan, in the north of England, and London. My specific research sites and encounters included the following.

First, a Zimbabwean pub in Coventry and *gochi-gochi* [barbecue] in Birmingham, both public-private spaces for leisure and socialising. These are spaces where cultural identities are expressed and performed through food, language, music and a sense of belonging. Second, two diaspora congregations, Forward in Faith Mission International (FIFMI) in Coventry and the Zimbabwean Catholic Church in Birmingham, which are public spaces for the performance of cultural and religious identities. Diaspora congregations, dominated by women, are platforms for expressing diasporic identities and enhancing social networks. Third, the Zimbabwe Vigil's street demonstrations outside the Zimbabwean Embassy in central London. The Vigil is a space where Zimbabweans from different racial, ethnic and gendered boundaries hold public demonstrations against human rights abuses in the homeland. Lastly, people's homes in Wigan offered an opportunity to experience diasporic life in private spaces. Wigan provided access to asylum-seekers and refugees, scattered around the country as part of the UK government's dispersal policy.<sup>1</sup> The methodology offered

comparative opportunities for delineating the different ways of capturing the mobile, shifting and interconnected expression of the diaspora across the country.

### **Competing Meanings of the Diaspora**

As Patterson and Kelley remind us,

Diaspora has always been employed (invoked) in such a way as to hide the differences and discontinuities. The very concept of diaspora has been extracted from peoples' lived experiences and then molded into metaphors for alienation, outsidership, home, and various binary relationships such as alien/native. The metaphor has come to represent those experiences and, in so doing, erases the complexities and contradictions as it seeks to fit all within the metaphor (2000: 20).

This quotation points to the importance of avoiding grand narratives of diasporic experiences, which tend to make other voices invisible. With this caveat in mind, I investigate respondents' diverse meanings of the diaspora.

#### *Diaspora as Reverse Colonisation*

One of the major findings of this study is that our understanding of the Zimbabwean pattern of migration to Britain can be enhanced through the concept of reverse colonisation. The majority of black respondents explicitly refer to their 'right' to be there. Prosper<sup>2</sup> sums up the idea of reverse colonisation:

When white people came to Zimbabwe they didn't come to learn from us, they didn't learn anything from us. We are here, and I can tell you 90 per cent of the people, in fact I would say 99 per cent whom you meet, most of them are economic migrants, they are here to get what they can get, it's reverse colonisation [...] The only thing that I think is different is that when white people came to Zimbabwe they weren't doing menial jobs but with a lot of Zimbabweans who are doing menial jobs.

Farai, to some extent, agrees with Prosper that Zimbabweans should exploit every opportunity in the UK, just as British colonisers did in Zimbabwe. 'What is happening is that Zimbabweans have to be educated, educated in the sense of getting away with things in this country'. Similarly, Mthokozisi narrates a story that summarises the essence of reverse colonisation:

One day I went to central London. On my way back I saw a white person lying on the floor in an alley close to some shops. I kicked him slightly and asked, 'Why are you sleeping on the floor?' The white person shouted at me saying, 'Why are you here in England? Why don't you go back to your country?' I replied him, 'To my country, where?' And the white person said, 'Where you come from'. But I said to him, 'I have come to England to take back the money you stole from my country. You know what, in my country where I come from we used to herd cattle in open trenches [mines] and when I asked my father who dug those trenches I was told it was a white man. The white man dug the trenches looking for money. And I have come here in search of that money. *Handiti makambodyavo kumba kwedu nhasi todayo kwenyu* [As you once ate in our house now it is our turn to eat in your house].

Matthew puts it more strongly:

This country [UK] takes responsibility why we are here. It's because of colonialism. The British people oppressed us; they took our land and made us live on infertile land. We were made captives in our own land [...]. People grew up under oppression and it became even worse when we attained our independence as our economic situation deteriorated. It's our turn to come to this country. God is making an equation that somebody who used to gain might also, even though not suffering, serve somebody.

The narratives of Prosper, Farai, Mthokhozisi and Matthew are shaped by the historical conditions of colonisation, and describe (black) Zimbabweans in Britain as opportunity-seekers or pound-seekers. The quotations highlight the agency of respondents' moral claim to be 'there', although they are categorised as the 'other' and 'economic migrants' by the dominant society.

From most of the respondents, there is a sense that the British owe them something and they have a right to work there, if not to settle. Mthokhozisi explains, 'We are saying to the white person, "Don't hate us because you once stole things from us. Let us take what we can since you stole things from our country. If we can, let us take, that's it". We can't suffer both back home and in this country'. Although Mthokhozisi has dual nationality, and thus is equally a British citizen, he considers himself an outsider, perhaps because of experiences of racism in his adopted country. Another example is Tapfumanei, who captures not only the colonial link, but explains how his presence in Britain has generated issues of exclusion and migration.

I grew up in Zimbabwe and most of my family members are in Zimbabwe and secondly, the people here don't want us here and I don't want to be here as well. They are our former colonisers and they plundered our resources. But for the meantime I have to be here because I want to earn a living.

Likewise, Steven agrees that the majority of Zimbabweans in the UK are not genuine political refugees but 'economic migrants'. He expresses his frustration with the use of the term 'economic migrants'. As he puts it, 'I dislike the term economic refugee because the British were the first economic refugees in Zimbabwe'. Hence, there is an awareness among respondents that Britain, as a former colonial power, has a moral duty to them, at the very least to treat them fairly in their efforts to participate in the labour market without being stereotyped. Tonderai explains:

As a loss adjuster I was so content with my life in Zimbabwe. Why then decided to come here? Their food is not good, their weather is terrible, and there are shops at every corner. The only thing why we came here is that we can feed ourselves, have shelter, have clothes and have money.

As this article will demonstrate, the majority of respondents (particularly men), remit to their country of origin. Remittances suggest the attachment of migrants to their homeland but, also, a reversal of the exportation of resources from Britain's former colony.

What is significant about the idea of reverse colonisation is that it legitimises respondents' sense of being 'here'; it validates their status and activities, even if they are undocumented migrants. Prosper explains, 'I personally believe colonisation was a bad thing but we can't reverse the situation so we have to make the best out of it. What do *maZimba* [Zimbabweans] do if they don't have

papers? You use somebody's name or get fake identification and you go and work'. Consider also the remarks of Blessing, an undocumented migrant: 'You know how easy it is to get a job in this country? It's extremely easy if you've got the skills. If you go for an interview and when they hear your accent they will ask you: "Do you need a work permit or not?" You just have to say, "I don't".' The quotations focus on the importance of social and human capital as strategies used by undocumented migrants to survive in the labour market. They show the ability of social actors to resist institutional structures in their everyday lives in the hostland. Furthermore, the assertiveness of undocumented migrants stems from the realisation that they are morally justified to be in Britain. Zimbabweans are among the few refugee communities there to have used their cultural and social capital to engage in a legal battle with the Home Office to avoid deportation.<sup>3</sup>

The significant increase in the population of Zimbabweans in some of Britain's multicultural cities, for example in Luton, Slough, Leicester, Sheffield, Coventry and Birmingham,<sup>4</sup> provides them with a feeling of collective belonging and an awareness of their influence on British society, as expressed by Phumuzile:

We are coming here because we want to explore opportunities here, be they of economy or good life or whatever. While we are looking for these opportunities we will in some way dominate some communities. There are some places where we live and no one stares at you with an eye that tells you, you are a foreigner.

Similarly, Tigere explains what happened to him when he visited an English pub in Birmingham, a place where Zimbabweans gather normally on Fridays and Saturdays:

We were speaking in Shona, *ya-ya ya-ya* [continuous dialogue] you know. A white guy came to me and says: 'Don't you think you guys are being ignorant when you don't speak in English? You are just speaking in whatever language that you are speaking and we can't even hear what you are saying and you are in an English pub'. I said to him: 'You don't understand my language but I understand your language, then who is ignorant between you and me?'

While this quotation provides an example of positive colonisation in being educated in English, it further shows the importance of collective belonging in the integration process of migrants. By conversing in Shona in an English pub, the respondent reinforces the idea of colonising 'in reverse'. Migrants' ability to use the colonisers' knowledge base against them informs most of their narratives. Hence, by dominating some communities, the quotations demonstrate the migrants' sense of achieving reverse colonisation.

Indeed, the Christianisation and colonisation of Africa happened simultaneously, and now the reverse is happening as African missionaries evangelise Christian churches in Europe. Evidence from my research shows there are few cities in Britain without Zimbabwean diaspora congregations. There are at least three Zimbabwean churches in London; likewise in Coventry and Birmingham. This pattern can potentially lead to the establishment of a strong Zimbabwean community in Britain but may also result in the re-evangelisation of Europe by African migrants.

During colonisation it was predominantly men who carried out colonial conquests and, where women followed, they were confined to the domestic sphere. The harsh conditions of Africa, with high temperatures, malaria and other

diseases, made European habitation difficult. In the early stages of reverse colonisation, it was primarily women in nursing and teaching professions who began to migrate to the UK and their husbands who followed as trailing spouses (Mbiba 2005). While colonisers complained of high temperatures, reverse colonisers complain about the extreme cold and unpredictable weather of Britain.

To take the analogy further, the flow of respondents to Britain resembles the gold rush of the white settlers, who envisaged the area north of the Limpopo (Zimbabwe) to be a place full of mineral deposits; the majority of Zimbabweans are in search of the 'pound'. When white settlers failed to find large quantities of gold, they took up farms. Recent Zimbabwean migrants to Britain express their frustration in realising that there is no gold on the streets of London and settle for demeaning work in order to survive (McGregor 2007).

Of course, there are other glaring differences. The white settlers' hegemonic power to define their destiny cannot be compared to the powerlessness experienced by undocumented migrants in terms of their immigration status and participation in the labour market. The reverse colonisers have no land to apportion to themselves, and the list goes on. Equally, the terminology has changed: colonisers referred to themselves as 'explorers', 'settlers' and 'farmers', yet migrants are referred to as 'refugees', 'economic migrants' and 'foreigners'. However, reverse colonisation shows the agency of the once-colonised to influence developments among their former colonisers, even if the experience is far from being equivalent. Once, Africa was the land to explore and plunder; now the African descendants turn to 'imperial' Britain to explore, work, settle and earn remittances to send to their country of origin.

Cohen (1996: 508) alludes to the 'diaspora of active colonization' when referring to the European (especially British, Portuguese and Spanish) imperial and colonial settlements. He labels them imperial diasporas. Portes *et al.* (1999: 225) argue that 'Immigrant colonisers harboured dreams of riches and eventual return, but their daily activities confronted them with the realities of a new country and, in the process, many became permanently settled in the colonies'. A similar pattern is emerging among the reverse colonisers, Zimbabweans in Britain. Yet, understanding the Zimbabwean diaspora in Britain as reverse colonisation may be contested, as white Zimbabweans do not fit into the schema. However, the reverse colonisation concept can be a useful construct with which to analyse the reverse migration prompted by historical ties such as colonial and imperial domination and other forces of globalisation and capitalism.

### *Diaspora as Babylon and Egypt*

Some respondents regard the diaspora as a place of suffering, akin to Babylon and Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Diaspora pastors preach an exilic message, namely that the congregations are experiencing the equivalent of the biblical Babylon or slavery in Egypt. Matthew explains:

You might want to say the Zimbabweans are in Babylon. The way the Israelites were being treated in Babylon is similar to the way Zimbabweans are being treated here. This is again similar to the treatment Israelites received in Egypt, as asylum-seekers and slaves. From a Christian perspective, we are experiencing our Egypt [...]. The racism we face everyday resembles the troubles the Israelites faced in Babylon and Egypt.



This quotation highlights one of the common features of a diaspora—a sense of being marginalised in the country of settlement, being an eternal outsider. Fidelis explains his experiences in Britain and his attitude towards return: ‘My attitude is that eventually I want to return home and make a contribution to my country [...]. I have never been made to feel at home here. Read newspapers and they make you feel you are a stranger; you are not part of this community’. Likewise, as Rutendo remarked, ‘Every day they talk on TV immigrants, immigrants, and it would appear as if you don’t have a place you call *kumusha* [home]’. Most of the respondents felt excluded from the dominant white society. Kennedy shares a similar experience:

No matter how long you stay here, you always feel I don’t belong here. And people here always ask you, ‘Where are you from?’ In a way it’s a coded way [...]. They are trying to tell you that you aren’t British. It’s different from the American way of doing things, when you become an American you are an American. [You could] live here for 60 years, they wouldn’t accept you.

Almost all respondents, without exception, narrate stories of racism and discrimination in their daily lives.

The majority of Zimbabwean asylum-seekers and refugees in Wigan were forced into the diaspora, and again forced to live in Wigan through the asylum dispersal policy in the hostland. Most of the respondents narrated disturbing stories of racial abuse and violence in the city. Rutendo provides an example: ‘When you are passing close to a pub you hear people shouting “Asylum-seeker, asylum-seeker” everywhere. One day in the bus, I still remember one old white man asking me a question, “Why are your teeth white when you are black?”’ Clearly, Rutendo’s experience reflects a colonial and racist view of black people as inferior and backward. Viewed against the background of a largely white community, these comments are manifestations of racial violence. Tonderai is another informant from Wigan. He explains: ‘Settling in this country, no way. You can’t settle in a place where they call you “nigger” every day. Just go outside the house at night and walk. All will be calling “nigger, nigger, nigger!”’ Similarly, Nozipho describes her experience of being called names for no reason other than being black.

In my three-year experience I have been called a nigger more than 50 times or so and in one incident my neighbour ended up intervening. It was on a Friday and I was walking and the guys I know them as I always see them and they started shouting, ‘Hey you nigger, hey you nigger and so forth’. My neighbours—I would say they are good people, they are aged—intervened.

The related labels such as ‘foreigner’, ‘asylum-seeker’, ‘refugee’ and ‘immigrant’ are politically powerful signifiers in a contemporary Europe that defines migrants as ‘other’. From the evidence of my multi-sited research, it makes sense to argue that Zimbabweans, who have had to make areas in the north of Britain their place of residence, are more likely to have a stronger sense of returning to the homeland than those in multicultural cities such as London or Birmingham. The Zimbabwean community in Wigan creates an enclave, as they are far from other Zimbabwean, African or Afro-Caribbean communities. This lack of spatial proximity to fellow compatriots and the racial discrimination they face make living conditions hard and influence their attitudes towards returning to the homeland.

### *Diaspora as Wenela*<sup>6</sup>

Some respondents liken the experience of the diaspora to the migrant labour system in the colonial period. Prosper describes the conditions under which many Zimbabwean find themselves:

Most of the people who are here don't realise they will never ever return to Zimbabwe. People come here and they say they will return but this will never happen. I will give you a classic example, think of Zimbabweans in the 60s and the 70s, those who went to *wenela*. How many people have grandfathers who never returned, and this isn't because they were killed in the mines but they stayed in South Africa forever. Those who returned to Zimbabwe were a minority.

Similarly, Tapfumanei tells us: 'Working in England for the money is like those *wenela* days. Our fathers used to go and work in South African mines but they would come back with their property and many things'. Tigere expresses the same idea of being an 'economic migrant': 'A British in Zimbabwe is a British and he comes here he is a British. He opens a company in Zimbabwe he remains a British. We are just here to work for our parents and go back home'. However, it is insufficient to argue that, because *wenela* history has shown that some of their ancestors failed to return from South Africa, so it might be the case that fewer Zimbabwean migrants in the UK would return to their country.

Although both events occurred in different historical contexts, one under colonisation perpetuating an unfair migrant labour system and the other in an ostensibly globalised world, there are points of comparison. The regulation of migration in the whole of Southern Africa was an essential part of settler-state strategies in constructing a 'docile' and humble workforce, consequently maximising profits for white entrepreneurs and suppressing nationalistic consciousness within the black population. Likewise, the migration of Zimbabweans to the UK can be understood in the context of the rise in demand for workers in the health sector in Britain (McGregor 2007). During the *wenela* migrant labour system, primary migrants were prevented from taking their families along and, once their contract ended, they were not allowed to remain at the mines. The introduction of visas for Zimbabweans intending to travel to the UK in November 2002 resulted in the creation of lone-parent households. Hence, some respondents see their experience in the diaspora as *wenela*.

### *Diaspora as a legal 'home'*

Although diasporic communities long for the homeland, it is equally true that most of them feel 'at home' or 'settled' in destination countries. The following remarks by Rudo are interesting: 'At the moment the UK is my home and I will make it as such because I only live once. I do not want to plan a life for when if ever I go back to Zimbabwe to settle because it may never happen'. Similarly, Mduduzi explains: 'I am 100 per cent happy in UK, in Zimbabwe I am only thinking of my relatives, I wish they could leave that country of fools'. Rudo and Mduduzi thus express weak attachment to the homeland. Similarly, some of the respondents who moved to Britain in the earlier periods of migration consider the hostland as their legal home, although their social and cultural home is in Zimbabwe.

Farai explains that the lack of houses in the country of origin hinders attachment and thoughts of return. As he puts it:

Those who will return are those who have made some properties back home. Even if the situation gets better in Zimbabwe but if you don't own a house you would want to stay here for some time in order to build your own house. Those who have houses here think they will sell their houses but houses here take a long time before they are sold. It must be a good house for it to be re-sold.

As evident from the quotation, there is a gradual shift for documented migrants from investing in the homeland to investing in Britain by buying a property. Six of the respondents had mortgages. This is a growing pattern among Zimbabweans in Britain and may be an indication that some are thinking of long-term settlement.

Whereas labour migrants, refugees and those with dual nationality can invest in mortgages both in the homeland and in the hostland, undocumented migrants can only invest in the homeland because of legal restrictions. The majority of Zimbabweans who resettled in Britain in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s—predominantly white Zimbabweans—possessed dual citizenship until recent changes to Zimbabwe's citizenships laws. Indeed, according to Home Office statistics<sup>7</sup> from 1996–2007, 25,855 Zimbabweans applied for permanent settlement in Britain. In spite of possessing dual nationality, David expresses his nostalgia for the homeland: 'I truly belong in Zim but am happy to call UK home too as it has served me well and I can live here in relative peace'.

Although some of the respondents appear settled, they may be called 'reluctant settlers' insofar as they regard the homeland as their social and cultural home. As Bernard puts it, 'I now have two children born in this country, so I have to consider if they will integrate into the Zimbabwean community back home or they are now British people...'. Expressing the longing and attachment to the homeland, Sihle remarked:

When we talk and say we are missing home we definitely don't miss a house in London, we mean Zimbabwe. For now when I am working out my career and I would want my kids here but when I am around 70 and I am no longer working I definitely don't like to be a pensioner. I don't see myself in a nursing home in London.

Reluctant settlers can be described as being caught in-between 'home' and settlement. Scholars have argued that many contemporary migrant communities straddle two nations, giving rise to a dual or hyphenated identity (Vertovec and Cohen 1999).

I have not exhausted all the possible meanings of the diaspora expressed by my respondents, or indeed by the entire Zimbabwean diaspora in Britain. However, by limiting them to the four meanings discussed above, my objective was to demonstrate that, although diaspora emphasises cohesion within the collective group, it also accommodates internal differences.

Do the same people, however, see their exile as reverse colonisation *and* in terms of Egypt and Babylon, or are these perceptions from different people, with different subjective experiences? An individual may share one or several meanings of the diaspora, illustrating the tensions and contradictions expressed in migrants' lives. For example, political activists who have fled the country and

sought sanctuary in the UK perceive their diaspora as exile, reflecting the Israelites' experience in Babylon. Babylon has been a coded word for the Jewish and African diasporas, denoting the exilic condition and suffering (Cohen 1996). Similarly, undocumented political activists may conceive the diaspora as reverse colonisation, giving them the agency and legitimacy to participate in the labour market. The next section investigates how the various meanings of diaspora affect Zimbabweans' attitudes towards return and settlement.

### **The Idea of Return and Settlement**

The attitudes of diasporans towards return or settlement are contingent, and constantly shifting; a result of social construction. Just as Benedict Anderson (1991) reminds us how the ideology of nationhood is a product of the dominant members of a society, the idea of return to the homeland and of settlement in the hostland depends on an array of individual factors, as well as external and internal contestation within the collective group. Insofar as this study analyses migrants' desire to return and not the actual return, the term 'settlement' is broadly used to include migrants' desire to remain permanently in the country of destination even though they may not possess full citizenship. Thus, legalistic definitions ascribed to the individual migrant by the state, which includes some and excludes others, cannot be used as a basis to measure the settlement outcomes of migrants (Sheffer 2003). Rather, it is migrants' social and cultural disposition towards the hostland which is of significance.

Sihle narrates one of the most intriguing and remarkable stories I encountered during fieldwork, about the manner in which Zimbabweans maintain dynamic connections with their homeland. In order to evade charges levied by banks and registered money-transfer agencies, and their cumbersome formalities, Sihle uses 'community transfer agencies'<sup>8</sup> when sending remittances to her family and relatives back home. She engages in transactions with individuals about whom she has no adequate knowledge in terms of who they are, where they live or how they carry out their business. The scant details supplied by community transfer agencies, through text messages, are their bank details, telephone and fax details. One of the text messages reads:

Exchange rate: £1 to Z\$10 million, minimum payment £50 per beneficiary. Petrol 55 pence/litre, minimum 40 litres. Services available for groceries and doctor for your loved ones. Same day service! Account Details [...] fax/telephone [...]

When Sihle completes the banking transaction, she sends details about her family's bank account and mobile number to the community money-transfer agency. On the same day, or within two to three days, Sihle's beneficiaries in the homeland also receive a text message. This instructs them to collect petrol coupons, which they use at designated garages, or informs them that money has been credited to their bank accounts or groceries delivered to their homes. Explaining social capital, Portes (1998: 9) argues that trust exists in such situations 'precisely because obligations are enforceable, not through recourse to law or violence but through the power of the community'. However, during my fieldwork I heard numerous accounts of duplicitous community transfer agencies, which correspond, to some extent, with what Roger Ballard (2005) refers to as

the *hawala* networks operating among South Asian transnational diasporas. The *hawala* networks have been described as an ‘unregulated underground banking networks’ (Ballard 2005: 321), increasingly targeted by Western countries, who perceive them as conduits of terrorist activities and drug-smuggling (Ballard 2005).

Sihle’s story highlights the extent of the hyper-inflation in Zimbabwe and provides evidence of a disintegrating economy. Indeed, some have suggested that remittances are preventing the total collapse of the economy. More importantly, her narrative demonstrates how Zimbabweans maintain strong transnational ties with family and relatives in the homeland. Bloch’s (2008: 302) study concludes that ‘eighty per cent of respondents remitted money to Zimbabwe and economic exchanges between Zimbabweans in the UK and in Zimbabwe were regular and had been sustained over many years’. Hence, the presence of the Zimbabwean diaspora in Britain constitutes a potentially exploitable resource that represents a significant developmental challenge for the country.

When asked about their motives to return, the majority of male respondents—like Steven, below—described an imaginary Zimbabwe, where they would return and live in well-built houses, running their own companies and businesses:

A Zimbabwean is looking for a house back home, that’s why the governor of the Reserve Bank came up with Diaspora Housing Scheme<sup>9</sup> and is being snapped up quickly. Every Zimbabwean is asking oneself: ‘When I go back home what will they say I was doing?’

Concern with property in Zimbabwe is common among the majority of male black Zimbabweans. Mthokozisi regards as ‘infectious’ the extent to which diasporans are ‘buying houses, housing stands, *kombis* [commuter minibus], lorries and buses in the UK and Japan’ and shipping them to Zimbabwe. When I interviewed Ndunduzo, he expressed his surprise that ‘some still don’t have a house back home and if you are deported what are you going to say to them?’

However, the sending of remittances by diasporans to the homeland can also be seen in the context of the government’s desperate effort to tap foreign currency from its citizens abroad. For the sake of Zimbabwe’s economic survival through remittances, the ‘homeland’ government developed Homelink programmes, which comprise lucrative housing schemes and money-transfer agencies—i.e. official channels for sending money to the country of origin. Significantly, the government actively constructs the meaning of diaspora as temporary; living abroad is a temporary condition, and migrants must secure their future through investing in their country of origin. Some respondents are aware of the government’s need to generate foreign currency, as Mthokozisi explains:

The government mooted this idea because they are in need of foreign currency. Otherwise I wouldn’t want to buy a house already designed rather than design my own house. Now there isn’t any material to build our own houses, if you buy from abroad the government would force you to pay duty when bringing the products in the country. Why should people pay duty for building materials and food products?

Unattractive rates offered by the government and the lack of confidence in the Zimbabwean government led to the collapse of the Homelink initiative.

While many men spearhead the drive to return to the homeland when the political and economic circumstances have changed, women are putting a foothold in their occupations, positioning themselves for permanent settlement (see Pasura 2008b). Phumuzile, Rudo and Patricia are among the female respondents who have mortgages in the UK, suggesting the establishment of some kind of permanence in Britain.

As the Zimbabwean economic crisis deepened, the form of remittances underwent a dramatic shift away from the buying of *kombis*, cars and houses towards buying everyday commodities such as food, fuel, groceries and medicines—including HIV medication—for relatives and friends in the homeland.<sup>10</sup> The volume and intensity of these transnational transactions demonstrates how Zimbabweans in Britain are active in maintaining family and kinship ties and obligations (Bloch 2008).

## Conclusion

In this article I have demonstrated how respondents give a variety of meanings to their conditions and experiences in the diaspora. Some depict the diaspora as reverse colonisation; others see it as metaphors of Babylon and Egypt; yet others talk of the diaspora as *wenela*, while, for a number of migrants, the diaspora is seen as a legal home. This diversity of meanings demonstrates the difficulty of providing a universal diasporic experience upon which deductive reasoning could be applied; each migration phenomenon needs to be located within its own specificity.

The article argues for the relevance of reverse colonisation as an alternative framework in understanding the migration experiences of Zimbabweans in Britain. Reverse colonisation gives migrants the agency and legitimacy to participate in the social, political and economic life of the hostland. It confers diasporans with a sense of entitlement and moral right to come to their former imperial power to study, work and settle. Hence, what is significant with reverse colonisation is that it legitimises respondents' sense of being 'there', even if they are undocumented migrants. For example, in 2005 more than 400 Zimbabweans protested outside the Home Office in London against forced deportation. Arthur Mofe, chairperson of the campaign said, 'We suffered under colonialism, and we have the right to be here. We are not going back until we do so voluntarily. We are not dogs, we are not criminals. We want to go back to a free Zimbabwe' (Kimber 2005).

This sense of reverse colonisation is felt and expressed by the growing Zimbabwean population in many cities in Britain. The feeling of collective belonging etched out in diaspora congregations, the pub and *gochi-gochis* shows the agency of the once-colonised Zimbabwean diaspora in having an influence in British society. Beacon Mbiba (2005) refers to Britain as 'Harare North', and Slough has now been renamed Chirau—a communal area of Zimbabwe. The reverse colonisation framework provides an analytical lead for rethinking patterns of migration to Britain from former colonies—for example post-World War II migrations from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and the Caribbean. However, the concept requires further theoretical and conceptual development in order for its potential as a generative force for research to be realised.

Some respondents construct their diasporic experience as being akin to the biblical exile in Babylon and Egypt. As classical diaspora theorists, Cohen (1997) and Safran (1991) argue that hostile conditions such as discrimination, prejudice and racism in the places of settlement may heighten migrants' attachment to their original or imagined homeland. Two-thirds of the respondents were working in service-oriented occupations, embedded in a new era of globalisation searching for cheap and flexible labour. This situation is confirmed by recent studies which have identified the concentration of Zimbabwean migrants to Britain in the health and care industries (Bloch 2008; Mbiba 2005; McGregor 2007). Thus, some respondents consider the experience in the diaspora as replicating *wenela* times, not just in terms of the demeaning nature of the work but also of restrictions on the mobility of migrants and their dependents in coming to Britain.

Attitudes towards return or settlement are not fixed but contingent and subject to transformation by external and internal conditions and competing narratives. Although the government of Zimbabwe is hostile to its diaspora, because of foreign currency shortages in the country it encourages its citizens abroad to send remittances by reinventing the notion of return. The majority of the men are reluctant settlers and hope to return to the homeland to regain their gender status within the private and public sphere. In contrast, the majority of women have experienced upward social mobility in the hostland and would want to settle permanently in the UK (Pasura 2008b).

## Notes

- [1] Through the Asylum and Immigration Act of 1999, the UK government introduced its dispersal policy, designed to reduce the pressure on accommodation and resources in London and the surrounding areas.
- [2] All names in this study have been changed to protect respondents' identities.
- [3] On 16 November 2004, the UK government lifted a moratorium preventing the deportation of failed asylum-seekers from Zimbabwe. The decision was challenged in the High Court and the judge ordered the AA case (unnamed individuals) to be brought to the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal, to determine whether 'refused' asylum-seekers from Zimbabwe automatically faced persecution if returned there. At present, the case is yet to be finalised. **DOMINIC, CAN YOU GIVE AN UPDATE ON THIS?**
- [4] See the report about the geographical spread of Zimbabweans in Britain in Pasura (2006).
- [5] All respondents have a Christian background, thus Babylon and Egypt must be understood in a biblical sense.
- [6] Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WENELA) was a recruiting agency in South Africa that was given exclusive rights to recruit labour to work in the mines in the Southern African region during the colonial period.
- [7] For full details, see Home Office *Control of Immigration Statistics* from 2002 to 2007 available at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/>.
- [8] By 'community transfer agencies', I refer to unregistered remittance agencies predominantly owned by Zimbabweans in Britain, used for sending money, fuel, groceries, HIV medication and cars to Zimbabwe.

- [9] In 2004, the Zimbabwean government, through the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, launched the Homelink Private Limited. The company offers the Homelink Housing Development Scheme and Money-Transfer Agencies. For the Homelink Housing Development Scheme, non-resident Zimbabweans in the diaspora are offered loans to buy properties in Zimbabwe, but they can make repayments in foreign currency over a period of five years.
- [10] See <http://www.zimbuyer.com/>; <http://www.mukuru.com/> for evidence of the emergence of a number of UK-based Zimbabwean online grocery shops.

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