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**Where Postcolonialism Meets Postsocialism:  
African Migrants in Russia as a New Research Field**

The paper represents the work in progress launched recently by the papergiver together with his graduate and undergraduate students from the Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Center of Social Anthropology of the Russian State University for the Humanities. At present Africans constitute a rather small minority among the migrants to Russia. It is also clear that never their number, as well as social significance, will become comparable to those of the migrants from former Soviet republics and probably even from some other countries, like China. Anyway, the inflow of Africans to Russia is definitely growing. There is no statistics regarding their number but it may be estimated as several dozen thousand. Still innumerable, Africans are already well noticeable in the Russian ethnocultural landscape. So, we regard our project as very timely.

The project is definitely up-to-date from another, wider standpoint, too: The mass-scale international, particularly “intercultural”, “transcivilizational” migrations is one of the most basic, crucially significant processes that define the general frame and mode of contemporary global transformations. The migration problematics’ coming to the forefront of the research agenda within the academic community, including its social anthropological part, is a clear sign of it. What is also evident, is that without taking migrations to Russia into serious account any research into the migration processes at the European (or wider) level would be *a priori* incomplete and imperfect.

Our study of African migrants in Russia falls into two interrelated parts: The sociocultural adaptation of Africans in Russia on the one hand, and their perception and accepting / non-accepting by the Russian society on the other. The basic methods employed are

interviewing according to a plan (*i.e.*, formalized interviews), distributing questionnaires with subsequent database making, and observation (participant when possible) both among Africans and original Russian citizens. The evidence collected and results got within the limits of another project in progress, “The Image of Russia in Africa”, headed by the papergiver in the Institute for African Studies are also employed. Due to many organizational reasons, the research is limited to Moscow city and region; nevertheless we believe this does not discredit our work because a great part of African migrants to Russia live just there. Furthermore, we regard our work as equally important both for postcolonial (African) and postsocialist (Russian) studies in the global context. Indeed, it informs us about the Russian society as a whole to not a smaller degree than on the African community as its new part that reflects many typical features of its members’ home societies. So, we are looking at how postsocialism is welcoming postcolonialism.

By the end of the Soviet era in the early 1990s almost all the Africans residing in the country had been university and college students, that is non-permanent residents spread rather evenly among numerous education centers all over the country except Siberia and the Far East. However, with the USSR’s break up the situation has changed radically. The number of African students coming to Russia decreased considerably, first of all due to the cutting of state quotas for free education and introduction of tuition fee for the rest prospective students, too high for many of them. In the meantime, the raising of the “iron curtain” resulted in the immigrants’ in the strict sense of the word coming to the country. Some of them are refugees from “hot spots” like Ethiopia, Rwanda or Somali were or are in different times. Others are economic migrants while still others are (would be) transit migrants to the West. It goes without saying that far from all of them have legal residence and work permissions. Usually such people have insufficient education background, the Russian language skills, financial possibilities, few friends, if any among Russians, etc. As a result, they often experience severe difficulties in adapting to life in Russia. It seems that distributing advertisement leaflets and standing as “sandwich people” at underground stations gates is now becoming a very popular and typical job among such migrants, their privilege, like selling cheap souvenirs in Paris. One can also see many Africans selling cheap clothes, footwear, utensils and so forth in numerous non-agricultural goods markets

where they work alongside with Russians, Ukrainians, Caucasians, East Asians and others (contrary to foodstuff markets in which people from the Caucasus and Central Asia dominate.)

Another, smaller but very distinctive, part of Russian Africans is formed by people of absolutely another sort. Almost all of them are Soviet or Russian universities graduates who (mainly through marriage) have got Russian citizenship, live in the country for already twenty years or so, speak fluent Russian, know Russian lifestyle very well, enjoy support from their Russian family members and so on. They are businessmen, journalists, university teachers, medical doctors. However, rather few of them are wealthy enough to invest in the Africans collective activities. Today the overwhelming majority of Africans in Russia, disregarding their social status are concentrated in a limited number of megapoleis, Moscow first and foremost (and this is why we consider our work as valid).

So, the social and legal composition of Russian Africans has changed greatly and become heterogeneous while the geographical areas of their distribution shrunk.

The crucial key-point the Project addresses is that of the formation of the African diaspora in Russia. Under “diaspora” we mean not just a set of persons but a network community that serves as a means of both more successful adaptation in the accepting society and original identity support, and owe to numerous and various visible and invisible threads among its members forms something like an ex-territorial *status in statu* within a wider society. The analysis of the evidence collected by the Project participants gives ground to argue (yet in a preliminary way) that the process of diaspora formation among Africans is passing slowly and many people are remaining out of it at all limiting their social ties to a narrow circle of their immediate acquaintances.

However, some conscious attempts in this direction have been made, characteristically, not by the neediest but *vice versa*, by some of the best doing and integrated in the accepting society Russian Africans. (The same is true with the Russian Migrants Federation which, besides Africans, unites migrants from Asia and Latin America [fig. 1].) These people’s

activities acquire the shape of organizing clubs and societies, informal in most cases which goal is to provide its members with not support and recreation in the native cultural milieu only but their business and social success in Russia as well, as by now such organizations involve in their activities “respectable” Africans almost exclusively. “Common” migrants have their own forms and ways of finding each other in the Russian megapoleis jungles. So, the social distance between the two parts of Russian Africans is really great, and the spheres of their interaction are very narrow. Nigerians are most advanced in the sphere of “diaspora building”. The Nigerian Community Russia is the only officially registered African migrants’ organization in Russia, with its elected administrative body, regularly updated website, ties with compatriots in other Russian cities and countries, and so forth. However, not all even well-doing Nigerians living in Russia are eager to join the Community due to different reasons.



Fig. 1. The First Congress of the Russian Migrants Federation. Moscow, March 14, 2008.

Another institution around which Africans are grouping are churches and mosques. This is especially true with the former because, contrary to the latter, today there are not so few African (as well as other) protestant congregations active in Russia. The social background of their parishes is mixed and includes a lot of not so well-established persons. The part churches play in their integration process looks ambivalent: On the one hand, they give them consolation and support what helps the Africans in their life in Russia while on the other, promote their further seclusion from the wider Russian society.

Finally, there are several night clubs, cafes and restaurants in Moscow in which Africans, especially young prefer to meet. Naturally, there are more and less respectable among them. The typical regular visitors of some of them are African students and migrants with a modest but stable and at least “more or less” legal income, while some of these institutions serve as meeting points for those Africans who live at or beyond the brink of criminal legality.

What is important to find out, is the level at which the Africans who have come to Russia from all over the Dark Continent yet tend to integrate. Our analysis shows that basically, this level is that of the country of origin and not of common ethnic, regional (within a country or the continent) origin, or something else. As for the pan-African sentiments, they may present as a virtual frame for distinguishing “us” from “them” upon the “white” cultural milieu but as a rule, do not lead to the appearance of steady nationally mixed informal or furthermore groups, clubs and societies, especially when the European languages spoken in the Africans’ home countries are different. This conclusion seems to be equally true for representatives of both social groups of Russian Africans.

Thus, at present no one and only “African diaspora” is forming in Russia. What we can observe at present, is a rather weak tendency to the potential appearance of a number of African national diasporas with a loose feeling of their pan-African unity that will reveal itself most vividly in cases of common emergency, like the necessity to resist racist tricks. The Nigerians are most advanced on this pathway, probably followed by the Ethiopians and Cameroonians.

Certainly, it is objectively different to expect from the Africans integration at the pan-continental level as they do not represent one ethnic group or even country of origin, contrary to the Azeri, Chinese or many others. But from the outside they are and will always be seen and perceived as a single African community. Here we come to the second part of our Project: While the Africans’ attempts to survive and even adapt in Russia is one side of the coin, the way they are accepted is the other. One of the Project’s principal goals

is to reveal the images of Africa and Africans in the Russians' consciousness on the premise that the images of other cultures influence crucially the attitude to those cultures representatives. In particular, the images of Africa and Africans play a fundamental part in the shaping of public opinion toward immigrants. Owe to them the stereotype visions of people of other cultures are formed and reproduced; they influence directly the practice of the relations with them. The role of mediators and regulators in the relations between a country's racial majority and immigrant communities is to be played by the civil society and the state that pursue policy in the legal, economic, cultural, educational, information, and other spheres.

Russia (as well as other Eastern and Central European countries) has not got such a long-lasting and contradictory experience of interaction with the Africans as the West. Besides, the "closed" nature of the society in still recent Soviet time, the difficulties of the transitional period reforms complicate the matter even more. A negative part has also been played by the national mass media: If till the late 1980s the image of Africans they had been spreading was always positive (as of those struggling against world imperialism and economic backwardness), since the time of Gorbachev's Perestroika they have constantly been represented as symbols of hopeless savagery and stupidity, helping whom the communist regime had just been wasting money instead of making friends with the "civilized world" and raising living standards of the Soviet citizens. Today this attitude to Africa and her inhabitants once introduced and unfortunately supported up till now by many mass media is still alive in the consciousness of a significant part of the Russians. Most recently it became evident this June in hundreds of responses in the Internet to President Dmitri Medvedev's declaration at the G8 summit that Russia would help African countries.

Another very popular mental pattern of perceiving Africa and the Africans is a glance at them as at a matter of exotics and curiosity. (It is not by chance that in the most recent years Africa has become a popular destination for Russian wealthy tourists.) There is no prejudice in this perception but it reflects the fact that people are not ready to accept the Africans' presence in the Russian cities' streets as an every-day reality yet. Our study also testifies to the fact that young Russians, even their most educated part – Moscow city and

region students, have very little knowledge, even at the basic level, about African culture, ethnography, history, geography, politics and so on, what can be estimated as a display of the general, unsatisfactory, situation with school education in present-day Russia. This generally positive but too simplified and one-sided image of Africa and the Africans is now actively exploited by advertisers (fig. 2 – 5):



Fig. 2. Cinema poster. Text on the side stands:  
 “‘Equator’. An Ulyana Shilkina’s Military Comedy”.



Fig. 3. Text on the central stand: “We will teach all to love Africa!”  
 (A clear allusion to the phrase Russian officers as if like to repeat to privates while drilling them: “I will teach you to love Motherland!”)

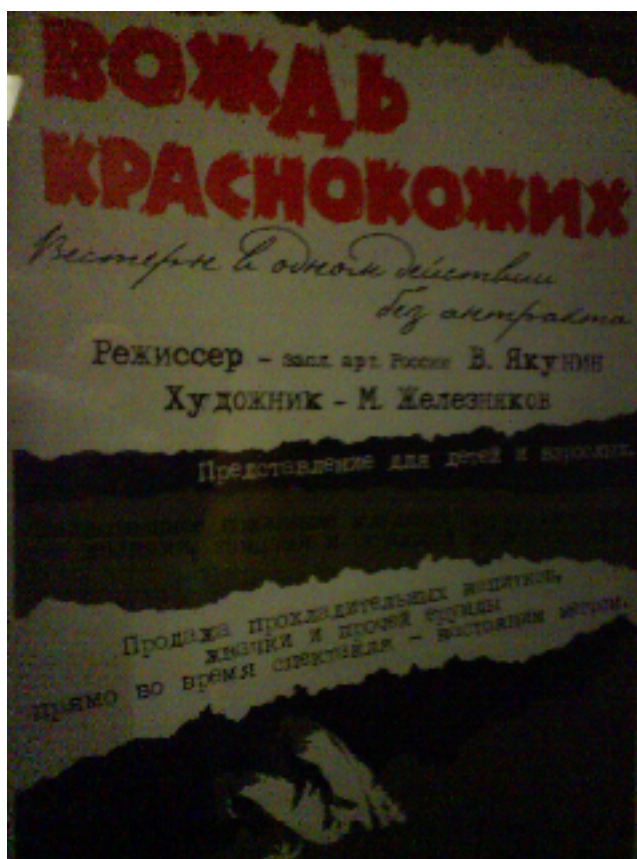


Fig. 4. Theatre poster. “The Ransom of Red Chief” after O’Henry. “Selling of refreshments, chewing gum and other chicken-feed just during the performance – by a true Negro”.



Fig. 5. Advertisement in underground:

“I am going to a sun deck, to sunbathe. These four are with me!!!”

As in any society, there also are racists in Russia, active and passive (implicit). Today, due



to the national and international media, the whole world, including Africa, is well aware of drastic acts of racism that take place in different Russian cities from time to time. In particular, the awareness of them prevents some Africans from going to Russia for getting education, and in general they damage seriously the image of Russia in Africa worldwide. As a young man told us in an interview taken in Tanzania last autumn, the Russians “are really racists, like Nazis”. Yet in our opinion, the percentage of racists (at least active, actually or potentially) in Russia is not bigger than in any other country. However, if this is really so, why are racists so visible just in Russia?

This problem has two dimensions. The first of them is the attitude to racists of the Russian society. There are much fewer citizens in it than in the West who, by no means being racists themselves, would like to stir to action against them and to declare openly and loudly that they are against racism, that the Russian nation is not racist. Again, this is a reflection of the contemporary Russian society’s general condition. It is not a ripen civil society in which (at least in the ideal) everyone regards all what is happening in it as his or her own business and does not shift full responsibility for the course of events on the state.

The second dimension is the state’s legal struggle against racial (as well as ethnic and religious) extremism. Although suppression of extremism has recently been declared an important goal of the state, the legal base for this struggle strengthened, and a number of loud criminal cases led up to court, mild sentences on some of them, as well as open and in some cases (for example, of The Movement Against Illegal Immigration) even legal activities of a significant number of right extremist organizations tell that problems in this sphere still persist.

The migration policy is also far from being absolutely clear and precise, and hence effective. It is so particularly because the discussion on the necessity of migrants for Russia, the desirable ethnic / cultural and educational / professional priorities in accepting them is still on both in the society and different governmental circles. The opinions vary from the idea to welcome only ethnic Russians from the former Soviet republics to that of opening the doors to the country as widely as possible. In any case, the tendency typical of

migrants-accepting countries is becoming more and more evident in present-day Russia, too: Non-qualified jobs, yet necessary for the state and society, are losing their attractiveness for Russian natives. Already now one can find few Russians among street and office sweepers or construction workers. Some of them are Africans although they are too innumerable to fill these niches to a considerable degree; the main part in them is played by migrants from Central Asia (sweeping), Turkey, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and again Central Asia (construction).

Besides, attracting immigrants, even legal and especially illegal, is definitely more profitable for employers: the migrants may be paid less than native Russians. This promotes corruption that washes away barriers (weak and without that) before illegal immigration even more. In the meantime, due to some official regulations and prejudice of a part of employers, it can be difficult for a migrant, particularly from the outside of the former USSR, including that from Africa to get a legal, reasonably respectable and well-paid job. The routine arbitrariness of militia (Russian police) is also worth noting, as well as that state migrants social adaptation and citizens tolerance education programs are still in embryo remaining mainly public organizations' business.

To resume, the process of the African migrant community's growth in Russia is on and its further intensification can be predicted safely (given Russia remains an open-to-the-world state). However, at the moment the Africans' injection in the local society faces difficulties explainable by imprepation to this of many of them on the one hand, and by incomplete readiness of the Russian society and state to accept them, on the other hand.