

## A ‘NATIVE’ IS NOT A ‘NATIVE’ IS NOT A ‘NATIVE’: CONSTRUCTING AND DECONSTRUCTING KENYAN IDENTITIES

The state that is now called “Kenya” is a colonial formation which includes a number of ethnic groups. But who counts as a “native” in this set-up? Does this elusive, apparently timeless notion only apply to Black Africans or can it be extended to include people of South Asian or European ancestry actually born in Kenya?

M. G. Vassanji’s novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* represents a Kenyan Indian viewpoint on constructions of the “native” from the days of the Mau Mau freedom fighters to contemporary post-colonial Kenya and will serve as a starting point to explore the conception of the “native” as a distinctive articulation to express “otherness” as a political tool.

In its most basic meaning, ‘to be native to a country’ implies that one was born there but obviously, it is not as easy as that. Rather, the term ‘native’ is a highly contested one. Its usage during colonialism implied that all non-White human beings living in a territory to be colonised were declared the authentic ‘other’ to the civilized colonisers and thus believed to be prone to rituals and superstition while at the same time being savage and lacking education, a state of darkness colonialism allegedly wanted to alleviate. Aside from the political and moral justification to apply colonial rule, this construction of the ‘native’ as primordial, atavistic ‘other’ left only precarious subject positions to be occupied by the non-Whites with the resulting powerful discursive formation leading to a fundamental change in their self-perception.

In his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon focused on the powerful urge of the ‘native’ to mimic the colonisers without ever reaching the idealised image and thus always remaining in a state of in-betweenness which, for Fanon, is not a state full of potential and subversion as it is for Homi Bhabha (cf. Bhabha, 1994, 88f.), but rather leads to an incurable inferiority complex which Fanon analyses not only as a result of economic disadvantages but as an “epidermalization of this inferiority” (Fanon, 1967,

11). Apart from the complex psychoanalytic effects that the discourse of the 'native' surely has on the colonised, it has also been used as a political tool to prevent resistance to colonial rule.

In the following paper, I would like to look at constructions of various 'natives' in Kenya by focusing on M. G. Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. In this novel, as can already be gathered from the title, Vassanji reflects not only on the question of Black African 'natives' but also on the position of the South East Asian community in Kenya which raises further questions of belonging and what it might imply to be(come) a 'native' — this elusive, apparently timeless creature.

Kenya, unlike other British colonies, was not only meant to provide a market for economic goods or be a supplier for raw materials, but due to the favourable climate in parts of the country was also used as a settler colony. In pre-colonial times the territory had been occupied by some 40 different ethnic groups, some of these nomadic like the Masai, others working the land as farmers like the Kikuyu. With the advent of British colonialism, in a homogenising sweep all these different ethnic groups were declared to be natives where their lack of civilization was concerned. Still, rivalries between the different ethnicities, which existed in the contact zones, were employed to further British rule by making use of tactics of divide and rule. Thus from the very beginning, notions of 'good' and 'bad' natives were introduced as a political tool in the formation of the state that we now know as Kenya.

A striking example for the use of drawing a dividing line between different ethnic groups is the Mau Mau fight for independence, termed Mau Mau rebellion by the British, which eventually led to the declaration of a national state of Emergency in 1952. The Mau Mau consisted mainly of Kikuyu but smaller numbers of Meru and Embu could also be counted among their members. The reason for the restriction of the guerilla activities to a limited area of the country can be found in British settler policies because the Africans taking up arms against the British were mainly the ones living reduced to being squatters in the so-called White Highlands where most of the British coffee farms were situated (cf. Kershaw, 1997). It is interesting to note that the rhetoric used by the Mau Mau focused on getting their soil back, a metaphor grounded firmly in ideas of the nexus between one's place of birth and the right to a definite space without striving for an 'authentic' past but rather in an engagement with the colonial present. Their anti-

hegemonic discourse was able to provide them with new subject positions, albeit only for a very brief period.

Vassanji relates the history of Kenya from the days of the Mau Mau over the heyday of the time immediately after independence right until the decline into a state of corruption characterised by a powerful elite filling their pockets. The political events leave their marks in the private world of Vikram Lall, born in Kenya but now living in his Canadian exile, another in-between place, who functions as a first-person narrator and thus provides his perspective on the unfolding story. Vassanji uses the device of a narrative frame that introduces Vikram Lall as “one of Africa’s most corrupt men” (Vassanji, 2004, 1), creating suspense as to how this might have become possible because immediately after a short prologue the narrative switches back to 1953 when Vikram is an eight-year-old boy living in Nakuru where the Mau Mau have started killing European settlers.

While the British, aided by the majority of the Kenyan Indian community, try to hunt down the Kikuyu Mau Mau fighters, they are impeded by the fact that they cannot distinguish properly between the different ethnicities, a fact which works against the assumption that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ natives are not only constructions but result from ‘authentic’ traits of specific people which can be clearly distinguished at times of war. Vassanji draws attention to this fact by illustrating how a Masai is rounded up by the British under suspicion of being a forest fighter. After his name is cleared, he feels more insulted that he was taken to be a Kikuyu than he was at being suspected to be a member of the Mau Mau, thus reverting colonial constructions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’.

Through constantly deconstructing all kinds of identities, the novel highlights on numerous occasions how slippery the concept of ethnicity actually is and how much it depends on the way it is constructed and accepted by others. Thus, Sakina, the wife of a neighbour who looks like all the other Punjabi women, is discovered to actually be a Masai. Once her ancestry is revealed, it seems obvious to everyone that she couldn’t possibly be Indian: “It was so obvious afterwards: Sakina-dadi was distinct. She was taller than my dadi, skinnier and long-legged. She was dark, though in a way some Indians were” (Vassanji, 2004, 29). The true nature of the ‘native’ seems to be constantly deferred, denying her/him a non-essentialist subject position.

The Indians, too, make use of the discourse of the 'other' to distinguish between the 'natives', i.e. the Black Africans who seem to possess an imaginary coherence, and themselves in order to feel superior: "We used to laugh at the Masai as kids. We thought of them as dark exotic savages left behind in the Stone Age, with their spears and gourds and half-naked bodies" (Vassanji, 2004, 66). This kind of discourse awards the Indians with a moral justification to celebrate their difference and to depict themselves as complex and differentiated while the African 'natives' appear to be authentic and bound by their geography. In tune with this position, Vikram's descriptions of the Black Africans (except where his childhood friend Njoroge is concerned) remain mostly vague as they form only a backdrop to his everyday life and are of no real consequence.

In this context, notions of home become relevant because a home is not only a material space or physical location but rather a spatial imaginary filled with specific meanings and central to identity construction. Thus, Vikram's home provides an additional layer of meaning invisible to the British or the Blacks. Although it is not isolated but set in a hybrid mix of voices and identities rendered as: "Morning came refreshingly, ... the radio turned to Hindustani service, servants chatting outside in Kikuyu, Luo, Nandi or Swahili" (Vassanji, 2004, 49), he is raised as a member of the Indian community with his mother keeping a whole set of traditions and symbols alive while she distinguishes sharply between making a home and being 'native' to a country: "This is where I have married and made my home, she said. And this is my husband's and children's country" (Vassanji, 2004, 122). Thus, the Indian families in Nakuru celebrate Diwali and have shrines in their homes rather than looking up to Mount Kenya to search for guidance supplied by Ngai, the god of the Kikuyu.

The diasporic Indian community, just like Vikram, is thus positioned in the in-between space alluded to in the title of the novel. They have black African servants and their shops are frequented by Whites and other Indians alike but they are marked as different and inferior by the Europeans while the Black Africans regard them as collaborators with British rule. The only terrain on which they seem to feel secure is their alleged Indianness, no matter whether employed purposefully or not, because it seems to keep the collective memory of their 'mother' country alive.

Only, this also proves to be an in-between world of continuous displacement if you look deeper into the matter because due to the partition of India and Pakistan after

independence, for some diasporic Indians (especially the Punjabis) home is no longer fixed to a known territory, i.e. Punjab, but rather to a new nation state which they might never have visited, in this case India. Additionally, the Indians don't form a homogenous group in other respects, either. This becomes not only clear to Vikram when he learns that his mother "did not think much of the dark Bengalis anyway" (Vassanji, 2004, 89) but also when he asks his family about Jomo Kenyatta. While he is the demon Ravana himself for his conservative mother, his communist uncle describes him as a true revolutionary who wants to reclaim the Kikuyu land to give it back to the people and can thus be reclaimed as a transnational freedom fighter on a par with Indian heroes like Gandhi or Nehru.

Apart from the Indian-born members of the community, there is quite a number of them who were actually born in Kenya like the title character, Vikram Lall, or, indeed, his father. Their family tree goes back to the building of the railroad which, despite being a transient, moving space, lies at the root of the South East Asian community in East Africa. It was mainly built by labourers from northwest India, among them Vikram's great-grandfather who allegedly engraved his name and birthplace in one of the rails, thus literally inscribing his identity into the new country and marking his new sense of belonging as well as laying claim to the land. Similarly, Vikram and his father regard Kenya as their home and native country while India is not real for them:

India was always fantasyland to me. To this day, I have never visited my dada's birthplace. It was the place where that strange man with the narrow pointed face, bald head, and granny glasses, Gandhiji had lived and died ... and where the impossibly four-armed and pink-faced gods of my mother's statuettes and Lakshmi Sweets' annual calendar pictures had fought their battles and killed devils... My father — proudly Kenyan, hopelessly (as I now think) colonial — went to India once, and brought back my mother. He found everything in India dirty and poor, and for the most part he had a miserable time of it (Vassanji, 2004, 21).

By constantly questioning the binary constructions making up the nexus between 'ancestry' and 'identity', Vassanji opens them up for rewriting. Both, father and son, reject the space that they allegedly 'come from', declining the notion of being 'natives' to this country of legends and ever-present tales in favour of Kenya, the country they feel intimately connected to. The subject position open to Indians like Vikram is nonetheless ill-defined as he can only enunciate his identity from an intermediate state, caught

between a perceived pureness of his African and European childhood friends, respectively, which profoundly influences his self-perception of feeling 'different':

There was a depth to my friend that I could not reach, could never fathom even when we became close. Just as there was a mystery and depth to Bill and his Englishness. ... I couldn't help feeling that both Bill and Njoroge were genuine, in their very different ways; only I, who stood in the middle ... sounded false to myself, rang hollow like a bad penny" (Vassanji, 2004, 54).

But when Vikram is on a train journey through Kenya, he still feels that he is a native of the country: "But this, all around me, was mine, where I belonged with my heart and soul" (Vassanji, 2004, 121). It is, of course, illuminating that this feeling of belonging is firmly bound to space, not necessarily to the 'natives' inhabiting it. Thus, Vikram's father went to India to get a wife. Vikram himself also marries an 'Indian' wife later on, even if she is 'only' a Gujarati. Women as the bearers of cultural traditions are supposed to keep the heritage alive, only which part of the heritage this is supposed to be and which meaning it might be awarded remains open to discussion.

In the early days of Indian migration, the marriage situation was quite different because then it was deemed permissible to marry an African woman, at least where Muslim men were concerned. Talking about his friend, Vikram's grandfather explained that "nothing in his upbringing forbade marrying someone from another community or race" (Vassanji, 2004, 43) provided the wife became a Muslim, too. According to this code of behaviour, religion becomes the distinguishing factor, not the markers of skin colour or of terrain lived in at a certain point in time as favoured by Western discourse.

After Kenya's independence, in an attempt to encourage nation-building, the different ethnicities are supposed to cease to be important, at least on the surface. While the colonial state constructed cultural and ethnic difference, the new nation state strives to homogenise its population to rule effectively. Thus, Njoroge is not described as a Kikuyu anymore but "was now a young Kenyan of today, a leader of tomorrow" (Vassanji, 2004, 171). In order to fill the post-colonial formation that is Kenya with meaning and to add a cultural core, identities are supposed to be re-constructed along the lines of the nation which is supposed to also include the South East Asians. The new nation fails to fulfil this progressive idea, though, and doesn't challenge the old identity categories which can again clearly be discerned in the realm of marriage.

When Deepa, Vikram's sister, wants to marry Njoroge, her parents put up resistance. Her mother explains it thus: "There's nothing wrong with being an African or Asian or European. But they can't mix. It doesn't work" (Vassanji, 2004, 206). The idea of 'marrying one of your kind' is also extended within the group of Indians itself, with the dividing line being marked by mother-tongue and religion. When Vikram is courting a Muslim woman of Indian descent called Yasmin, her brothers leave no doubt that they don't desire a Hindu Punjabi in their family. The same is true for the Africans because Njoroge is also not sure how his friends would react to Deepa.

The influence of the communities can only be shed by leaving their spheres of dominance altogether. This is what Njoroge and Deepa experience while on a short sojourn in Dar-es-Salaam: "But nobody knew her in Dar; she was doubly a foreigner. As a Punjabi she did not have a community here; and in her clothes, her speech, the accented Swahili she spoke, she was so very obviously a Nairobi girl — westernized, fashionable, and presumably free in her ways" (Vassanji, 2004, 235). While finally being recognized as a 'native' of Kenya, this comes at the price of once again being identified as an alien, somebody who doesn't belong.

Nonetheless, the city, whether in Kenya or Tanzania, seems to offer more freedom than the country and promises the abolishment of old cultural and political boundaries. Right after independence, the space of Nairobi is reclaimed by renaming streets after former freedom fighters like Dedan Kimathi to mirror the new democratic nation and provide places of identification for the whole imagined community. The capital is especially suited to this purpose. As it was only built with the advent of the railway, nobody can stake the claim of being an original 'native' to the city, thus enabling it to fulfil the function of a multiethnic community. In the course of the novel, it transpires that this is only partly successful, though, because apart from the slum, which is a real melting pot for people who originate from everywhere in Kenya, the different ethnic groups occupy different parts of the city. Eastleigh is an example in point which turns from an Asian suburb to a Somali enclave after many Asians leave in 1968 due to changed British citizenship regulations.

The idea of "not mixing" is virtually encouraged by all ethnic groups residing in Kenya and is definitely not limited to the private sphere but has a huge impact on public and social affairs as well. Thus, only a short time after independence, the Kikuyu elite is

favoured where political posts or the distribution of land are concerned while the former Mau Mau fighters continue to languish in prison. Kenyan society remains divided along ethnic but also, equally important, class lines:

To the African I would always remain the Asian, the Shylock; I would never escape that suspicion, that stigma. We lived in a compartmentalized society; every evening from the melting pot of city life each person went his long way home to his family, his church, his folk. To the Kikuyu, the Luo were the crafty, rebellious eggheads of Lake Victoria, the Masai backward naked nomads. The Meru prided themselves on being special, having descended from some wandering Semitic tribe. There were the Dorobo, the Turkana, the Boran, the Somali, the Swahili, each also different from each other. And then there were the Wahindi — the wily Asians who were not really African (Vassanji, 2004, 311).

Despite his position as the 'other' where his being African is concerned, Vikram reconstructs his Kenyan identity along status and class affiliations. After having finished his studies in Tanzania, he enters Nairobi's post-independence political scene, rising from his appointment as railway inspector to the Kenyatta government's chief money launderer. Both these jobs deconstruct stereotypical subject positions open to Kenyan Indians in colonial times and rewrite them to meet postcolonial demands.

Through his financial dealings, which are initially declared a great service to the nation, Vikram becomes "one of the chosen few among the nation's multitude" (Vassanji, 2004, 323) who meets Jomo Kenyatta, his childhood spectre as well as hero, on a regular basis. When Kenyatta invites Vikram to call him father, he seems finally able to adopt and embrace the identity of a 'native' Kenyan. But when he has outlived his usefulness and a new president (called Patrick Iba Madola in the novel) from a different ethnic group is installed, old stereotypes and regimes of exclusion resurface — the 'Asian Shylock' is rejected and has to leave his home country.

The problem of setting up a discourse free of essentialising identity constructions remains unsolved, and not only in Vassanji's novel. As an example one might only think of the violence in the aftermath of the recent elections in Kenya. While many commentators declared these tensions to be the result of 'tribal' rivalries — and thus subscribed to the discourse of the unchanging, violent 'native' — the class question was hardly discussed. Nonetheless, it seems obvious that it is not the construct 'Kenya' that inspires allegiance or inter-ethnic approval but rather the ethnic community because it is

still consciously implicated in tactics of divide and rule. Thus, ethnicity as an expression of 'otherness' is still (mis)used as a political tool in the power game to ensure a hegemonic position. The precarious liminal notion of in-betweenness also offers no respite. With the national project of the post-colonial bourgeoisie not being rejected, there seems to be no possibility of a non-nativist, transnational politics.

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