"We Are All South Africans Now:" The Integration of Mozambican Refugees in Rural South Africa

Tara Polzer
Director, Forced Migration Studies Programme Rural Research Project

tarapolzer@mweb.co.za

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"We are all South Africans now:" The Integration of Mozambican Refugees in Rural South Africa

Tara Polzer

"Why do you come here and ask these questions? We are all South Africans now. There are no Mozambicans here," he responds when I ask where the Mozambican section of the village is. Are these the words of a refugee afraid of being identified? Of a local leader protecting part of his constituency – for their benefit, or to retain their patronage? Of someone concerned to avoid the tar brush of foreignness for a community where the lines between "us" and "them", "local" and "outsider" are far from clear?

Among the "durable solutions" espoused by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as ways of resolving "the refugee problem," local integration has become the mistrusted and under-resourced step-child. When the international refugee protection system was established in 1951, the assimilation of (European) refugees in (European) countries of asylum was considered the obvious and most favourable "solution." Today, especially in Africa, local integration is seen as politically unfeasible, only to be considered as a last resort once repatriation or camp-based care have failed. The example of Mozambican refugees in South Africa, however, is one of many integration stories which suggests that most of the debates about local integration are based on very limited assumptions about which conditions are conducive to successful integration and which "politics" are relevant.

The standard narrative of refugee integration focuses on the characteristics of the "refugee"; assumes that formal, national state institutions, especially legal status, are most important in determining a person's position in society; clearly differentiates between "refugees" and "locals"; and posits that "refugee" problems are resolved as soon as they live like "locals", whose lives are seen as stable, static and unproblematic. This is not to suggest that this story has no value. Even a discussion of integration on these terms represents a departure from the mantra of voluntary repatriation (as the solution for refugees), deportation (as the solution for illegal immigrants), and xenophobia (as the unfortunate reaction of frustrated locals to the supposed threat of immigration). Furthermore, it works with categories routinely understood by governments and NGOs and can therefore be used to motivate for policy change within already accepted discourses. My project has used this narrative to good effect in advocating with the national government to extend legal status to Mozambican refugees.

But there are also other integration stories which are less shaped by the categories imposed by external, intervening institutions. In Bushbuckridge – a district on the borders of states, nations, and cultures – a longer, more complex and more ambiguous story takes into account the history and character of the "hosts" and includes highly subjective indicators, such as identity. This story sees state institutions, like citizenship, as crucial frameworks, but ones whose meaning and ownership are contested by all residents of the area, not just new arrivals. It also speaks of shifting and situational

categories of "us" and "them", where differences of citizenship and place of birth pale in significance compared to locally entrenched politics of history, language and culture. Finally, this story tells of displacement and vulnerability not just as exceptional conditions, but as the norm, meaning that assimilation into "local" society does not always mean a reduction in vulnerability.

Bushbuckridge is situated along the north-eastern border of South Africa, separated from Mozambique only by the Kruger National Park. The district is made up of two former apartheid "homelands" – one for the "Shangaan" people, and one for the "Sotho" people. It is one of the poorest and most marginal parts of South Africa: official unemployment stands at 69%, two thirds of households experience regular food insecurity, and there is virtually no subsistence agriculture or livestock farming. Government safety nets such as old age pensions and child support grants reach only a quarter of the population, far below the national average.[1] For many of the people born here, citizenship, as a bundle of entitlements in relation to a central state, is a chimera. For some it is not even represented by a formal identity document or birth certificate, since they lack the transport money to apply for them.

Bushbuckridge is also home to around 50,000 Shangaan-speaking refugees who fled the civil war in Mozambique in the mid 1980s. They make up around 15% of the district's population, up to 30% along the eastern border with Mozambique. They are often termed "self-settled" and "semi-integrated" - labels employed as contrast markers to the assumed standard of "refugee camps." But what does *integration* actually mean in this marginal border area? Answering this question is an ongoing project of mine, which has involved unlearning theoretical models and rejecting labels as well as learning local realities anew. The programme I joined two years ago and now direct has accepted the consequences of this unlearning and has changed its name from "Refugee Research Programme" to "Rural Research Project."

Of the estimated 320,000 Mozambican refugees in South Africa at the end of the Mozambican civil war in 1992, only 31,074 were officially repatriated by the UNHCR in 1993-94. Although there are no reliable statistics on how many self-repatriated in the following years, it is realistic to estimate that 200,000 decided to stay in South Africa, many of them in Bushbuckridge district. Today, almost 20 years after the original influx, legal, social and economic integration of Mozambican refugees is advanced in Bushbuckridge. The process has not been homogenous for all refugees: many have achieved complete assimilation to the point of becoming invisible within mainstream society, while others remain identifiable through settlement in isolated villages, lack of legal status and levels of poverty.

The conventional integration story for Bushbuckridge balances the role of the national government in denying and then granting legal integration, with the role of local conditions in facilitating social integration. The apartheid government of the Republic of South Africa, which had

[1] Statistics SA, *Measuring Rural Poverty* (2002) 1.

not signed any of the international Conventions on refugee rights, did not recognise the (black) Mozambican refugees and refused them protection on their arrival in the mid-1980s.[2] They were allowed to remain within the borders of the nominally independent "homelands" of (Shangaan) Gazankulu and (Swazi) KaNgwane, but were treated as "illegal aliens" and deported if caught elsewhere. In the absence of international or significant local aid, the lack of legal status led to hardship for many refugees. Formal employment was denied and labour exploitation was rife; government pensions, which kept many South African households afloat, were not accessible; there was no land for subsistence agriculture; and access to space for housing in existing villages was constrained.

Since the mid-1990s, and with the change of government in South Africa, these institutional constraints have been slowly but progressively eliminated. Formal group refugee status was granted from 1993-1996 by the new South African government. This was followed by several amnesties which allowed over 176,500 Mozambicans, most of whom were former refugees, to receive permanent residence status. This secured protection from deportation, access to formal employment and rights to land, water, and electricity in formally demarcated villages. A 2004 Constitutional Court judgement has extended eligibility for old age pensions and child support grants to permanent residents, making them distinct from citizens only in terms of political rights.

Even in the 1980s, local *social* conditions mitigated the negative effects of national policies. Immediate and close interaction between refugees and locals was facilitated by the shared Shangaan language and culture, the long history of cross-border labour migration to the area, and a supportive local "homeland" government which allowed self-settlement on land allocated next to (although not in) existing villages. On arrival, many refugees sought out family members already settled in the area and moved in with them, intermarried, or were adopted by local families. Many used these social connections to evade legal constraints by acquiring – formally or illegally – a South African or "homeland" identity document. This enabled formal employment, housing, freedom of movement and political participation to the same extent as for South African blacks, with all the restrictions this implied under apartheid. Soon shops, churches, and crèches were owned and led by integrated former refugees as was much of the district's taxi and car repair industry. Such "self-integrating" refugees did not wait for specific government assistance, or even for neutral government policies, but used connections, initiative and a supportive local social framework to make themselves a space in which to succeed in a hostile national environment.

Since 1994, the more supportive legal environment has greatly accelerated and broadened the already well established social and economic integration process in Bushbuckridge. There are still pockets of disadvantage in those settlements populated mainly by former refugees,[3] because poverty,

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[2] In contrast, white "Portuguese" Mozambicans were welcomed into South Africa at the time of Mozambique's independence from colonial rule and during the civil war.

[3] Since 1996, Mozambicans are no longer recognised as refugees in South Africa.

distance from government offices, and official corruption and incompetence mean that c. 15% of the former refugees still do not possess identity documents. Higher under-five mortality, less infrastructure, fewer assets and lower incomes still characterise these settlements. Nonetheless, the trend is clearly toward integration: the populations of the "refugee settlements" have been steadily decreasing over the past ten years as people move to neighbouring mixed villages; formal stands are being demarcated in the settlements; and electrification and the installation of water pipes is progressing along with the extension of utilities to many of the more isolated South African villages. Even local popular perceptions about Mozambicans no longer focus on their supposed propensity to steal, but on their more "traditional" ways of life and that they "work hard" and "respect others." This changing perspective also reflects the reduction of "otherness" which comes with improved socio-economic status.

In sum, most Mozambican refugees in Bushbuckridge can be described as both legally and *de facto* integrated, meaning that their everyday experience is (or is becoming) that of being part of the local community - without fearing physical attack or deportation, free to settle and move as they choose, able to sustain a livelihood, able to access social services such as education, health and social security, and able to socially interact and intermarry with locals.[4]

What this account fails to address are questions such as: who is "South African" and who is "Mozambican;" who is an "insider" and who is an "outsider;" and whose community is more "displaced" or "vulnerable". The terms "refugee" and "Mozambican," used above as if they were self-explanatory, are in fact highly problematic in Bushbuckridge and are consciously rejected both by those who fled the civil war in the 1980s and "local" leaders.

The history of labels like "local" and "refugee," "South African" and "Mozambican" has fundamentally shaped the politics of identity and integration in Bushbuckridge. All Shangaan-speaking people in South Africa can trace their ancestry to groups fleeing colonial and chieftainship succession wars in Mozambique in the 1830s, 1860s and 1890s. Since then, the Shangaan people have interacted with the South African state in various ways in search of political recognition and security of status. Initially, they allied themselves with the Sotho-speaking chieftainships resident in what is now Bushbuckridge and were given land on which to settle, intermingling with the extremely ethnically and politically diverse inhabitants of the area. With the advent of the apartheid politics of "separate development" for whites and blacks in the 1950s and 60s, the Shangaan leadership managed to manipulate and instrumentalise the state's discourse of "tribal" identity by claiming the status of an indigenous tribe, against the opposition of the local Sotho-speaking constituency. As a consequence, a separate Shangaan "homeland", Gazankulu, was established in the 1970s. The claim of indigenousness continued to be challenged as recently as the violent 1984 and 1989 border disputes between Gazankulu and the neighbouring Sotho "homeland" Lebowa, during which Sotho leaders claimed that

[4] See K. Jacobsen, "The Forgotten Solution: Local Integration for Refugees in Developing Countries," (Working Paper 45: New Issues in Refugee Research, 2001), 9.

all Shangaans were refugees and should "return to Maputo".[5] Significantly, Lebowa did not allow (Shangaan) Mozambican refugees arriving in the 1980s to settle within its borders.

This historical fight for "belonging", quite independently of formal citizenship status, has shaped the way in which "South African" Shangaans in Bushbuckridge have categorised Shangaans newly arrived from Mozambique. For example, it is considered extremely insulting to ask someone whether their family comes from Mozambique. A local politician, whose grandfather was a labour migrant from Mozambique, explained: "you know what, that name [Mozambican] it doesn't make them feel comfortable. Ja, it is the same as if someone is saying you are a foreigner."[6]

The threat of being associated with foreignness can be met in two ways: dissociation from new arrivals, or their incorporation by denying their difference and outsider status. South Africa's Janus-faced discourses of national unity and xenophobia could potentially provide support to both reactions, although "national unity" has generally been interpreted as applying to citizens only.[7] "South African" Shangaan leaders in Bushbuckridge seem to have adopted a broader interpretation of unity – perhaps because it undermines aspersions against their own right to belong:

> After our former President [Mandela] made mention that [all] people who are living here… we are all Africans, so let us live together in peace and harmony. So those people [Mozambican refugees] started to realise that no, they are now welcome. They can stay. … When I have some meetings with the community I used to tell them we are all South African, we are all African, we are all South African.[8]

Unity is pursued not only in rhetoric, but through the efforts made by local leaders to assist "our brothers from the east" to get South African identification documents and citizenship. There is little differentiation by community leaders between "refugees" who arrived in the 1980s and more recent (generally illegal) "labour migrants" – a distinction which is strenuously upheld at the national level, with the former having been (exceptionally) granted the right to status and the latter not.

This suggests a local categorisation of "insider" and "outsider" which is very different from national government assumptions. "Cultural" or ethnic solidarity comes before divisions of nationality and citizenship. Of course, this local solidarity does not occur in a vacuum. As Barth famously pointed out in the 1960s, ethnic identities are not constituted absolutely or internally, but through the constant retracing of borderlines in relation to other identity groups.[9] In the case of Bushbuckridge, the local "other" for Shangaans is the "Sotho culture," an opposition within which Mozambican refugees act as allies and "insiders." Crucially, the opposition between Sotho and Shangaan is commonly recognised

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[5] See E Ritchken, "Leadership and Conflict in Bushbuckridge: Struggles to Define Moral Economics within the Context of Rapidly Transforming Political Economies" (PhD, University of the Witwatersrand, 1995).
[6] Interview SM, 6 April 2004
[7] See Tara Polzer, "Discourses on Immigration in South Africa: Managing Diversity in a New Nation," in *The Challenge of Pluralism*, ed. Avery Plaw (forthcoming).
[8] Interview SM, 6 April 2004
[9] F. Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969).

today as a creation of the apartheid regime, not an essential difference, and is therefore rejected in the spirit of national unity and "South Africanness." In spite of it being a "weak" opposition, when asking about reasons for community conflict, "cultural" and "language" differences inevitably come up, while "foreigners" or "Mozambicans" are rarely, if ever, mentioned.[10] As pointed out by the traditional headman of a village with a large "refugee" neighbourhood: "there is no conflict here in this village, because we are all Shangaan. There is much conflict in those other villages, where Sothos and Shangaans live together."[11]

Finally, "displacement" and therefore vulnerability is the rule rather than the exception in Bushbuckridge. The current village structure in the district was created through the apartheid policy of forced resettlement of blacks from dispersed, largely agricultural, self-sufficient kinship units into dense, landless, migrant labour dependent settlements in the 1940s-70s. Narratives of the "good old days" are very similar for "refugees" and the "locally" displaced. Memories of independence, ploughing, family cohesion and distance from prying strangers are contrasted with a dependence on cash wages, jealousy and violence among neighbours in crowded villages, and the dissolution of family and community values because of the encroachment of *xilungu* ways, the ways of the white man. When asked about the most significant social changes in the district over the past thirty years, most "South Africans" do not mention the refugee influx in the 1980s. In the context of general social upheaval and population movements - where population densities doubled every decade between the 1950s and 1980s because of forced displacement within South Africa - the addition of another 50,000 people, distinguished through slightly greater poverty and lack of documents, was not such an exceptional occurrence.

The picture of integration outlined above is a very localised reality, as any integration process anywhere will be fundamentally shaped by local social and political processes. Immigrant integration depends only partially on national government policy. Locally, it also need not arise from a position of host strength, security, and therefore tolerance of others; it can be fed by identity vulnerability, the need for allies and the contestation of social boundaries in relation to a state which is almost as distant for "locals" as for newcomers. As a project working for the successful integration of refugees in Bushbuckridge, we have learned the lesson that national policy change is only part of the story, albeit important. We have especially learned that categories used for national advocacy ("refugees" as a clearly defined and particularly vulnerable group with "special" rights) can be counter-productive at the local level. Emphasising difference by using labels like "refugee" and "Mozambican", by researching only the experience of "refugees", by providing services only to "refugees", by seeing the vulnerability, marginality, and displacement of "locals" as context factors instead of the very content

[10] It is important to note that this has also changed over time. In the mid-1990s, "Mozambicans" were often mentioned as being responsible for crime. However, they were rarely seen as having a separate "culture."

[11] Interview WSM, 7 April 2004

of local (two-way) integration – all are interventions we are learning to avoid, in order to avoid thereby undermining what we hoped to support: that “we are all South Africans now.”

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