

Settled Strangers. Asian Business Elites in East Africa (1800-2000) by Gijsbert Oonk published by Sage, 2013.

Book Review by Amenah Jahangeer Chojoo

Introduction: Approaches in Migration Studies

Migration Studies are more than ever a topical field of academic investigation as contemporary migration seems to have gathered momentum, building upon modern and earlier migration streams. Each migration experience has its own determinants and manifestations and an appropriate mix of methodologies is required to disclose its peculiar shape, characteristics and impact on the population concerned. This book has risen to the challenge of carrying us through the checkered settlement experience of a peculiar minority in East Africa: the Asian Business Elite. Gijsbert Oonk has carried out this research, using a particular set of interdisciplinary methods that he discusses at length, within the theoretical framework that he considers most suitable for the purpose. He has managed to present a minority which is marginalized in colonial discourse and underrated in current African-based historiography.

A major problem with his approach is that the “South Asian” is equated with the “Asian Business Elites”, which is an oversimplification, given that South Asian migration in East Africa, which spanned a long period of time, has brought along, not only a variety of trading castes of diverse religions, but also indentured workers¹. Though many of the remaining descendants of migrants are engaged in business, others are engaged in other fields. Besides, while a section of this population can be called the business elite, many are small shop-owners / retailers, like the majority of those expelled by Idi Amin in 1972.

An alternative to the “middlemen minority” approach would be to view the people of South Asian origin as one section of the diverse Kiswahilis, as proposed by Middleton (2004: 2023). This approach gives legitimacy to the settlers and offers scope for their integration in the local complex society.

Gijsbert Oonk has carried out intensive fieldwork in Tanzania and Kenya. He has interviewed 132 Hindu, 89 Muslim, 8 Sikh, 4 Goan and 2 Parsi business people, mostly in Dar-es-Salam and Zanzibar between 1999 and 2004, with a few in Mombasa and Nairobi. He gathered a large amount of family documents and pictures and carried out participant observation at significant events. After building trust with his informers, he conducted interviews in a loosely-structured way, followed by life-story interviews, stressing inter-generational changes.

He supplemented this data with archival work in London, Tanzania, Kenya and Zanzibar archives.

Settling as an Economic Process

Explaining settling as an economic process in Chapter Two, the author critically confronts the “Dhow Story” derived from his interviews with archival materials. He deconstructs the narrative of the founding father achieving prosperity through hard work, thrifty habits and family solidarity with material derived from the bankruptcy court archives. This allowed a perspective on the many business failures that plagued many South Asian traders, who most probably returned home or moved elsewhere. The author brings forward his theory of “trial and error” as an inherent element in the migration process of South Asian trading castes. While undoubtedly hard work, skills and ethnic networks were necessary to succeed, access to capital and information on markets was not given out freely: the person had to earn a “good name” and build confidence around him. Gijsbert Oonk stresses that although Oral History is a powerful instrument for a “History from below,” it is important to support family narratives with evidence provided by archival materials.

Settling as a cultural process

Cultural change is, by all means, a difficult topic to tackle in any society. Gijsbert Oonk's approach is astute as he tries to work through various types of contact and adaptation processes of the South Asian business elite in the peculiar context of colonization and decolonization in East Africa. The author argues that South Asian culture changed as a result of three areas of cultural contact, namely with the Swahili culture and environment, with the white colonial elite and western education and with the “homeland” or the “pure and original culture”, whether imagined or not (p.112).

Here, interview methods and participant observation provided data to assess the “bottom-up” process of cultural change, supported by analysis of artefacts. The decision to settle down is viewed as a crucial element in the process of cultural adaptation. For the Hindu settler negotiation around the notion of purity becomes primordial; what to eat, whether to remain vegetarian and getting the food prepared by the right people, whom to marry and whether to entertain caste taboos, constitute major issues. Other areas of interest in analyzing cultural change are dress habits and language retention and use. The issues are rather different for the Muslim settlers, the religion being shared with a section of the Swahili people and other migrants. Change is viewed in the context of rampant globalization and the strategy of keeping several nationalities in the families to allow for greater flexibility for the transnational business elite.

While the above-mentioned methods have yielded some results, many aspects of cultural change remain unexplored. Life-history interviews would more likely remain silent on slavery, for instance, which was practised on plantations and in the domestic realm till the end of the 19th century, and which had structured relationships between various categories. How did the cultural values change or were replaced by new ones in developing institutional and political contexts? Besides, the internal diversity of values or modes of cultural development in the business community are not, according to me, sufficiently explored.

Settling as a political process

The political process of settling and unsettling is the theme of the fourth chapter. Here, the position of the South Asians as colonized people coming from a colonized homeland and laboring under, at times, hostile legislations or attitudes in the adopted entity, is analysed in its historical setting. They were maintained as a separate entity from the African masses and constituted the agents for capitalist penetration of the interior. Inspired by Gandhi's activism in South Africa, they voiced out their grievances as separate from those of Africans. At Independence this posture became untenable as they had to choose between local and respective European nationalities. The business elite found it more profitable to stick to a British passport, at least for some members of the family. This allowed them to pose as global citizens, having a variety of places of residence and passports all over the world while maintaining relationships with the African "homeland".

Diaspora in Question

What is the position of the Indian "homeland"? Here the author's fieldwork has highlighted an interesting process of distancing with India. The business elites slowly severed business links with India, especially after India's independence when the official policy of the new nation was to encourage expatriate Indians to settle in their adopted countries and not to expect any support from India. With severance of economic ties, the propensity to look upon India to provide brides diminished and even its role as cultural reference point likewise reduced (p.180). This observation is interesting in the context of diaspora studies which have gained currency in recent years. The author raises questions about the importance of the concept of diaspora especially as the importance of the "homeland" (real or imaginary) remains a crucial part of this theory. His informants clearly seem to have ceased to think about their roots as a source of recognition, identification and appreciation (p.193). This provides an interesting comparison with settlers of similar origins in other parts of the world and in other socio-political contexts. The impact of India's change of policy towards its "diaspora" in the last decade would constitute a good area of study in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Gijsbert Oonk makes a convincing case for interdisciplinarity in tackling migration studies, and his own experiments out of the beaten paths of history have yielded interesting results. His “bottom up” approach in studying people has highlighted their role as agents of History, not just silent witnesses of events. This has allowed him to detect outwardly observable cultural changes and the peculiar strategies adopted by these business elites to adapt, integrate and shape their own reterritorialized identity. He writes: “My third conviction is that human populations construct their own identities, and their cultures interact with others and do not exist in isolation” (p.232).

However, many internal aspects of cultural change such as changes in values in response to changing institutional contexts, as well as internal diversity in approaches, have not sufficiently come out through the above methods.

This book makes for very interesting reading as it carefully maps out the author's creative mixing of methodologies in a context of scarce archival data on the group of reference, and mobilization of theories to approach this very special case in migration studies.

Notes

¹ See Bose (2006), Goswami (2011), Morris (1956)

Reference

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