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African Immigrants in South Africa

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BY RUTA NANIVADEKAR

AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

According to the South African Forced Migration Studies Programme, there are between one and three million African immigrants currently residing in South Africa (Jolly, 2008). There were 57,899 official refugees and 219,368 registered asylum seekers as of January 2012, which is the highest number of asylum seekers out of any country in Africa and the world (UNCHR, 2012). Immigration from other African countries into South Africa has implications for the economy, politics, health and education services, South Africa's role in the greater African continent, and ideas about human rights. As such, African immigration, both documented and undocumented, is an increasingly prominent national issue.

This study seeks to answer two core questions. First, what are the general experiences of African immigrants in South Africa? Secondly, what social tensions exist between immigrants and South African Coloreds and Blacks¹? Drawing from my own localized, qualitative findings and national studies and statistics, I explore the challenges immigrants face, the violence that sometimes erupts, the nature of social and economic tensions between immigrants and South African Coloreds and Blacks, and the factors that contribute to economic competition.

¹Black and Colored are two different racial groups in South Africa. Blacks are those descended from the indigenous people of the region, such as the Xhosa, Zulu, etc, while Coloreds usually have lighter skin than Blacks and are mixed race. They are usually a combination of White European and Black, but they may also have blood from other parts of Africa or Asia. Under apartheid, Coloreds had more status than Blacks, but not as much as Whites, certainly.

TROUBLES IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Most immigrants from other African countries come to South Africa because they cannot live safely or cannot make a living in their home countries. There is political and economic turmoil in many African states, and many of their citizens are desperately seeking to escape to countries with more favorable conditions. Many people throughout Africa come to South Africa because it has the strongest economy on the continent, ranking 26th in the world in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Central Intelligence Agency: South Africa, 2012).

Based on news stories, government publications, and scholarly work, it is clear that Zimbabwean migration has taken center stage in the national debate over immigration. Zimbabwean asylum seekers comprised 68% (149,000) of all asylum applications in 2009, but only 200 received asylum (SAMP, 2011, p.18). Zimbabweans are regarded as economic refugees because they are escaping Zimbabwe's dire economic situation (International Organization for Migration, 2009, p. 6-7). According to the Deputy Minister of the Department of Home Affairs, the thousands of Zimbabweans applying for asylum just "clog up the system" (Moorhouse & Cunningham, 2010, p. 591). Malawians file the second highest number of asylum claims in South Africa, comprising 7% of applications in 2009, but they too are rarely granted asylum (SAMP, 2011, p. 18). It is much easier for asylum seekers from Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia to be granted refugee status because these countries have experienced outright violence as opposed to economic turmoil (International Organization for Migration, 2009, p. 6-7).

SOCIAL TENSIONS REGARDING THE PRESENCE OF FOREIGNERS

There are many social tensions regarding the presence of immigrants in South Africa. They have become a scapegoat for many of the problems the country faces such as unemployment, lack of housing and other services, increased drug use, and crime. Economic competition is a key source of conflict between South Africans and immigrants, which is unsurprising because South Africa's unemployment rate is one of the worst in the world, ranking 174th out of 201 countries (Central Intelligence Agency: Country Comparison-Unemployment Rate, 2012). Many poor South Africans believe that immigrants are "stealing" the few jobs there are by accepting lower wages, while many employers actually prefer to hire undocumented immigrants over South Africans because they are more "docile" and "hardworking" (International Federation for Human Rights, 2008, p. 30). In my research, I found that some employers also prefer to hire immigrants because they are often considered to have better work ethic and are considered to be more reliable employees than South African Coloreds or Blacks. In addition, immigrants (especially Somalis) also compete with South Africans in the informal trading sector, and some South Africans believe immigrants unfairly steal the businesses of locals. There are regular reports of South Africans robbing, petrol bombing, or otherwise attacking Somali-owned spaza shops and the people who work there.

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According to Wits Forced Migration Studies Programme, a sense of abandonment by the government contributes to South Africans' anger towards immigrants (as cited in SAMP, 2008, p. 21). The African National Congress's 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme aimed to provide education, housing, eliminate hunger, and empower Black people (African National Congress, 1994). They were ambitious goals, and while some gains have been made, the promises are nowhere close to being fulfilled. A study by the Southern African Migration Project found that two thirds of respondents believed that immigrants divert and deplete services such as water, electricity, and health care meant for South Africans (as cited in Johnson, 2010, p. 17).

The media and the rhetoric expressed by public figures promote negative perceptions of immigrants, encouraging the belief that they unfairly compete with South Africans for government services and goods. Media reports on immigration use terms such as "waves" or "hordes," which foster the sense that South Africa is being taken over by immigrants (Citizenship Rights in Africa, 2009, p. 22). Immigrants are constantly linked to crime, with the ex-Director of General of Home Affairs stating that "approximately 90% of foreign persons, who are in the RSA [Republic of South Africa] with fraudulent documents, i.e. either citizenship or migration documents, are involved in other crimes as well" (SAMP, 2002, p. 1).

RESEARCH METHOD

My research method was entirely qualitative and quite informal. I wanted to get a holistic understanding of immigrant experiences in one specific locality, how South Africans feel about the increasing presence of immigrants, and the social tensions that arise between them. I conducted my research over the course of three weeks during a study-abroad trip with my university. I stayed in a fairly remote township (I will refer to it as Charlestown ²) located in the Western Cape Province.

The economy around Charlestown is fairly limited. Residents can work at some local businesses, a brick factory, in construction, or commute to nearby towns to work in a variety of service occupations. Many people participate in Charlestown's informal economy by opening up spaza shops, fixing up cars, and knitting gloves and hats to sell. Unfortunately, there are not enough economic opportunities for this community, and Charlestown's unemployment rate remains about 28% (Mason, personal communication, June 2012).

Since almost all the spaza shops in Charlestown are owned by foreign-nationals, especially Somalis, I decided to make the presence of immigration in the spaza shop sector a key focus of my research. My professor and I walked around the township, stopping at every spaza shop, introducing ourselves to the owners and employees and trying to strike up conversations with them. If someone shared their ideas willingly, we would mention that I was a student who was interested in learning more, and we would ask if they might talk to me again in the future. We tried to make it clear that we were not journalists or inspectors, but nevertheless, people understandably tended to be somewhat wary of us. I interpret this uneasiness as a sign that many of them do feel insecure and that real social tensions exist. I conducted five interviews with foreign shop owners, one formal interview with a Colored shop owner in her living room, and two short conversations

SPAZA SHOPS

A spaza shop is a small micro-convenience store found throughout the township that sells basic goods like bread, chips, telephone minutes, and cigarettes. They are often run out of large shipping containers that the owners rent out.

²The name of the township and its businesses, the names of all respondents, the countries that African foreigners are originally from, and some other details have been changed to protect the identities of respondents.

³This is the first of many references to formal and informal interviews that I conducted in Charlestown and a couple other locations during July, 2012. The citations for these interviews are listed under "Personal Communication Bibliography."

with other Colored shopkeepers at their shops. All the interviews with immigrant spaza shop owners were informal, taking place in the spaza shops themselves and sometimes incorporating their other Somali friends. Another key focus of my research was on immigrants who are employed by South Africans (often White South Africans). I went to a nearby tourism business to talk to two immigrant tour guides. I also spoke with the manager of the establishment, who is White. I also interviewed a few other average residents who were not directly involved in employing, working for, or competing with immigrants.

I wanted the conversations to be as natural as possible, so I asked only a few formal questions and let the participants guide our dialogue. It is crucial that I mention how uncomfortable I felt being in a “researcher” role. Because I was a student who had never done fieldwork before, I had to learn how to appropriately meet, connect with, and interview people during this research process, and I often made mistakes. In an effort to be a culturally responsive researcher who acknowledges that research has the potential to establish troubling power dynamics, (Rodriguez, et. al, 2011, p. 401) I was constantly worried that I was being disrespectful, intrusive, or intimidating. I was too hesitant to ask pointed follow-up questions, and sometimes I was too nervous to even realize that I needed more clarification. Due to a lack of concrete data and explicit statements, there is some uncertainty in my findings. Many of the conclusions in this study rely on my interpretations of what respondents said. I have filled certain gaps in information based on respondents’ facial expressions and tone, conversations with other people whom I did not interview, and news stories. However, I have countered this uncertainty with extensive research on national trends, which usually align with my findings and inferences.

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FINDINGS

THE DECISION TO MIGRATE TO SOUTH AFRICA

The majority of the foreign respondents migrated to South Africa because their home countries are too dangerous or because they cannot make a living there. Almost all the Somalis I met had fled their country’s civil war, while people from other nations had moved because the economic opportunities were better in South Africa. As Kurt ³ explained, South Africa is a rich country compared to the rest of the world, and upward social mobility is more attainable. Henry, from a small African nation, said that people from other African countries are often educated, but they do not have the opportunity to utilize their education and make a good living in their home countries. Thomas, a highly educated tour guide, said that in his home country people with Master’s degrees have to settle for being shopkeepers, but in South Africa, someone with that level of education is guaranteed to get a good job. Although most people said South Africa was “fine” almost everyone did not intend to stay in South Africa for the rest of their lives.

PAPERS

Obtaining the appropriate documentation to live and work in South Africa is a major strain on the daily lives of immigrants. Based on comments they made, I believe all the people who discussed documentation issues with me were refugees or seeking refugee-status. Matthew and Robert, both Somalis, complained that it is difficult to get “papers,” and it was evident that this made Robert quite upset. As he gestured to his own dark skin, pointing out that they are all Africans, he asked why South Africa does not allow other Africans to live and work within her borders. He does not understand why such distinctions are being made between people who are all African. Even if immigrants receive legitimate documentation, enforcement officials will sometimes destroy their certificates, or they will be “accused of carrying counterfeit documents, as a result of minor inaccuracies in their personal information (name, birth date, etc)” (International Federation for Human Rights, 2008, p. 10).

For Thomas, it is difficult to get asylum because there is no war in his home country. He said South Africa gets international acclaim and money from the United Nations for hosting refugees, implying that South Africa’s government gains nothing from accepting migrants like him into the country. Thomas estimated there are 600-700 applicants every day at the Refugee Reception Center, so he must spend all day waiting in line to gain asylum. He only receives temporary work permits, and he is never guaranteed to get an extension. He said immigrants can get permanent papers if they can prove they are in a romantic relationship with a South African citizen. One of his friends agreed

to pretend that they are in a relationship. Even though he got approved for a permanent work permit a year and a half ago, he has not actually received his documents yet.

Thomas’ experience illustrates many of the immigration issues in South Africa. First, there are a lot of immigrants applying for asylum even though they are technically economic refugees. So why are they still applying for asylum? South Africa has very strict employment policies that prohibit employers from hiring foreign nationals if there are South African citizens willing and able to do the work (Department of Home Affairs, Civic Services Section, n.d.). Therefore, most “unskilled” immigrants cannot qualify for a work permit. However, refugees can obtain work permits because the 1951 Convention requires that host countries grant all refugees the same rights as citizens other than the right to vote (UNCHR, 2011, p. 4).

I imagine many economic refugees know that they will not get a permanent permit but apply regardless in order to get the temporary permits issued to all asylum seekers. Thus, immigrants can work in South Africa at least while their applications are being processed. These “documents of limited validity compromise refugees’ efforts to become self-reliant by making it hard for them to hold long-term jobs” (UNCHR, 2012). Renewing asylum-seekers’ permits or refugee certificates (which have to be renewed every two years) can be a very inconvenient process. There are only five Refugee Reception Centres in the entire country, so immigrants may have to take time off work and travel long distances to apply for or renew their refugee status (International Federation for Human Rights, 2008, p. 10). The day after I interviewed him, Thomas had to take a

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day off work to go to the Refugee Reception Centre, which is many hours away from Charlestown. Thomas luckily has an understanding employer who allows him to take work off, but many other immigrants may not be so fortunate.

Ian, who seemed ethnically Somali, complained that obtaining paperwork is expensive because the Department of Home Affairs charges them a lot of money. I do not know if he was referring to paying official legal fees or bribes. Officially, refugee permits are free while most other permits cost money (South Africa Government Services, n.d.), so either Ian is not a refugee or he is being charged illegitimate fees, or both (I cannot confirm his immigration status). Other studies have found that police extort immigrants, whether it is for documentation or other reasons (Citizenship Rights in Africa, 2009, p. 25). Gregory, a young, local Colored man, said that immigrants must bribe officials to get their papers, but even then they often do not receive their papers after all. I am not sure if Gregory was referring to immigrants who do have a legal right to work in South Africa but have to pay officials to receive the actual documents, or if he was referring to immigrants who are trying to get falsified documents because they cannot actually qualify for a work permit or refugee status. Although the respondents did not discuss fees much, it clearly is an issue with which immigrants struggle.

Another difficulty immigrants (even documented ones) face is that they are unable to open bank accounts because the “law allowing refugees and asylum-seekers to have bank accounts is not being fully implemented” (UNCHR, 2012). Thus, Matthew, who has a permit, must store his earnings in his shop. When his shop got robbed in 2010, the robbers were able to take all his money. Matthew explained to us that he works really hard from 5:00am to 9:00pm every day, and losing all his savings was “demoralizing.” Because they cannot store their money in the banks, immigrants, both documented and undocumented, are constantly at risk of being robbed and losing all their savings (Citizenship Rights in Africa, 2009, p. 24).



SECURITY

Most of the immigrants I interviewed indicated feeling insecure in Charlestown. They would usually say that living in Charlestown was “fine” and that overall they felt safe, but then they would mention the security problems. This sentiment is reflected nationally with McDonald reporting in 2000 that up to 86% of immigrants surveyed think the crime situation is worse in South Africa than in their home country. It reports that “as many as 42% said they had been robbed, 24% had been harassed and 23% assaulted” (as cited by SAMP, 2002, p.1).

According to Gregory the last major incidence of violence in Charlestown was in 2010, when multiple foreign owned businesses were looted and burned down. It seems that immigrants who live in the townships are in more danger than those who live farther away (in town or on their employer’s property). Thomas said immigrants around Charlestown would rather rent an expensive place in town than live in the township, and according to the UNCHR (2012), this occurs throughout the country. However, a lot of immigrants might not be able to afford housing in safer areas, so they may have to live in cheap, dangerous neighborhoods where they are more likely to get attacked (Citizenship Rights in Africa, 2009, p. 24).

Gregory recounted a time when he participated in beating a Malawian man in a nearby, primarily African township. He was surprised when the bystanders who had witnessed the beating blamed the Malawian man for starting the altercation. The man had been stabbed, but bystanders said that he had accidentally been punctured by shards of glass. The police believed the witnesses’ accounts with little convincing. Gregory said this happens quite often.

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Meanwhile, police tend to ignore the concerns of immigrants. Ian said their shop has been robbed many times, but the police (who are mainly Colored) do not follow through on their cases. In 2007, more than a hundred Somali shops were looted or burned down in the Motherwell Township near Port Elizabeth. “Reports indicate that the police did not actively intervene to prevent the looting, and that some police officers may even have taken part in it” (International Federation for Human Rights, 2008, p. 35). Because it is unlikely the police will punish them for harming immigrants, attackers might find foreigners and their property to be easy targets.

The Somalis in Charlestown are actively trying to improve their own security situation by financially contributing to the community projects. For Patricia, a community development organizer employed by the state, the Somalis are an important source of assistance, and she gushed: “they’re my friends!” They often will generously donate money so she can buy soft drinks for school children’s events or to provide groceries for a family. I asked Matthew why he and the other Somalis donate so much money, and he says they do it so that their neighbors might protect them when robberies occur.

One common form of violence is throwing petrol bombs at foreign-owned spaza shops, usually burning them down. None of the respondents in this study indicated that they have experienced or witnessed petrol bombings in Charlestown, but they are a very regular occurrence around the country. I asked Henry why foreign-owned spaza shops are petrol bombed, and he explained that they are usually perpetrated by gangs who will threaten to bomb someone’s home or business unless they pay a steep bribe. Henry said that immigrants are a “soft target” for gangs. Immigrants are

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vulnerable because they lack connections to others in the community, and so there will not be as many repercussions for the perpetrators of the violence. Charman and Piper similarly found that in the Delft South area, “only those [immigrant shopkeepers] with strong linkages and or community support have avoided crime” (2011, p. 3).

Foreign-owned spaza shops might be especially vulnerable to crime because they tend to stay open later than shops owned by South Africans. A Colored shopkeeper named Collete and her daughter (who seemed to resent the presence of all foreigners in their areas) said that the Somali shops attract robberies because they are open until 9:30 at night. They are “open late, and that’s all for money,” Collete said as if she thought they were being grossly greedy. In 2008, the South African Police Service strongly recommended that all spaza shops close by 7:00pm to reduce their risk of being robbed, and this curfew was later lengthened to 9:00pm so that shopkeepers would not lose too much business. Even still, Charman and Piper found that most immigrant shopkeepers choose to stay open until 10:00pm despite the higher risk of robbery. One South African who rents his shop to a Somali thinks “the unwillingness of Somali shopkeepers to adhere to community rules on business closures was providing a favorable opportunity for attacks” (2011, p. 14). This stance implies that these shops are not targeted because they are foreign-owned and that if locals kept their businesses open late, they too would be robbed. Using this rationale, South Africans blame immigrants for being the victims of crime.

Foreign-owned spaza shops are also targeted because they present unwanted competition for South African shopkeepers. In Charlestown, there are eight Somali-owned shops but only four Colored-owned spaza shops, so locals might feel outnumbered and threatened. Tim is one very successful self-made Colored businessman in Charlestown. A few years ago the community was deciding if they should allow foreign-owned spaza shops into their community. Tim supposedly argued (according to a local Colored respondent named John) against foreign-owned shops because he wanted a monopoly in Charlestown, and the small foreign-owned spaza shops cut into his business. John seemed to suggest that Tim tried to discourage foreign shop owners by using force.

Other studies have shown that violence against immigrants is usually committed by unemployed men who are directed or supported by powerful people, such as local businessmen (Charman & Piper, 2011, p. 4). Sometimes South African business people are very direct about their intentions to drive off immigrants. For example, “In October 2008, members of the National African Federated Chamber of Commerce and Industry (NAFCOC) in Western Cape... circulated a letter threatening to resort to violence against Somali business owners in their city if the latter did not close down their shops” (Citizenship Rights in Africa, 2009, p. 21).

**THE MANY FACETS OF ECONOMIC
COMPETITION**

From my interviews, it was clear that there is a considerable amount of resentment towards immigrants, and economic competition causes (or at least partially fuels) almost all of it. South Africans view both self-employed and externally-employed immigrants as an economic threat, but Kurt says he prefers

running his own business because South Africans do not get as jealous of self-employed foreigners as they do of immigrants who got jobs working for “white people” (employers). John and Gregory, who are both Colored and overall quite accepting of immigrants, also seemed to view foreign shop owners more positively than immigrants who find jobs. However, this might be because these two men were craftsmen, so they might directly compete with unskilled immigrants in the construction industry.

It comes as no surprise that immigrants are perceived as an unwanted source of competition. In a country where about 25% of the population is unemployed, sources of employment are a precious commodity. In Johannesburg, the unemployment rate for South Africans was 33% in 2008 while it was only 20% for foreign nationals. South Africans might feel that these kinds of discrepancies are unfair. One official told Steinberg “People say there is a struggle for resources going on between South Africans and foreigners... Actually, the struggle is long over. The foreigners have won hands down” (Institute for Security Studies, 2008, p.5).

FOREIGNERS TAKE WEALTH OUT OF THE COMMUNITY

All three of the Colored shop owners I spoke with mentioned that immigrants do not employ South Africans. From what I observed personally, I noticed that immigrant shop owners in Charlestown tend to hire people from their home countries. Matthew explained that the more established Somali shopkeepers hire new Somali migrants so that they can save up some capital and eventually start their own shop. It seems like hiring recent immigrants from one’s home country is a way of supporting the newcomers while they transition to life in South Africa.

However, two of the three Colored shopkeepers I interviewed clearly expressed disapproval about this while the third implied by his tone that he too disapproved. James said that the presence of Somali business owners is “good for the economy [because it creates competition, he clarified] but not for employment.” Because immigrants only employ people from their home country, locals remain unemployed. Also, the money does not stay in the community because immigrants often send remittances back home to support family members, or they might save as much as possible and then move back home after a few years.

To some people, the fact that immigrants send remittances to their home countries might seem like a loss of national wealth. According to Steinberg, this dissatisfaction is based on the assumption that the South African economy is a “finite lump,” and so any wealth that



foreign-nationals acquire within South Africa is essentially stealing wealth from a South African (Institute for Security Studies, 2008 p.1). Another component of this resentment is that many older Coloreds and Blacks spent decades struggling under apartheid, a period when most of them were denied access to opportunities and wealth. Steinberg states that “if one believes that the lump [of South African wealth] is...a reward for having survived apartheid and voted a democratic government into power, then the sight of foreigners running their stalls is an affront” (Institute for Security Studies, 2008, p. 8).

FOREIGN-OWNED SPAZA SHOPS HAVE CHEAPER PRICES

Many ordinary South African residents, such as John (who is Colored), support foreign-owned spaza shops because they offer cheaper prices. John also appreciates that there are numerous foreign-owned spaza shops in the vicinity of Charlestown because there is always one nearby, and there are less customers at each one, so the lines are shorter. He said the immigrant spaza shop owners also help their customers by letting them pay on tabs if they do not have any money at the time of purchase. Charman and





Piper also found that residents who supported foreign-owned spaza shops were grateful for the lower prices, the longer business hours, and the “good service” they provided (2011, p. 21).

The immigrants’ cheaper prices do usually anger local spaza shop owners, though. Violence towards foreign shopkeepers is sometimes linked to frustrated local shop owners not being able to match the much cheaper prices that foreigners offer. Some immigrant shopkeepers offer prices that are “substantially discounted to pull customers away from long established stores” (Charman & Piper, 2011, p.4). However, I do not know if immigrant shop owners in Charlestown have used this discounting strategy. Collete and Kelly were visibly angered as they explained why they think foreigners have cheaper prices. They said that immigrants’ prices are cheap because they want to just get rid of their inventory, and they appeared to regard “getting rid of inventory” as an unethical business practice. John, on the other hand, states that immigrants have lower prices because they order less stock.

IMMIGRANTS ARE FRUGAL

Henry said that local South Africans mistakenly assume that immigrants are selling drugs because they are jealous and cannot fathom how the immigrants can afford to offer such cheap prices and expand their businesses so impressively. South African shopkeepers are unable to reach the same level of success, so they conclude that immigrants could not have achieved their successes if they were not making additional money by selling drugs. But according to Henry, South Africans simply lack discipline in their daily lives. They cannot expand their businesses because they live luxurious lifestyles and cannot save up their earnings. Gregory reiterated that immigrants live more frugally

than South Africans by not buying furniture, living off just one bag of corn maize for a whole month, and wearing basic clothing. According to many people, this frugal lifestyle is one of the main reasons why Malawians (and other immigrants) in Charlestown work for cheaper wages. Collete said that Malawians sleep underneath cardboard instead of living in real houses. Instead of eating out of “crockery,” they will open a can, put the fish in a plastic bag, and eat it with their hands. Unlike John and Gregory, Collete clearly looked down upon immigrants (namely Malawians) for their relatively cheaper lifestyles. Her examples and tone implied that she thought Malawians were uncivilized.

WHY DO IMMIGRANTS GET HIRED OVER LOCALS?

Collete also vented that “Malawians...come and steal our work.” According to her, the Malawians have replaced all the Colored and African people at one of the tourism locations and all the boutique shops. She thinks it is the Malawians’ fault that the South African youth must go work in the bush for they can no longer find work in Charlestown. Understandably, employers often prefer to hire immigrants because they will work for much cheaper than locals. John has heard a rumor that two Malawians will work a full day’s worth, but they will be content to share only one person’s wage between the two of them. Immigrants are willing to accept low wages partially due to their frugal lifestyles, but exploitation is another key factor. John thinks paying Malawians cheap wages is abusive because they are hungry, poor, and desperate for work. Thus, John does not blame Malawians; rather, he blames employers for taking advantage of their willingness to work for low wages.



Gregory says illegal immigrants will accept meager compensation because they cannot resist. Unlike South African citizens or documented migrants, Igglesden, Monson, and Polzer explain that undocumented immigrants cannot complain to authorities, so employers can pay less than minimum wage and disregard other aspects of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (as cited in Moorhouse & Cunningham, 2010, p. 592). However, even documented immigrants experience exploitation.

Another issue is that when immigrants accept lower wages than locals, they reduce the market price of labor, and if South Africans do not also accept those lower wages, they will be replaced by immigrants (Citizenship Rights in Africa, 2009, p. 20). Gregory was quite supportive of immigrants overall, but even he thought it was unfair to South Africans when Malawians work for lower wages because locals do not want to or cannot afford to work for so little. However, he also thinks there are many instances where employers hire immigrants because they demonstrate more merit, and if they really were most qualified, they deserve the job.

Immigrants are often much more prepared for certain kinds of work than locals, especially in terms of their educational qualifications. This is especially true in the tourism industry where good English skills are important. Zimbabweans usually have an advantage in many service sectors because they tend to be well educated and well-versed in English (SAMP, 2008, p. 20) due to their country's superior secondary education based on the British Cambridge system (Moorhouse & Cunningham, 2010, p. 589). Meanwhile, 14% of South Africans over age 15 are illiterate (Central Intelligence Agency: South Africa, 2012), and only 61% of students who took the final 12th grade matric exam in 2009 passed (Education USA, n.d.). Furthermore, many older Coloreds and Blacks are disadvantaged because of the apartheid educational system, which invested far less in Colored students than Whites and even less on African students compared to Coloreds (Thompson, 2001). As a

result, "there is a surplus within SA [South Africa] of unskilled individuals, largely a legacy of the apartheid educational system. Thus the xenophobic fears of South Africans, although expressed in a completely unacceptable manner, do often prove to be correct – migrants do take 'their jobs'" (Moorhouse & Cunningham, 2010, p. 595).

Thomas says South Africans resent him, but he thinks "It's not stealing... It's all about what you can do." He is knowledgeable and speaks very good English, French, and Spanish, so his boss chose him over his Colored colleagues to lead tours for important visitors. This upsets some of his co-workers. However, Thomas attributes his success to his unquenchable thirst for knowledge, which propels him to learn extra information and practice his English in his free time. By contrast, Thomas thinks South Africans are often ignorant and lack the motivation to continuously learn. He partly blames the abysmal educational system, bad teachers, and the schools' inability to teach their students how to enjoy and value learning. But he also thinks that South Africans are just lazy sometimes, so they do not try to improve their job performance. In this way, Thomas thinks South Africans cause their own problems because they do not engage in habits that make them economically competitive. This is a crucial point that I will return to later.

Employers might also prefer to hire immigrants because they work harder. Gregory said Malawians "will work their asses off" and that they work even on the weekends. It seems there are some crucial aspects of the immigrant experience that motivate people (whether they are self-employed or hired by South Africans)

MANY OLDER COLOREDS AND BLACKS ARE DISADVANTAGED BECAUSE OF THE APARTHEID EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

to work very hard and diligently. Immigrants who moved to South Africa for economic reasons know that the sole reason they are in the country is to work. Many of the self-employed immigrants in Johannesburg “are what development economists call survivalists, working long and difficult hours to earn the equivalent of an unskilled labourer’s wage” (Institute for Security Studies, 2008, p. 7). Matthew, who works in his shop 5:00am-9:00pm every day, is one of these survivalists. Henry too says he works very hard because he must financially support his family by sending home remittances. But as he also pointed out, local people also have families depending on them, yet they are not as diligent as immigrants. Henry also thinks that immigrants work hard because they lack family and other support systems in South Africa, meaning that they must rely on only themselves to survive. By contrast, locals are not motivated to work because, in his words, they can stay at their uncles’ and be fed by their aunts, and this makes people lazy.

SOUTH AFRICANS’ WORK ETHIC

Resentment between South Africans and immigrants can be a two-way street because many immigrants blame South African Coloreds and Blacks for their own plight. They think that South Africans could be economically successful, but they expect too much, do not work hard, and engage in other detrimental behaviors. Steinberg’s study supports this, as he too found that many immigrants criticize South Africans when explaining why South Africans were less successful at finding employment (Institute for Security Studies, 2008, p. 7).

As I discussed above, Henry believes that South Africans cannot run and expand their own spaza shops because they live luxurious lifestyles and do not save up their money. He thinks people borrow too much money, which consequently causes corruption as they scramble to pay their debts. People (he seemed

IMMIGRANTS WHO MOVED TO SOUTH AFRICA FOR ECONOMIC REASONS KNOW THAT THE SOLE REASON THEY ARE IN THE COUNTRY IS TO WORK.

to be talking specifically about government employees) see the high standard of living that their predecessors had, and they expect that same level of success immediately. He says that South Africans in all occupations want to “jump the ladder, not climb it,” implying that they expect to be successful without investing much time and effort. Even Collette echoed this notion, saying “Our people are impatient to wait and see.” They do not “want to first crawl, then walk, then stand up straight.” Collette says they do not start their own shops because they are “party people” who would rather watch a rugby game on Saturday afternoons than stay at home thinking about accounts, profits, and permits. Therefore, they prefer to work for others and just get paid wages. She also says that many do not even want to start a shop near another existing shop because they do not want to have to compete and run the risk of failing.

Similarly, Ian and his Colored friend Jared say that people complain that immigrants cause too much competition, but they never start their own shops. As stated above, immigrants think South Africans are responsible for their own economic situation. Thomas said something similar in terms of wage rates. He explained

that the South Africans will not agree to the low wages, but they get angry that immigrants took their jobs and their money. The word “but” is crucial, implying that South Africans have no right to be upset because they are voluntarily choosing to reject the market-based rate that they are offered.

OTHER FACTORS: STATE PROVISION, ALCOHOLISM, AND RACE

Many immigrants (and locals too) think that South Africans rely too much on their government to provide for them. According to Thabo Mbeki, “South Africa is becoming... a distributive, rather than a developmental state, one in which an increasing proportion of the country feeds off the surpluses generated by a small cluster of industries” (as cited by Institute for Security Studies, 2008, p.9). When comparing South Africa to his home country, Kurt said that people back home build their own houses; the government does not simply hand them a house as the South African government does. In Thomas’ opinion, South Africans do not try to expand their horizons or work hard because life is easy for them. “For them, it’s a comfort zone. They don’t want to get out of it.”

Both locals and immigrants claimed that South African Coloreds and Blacks drink too much, which causes them to be economically unsuccessful. Ian and Jared said that Colored people excessively drink, and this in part makes them incapable of managing successful spaza shops. I asked Liam, a White tour guide, why he does not hire Xhosa workers, and he said that he has tried to hire Xhosa, but he has been “burned” because they are unreliable. He said they spend their pay

mainly on alcohol before they come back to work, so they are not willing to work when he needs them. “The habit of binge drinking is... ingrained in South African culture at all social levels, researchers say” (Baldauf, 2007). However, alcoholism is especially prominent in the Cape region because vineyards would partially pay their Colored and Black farmworkers in wine, which encouraged excessive drinking. The “dop system” as it was called, was banned in 1980, but continued illegally until 1991. Older South Africans may have worked in these situations and became alcoholics, and many may drink excessively after they get paid.

According to many sources, the Black South Africans are more opposed to immigrants than Coloreds. Thomas said that during the 2008 riots, it was Blacks who were getting angry. Gregory said that the violence against immigrants in the primarily Black township close-by is much worse because Blacks cause more trouble overall, such as burning down immigrants’ homes. Christopher explained why the Xhosa, rather than the Coloreds, are in direct competition with unskilled immigrants. Colored people expect higher wages than the Xhosa, so employers usually hire Xhosa for unskilled jobs. However, the Malawians will work for even less than the Xhosa, so it is the Xhosa, not the Coloreds, who are replaced with cheaper Malawian employees. Xhosa are often less educated and speak poorer English than Coloreds because, as discussed above, Black education during the apartheid era was by far the most inferior. Therefore, many working-age Blacks are less qualified than their Colored neighbors (Christopher, personal communication, July 2012).

**BECAUSE IT IS UNLIKELY THE POLICE
WILL PUNISH THEM FOR HARMING
IMMIGRANTS, ATTACKERS MIGHT FIND
FOREIGNERS AND THEIR PROPERTY TO
BE EASY TARGETS.**



CONCLUSION

This study examines the experiences of African immigrants in South Africa and the social and economic tensions that often arise between immigrants and locals. I started by conducting qualitative research in a township in the Western Cape so I could gain an understanding of the immigration stresses that this particular community experiences. Over the course of three weeks, I conducted formal and informal interviews with at least 19 people, about half of whom were immigrants. I then looked at official statistics, news stories, and scholarly work that others have done regarding African immigration in South Africa as a whole. This paper incorporates the results from my qualitative research as well as the relevant information from other sources, allowing me to discuss how the experiences of immigrants and the social dynamics in Charlestown compare to what is happening on a national scale.

This research has several holes that I hope future researchers will be able to mend. Only four of the approximately 19 respondents were women, and none of the women were immigrants themselves. I also did not interview any Malawians or Zimbabweans, which is unfortunate because there is a significant Malawian population in Charlestown and also because Zimbabweans figure prominently in the national immigration debate. I also could not extensively interview

Xhosa because I did not meet Xhosa who own spaza shops, and because I could not interview Xhosa at the tourism establishments. There was also a greater language barrier with Xhosa.

Another source of error might be caused by the way my questions were framed. I asked people to explain issues such as the social tensions and resentment between immigrants and locals, and these negatively framed questions might have encouraged respondents to focus on the negative social dynamics that exist between locals and foreigners. The lack of in-depth data is also due to the fact that I only had three weeks to organize and conduct all the interviews. I did not have enough time to connect with a diverse range of people, build trust, and have meaningful conversations with them all.

I hope that future researchers can spend more time in Charlestown developing relationships and connecting genuinely with respondents so that both parties feel more comfortable and can share fully and clearly. As people throughout the African continent become increasingly mobile and as economic and political turmoil in other African countries persists, South Africa will likely continue to be a major destination for African immigrants. It is important to continue doing in-depth research about the social dynamics surrounding the presence of immigrants in South African communities. We need to recognize and understand the long-term implications, both positive and negative, that African immigration in South Africa holds for the country. Only in this way will the state and other organizations be able to address and minimize the social tensions and improve the quality of life for everyone.

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