

Book Review

Struggles for Citizenship in Africa. Manby, B. (2009). London: Zed Books. 198 pp. ISBN: 978-1-84813-352-5.

What is citizenship? Who is a citizen? These seemingly simple, yet highly complex, questions are at the core of the discussions in this short but engaging book. Manby outlines and discusses various challenges to the quest for a holistic and inclusive definition of citizenship within the constitutional frameworks of African countries. Caught up in this problematic struggle to conceptualize citizenship are millions of people whose enjoyment of their otherwise inherent citizenship rights is curtailed by the accident of their identity - gender, ethnicity, race, or religion. The opening words, “we needed a war because we needed our identity cards...” (p. 1), quoted from a rebel fighter in Côte d’Ivoire, highlight the frustrations of such people, rendered stateless and invisible by their inability to obtain citizenship documents. The identity card, a colonial relic, is symbolic of the exclusionist nature of identity politics in Africa. Following the colonial blue print, independent African governments have continued to use (and abuse) identity cards, among other citizenship documents, to determine who is included, or excluded, in the enjoyment of citizenship rights and privileges (chapter 6). Manby’s core argument is that denial of the right to citizenship, with the attendant implications for ownership of land, property, and participation in the social and political life of the nation, has been at the heart of many of the social and political upheavals in post independence Africa.

In the introduction, Manby provides an overview of key arguments in each of the chapters. Chapter 2 explores the evolution of citizenship law in Africa with the inevitable dive into how colonialism disrupted the norms of membership in African communities. Of significance here, however, is reiteration of how colonial citizenship laws were a contradiction in that “nationality in itself did not necessarily give the individual concerned full rights within the state, since it was accepted that only a few could participate fully in its government” (p. 26). The irony was that the foreigners, i.e. the colonialists, enjoyed more citizenship rights than the natives. The other contradiction was the introduction of discrimination based on gender. Citizenship laws in Africa, modelled upon those of the European colonial states, favour men. Consequently, in many African countries, mothers cannot pass their citizenship to their children if the father is not a citizen. This is contrary to indigenous African practices that privilege identity based on matrilineal descent.

Imperialism resulted in the repackaging of citizenship, and citizenship rights, into racial, ethnic, religious, and gender vessels, thus the genesis of the politics of exclusion and marginalization, even decitizenization, of those who did not identify with the “correct”, often transient citizenship labels. Notably, many African governments have since instituted citizenship laws that are apparently neutral with regard to gender, race, and ethnicity. However, the systemic legacy of imperialism, particularly the creation of ‘nation-states’ - with arbitrarily drawn boundaries bringing together communities with diverse cultural beliefs – has continued to pose

challenges to the institution of citizenship laws that provide equal licence and recognition to the myriad identities.

Yet this book is not just another “blame-colonialism” work. The author discusses various post- independence developments relating to politics, ethnicity, migration, trade, intermarriage, and constitutional amendments that highlight the problematic nature of citizenship in Africa. One such development is the manipulation of citizenship and immigration laws for political expediency. Such manipulation has led, for example, to the marginalization of ethnic and racial minorities in parts of Africa. Chapter 3 spotlights two groups that have especially suffered such marginalization. The first group includes descendants of immigrant populations – particularly those of European and South Asian descent (in Eastern and Southern Africa) and the ‘Lebanese’ (in Western Africa). The second group includes people of African descent whose origins lie outside of the countries they currently inhabit and consider as their natural homes. These examples illustrate not only the disenfranchisement of these groups, but also the fact that such exclusion is the result of deliberate manipulation of citizenship laws by those in power to undercut any political, economic, or social power (real or imagined) that such groups may wield.

Moreover, the manipulation of citizenship laws is a tool used by those in power to silence political opponents and critics (chapter 7). The most glaring case in this chapter is the bizarre declaration by the Zambian High Court in 1999, at the behest of the Chiluba government, that Kenneth Kaunda was not a citizen of Zambia, the country he had served as president for 27 years. The chapter also discusses the use of citizenship and immigration laws, in particular the threat of decitizenization and deportation, as a form of censorship.

In chapter 4 Manby discusses the problem of mass denationalization and expulsion of people, particularly those who, prior to such expulsions, were considered as full citizens of the countries that expelled them. Such include the expulsion of Eritreans and Ethiopians from Ethiopia and Eritrea respectively from 1998-2000, and black Mauritians from their country in 1989/1990. The pain of rejection, of being declared stateless, by one’s country, is captured in the story of B.H, an Ethiopian nurse working in Addis Ababa, who was expelled, along with thousands of others, as an “enemy alien” (p.103) without any recourse to due process. Even though protocols such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights of 1986 explicitly prohibit the expulsion of non-nationals, the charter does not address the more pertinent issue of expulsion of nationals, or the deliberate denationalization of certain groups in the population. Such expulsions fly in the face of international laws that protect people from expulsion from their countries of citizenship.

Chapter 5 highlights the experimentation with federalism as a response to the challenge of multi-ethnicity in Ethiopia and Nigeria. Whereas such federal constitutions were initially meant to ensure equity and to protect members of smaller communities from domination by the bigger communities, failure to adequately conceptualize and define indigeneity has led to discrimination based on non-indigeneity. Moreover, such categorizations as indigenous and non-indigenous have the potential to stoke the ever-present embers of ethnic rivalry.

Chapter 8 addresses the issue of citizenship through naturalization, and the many legal, as well as systemic barriers, in the process particularly for refugees seeking to settle permanently in the countries providing them with refuge. My disappointment with this chapter is that the author does not adequately interrogate the reasons why various countries are hesitant to effect legislation allowing refugees to acquire citizenship. – in the absence of such analysis, one is left to wonder whether the authors wanted this to appear to be a uniquely an African problem or not!

In chapter 9 the dream of Panafrikanism, first mooted by Kwame Nkrumah, and the various [futile] attempts by African states to forge a single political and economic unit are revisited. I agree with the author that the realization of a United States of Africa (why that name?) “will require action across the board and not only reforms of citizenship law” (p.160). However, I disagree with the blatant dismissal of “citizenship based on ethnicity or inherited connection to the land” (p. 160) in favour of “an objective criteria that welcome as new members...all those who can make a contribution to its future” (p. 160). I do not see a contradiction between these two positions. Indeed, both underscore the need for African countries to revisit, and possibly ground their citizenship laws, on traditional African values regarding community, belonging, and the treatment of foreigners.

I also think that the book should have accorded more space to the role of education in addressing the myriad problems relating to citizenship in Africa. Unfortunately, the author only gives a cursory point my stating that “the education system can make its contribution to ensuring that individuals can engage with equal autonomy in both the public and private spheres” (p. 161). Besides the well-researched arguments, and in-depth analyses, I like the author’s use of case studies (including individual narratives) to illustrate various arguments in the different chapters of the book. This, coupled with the use of accessible language, makes the book an easy and interesting reading.

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