Chronicling Kenyan Asian diasporic histories: ‘newcomers’, ‘established’ migrants, and the post-colonial practices of time-work

Abstract:
Recent studies of international migration have observed its increasing complexity. Circular, return and temporary migration between India and Kenya, arising from the economic and political multi-polarities of increasing South-South partnerships, is one example of such complexity. These flows are distinct from the migration patterns of the longer-established Kenyan Asian diaspora, who settled under the auspices of the British Empire from the 1890s until the beginning of the 1960s. This paper explores how these transformations are negotiated through the dynamics of Kenyan Asians’ ongoing post-colonial liminalities and ambiguities of citizenship, focusing in particular on the temporal production of distinctions between ‘newcomers’ and ‘established’ migrants, even when in practice these distinctions are much more fluid. This article highlights the regulatory practices of ‘time work’ that that enfold the migratory chronologies of ‘established’ migrants into the time of the nation, whilst excluding those of ‘newcomers’. It explores the selective remembering, forgetting and reworking of the colonial past, a process informed by the dynamics of modernity, diaspora, nation and postcoloniality in contemporary Kenya. It argues that whilst distinctions between ‘established’ and ‘newcomer’ migrants might reflect different positionings in transnational social fields, differences are also negotiated in contradictions between the experiences, meanings and understandings of time. This demonstrates how space on its own is itself a inadequate conceptual lens with which to examine relationships between ‘newcomers’ and ‘established’ migrants, and that further research is needed that attends to the temporal dynamics mediating the temporal dissonances of contemporary transnational social fields.

1. Introduction
Since the 1990s, the elastic labour demands of India’s economic liberalization have resulted in increasingly complex forms of circular and multi-sited migration flows (Xiang, 2007). Whilst the vast majority of this heterogeneity can be found in the flows to and from OECD countries and the
Middle East, there is a smaller multi-directional flow between India and East Africa. Temporary Non-Resident Indian (NRI) labour in a diverse range of low and high-wage occupations across the telecommunications, light industries, horticulture and energy sectors (Puliyel, 2009) has arisen from the strategic strengthening of India-Africa economic partnerships over the last decade (Mawdesley and McCann, 2011). In 2012, approximately 10,000 1-year work permits were issued to NRIs (KNBS 2012) and an estimated 35,700 NRIs reside in Kenya (MOIA, 2012), though undocumented and informal migration may bring this number closer to 50,000. The temporary nature of this migration is manifest in the colloquial term “rocket”, used by Kenyan-born Asians to denote the ways in which NRIs seemingly utilise Kenya as a ‘launchpad’ (Puliyel, 2009) to the United Kingdom and North America.

Recent NRI flows are distinct from previous patterns of kin-chain patterns from rural Gujarat, Goa and the Punjab that dominated under British colonialism in the region between the 1890s and the 1960s and established a largely settled population referred to in popular parlance as “Kenyan Asian” or “South Asian Kenyan” (See Herzig, 2006 and below for a fuller discussion of these terms). In contrast, migrants arriving since the 1990s have tended to be temporary independent labor migrants and entrepreneurs from urban centres across India. Onward migration of the original Asian settlers and their descendants to the UK and North America, particularly following Kenyan decolonization, is reflected in a numerical decline of this population from 176,000 in 1962 (Herzig 2006: 30) to 46,000 in 2009 (KNBS 2010). The literature exploring Asians’ triple identities, as constituted through transnational relationships spanning Kenya, South Asia and Britain (Warah 1998), is longstanding and ongoing, but lacks engagement with how Kenyan Asians are negotiating new NRI migrations. This gap is significant because of ongoing anti-Asian sentiments (McCann 2010) that, as current events suggest (Hindustan Times 2007), are being exacerbated by India’s economic presence in the region. This paper seeks to show how ‘established’ Kenyan Asians define the category of ‘newcomer’ in context of negotiations over their contemporary post-colonial Kenyan subject positionings. In order to do so, it examines the temporal production of distinctions between ‘newcomers’ and ‘established’ Asians as categories of difference.
International migration is increasingly temporally complex; the new ‘age of migration’ (Castles and Miller, 2009) is characterized by a multifaceted and contingent range of movements that are “more likely to be transient and complex, ridden with disruptions, detours and multiple destinations” than permanent (Lorente et al., 2005: 1). There is growing interest in how these transformations build on and complicate previous migration patterns, and in particular, the implications for relations among ‘newcomers’ and ‘established’ migrants of common national ancestries, including the second and subsequent generations (Reynolds, 2012). The role of place in mediating relationships between ‘newcomers’ and ‘established’ migrants is central to these discussions (for example, Yeh, 2007), but there is less explicit theorization of the role of time. Nonetheless, time, as a mode of regulation within communities, is deeply implicated in questions of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ (Bastian, 2014) and can thus can also be a useful analytic in exploring such relationships. The overall aim of the paper is not to describe the distinction between ‘newcomer’ and ‘established’ migrants, but to identify the dynamics of modernity, diaspora and nation—themselves temporal constructs—that are mobilized and deployed to constitute and normalize ‘newcomers’ and ‘established’ migrants as categories of difference between those differently positioned in the multiple layers of Kenya-India transnational social fields.

The paper begins by reviewing the analytical use of space and place to explain relationships between ‘newcomer’ and ‘established’ migrants, and then traces recent explorations of time in migration studies. The paper then discusses the historical context of Kenyan Asians’ changing transnational social fields—that is, the multiple interlocking transnational networks of social relationships (Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004)- before offering evidence of the ways that discourses of modernity, nation, and diaspora are deployed to establish differences between ‘newcomers’ and ‘established’ migrants. It illustrates that such discourses are used as way of embedding Kenyan Asian chronologies in the history of Kenya whilst excluding those of NRIs. The paper shows how the embedding of Asians in Kenyan historical time scripts ‘newcomers’ as outsiders in relation to the ‘established’ Kenyan Asian diaspora and to postcolonial Kenya. The paper concludes by calling for further research that attends to the temporal dynamics
mediating ideas of migrant communities in contemporary transnational social fields.

2. Migrant social fields in transnational times

Scholars working from the critical tradition have long problematized the homogenizing tendencies of scholarship that uses national framings of migrant groups as a coherent analytical lens (McAuliffe 2008, Bauder 2013). In particular, scholarship has taken an interest in the complex matrices of diasporic identities and subjectivities that arise from embeddedness in “the multiple sites and layers of ... transnational social fields” (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007: 130). Rather than reproduce the now somewhat clichéd concept of transnational life as a rootless space of flows and a space ‘in-between’, this work has sought to ground migrant identities in the “actual topography” (Khagram and Levitt, 2008: 28) of transnational social fields and multi-scalar processes of migrant place making (Ehrkamp, 2005, Ralph and Staeheli, 2011). In doing so, there is now a nuanced literature that explores the multidimensionalities of space and place in mediating differences within migrant communities.

The literature on the relationship between ‘established’ migrants and ‘newcomers’ also gives prominence to the mediative role played by space and place. For instance, commonalities of country of origin can help newcomer migrants access the social capital embedded in the social fields of migrant communities (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). While the presence of ‘established’ co-nationals is largely treated as a positive force in policy and academic literature, structural inequalities and unequal social relations can also be exacerbated (Kilduff and Tsai, 2003). ‘Newcomers’ and ‘established’ migrants can be differently located in the complex layers of transnational social fields, affecting the ability of ‘newcomer’ migrants to access and mobilize social capital (Ryan et al, 2008). For example, different waves of migrants arriving in the UK from the Caribbean at different times possess different cultural codes of behavior that intersect with gender, race and class to inform intra-ethnic boundaries (Reynolds, 2012). Furthermore, relationships between ‘newcomers’ and ‘established’ migrants involve complex navigations around the multiple symbolic meanings of home and common national ancestries (Gray, 2006; Galasińska,
2010; Brown 2011). Different degrees of emplacement in new settlement contexts can also prevent those with common geographical ancestries from engaging with each other owing to transformations in political and economic regimes of migration governance, as Yeh’s (2007) study of exiled Tibetans showed. Taken together, these studies have provided significant geographical interventions that further trouble the assumed naturalness and homogeneity of diasporic communities by pluralizing its ambivalent and multifaceted dimensions.

Whilst the role of space and place has now become central to theorisations of identity work within contemporary patterns of cross-border flow, there is a growing impetus to explicitly theorise the role of time. This has arisen from wider recognition of the complex temporalities of migrant life (Griffiths et al, 2012) and the significances of the lifecourse to patterns of migration (Giralt and Bailey, 2010; Conlon, 2011; Andrucki and Dickinson, 2015). Indeed, migration involves a varied set of experiences of time, including waiting and slowness as well as oft-described simultaneity and speed (Shapendonk and Steel, 2014). Cwerner’s (2001) explication of the six-fold times of migration - strange, heteronomous, asynchronous, remembered, collage, liminal, diasporic and nomadic -, which he deploys to capture the temporal dissonances, ruptures and re-workings brought about by migration, has been key to these re-theorisations. Studies have looked at temporal dissonances in many different kinds of migration contexts, from the material qualities of migrants’ travel (e.g. Crang and Zhang, 2014), to longer-term temporal transformations across generations (e.g. Crul and Doomernik, 2003).

As well as revealing and de-naturalizing the temporalities of migration, there are also calls to more explicitly theorize temporal dissonance as a practice of inclusion and differentiation (Griffiths et al, 2012). For Bastian (2014: 149), ideas of ‘shared time’ are a cornerstone of the very idea of community (however defined), such that “‘sameness’ is associated with being in time with the community and ‘difference’ is associated with being out of time with the community”. Diasporic communities are themselves constituted through the ideas, practices and imaginaries of shared time (Gilroy 1997). Rituals of commemoration, constructed around selective narratives and memories of the
past (Alexander 2013), lie at the very heart of diasporic cultural identities, serving as a process of claims-making in the present (Hall 1990). Generating – and indeed contesting - common temporal frames of reference within migrant communities involves practices of ‘time-work’, what Flaherty (2003: 19) defines as “one’s effort to promote or suppress a particular form of temporal experience”. One example of this is Golden’s (2002) study of recent Soviet migrants to Israel, which explored Israeli state efforts to enfold ‘newcomers’ into a shared national time through the temporal sequencing of an immigrant narrative from beginning to end. Further, drawing on Flaherty specifically, Cheng (2014)’s study of student migrants demonstrated their use of ‘time work’ in Singapore to both accrue cultural capital and subvert temporal norms and expectations. These examples illustrate the need for research that illustrates the ways in which temporal discourses are deployed to manage, rework and reimagine the dissonances brought about by cross-border mobility.

3. Methodology
This article draws from a qualitative study conducted as part of a research project focused on the relationships between established Kenyan Asians and newcomer NRIs in Nairobi, designed to explore the importance of diasporic heritage. It was conducted from 2009 to 2010, using a qualitative methodology that used semi-structured, in-depth interviews with both ‘newcomers’ (NRIs who had been in Kenya for 2 years or fewer) and ‘established’ Kenyan Asians, (second and third-generation descendants of migrants who arrived in Kenya under the auspices of British colonial rule.) The twelve NRIs interviewed worked in a range of high and low-wage occupations on temporary contracts, with questions focusing on their migratory histories, motivations, occupations, social life and everyday experiences in Nairobi. Seventeen interviews were conducted with ‘established’ Kenyan Asians; all worked, or had worked, within small family businesses. This group’s particular privileges included access to financial capital, which afforded them greater mobility, including trips to India, the UK, or the USA. Kenyan Asian interviews revolved around their family biographies of migration and their perceptions of ‘newcomers’. Interviews were analyzed using a narrative approach (Plattner and Bruner, 1984), which involved examining the
ways respondents portrayed themselves and others, and how individuals constructed past and future life events. Discourse analysis of newspapers, websites, online blogs, discussion groups and Kenyan Asian family (auto)biographies supplemented interview data.

4. Historical transformations in Kenyan-Indian transnational social fields

Migration between South Asia and East Africa has been documented since 1 AD, although Portuguese, and, later, British colonization expanded and intensified what were scattered and sporadic movements (Gregory, 1971). Between the 1890s and 1960s, the majority of South Asian settlement arose via kin-chain networks linking East Africa with villages, towns, and regions in South Asia (Mangat, 1969). The literature examining Kenyan Asians’ transnational socio-economic fields that developed in the colonial-era has a tendency to homogenize these fields as both static and regulated by Asian ethnic characteristics, behaviors and traits, despite evidence of flux (Oonk, 2004). However, internal boundaries around caste, class and gender underwent significant transformation as a result of evolving marriage, reproductive, associational, educational and business practices that shifted social orientation away from South Asia towards East Africa (Herzig, 2006). This was also in part the result of restrictive policies on investment and trading (Himbara, 1994). Under Africanization policies of the late 1960s and early 1970s, post-colonial transformations resulted in the diversification of Kenyan Asian business ownership and occupational roles, from a field dominated by petty trading and manufacturing that used India as a source of trading partnerships and cheap labour (Oonk, 2004: 12), towards business ownership and employment in professional services such as accountancy, IT and healthcare (Sian, 2007; Adam, 2012).

The colonial conditions under which India-Kenya transnational social fields developed have long-circumscribed an anticipatory relationship to Britain. In the early 1900s, members of the National Indian Congress encouraged Indians to seek freedoms abroad under the opportunities provided by access to a shared global British empire, whilst settlers sent stories home about the prospects for émigrés under British colonial expansion into East and Southern Africa (Metcalf,
British colonial political structures positioned Asians as a ‘middleman minority’ in the colonial administration of Africans. In practice, this ranged from accruing economic and political advantage (Gregory, 1971), inheriting mannerisms and dress (Salvadori, 1989), to the enforced use of English in Asian education (Oonk, 2007). Furthermore, aggressive post-colonial Africanization policies that restricted Asian employment, citizenship and commerce led to an exodus of 59% of the Asian population by 1969 to Britain and, less so, North America (see Rothchild, 1973). Evidence from interviews suggests that even for families who chose to stay in Kenya, one or more members hold a British passport ‘just in case’ as a flexible strategy for managing future risk (M. Shah, personal communication, 12th August 2009).

Amongst Asians that stayed, commercial restrictions forced Asian businesses to employ Africans rather than rely on India as a source of labour (Himbara, 1994). Nonetheless, because of the shortages of skilled workers across those sectors formerly dominated by White and Asian minorities (Gatheru, 2005), NRIs, many of them male extended relatives of Kenyan Asians, continued to arrive in Kenya, often on an undocumented and irregular basis. The United States’ Immigration Act of 1990 that facilitated NRI’s acquisition of US work permits when applying from Kenya supported ongoing migration from the subcontinent and indeed led to the coining of the term “rocket” to denote the use of Kenya as a ‘launchpad’ for careers in North America (Y. Ghai, personal communication, 1st August 2009). However, in practice, some of these migrants settled permanently, married local Kenyan Asians, acquired Kenyan citizenship and started new businesses (Warah, 2011), often themselves now employing ‘newcomers’. India’s economic liberalization since the 1990s also supported the further migration of NRIs entrepreneurs, many lacking pre-existing ties either to Kenyan Asians. The newer cohort of short-term migrant entrepreneurs and expatriates arriving over the last decade –closely associated with the recent growth of Indian-Kenyan political and economic partnerships- is much smaller demographically. In contrast to the migrants arriving in the early to mid-twentieth century, interviews with members of this newer cohort suggest that their ambitions are to send remittances and acquire skills for career progression in India.
The above transformations are manifest in different naming conventions that connote explicit temporalities of belonging in a similar way that the term “Fresh off the Boat” is used to describe newcomer Asian Americans (Pyke and Dang, 2003). As well as denoting the use of Kenya as a short-term ‘launchpad’ for eventual transit elsewhere, the term “rocket” implies a lack of rootedness in established Kenyan Asian transnational social fields. Kenyan Asian journalist Rasnah Warah (2011), for instance, describes “rockets” as “people who landed from nowhere”. Although “rocket” has been in use since the 1970s to refer specifically to transit migrants bound for the US, it now refers to all recent migrants from the Indian subcontinent regardless of length of stay, citizenship status or migration and settlement intentions (see for example its use in newspaper articles such as Bindra, 2007). “Rocket” is also used to distinguish ‘newcomers’ from the descendants of colonial-era Asian settlers, for whom East Africa is a more permanent home (Mamdani, 2011). The term “Asian” is itself deeply entwined with colonial Asian settler identities, as the British used it as a descriptor for all ethnic South Asians in Kenya. Kenyan Asians, like their counterparts in Tanzania (Anand and Kaul, 2011), have appropriated the term “Asian” to signify commonalities as a minority Kenyan community distinct from Africans and Europeans. Furthermore, the once derogatory Kiswahili term for Asians –“wahindi”- has also been reclaimed by Kenyan Asians to emphasise the interminglings of South Asian belongings with colonial economic histories of settlement in Kenya (see Bindra, 2006). The different naming practices not only denote temporal asynchronicities between ‘established’ and ‘newcomer’ migrations, but also erect boundaries around Kenyan Asians as a group embedded in the national chronologies of Kenya.

5. Chronicling Kenyan Asian history

Despite their long histories of settlement in East Africa, Asians remain very much on the margins of Kenya’s national(ist) historiography (Odhiambo, 2007). Not only have their contributions to anti-colonial political struggles been downplayed, but nationalist politicians actively manipulated a disdain for their contributions based on their apparent dual, or even triple, geographical identifications (Theroux, 1997). From published accounts of ordinary Asian
families’ migration and settlement histories (Kapur-Dromson, 2007), biographies of Kenyan Asian political figures (Patel, 1997), magazines such as Awaz (www.awaazmagazine.com), to public exhibitions (http://www.asianafricanheritage.com), different Kenyan Asian communities have attempted to remedy such absences through stories and narratives of migration and settlement. Discussing the 2000-2005 Asian African Heritage Exhibition, the director general of the National Museum of Kenya asserts that

“The Asian African Community in Kenya has a rich history dating back to the 1900’s, which needs documentation so future generations appreciate the role played by this community in the making of the Kenyan nation, and the larger East African community” (Asian African Heritage Trust, 2012: 2).

Numerous online sites, listservs, forums and blogs are also dedicated to documenting this history (e.g. www.namaskar-africana.com).

A key theme in historical narratives of Asian settlement (and academic literature) is of ‘success under duress’ (Ranja, 2006). The past treatment of indentured Asian labourers occupies an important aspect of this chronology. As in the quote above, chronologies of Asian settlement often begin in the early 1900s, as this is when Indian labour from the Punjab was indentured to work on the construction of the Ugandan railway. The railway (and its Asian construction workers, train drivers, clerks and administrators) was instrumental in the development of Nairobi from a railway depot into the capital of British East Africa in 1907 and Kenya in 1963 (Adam, 2012). Photographs depicting indentured Asians toiling on the construction of the Mombasa-Ugandan railway whilst overseen by their colonial masters are commonly used to illustrate this settlement history (e.g. Chandan, 2007). Despite the perpetuation of indentured chronologies, very few Kenyan Asians are descended from railway labourers, as the majority returned to the Punjab upon completion of their contracts (Mattausch, 1998). Instead, indentured Asian labour functions as an “origin story” (Nash 2008) that contributes to fostering commonalities of colonial struggle and disenfranchisement with Africans whilst emphasizing the contributions of Kenyan Asian blood and sacrifice to the economic foundations of the country.
The long trading traditions and entrepreneurial successes of Kenyan Asians, especially of Gujaratis, has come to overshadow indentured labour as the foundational moment in the history of Asians in East Africa (Mattausch 1998), in part because Gujarati traders reference a longer clock-time of settlement going back to at least the 1860s (Mangat 1969) and also because it partially de-centres the role of the British colonial authorities in Kenyan Asian chronologies of settlement. For example, Pheroze Noworojee, Chairperson of the Asian African Heritage Trust states that

“the Trust moved away from the colonial, racial and sectional labels of the past... after more than 200 years of settlement and many generations in the country, we had become African” (Asian African Heritage Trust 2012, 2).

Many contemporary historiographies of the Kenyan Asian community begin from Gujaratis' pre-colonial involvement in the Indian Ocean dhow trade. For example, the 2001 Report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora (one produced in collaboration with key Kenyan Asian community leaders) begins the story of East African settlement in 1AD as a way of de-centering the role of Britain in South Asian settlement histories (Dickinson 2012). Any challenges are articulated as eventually overcome by supposed Asian 'values' of fortitude, hard-work and the close-knit structures of Asian extended families and communities (e.g. MOIA, 2001; Madhvani and Foden, 2009). Often missing from historical accounts are the ways that Asian's East African trading networks were reshaped first through collaborations with the Omani Sultanates of Seyyid Said (Mattausch, 1998) and then through collaborations with British colonial regimes (Gregory, 1981). Both allowed Asian businesses to flourish in entrepreneurial endeavors and professional occupations. These are the kinds of forgettings that arise from the ways that broader political contexts shape the processes of chronicling history (Chakrabarty, 1992). The temporal trope of pre-colonial traders long-embedded in ancient maritime trading networks is a key element in a narrative repertoire mobilized in holding together a singularized Kenyan Asian history, one that allows Kenyan Asians to assert their contributions to building the modern Kenyan nation.
6. Defining ‘newness’

Although the chronology of entrepreneurial successes homogenizes differences and performs a singular ‘Asian’ category, as this section explores, this historiography forms a narrative against which ‘newcomers’ are read, judged and understood. This section explores the ways that ‘newcomers’ are perceived to trouble the historical and contemporary inhabitation of the social category ‘Asian’ by bringing to light some of the contradictions, inconsistencies and contestations of Asian historiographies, and as a result, generating effects of inclusion and exclusion.

Defining ‘newcomers’ in the present

A key modality of ‘newness’ is perceived rupture, rather than the continuity, with the kin-chain patterns of migration that dominated in the past. The contemporary routes by which ‘newcomers’ arrive in Kenya are perceived as different from the prior chronologies described in the section above, as Ismail\(^1\) (late 50s), who owns a manufacturing company, explains:

“My father used to employ many Asians in the 1950s. Cousins, second cousins, uncles, friends and all that. Now when I try to find people in Gujarat to work for the family business, it is so hard...the connections aren’t there any more”

It has become increasingly difficult for Kenyan Asians to draw on extended family as a source of labour because of the declining importance of kin-chain patterns and marriage practices, which resulted in almost all extended family members settling in East Africa (Oonk, 2007). Whilst some NRIs in the study do continue to rely on pre-migration social ties to established Kenyan Asians, particular those migrants who settled after Kenyan independence, interviews with NRIs suggested that it was becoming increasingly common to utilize migration brokers as a means of securing work. Many Kenyan Asian business owners interviewed also advertised positions in local newspapers in large cities such as Mumbai or Ahmedabad. In these contexts, some respondents noted that it was increasingly complex, expensive and difficult to secure NRI labour, particularly under the increasingly restrictive immigration policies of the Kenyan government aiming to limit Indian and Chinese temporary work permits (Olopade, 2012). For instance,
Madhavan (a Nairobi restaurateur, early 40s) estimated the cost of visas, wages, airfare, accommodation and work permits to employ NRIs at 2 million Ksh (USD$23,000), which he claimed was “before you pay off the official”.

Whilst the entrepreneurial success of colonial-era family migration dynamics has become part of a wider collective narrative emphasizing Kenyan Asian contributions to national teleologies of development, ‘newcomers’ are also excluded because of a supposed inability to reproduce the internal cultural traits and values of prior migrants. For example, Jaffer, an Ismaili Bohra whose grandfather arrived in Kenya in 1909 as small-scale shop owner, described the different relationships that Kenyan Asians and newcomer NRIs have to Kenya:

“my grandfather … was part of Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee’s … network … This is a basic stage that our ancestors went through when they moved to Kenya. We struggled over time to make our lives here and in the process developed this county to the one you see now…. The newcomer Indians …have succeeded immensely, like we did in the 1900s...but it is for themselves”

Although historians have shown that Asians acted quite strategically in exploiting the new opportunities opened up by British expansion into the interior (Gregory, 1971), Jaffer believed that his grandfather practiced Asian trade in East Africa with a benevolent intent in comparison to newcomers. The respondent’s weaving of his family chronology with that of AM Jeevanjee (a prominent Gujarati merchant celebrated for his contributions to the development of Nairobi) further contributes to the wider collective Kenyan Asian chronology whilst excluding and de-legitimizing ‘newcomers’ successes. Furthermore there is a clear temporal partitioning at work, with Asians defined as those with genealogies that can be traced back to the colonial-era and who contributed to the colonial modernization project.

Whilst the above account normalizes ‘newcomers’ as perpetual foreigners only seeking individual gain, for others this was perceived to have emerged from the vicissitudes of modern India, offering a further discursive script of temporal dissonance based on the asynchronicities of past and present flows:

Mukul: “Rockets... only collect and save as much of their income as possible before flying off to the UK”
Mukul is here referencing the twin dynamics of contemporary Indian emigration patterns elaborated on by Xiang (2007): remittance saving, and the temporary and multi-sited nature of Indian workers’ transnational career strategies. The contemporary migration patterns of ‘newcomers’ as arising from financial gain are scripted as antithetical to narratives of Kenyan Asian economic contributions to Kenyan modernization, even when many of the ancestors of ‘established’ Asians were themselves engaged in dynamic circulatory and temporary migrations that led eventually to a permanent stay.

Whilst ‘newcomers’ troubled linearized narratives of Asian history, others contested the perceived incompatibilities between the Indian and Kenyan present because of the ability of ‘newcomers’ to contribute to Kenya’s modernization, as demonstrated in both of the quotations below:

Sally: “India is now the main player globally in IT….there are good opportunities for them here. For me, the expertise is there, not in Kenya”

Madhavan: “I’m all for those that come and can help develop Kenya [using] the skills we don’t have”

Both Madhavan and Sally (late 40s, telecommunications business owner) reference the well-documented skill shortage amongst young Africans that has left them unable to compete in the demands of the global job market (Wamalwa, 2014), despite a range of government initiatives over the last thirty-five years (Sian, 2007). Simultaneously, there is an excess of globally flexible skilled labour in modern India (Xiang 2007) that is able to meet the demands of modern Kenyan Asian entrepreneurial environments. For both Sally and Madhavan, the potential contributions of NRIs to the capacities of individual businesses (Sally) and the wider Kenyan economy (Madhavan) justify their continued employment even when, as recent national public discourses surrounding restrictions on both NRI and Chinese work permits suggests (Olopade, 2012), it is becoming increasingly untenable to do so. Nonetheless, both these articulations rely on temporal constructs of Indian modernity that positions NRIs outside of Kenyan modernity, and further enacts temporal differences between ‘newcomers’ and the ‘established’ diaspora.
Embodying ‘newness’ through the past

Despite attempts to write Asian history into the very fabric and timescale of East Africa through the performance and circulation of a historical entrepreneurial narrative, the lives of East African Asians, as Joseph (1999) has argued, continue to be mediated through a conditional citizenship somewhere between citizens and non-citizens. In Kenya, this emerged from Africanization policies and post-colonial nationalist discourses of the 1960s and 1970s that, whilst never resulted in the forced expulsions seen in Uganda, nonetheless drew on and fomented similar stereotypes about Asians as an exploitative and exclusive community engaged in unscrupulous business practices for short term profits (Theroux, 1997). These stereotypes were themselves based upon the ‘divide and rule’ techniques of British East African colonial governmentality that propagated a view of Asians as exploiters of Africans in order to elide blame (Ocaya-Lakidi, 1975). Kenyan Asian business practices do have a history that is rooted in norms of wealth distribution and trust in extended families (Himbara, 1994) but the stereotypes that continue to mark the category of ‘Asian’, particularly during times of national conflict (see Kalan, 2013), emerge from intersections between techniques of colonial governmentality, post-colonial nationalist discourses as well as of Asian business practices.

The ways in which the category of ‘Asian’ is inhabited in contexts of these stereotypes mediates the temporal scripts of ‘newcomers’. Questions of trust, for example, are a key attribute against which newcomers are judged, ones that are contingent upon the different temporal contexts in which trust is read and understood. In reference to NRI employees, Sally justified her continued employment of NRIs in terms of perceived cultural attributes rooted in shared Indian ancestries: “we know that we can trust them, since they know our culture and way of working”. This cultural reading of trust references long-standing and relatively static ideas of the norms and traits connecting people from the Indian subcontinent in spite of spatio-temporal dissonances. In contrast, Oonk (2004) found that Kenyan-born Asians perceived to lack trust in Indian business associates owing to the competitive business environment of modern India and the weakening of transnational social fields that had previously circumscribed an entrepreneurial context founded on extended family bonds. When articulating
and reading trust through contemporary post-colonial national discourses of anti-corruption currently circulating as a result of the 2007 post-election violence and 2008 Anglo-leasing scandal (in which prominent Asian entrepreneurs had a role – see McCann, 2010), newcomers were felt to resurrect the anti-Indian tropes circulating after decolonization. This is demonstrated in the following two quotes:

Mohilal: “It's known that most rockets are illegal immigrants...it's giving Asians a bad name”.

Mahendra (late 70s, retired teacher): “Most of them don’t even bother to learn English never mind the local tongue Kiswahili... this is what got Asians in trouble [in the 1960s]”

Even though it was not explicitly acknowledged by both respondents that they were subjecting ‘newcomers’ to same stereotypes as ‘established’ Asians (despite little evidence that such alleged illegal practices exists), both respondents articulate a fear of ‘established’ Asians’ continued stigmatization through a racial association with ‘newcomers’ behavioral practices (as another example, see Bindra’s 2007 article ‘The Diamond Plaza phenomenon: the best of us, the worst of us’). When read through contemporary national discourses surrounding the etiquette and behavioral codes of trust, ‘newcomers’ trouble in the present Kenyan Asian’s colonial histories which Asians have tried so hard to silence through the temporal performances described in section 5, above.

The potential for ‘newcomers’ to disrupt carefully weaved historical narratives resulted in disapproval of the ‘established’ Asians whom they believed aided NRIs. For example, Mahendra stated:

“Let’s not forget that the local Asians are participants in the rocket migration. They slip money to the relevant person in the government and magically they have two or three of them working under them”.

Madhavan also disapproved of the practice on the grounds that “It is our duty (his emphasis) as Kenyan citizens to prioritize locals for the jobs”. This narrative show how scripts of ‘newcomers’ are mediated by the idea that they re-presentation the colonial era through their racial embodiment of Asians’ stereotyped past, whether that is in terms of cultural traits, exclusiveness or unscrupulous
practices.

The above narratives also index 'newcomers' as embodiments of Kenyan colonial traditions rather than agents of progress and modernity. East African historians suggest that Asians gradually lost embodied markers of ethnicity during the colonial period owing to taking on the language and mannerisms of Britishness, particularly through educational practices that scripted ideas of Britain and its empire as the epitome of modernization and civilizational heritage (Oonk 2012). This was another function of the techniques of colonial governmentality that constituted the three-tier colonial racial hierarchy within which Asians were supposed to act as intermediaries and representatives of the colonial government in their dealings with Africans. Thus the enforced use of English was aimed at strengthening Asians as arbiters of colonial modernity, transforming them into respectable and loyal British subjects. Alongside this, some Asian cultural associations perceived Kenya as more modern than India, and encouraged members to adopt British customs (Salvadori 1989). For instance, in his memoirs, the Aga Khan III, spiritual leader of Ismailis, writes that his followers in East Africa “encountered a society in process of development which is, if anything, European African. To have retained an Asiatic outlook...would have been for them ... a dead weight of archaism in the Africa of the future” (Shah, 1954: 190).

This history, one that also encompasses onward migration to (and return from) the former imperial metropole, has deeply inscribed an imaginative relationship to Britain in East African Asian identity (Warah, 1998) and further mediates the temporal production of ‘newcomers’ as embodiments of Indian tradition/backwardness. This is demonstrated in the quotes below, where modernity and tradition is read from the bodily comportments of newcomers:

Jamila: “They [NRIs] like paan (betelnut)... that seems uncivilised to our modern eyes”

Mahendra: “[women’s] hair is usually tied back in a long plait the traditional way. You can tell them [NRIs] from the Asians...Asians also dress differently, like Westerners”

Herzig (2010) argues that the embodied traits associated with the category “rocket” reflect class differences, in particular NRIs’ lack of cultural capital. This
explains the viewpoints of those who described NRI professionals working for multinational corporations more favourably than other NRIs as (for example) “well-mannered like us” (Hafisa, early 50s, retired teacher) whilst describing those NRIs on low-wages who lacked the ability to speak English and possessed few professional qualifications as “typically” Indian. Nevertheless, they also echo stereotypes relating to South Asian appearance, sanitation, and customary practices commonly applied to Asians in Kenya by the colonial government (Otiso, 2009) and reference the embodied traits associated with notions of civilization that under wider British colonial governance systems were counterposed by assumptions about a lack of development (Fischer-Tiné & Mann, 2004).

The above quotes also hold onto a temporal belonging that ‘newcomers’ may never be able to achieve because of the independence movement of the 1950s and 1960s that eventually displaced the British colonial regime and attempted to dismantle race-based systems of colonial governmentality. Mahendra’s quote below is a reminder of how, as a result, ‘newcomers’ may never be able to be the same as Kenyan Asians:

“The culture here was very different under the British. Most Kenyan Asians learnt in British schools ... we were forced to in those days...but this improved the lot of the Asians who moved here...what I mean is that they taught us how to speak English properly, they gave us manners and their way of thinking, which helped us enormously to progress our culture”

Here language and education comes together in the account above in ways that indicate the impossibility of ‘newcomers’ ever achieving equal status within the temporal norms of Kenyan Asianness because of the ways that Kenyan Asianness was constituted through past processes and transformations that are now forever out of reach. The temporal specificities of Kenyan Asian progress and modernity allows newcomers to be labeled as perpetually “Indian”, whilst simultaneously establishing respondents’ own spatio-temporal distance from contemporary South Asia, and by implication, South Asians, further inscribing differences between them.
7. Conclusion

This article explored the practices of ‘time work’ through which distinctions are produced between ‘newcomers’ and ‘established’ Indian migrants in Kenya in the context of heterogeneous historical and contemporary migration flows between India, Kenya and Britain. The dynamics of modernity, colonialism and postcoloniality underpin and inform the boundaries between ‘newcomers’ and ‘established’ Indians/Asians in ways that elide the slippery and contested definitions between them. Time-work in this sense becomes a way of regulating the complex subjectivities that arise for Kenyan Asians still negotiating geographical liminalities and ambiguities of belonging. I have suggested that time-work encompasses chronological discourses that turn on appropriations and reworkings of the past in order to index a fit between ‘established’ Asians’ migratory histories and the political temporalities of Kenyan modernity. The paper showed that ‘newcomers’ disrupt these chronologies by bringing to light some of the contradictions involved and, through their very embodiments, re-presence some of the silenced and hidden elements of Kenyan Asian colonial chronologies of settlement. Thus whilst the distinction between ‘established’ and ‘newcomer’ migrants might be reflected through differences in migration and settlement patterns, this study suggests that the differences are also negotiated in contradictions between experiences, meanings and understandings of time.

This paper also shows that legacies of British colonialism in East Africa inform the production of categories of ‘established’ diaspora and ‘newcomer’ migrants. Whilst Kenyan Asians use a number of different naming practices that index Kenya as their primary locus of identification, this is made possible by different historical embeddedness in global regimes of empire that have circumscribed class and citizenship positionings. This (re)produces differences from contemporary NRI migrants, particularly those (like their counterparts in the Middle East) trapped in low-wage occupations, subject to familial and social pressures and expectations surrounding remittance-savings and who might be undocumented or irregular. These differences are manifest in the circulation of rumors and stereotypes about ‘newcomers’ (as described above); and also in
‘newcomers’ everyday mundane encounters with ‘established’ Asians in, for example, spaces of worship, leisure clubs, cultural associations, and other localities that are a long-established feature of East African Asian social life (see Frenz 2013). Thus ‘newness’ can intersect with other categories of difference such as class, ethnicity, religion, regional origin and gender to produce complex effects of inclusion and exclusion. Indeed, much more research is needed into the specific experiences of ‘newcomers’ in such spaces, particularly to understand how the disciplining nature of time-work is navigated.

Whilst the literature continues to insist on the role of space in mediating the relationships between ‘newcomers’ and ‘established’ migrants, this paper suggests that space on its own is an inadequate conceptual lens with which to examine this relationship. The study showed that spatial histories are constantly being adjusted, adapted and called on to inform norms and expectations of ‘newcomer’ migrants. This is particularly the case for migrants in postcolonial contexts where political borders and boundaries are themselves constantly shifting (Wang et al, 2014), giving the use of the territorial nation-state as a framing device for conceptualizing human mobility an unstable and contingent quality (Bauder 2013). The binary assumptions that continue to underpin the definitions of a ‘newcomer’ (such as temporary/permanent, refugee/economic migrant, citizen/non-citizen) themselves rest on temporally contingent socio-political territorial configurations (Robertson, 2014). Taking this into account is needed to begin to understand how different layers of migration over time are negotiated, and the multi-faceted power dynamics that condition the process.

Notes
1. All interviewees have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.
2. According to the Ismaili belief in ibn waqt (‘children of the time’), the Aga Khan is a living Imam who interprets Shariah law according to contemporary customs (Salvadori 1989: 232).

References


McCann G. 2010. Ties that bind or binds that tie? India's African engagements


