Not Just a Personal Decision

Moral Obligations and Collective Pressures on Return to Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article explores the interplay between individual decisions and wider collective pressures over return migration among Zimbabweans in the UK. What was perceived as a transitional moment in Zimbabwe opened up the possibility of return after exile, and has been characterized not only by hope but also uncertainty, fear and ambivalence about return. As such, it is a particularly interesting time to study return considerations, which are not simply personal, but are influenced by moral obligations and collective pressures, both within the diaspora and transnationally. The article analyses the intersection between the personal and communal domains in matters of return in relation to three aspects of the anticipated transition; economic change and uncertainty in Zimbabwe, the politics of asylum, and identity politics. I argue that emotions and decisions about settlement and return are complicated by collective influences on personal considerations and that questions of return are partly questions of identity.

Keywords

Résumé

Cet article explore les interactions entre les décisions individuelles et les pressions collectives entourant l'immigration de retour parmi les Zimbabwéens vivant en Grande-Bretagne. Ce qui était perçu comme une phase de transition au Zimbabwe a ouvert la possibilité d'un retour au pays empreint à la fois d'espoir, d'incertitude, de peur et d'ambivalence entourant le retour. En soi, c'est un moment particulièrement intéressant pour étudier les arguments évoqués en faveur d'un retour au pays qui sont pas

simplement d'ordre personnel mais souvent influencés par les obligations morales et les pressions collectives, à la fois au sein de la diaspora et sur le plan transnational. Cet article analyse l'intersection entre ce qui est personnel et ce qui est collectivement partagé dans les questions du retour sous les trois angles de la transition anticipée; les changements et les incertitudes économiques au Zimbabwe, les politiques menées en matière d'asile et d'identité. Je défends l'idée selon laquelle les émotions et les décisions portant sur l'installation et le retour sont compliquées par les influences collectives sur les considérations personnelles et que les questions du retour sont partiellement des questions liées à l'identité.

Mots-clés

immigration de retour – conflit – décisions diasporiques personnelles/collectives – Zimbabwe – Grande-Bretagne

Introduction

> So many people have gone home. And they are telling me some very good stories. Yes, things were bad [in Zimbabwe], but things are improving! [Now] it's a matter of whether we want to hold onto these bad stories and shy away from going home.
>
>   JOE[1]

Joe is a Zimbabwean refugee living in London. He has done very well for himself; after gaining refugee status he has been able to study, he has obtained a respectable job and has brought his Zimbabwean family over to Britain. All the while, he dreams about returning to Zimbabwe from exile to help rebuild the place he calls home. The 'Inclusive Government' in Zimbabwe formed in 2009 and the relative stability thereafter, made these ideas more pressing. When I met Joe in 2012, he told me that he met up with other Zimbabweans in his social network to talk about return, and that in his opinion return was safe. As the above quote demonstrates, Joe pressed that it was time for Zimbabweans to consider returning. He addressed a Zimbabwean 'we' and said "we [... must not] shy away from going home".

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1   Joe, London, 6 June 2012. Interviewees have been anonymised; all names are pseudonyms.

Previous studies of return to countries of origin with a recent history of conflict have mostly looked at actual return (but see McSpadden 2004). This is not extraordinary as processes of return to (post-)conflict societies are highly politicized. Studies are frequently motivated by specific policy concerns relating to refugees' rights, or the sustainability of return and reintegration (Black and Gent 2006; Stefansson 2006). Scholars have also focused on the degree of coercion in return migration (Israel 2000; Oxfeld and Long 2004; Webber 2011). A few volumes cover return to countries in conflict or post-conflict as a whole, seeking to include several of the above-mentioned topics (Black and Koser 1999; Genova and Peutz 2010).

This literature focuses insufficiently on migrants' return deliberations. Return is generally imagined long before it takes place, and is often considered without actual return ever happening (Cohen 2008; Oxfeld and Long 2004). Yet return considerations are important in themselves. They say a lot about a migrant's relation to his or her country of origin and about transnational ties. In addition, they provide insight into integration in the country of settlement, and the consolidation of diasporic identities. Many studies have focused on the relationship between integration in the country of settlement and the maintenance of transnational ties to the country of origin (Carling and Hoelscher 2013; Kivisto 2005; Morawska 2003; Snel, Engbergsen, and Leerkes 2006), and some scholars have suggested that a myth of return can hinder integration (see for example Anwar 1979). It is, however, useful to distinguish between migrants' deliberations over potential return and the mythical ideas of return that may characterize diasporic identities more broadly. Studying return considerations gives particular insights into how migrants weigh quality of life and opportunities in the country of settlement (McSpadden 2004; Zetter 1994). When after years of conflict a more peaceful state in the country of origin allows exiles to consider going back, this may lead to actual return to the 'homeland' or it can act as a reality check where migrants reconsider their nostalgic memories of 'home' and optimistically reinterpret life in their 'host' country, realising how much they have integrated without being aware of it (Muggeridge and Doná 2006; Oeppen 2009). Return considerations can reveal which factors are most important in migrants' subjective evaluations of the quality of their lives and futures in different places. These deliberations also highlight significant impinging external influences, such that decisions are not purely personal matters. In this article, I contribute to the literature on return by looking at how Zimbabweans in the UK consider return individually and collectively, and how individuals negotiate collective diasporic influence. Migrants are part of nuclear and extended families, of diasporic organisations and of transnational networks. Obligation and expecta-

tions are part of these relationships, and weigh heavily on decisions about return.

The article is based on fieldwork from London in 2012. I engaged in meetings of diasporic organisations, in informal chats and conducted 18 semi-structured interviews. Research participants were recruited purposively, looking for diversity along the lines of gender, ethnicity (Ndebele, Shona, White), age (aged 29–70), time spent in the UK (arrival between 1975 and 2012), legal status, family composition and transnational engagement, return experiences and attitudes, and involvement in diaspora organisations and politics (Zimbabwe Vigil, Zimbabwe Association, church representatives, development oriented, membership of political parties including the Ndebele nationalist movement Mthwakazi, and the two main opposition groups MDC-T and MDC-M, as well as those little engaged or unengaged). Research participants were recruited through entry point organisations, personal contacts, snowballing or at different gatherings. The sample is illustrative of the diversity of voices in the diaspora, i.e. of differentiation shaped by successive waves of departure, class, legal status, skills and race (see Pasura 2010b). The methodology offers opportunities for exploring divides in the Zimbabwean diaspora and capturing diasporic discourses about return migration across these.

The time of my fieldwork was an interesting one because a transition was expected in Zimbabwe. We have since learned that the period of the Inclusive Government (2009–2013) did not lead to the anticipated political transition where power was expected to be taken away from ZANU(PF) at the next election. Rather, ZANU(PF) used this period to rebuild its power (Alexander and McGregor 2013). It was a transitional period of some sort, however, and it was certainly broadly perceived as such in 2012. This anticipated transition was characterised by hope, but also by uncertainty, fear and ambivalence about return, making it a particularly interesting time to study return considerations.

Below I elaborate what I call anticipated transition before turning to the reflections of Zimbabwean migrants in the UK, focusing on three aspects typical of the transitional period: the economic change and uncertainty in Zimbabwe, the politics of exile, and identity politics. Zimbabwean migrants are not only in a difficult situation in relation to return because of the nature of the time period, but due to the pressure of conflicting diasporic discourses and because the pressures that result from collective considerations to return also impinge on questions of identity.

Anticipated Transition and Return Considerations

Few countries transcend from conflict into a clear post-conflict situation (Richards 2005; Suhrke and Berdal 2012). However, in a transition, there will be some particular moments that create a sense of change and opening up of new possibilities. A ceasefire in an armed conflict, independence won after years of colonisation, regime change or the end of a dictatorship, or the signing of a peace agreement or of a new constitution create hope for the future, and when combined with decreasing violence, political liberalisation and better living conditions, migrants in diaspora may start to consider return migration for the first time since exile. However, such transitional moments are also characterised by the uncertainty and continued violence of 'post-conflict' societies (Suhrke and Berdal 2012), and returning migrants face a multitude of real and perceived challenges in the country of origin. Migrants often hope for and anticipate transition, while also being aware that it may not run smoothly.

Studies of actual return mention that refugees feel ambivalent before actualising it (Einhorn 2000; Huttunen 2005). Ambivalence about return is partly a question of how migrants internalise histories of war, conflict and violence, and shape exilic identities or national belonging in relation to turbulent pasts and ongoing insecurity. To many refugees, the country of origin is a paradoxical 'home', because it is at once a place of beautiful and frightening memories (Kivisto and La Vecchia-Mikkola 2013; Trew 2010). Often there is dissonance in refugees' stories about the home country that remains unresolved. This has led some scholars to call conflict diasporas 'hesitant diasporas' rather than diasporas in the classical meaning where members are geared towards the homeland and return (Huttunen 2005). Few refugees return only because of longing for home or because of the dictates of a particular political ideology. Einhorn (2000: 704) investigates the case of German Jewish Marxist women, members of the German Communist Party, and shows that even when a political party ordered a politicised group of refugees to return, her interviewees' stories show that 'the reasons for return from exile were more various, more tortuous, and at times more arbitrary, than such unquestioning political clarity would suggest'. Refugees fear that they may meet former perpetrators in the country of origin or that the values underpinning past violence persist (Einhorn 2000; Trew 2010). Memories of torture and conflict can overshadow positive memories of the country of origin as a good home or can eclipse feelings of security and togetherness. In this way, investigations of return considerations reveal aspects of the migrant's subjective evaluation of the situation in the country of origin and the ways this continues to shape identities. Hope and fear can be particularly intense when a transition is anticipated and the migrant is pondering return.

Expecting a transition also demands a re-evaluation of quality of life in the host country. Some refugees resist integration: rather, they long to return and to restore the past (Huttunen 2005; McSpadden 2004; Zetter 1994). However, when the possibility of return opens up with an anticipated transition, this can change. As McSpadden (2004: 38) writes:

> In interviews prior to liberation in 1991, Eritreans unequivocally asserted that they would return as soon as their country was liberated. However, by the time this was achieved, many found that the decision was not so clear and that they had to consider several factors in their decision to return or not.

Later, the Eritreans McSpadden interviewed answered that they had to consider educational opportunities, employment, familial responsibilities and obligations, gender and marriage relations, as well as political and social security. They extended timelines for return, making ten-year plans. Being in a diaspora can reconstruct identity and create new aspirations (Zetter 1994). However, switching identity – becoming 'migrants' instead of 'exiles', for example – may be painful and difficult. Considering return can be agonising because it requires a careful balancing of conflicting expectations within the migrant himself and between the social spaces of both the country of origin and settlement (McSpadden 2004).

Scholars often mention in passing that return is not just an individual matter, but do not elaborate beyond family obligations (Cerase 1974; Gmelch 1980; King 2000). The importance of the family unit as a level for decision-making, and the strength of individual migrants' feeling of moral obligation towards the family are well established in migration studies (Fleischer 2006; Tiemoko 2004). In order to migrate, the extended family lends money, provides information and networks, but also expects remittances, consumer goods and reliability in return (Agarwal and Horowitz 2002; Fleischer 2006). These expectations weigh heavily on migrants, promoting 'successful return' as the only possible type of return (Cerase 1974). Parekh (1996: 264) writes that obligations are "social actions that the moral agent ought to undertake and his failure to do [so] reflects badly on him and renders him liable to social disapproval". Mohan (2006: 871) explains that obligations are created in three different ways. First, they are created in relation to a specific promise, and as such, obligations are quite unambiguous. Second, they may relate to the membership of a group, and in this way obligations are more general and open to personal interpretation. Third, obligations are also part of being human, and are vague constructs shaped by morality. Mohan (2006: 880) uses a case from the Ghanaian diaspora

in the UK and shows that "obligations were specific to a given socio-political community and were part of defining its citizenship in terms of what a *good* member of that community should do". In fact, he says that obligations are mostly constructed in relation to kinship and community.

Economic obligations are not felt only by economic migrants; they are seen also in exile communities. Refugees and asylum seekers may not migrate in the first place for economic reasons, but they expect a better life also in economic terms, and they are expected to share their fortunes by way of remittances (Riak Akuei 2004). The pressure to remit may be greater on refugees than economic migrants, as remittances are both vital to the survival of those left behind, and there is a perception that problems in the diaspora can never be greater than those in a conflict ridden country (Horst 2004). Therefore, in a conflict diaspora, "everyone sends money" (Lindley 2007: 7). Riak Akuei (2004: 5) calls the remittances expected of Southern Sudanese resettled refugees 'unforeseen burdens' and says that it was not uncommon for refugees to keep sending remittances although they could not pay their own utility bills. The refugees hid their own economic stresses in order to fulfil the expectations of their extended families.

In considering return, migrants' sense of moral obligation may extend to actors beyond family and include matters less tangible than money and goods. Anticipated transition in the country of origin can bring its own communal pressures. One example is when transitional junctures reshape the collective discourses of politicised diasporas or politically oriented groups within the diaspora. Thinking about a diaspora more as a stance that migrants take than as a group of people, captures how loyalty to the country of origin is voiced by some migrants to make a specific claim which can become a powerful group identity and influence (Brubaker 2005; Horst 2013). Israel (2000) suggests that identities linked to political commitment to return should be thought of as *ideologies of return.* A stance or ideology can inspire actual return, but it can also provoke debates and divides between migrants who support this stance and those who do not. Migrants of diasporas created in contexts of conflict might see themselves divided amongst, or somewhere between the categories of political exiles and integrated citizens (Graham and Khosravi 1997). The former claims the impossibility of return while the latter may engage in the transnational activity of visiting the country of origin, provoking anger from those who cannot do so. This article sets out to explore such conflicts that emerge at the intersection between individual return considerations and collective moral or political discourses circulating within the communities they relate to. It goes further than expectations of the family by looking at a broader range of collective discourses creating moral pressures and impinging upon return.

Zimbabwean Migrants in the UK

Following the signing of the Global Political Agreement that brought the former opposition MDC parties into an 'Inclusive Government' with ZANU(PF), it was broadly believed that a transition was taking place. After 30 years of ZANU(PF) rule, the last ten of these being especially violent and characterised by dramatic economic decline, people anticipated a political transition.

Zimbabwe's UK diaspora is a particularly interesting case because it is a well-organised diaspora that is politicised and has repeatedly contested British government's foreign policy, and the politics of asylum and protection. This led to interesting divides, debates and conflicts between migrants and between the individual and the community.

There is a long history of migration from Zimbabwe to the UK (Bloch 2010). Still, the period following the establishment of the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999 and the subsequent actions of the ruling ZANU(PF), created a larger exodus than ever before (McGregor 2010). From the year 2000, the country was steered into a violent, political, humanitarian and economic crisis. By the peak of the crisis, more than 200,000 Zimbabweans resided in the UK (Pasura 2006). Although large parts of the diaspora were clearly conflict-generated, and those who left Zimbabwe after the year 2000 felt forced to leave (Bloch 2010), it is important to highlight that only around 31,000 Zimbabwean migrants have actually applied for asylum (UK Home Office 2013). Other entry routes into the UK include using British citizenship (for those eligible), family reunification, false passports, or temporary work or student visas that are sometimes overstayed (Bloch 2010; Pasura 2011). The Zimbabwean diaspora is diverse and there are also divides, conflicts and suspicions among migrants, reflecting political polarisation, fears related to the presence of Zimbabwean state intelligence operatives in Britain, as well as suspicions of potential informers for the British Home Office (McGregor 2009; Pasura 2011). Legal status operates as an important divide, as do class, political affiliation and degrees of political participation. Such divisions have provoked debates about what *being Zimbabwean* in Britain means, and who is a good representative of the diaspora (Mano and Willems 2010, 2008).

In the period of the Inclusive Government, the Zimbabwean economy experienced growth and there was a sense of change also in the UK diaspora. This was especially noticeable in how development initiatives and return entered migrants' agendas (McGregor and Pasura 2010). At the same time, however, there was uncertainty as to the stability of the situation in Zimbabwe. During the period of the anticipated political transition (and more obviously now that ZANU(PF) has re-consolidated), it was well-known that ZANU(PF) was stronger

than the two MDC parties, not least due to its ongoing control over the security arms of the state. Another uncertainty was that while the economy did grow, unemployment was still extremely high. This context shaped the interplay between personal and collective return considerations in the period of anticipated transition.

Economic Change and Uncertainty: Zimbabweans Should Return Wealthy

In the period following 2009, when there was a sense of an opening of political space and economic opportunities in Zimbabwe, the new economic possibilities featured prominently in migrants' considerations. My interviews revealed a sense of new room for entrepreneurship and investment in Zimbabwe. The interviewees shared stories about successful returnees who work in the IT sector, and in mining, farming and technology. These people were described as the first wave of entrepreneurs or 'risk takers' who benefited from return, and acted as role models. As individual migrants considered opportunities in Zimbabwe, new diasporic groups emerged geared towards development in Zimbabwe (McGregor and Pasura 2010). Some of these groups focused on return in particular, and they acted as places for broader discussion of the routes home. The initiative Skills for Zimbabwe was one such group. Its idea was to give Zimbabweans in the UK an incentive to return by offering employment within certain projects that would benefit both individuals and Zimbabwe as a country. During one of their meetings that I attended,[2] the discussion was geared towards which skills migrants in the diaspora might have that were needed in Zimbabwe and how to convince Zimbabwean, UK and Commonwealth decision makers to support the group's initiative. The attendees expressed an eagerness to return to Zimbabwe themselves and particularly seemed to look forward to a first fact-finding visit to Zimbabwe. However, when I chatted with representatives individually after the meeting, they admitted that return for them personally was more difficult than the organisation had debated publicly.[3] However, in the setting of a communal meeting about the path towards return, there was little space to discuss these constraining personal difficulties.

At the same time as the anticipated transition created opportunities, so uncertainties around return made individuals fearful. Especially Zimbabwe's

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2 London, 6 June 2012.
3 Peter, London, 14 June 2012; Stanford, London, 15 June 2012.

unemployment rate was a great concern.[4] Interviewees pictured having to take up informal employment or becoming self-employed entrepreneurs upon return. There was also a general fear of return in the diaspora because migrants believed that they lacked the skills and financial capital for the kind of successful return where one could make a living in Zimbabwe. As the refugee Joe[5] said:

> Some Zimbabweans really want to go back home, but I think there is one thing that I seem to … sort of … feel every time. I think a lot of people have got this *fear*. […] [A] lot of them had to stay, like me, a lot of time without working, because of [legal] status. So, they've just started working. And, eh, they don't have any investment back home. So where will they start from? That *fear* has to be addressed … if there is going to be a meaningful incentive to go back home.

Most Zimbabweans in Britain are middle-class skilled migrants who had the financial means, support and connections to embark on long-distance travel. However, finding work in the UK that corresponded with their skills was difficult and many migrants ended up working in the care sector or illegally (McGregor 2007). Zimbabwean migrants felt that they had become de-skilled while in the UK and that they lacked the skills for returning. While doing manual work in the UK was dirty and shameful, it was still considered an option because it took place in a foreign country. However, returning to Zimbabwe poor and unskilled was regarded as 'impossible'. De-skilling would not allow migrants to return as successful risk takers, and they feared being seen as failures. Yolanda[6] described people in this latter category of returnees, saying:

> [T]here are some who are just doing so *bad*. That you kind of think that "Oh My God", you know. So, […] if I was going to go back to Zimbabwe, I wouldn't go back without a plan. Without something, knowing that, I'm getting, I'm gonna get this much money, 'cause you can be broke … anywhere, but you can't be broke in Zimbabwe.

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4 Elaborated on by Bambanani, London, 21 June 2012; Christopher, London, 22 May 2012; Jim, London, 15 June 2012; Joe, London, 6 June 2012; Mary, London, 5 June 2012; Peter, London, 14 June 2012; Simbai, London, 12 June 2012; Victoria, London, 16 May 2012; Yolanda, London, 13 June 2012; Zibusiso, London, 23 June 2012.

5 Joe, London, 6 June 2012.

6 Yolanda, London, 13 June 2012.

Being poor in Zimbabwe and returning without skills and money was also regarded as impossible by migrants due to communal moral pressure. There was an expectation from Zimbabweans in Zimbabwe towards migrants to return wealthy and skilled, like prior migrants from the West (McGregor 2010). A powerful association between the diaspora and wealth was also underpinned by remittance sending over the course of the crisis (McGregor forthcoming). This expectation weighed heavily on many individuals, as Peter expressed:[7]

> There is an expectation from Zimbabweans back home, that when you've been in the diaspora, you're better off. And therefore, when you come back home [they think]; "we expect you to show that you are better off, financially, economically. We don't expect you to go back to the old job, we expect you to have a better job, we expect you to have a better house, [...] we expect you to be driving a Mercedes Benz". Those are the expectations back home. And they have an effect on me, because those are the expectations of my people at home. And I know I cannot meet those expectations, because I have a small car here, I don't have enough money, I don't have savings here. Ehm. So, eh, it's a bit difficult.

The repetition of the word 'we' and Peter's explanation that these communal statements come from 'my people at home', underline the strength of such collective moral influences. Many Zimbabweans, irrespective of legal status, felt that returning without wealth was shameful. It was common to pretend that one was doing well in the UK and to postpone return in order to conceal the harsh reality of life.

Zimbabweans were also too proud or shameful to admit to postponing return. Some interviewees, who had a strong intention to return and stated this in the interview, became more hesitant when I asked them specifically about when they would return and how.[8] One example of this was Joe, a refugee who wished to return to engage in development and who had friends of similar opinions. In terms of political security, he considered it safe to return. When I asked him about his future plans, he said confidently "[w]ell, to go back to Zimbabwe". He continued; "I ... think I'm giving myself at most four years. Just to finish off my studies and eh ... jump start one or two projects back home and ... I'll be gone". In the next four years he said he would "spend a lot of

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7   Peter, London, 14 June 2012.
8   Bambanani, London, 21 June 2012; George, London, 26 June 2012; Grace, London, 2 July 2012; Joe, London, 6 June 2012; Peter, London, 14 June 2012.

time in Zimbabwe, [pause] really preparing for my eventual return".[9] However, when I probed into his return plans, he seemed to brush me off and answered unclearly. His avoidance showed me that he was in a dilemma around return and that the discursive setting of the interview put him under pressure. In my opinion, Joe was fearful that he would not be able to return with riches and he was therefore doubtful about return. However, he could not articulate this, due to the circulation of information within the wider community that he belongs to. Particularly his close development oriented circles placed a moral weight on the communal duty to return. When people like Joe, who supported the stance that one should return to rebuild, faced personal doubts about return, they also faced not abiding by *their own* loyalty to return. In this way, personal and communal return considerations came into conflict. Likewise, a strong personal wish to return could come into conflict with the communal influence to return wealthy when a migrant was de-skilled and lacked savings in the country of settlement.

The Politics of Exile: Asylum Seekers Cannot Return

Every Saturday afternoon since 2002, Zimbabwean migrants have gathered outside the Zimbabwean embassy on the Strand in Central London. They bring banners and posters, put up a table that faces the street, and fill it with information flyers, petitions to sign and merchandise. They pray, drum, and dance and talk to passers-by. The message is that the Vigil "will take place every Saturday from 14.00 to 18.00 to protest against gross violations of human rights by the current regime in Zimbabwe. The Vigil will continue until internationally-monitored, free and fair elections are held in Zimbabwe" (The Zimbabwe Vigil 2014). Most of the migrants at the Vigil who attended in 2012 were asylum seekers, refugees or irregular migrants. The Vigil took attendance registers every Saturday, creating documentation that could help asylum seekers prove that they are politically active and visible to ZANU-PF while in the diaspora. The Vigil demonstrates weekly, as well as on special occasions and often writes letters to put pressure on the authorities. Many letters are written in the name of 'Zimbabweans in the diaspora'. At the Vigil, at the time of my visits, not-withstanding the power-sharing arrangement, it was accepted that there was no possibility of return for asylum seekers because they are active in opposition politics.

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9   Joe, London, 6 June 2012.

In this fraction of the diasporic community, there was a communal stance around insecurity in Zimbabwe and around the impossibility of return. This was reflected in how the migrants I interviewed who sought asylum in the UK firmly claimed that they were not able to return to Zimbabwe at the moment. When I asked about their return considerations, it became a thought experiment. I found myself having to ask in conditional ways in order to get more elaborations, other than "I have no choice" or "I can't".[10] Organised groups of Zimbabwean asylum seekers and refugees have sought to influence the UK's politics of asylum and protection, trying to persuade the authorities to stop deportations (McGregor 2011). During these debates, the claim that Zimbabweans should be granted asylum was made by linking identity and conflict. An exile identity was well-established in the diaspora partly as a result of the nature of asylum politics.

In the period of anticipated transition, however, exiles' voices ceased to resonate with British authorities' views, and even in other parts of the Zimbabwean diaspora asylum seekers' claims were not believed. Interviewees with legal status complained that the asylum seekers drew a lot of attention to themselves. Dominant diasporic discourses circulating in the diaspora during my research claimed that few of the current asylum seekers were genuine refugees (see also Pasura 2010a).[11] Migrants said that the immigration authorities would have granted asylum to those with a real claim for asylum by now as there are hardly any new arrivals. George, who had refugee status, for example, was keen to point out to me that "[y]ou may not have met a refugee from Zimbabwe before me. Probably this is the first time. The bulk of what we have here are economic refugees".[12]

With the anticipated transition, when so many migrants who have legal status were starting to discuss return and moving away from exile, asylum seekers were accused of stealing the debate about return. Stanford[13] said that while there were many Zimbabweans who wished to return to Zimbabwe and would have wanted to discuss the possibilities of return publicly, the asylum seekers' "argument seemed to drown out anyone else's argument. So it's always the failed asylum seekers sort of saying that they're afraid to go back because

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10   This is found also in a study by Doyle (2009: 39) who asks asylum seekers 'if it were safe to do so, would you like to return to Zimbabwe?'.

11   Bambanani, London, 21 June 2012; George, London, 26 June 2012; Jim, London, 15 June 2012; Stanford, London 15 June 2012; Yolanda, London 13 June 2012; informal conversation with community leader, London, 20 June 2012.

12   George, London, 26 June 2012.

13   Stanford, London, 15 June 2012.

they might be killed and so on". As the asylum seekers are very well-organised, continued Stanford, they turn up at public meetings in greater numbers than other diasporic groups and 'outnumber' other voices. There was increasing pressure from those with secure legal status for asylum seekers to rethink the identity of exile, while the latter clearly had an interest in perpetuating it.

At the same time as there was a strong legal status divide in the Zimbabwean diaspora with different communal discourses on each side, the time period was also characterised by a general uncertainty about the political situation and security in Zimbabwe. Especially as the September 2013 election approached, the first after the violent aftermath of the 2008 elections, individuals worried about political security. They explained that although a new government had been established, few systemic changes had taken place and the regime had not yet proven its ability to handle an election peacefully:

> Although things have been relatively peaceful for the last three years, no, four years now, nearly five, the apparatus for state violence is very much intact. [It] just hasn't been used, but, at the drop of a hat, things could go back to the darkest days of 2008.
>
> JIM[14]

The general uncertainty in the diaspora about political security led to an interesting trend. On both sides of the legal status divide, there was agreement that return for asylum seekers and other migrants who lacked legal status was impossible. For asylum seekers, this was due to the political insecurity in itself, while migrants who held legal status underlined the importance of planning return carefully with an escape route in re-migration. Returnees were described as 'risk takers' at the same time as migrants themselves were cautious about return and only planned it if they held legal status in the UK. Jim, who was a political activist in Zimbabwe, wished to return in order to get involved in MDC politics again. However, he was aware that he may need to flee from Zimbabwe in the future. His British citizenship was therefore very useful to him and he said that he also wanted to own a house in the UK before he returned. Another migrant who planned to return, Yolanda, said that she was ready to return anytime, but referring to citizenship and other ties, stated "I know that I could always come back to England".[15]

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14   Jim, London, 15 June 2012.
15   Yolanda, London, 13 June 2012.

Another aspect of the consensus around the impossibility of return for asylum seekers was a general agreement among Zimbabweans that asylum seekers are slowly broken down in the UK. They are not allowed to work and thus lose their skills over time. Yolanda put herself in asylum seekers' place and said in relation to her own return plans:

> It would be completely different if I [...] had come from a not so good upbringing [...] and [if I had] not had a passport at the moment or I'd claimed asylum. [...] Then I'd think "shit, shit!" That's what I'd think, that I can't go back there because I don't have the skills. If I try to get a job, I wouldn't have the skills. If I tried to go back [to the UK], I couldn't leave.[16]

Although there was a lot of suspicion towards asylum seekers from other migrants who claimed that they were not 'genuine refugees', this did not challenge the asylum seekers' stance that return was impossible. None of the interviewees who had legal status said that they wished deportation for asylum seekers; rather they wanted the British and Zimbabwean authorities to work for increased security in Zimbabwe and to equip Zimbabwean migrants for return.[17] Communal discourses around return sometimes put pressure on personal considerations, but in this instance, the collective view that asylum seekers *should not* be returned, also worked to protect individuals. At the same time, however, the anticipated transition did challenge the exilic identity that Zimbabwean migrants have held for more than a decade. This created new conflicts between individual and communal considerations that I will turn to next.

Identity Politics: Zimbabweans Should Not Become British

One of the reasons why times when transition is anticipated are such interesting junctures to investigate return considerations is because when return becomes possible to ponder, individuals also have to think about settlement. Among 18 interviewees, only one Zimbabwean migrant said that he definitely wished to stay in Britain.[18] Christopher was a white Zimbabwean who left Zimbabwe with his mind set on making a new start in Britain. His whole family later joined him. The rest of the migrants I interviewed, however, were either set on

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16   Yolanda, London, 13 June 2012.

17   Jim, London, 15 June 2012; Joe, London, 6 June 2012; Stanford, London, 15 June 2012.

18   Christopher, London, 22 May 2012.

returning to Zimbabwe, but did not have concrete plans, or were very ambivalent. This was due to more than economic and political uncertainty, but was a question of identity. Migrants had to ask themselves what would happen if they chose to make Britain their home.

Zimbabwe was still considered to be *home* for the vast majority of interviewees. They connected the idea of home to where the family was, to missing the openness of Zimbabwean life, missing food and smells, and to an emotional attachment to Zimbabwe that Tariro said "is hard to put in words".[19] In exile, many migrants have also been geared towards Zimbabwe in their political activities, development projects and sending remittances to family members. The idea of keeping Zimbabwe as home was also linked to a pride in being Zimbabwean, and maintaining a Zimbabwean identity. For some migrants, this pride made return to Zimbabwe a duty, or they felt a longing to go back. One interviewee, Bambanani, said that although some people did not have the possibility to return, the fact that their bodies would be repatriated should they die showed that they had an "ultimate wish to return".[20] Preparing funerals in Zimbabwe and repatriating bodies is common in the diaspora (Mbiba 2010). In Bambanani's opinion, wishing to return was the *right* thing for a Zimbabwean. In contrast, he felt it was wrong when Zimbabweans felt they belonged in Britain. Other participants also reasoned that Zimbabweans should make sure they do not become British.[21]

Thus, when return came to be considered seriously, some Zimbabwean migrants pondered settling in the UK. After having spent a decade in the UK, many owned houses, had mortgages and decent jobs, some had British partners, and their children attended British schools. These things created ties to Britain. However, rather than describing this as a newfound belonging, I found that interviewees described ties to Britain as 'constraints' or 'problems'. George said that he intended to return to Zimbabwe, but that his children, their schooling and future opportunities were limiting his decisions:

> You know the greatest challenge that I have, now, is that eh … there are people that I have brought to mother earth. And … ehm … I'm called upon to be rational in my decision-making. […] I have to make decisions with my, with the future of my children in mind. […] So these are, constraints that, eh … ehm … one might have, you know.[22]

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19   Tariro, London, 2 June 2012.
20   Bambanani, London, 21 June 2012.
21   Jim, London, 15 June 2012; Stanford, London, 15 June 2012.
22   George, London, 26 June 2012.

Stanford said that he wished to stay in the UK because he liked the place; he had many British friends and a stable job bringing in a good income. However, he said that he resented British citizenship as he felt it conflicted with what it meant to be Zimbabwean, and the history of armed struggle to achieve national liberation:

> when you look at the idea of British citizenship, [...] I feel like you lose part of your Zimbabweanness, and then you have to swear allegiance to the Queen and her offspring and all this. I ... I quite frankly find that somewhat insulting, ehm, for a proud people like ourselves where we have actually won our independence and have our own identity and our own country. [...] You see, a lot of people do it for convenience. Whereas I don't think, eh ... my humiliation through that process, would, eh ... be a convenient thing for me. [...] I think British citizenship is for British people. A Zimbabwean like me ought to remain Zimbabwean.[23]

For Zimbabwean migrants, it was thus often hard to admit feeling settled in Britain, and impossible for the UK fully to become home. National pride over their Zimbabwean identity and their reluctance to become British was partly about the history of settler colonialism and hard-won independence, but it was also about a conviction that Zimbabweans have not been treated well in the UK. There was for example agreement in the diaspora that due to racism, black Zimbabweans were systematically discriminated against in the labour market.

Return considerations during the anticipated transition opened up new questions that had previously been avoided. When individuals asked themselves whether they felt attachment to Britain as well as to Zimbabwe, they met their own collective teachings of being proud Zimbabweans, and a resistance to becoming British. They could struggle to unite these communal discourses with the thought that staying in the UK was desirable because of children in school, a new life and routine, or because work opportunities now created ties to the country of settlement. It was hard for individuals to admit to me explicitly that with all probability they were likely to stay in the UK, because this would mean an admission that they were giving up on their Zimbabweanness and creating a new home.

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23   Stanford, London, 15 June 2012.

Collective Pressures on Personal Return Considerations

Discussing personal considerations of and collective pressures on Zimbabwean return migration during anticipated political transition, sheds new light on broader debates over return. First, it underlines the importance of return considerations in themselves, and the potential insight they offer into diasporic communities' internal divides, their relationships with host countries and particular homelands. Return deliberations are powerful processes in which migrants weigh up practical and emotional, real and perceived challenges and opportunities in their country of origin versus those where they have settled. Whether or not individual Zimbabweans actually return or eventually decide to stay in the UK, their return considerations highlighted in this article sheds new light on the nature of debates that migrants have with their family, their community, and the unsettled dialogue with themselves, aspects of which may not be freely articulated for reasons of pride, shame or fear.

Second, the case study revealed that conflict diasporas and exile communities can face particularly acute dilemmas over return during episodes of potential transition in the homeland because they are affected by the potential loss of their reason for exile. There is a characteristically pronounced ambivalence over return (cf Einhorn 2000; Huttunen 2005; McSpadden 2004; Trew 2010). Ambivalence was pronounced across the diversity of Zimbabweans in the UK, and cut across diasporic divides. My explanation for this acute ambivalence hinged on the conflicting relationships between collective and personal return considerations.

Third, the article elaborates the strong collective diasporic pressures impinging on decisions. These collective diasporic discourses that reinforced the morality of return were centrally about politics, history and identity. These discourses upheld the moral value of returning successfully and with wealth. They also cast return as a collective Zimbabwean duty to resist a second British colonisation – of their identity – and to take pride in their Zimbabweanness. Some diasporic groups that engaged in development and reconstruction of Zimbabwe, or in politics, expected their members to be committed to return. Members of such groups felt the moral pressure to start making actual return plans.

The discourses that justified postponing return on the other hand, revolved around the shame of returning without wealth and fear over the political future. When it was not possible for a migrant to return in riches – what was considered the *right way* – return should be postponed to avoid shame. As there was general agreement that a migrant could not return without an escape route, so the possibility of return was linked to legal status. For migrants without

legal status, return was perceived as impossible. While this impossibility of return was a kind of protection, those who lived with this, mourned return. There was a sharp contrast between exiles' imagination of return as impossible and the dream of successful return, and unlike their compatriots, Zimbabwean asylum seekers were stuck in the UK even when the funeral of a close family member was held back home. There were also collective reasons why settling in the UK was hard to admit: ties to the UK felt more like 'problems' or 'constraints' in the light of the strength of Zimbabwean national identification. Individuals resisting citizenship in the UK, focussed on the negatives of life in Britain, and the materiality of their homes took on certain temporariness. Those postponing return in this way could also be ambivalent towards settlement.

Finally, return considerations became part of the fractious climate of Zimbabwean diasporic political life. Zimbabweans lied about their own considerations and were opinionated about the return, settlement and identities of compatriots. Collective influences were created and supported by individuals, but then also worked as strong – even painful – influences on them. The only way an individual could avoid these collective pressures was to reject the community that they were part of. Some individuals severely restricted what they spoke about to other Zimbabweans in the UK; they did not talk about personal matters and their homes were not opened to others freely.[24] They described this with pain and regret, however, as the sense of community is of the utmost importance to Zimbabweans.

In short, these communal pressures on Zimbabwean personal decisions over return are thus revealing of broader social and political diasporic dynamics. They underline the importance within conflict diasporas of moments – or longer episodes – of anticipated political transition, and shed light on the ways in which highly politicised diasporas may impinge on individual decisions. Through a focus on three key areas of concern – the economic change and uncertainty in the homeland, the politics of asylum in the host land, and identity politics – the article has furthered understanding of return dilemmas. It demonstrates how emotions and decisions over settlement and return are constrained by powerful collective influences and underlines how questions of return are partly questions of identity.

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24   Esther, London, 7 June 2012; Gift, London, 20 June 2012; Jim, London, 15 June 2012; Nancy, London, 8 June 2012; Simbai, London, 12 June 2012; Stanford, London, 15 June 2012; Tariro, London, 2 June 2012.

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