

Navigating Passports and Borders: The Complex Realities of Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa

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Abstract

The acquisition and maintenance of valid passports present complex challenges for many migrants. The complexity arises from many factors including political, economic, and administrative. Employing a multi-sited ethnographic approach, this study scrutinizes the hurdles encountered by Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa when obtaining and renewing passports, visas, and permits. Moreover, the study investigates the far-reaching repercussions of passport-related complexities on the daily existence and welfare of these migrants. The socio-political dynamics shaping the passport experiences of Zimbabwean migrants offer valuable insights into fostering more inclusive migration policies and procedures. Consequently, these challenges significantly impact migrants' daily lives and overall well-being, impeding their pursuit of a better life in South Africa. In response, migrants resort to “nimble-footed strategies,” such as using ephemeral stamps, to navigate their circumstances. However, these strategies also leave migrants vulnerable to exploitation and a lack of state protection. In essence, this study contributes to understanding the contemporary challenges faced by migrants amid evolving global crises, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era marked by increased regulation and restriction of migrants. This study traverses diverse geographical and political contexts, by shedding light on the ongoing militarization and contraction of borders and the rights of migrants.

Keywords: passports, borders, migrants, conviviality, Zimbabwe, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

A passport is a vital document that allows people to traverse international boundaries, find work, and access essential social services in foreign territories (Lloyd, 2003). The international migration process has traditionally been fraught with challenges, particularly concerning acquiring, maintaining, and renewing passports, as well as obtaining temporary residence permits, asylum-seeker permits, and student visas (Thebe, 2017). The passport carries symbolic significance, as it establishes identification and citizenship, granting travelers legal permission to reside and work in their destination countries (Dehm, 2017). However, acquiring, maintaining, and renewing passports and other legitimating documents can be difficult and contentious, prompting some to resort to unorthodox strategies to access such vital documentation (Bauböck, 2019). For example, earlier in 2024, the government of Malawi halted the processing of passports claiming a cyberattack on the country's immigration service's computer system. However, the government has also been grappling with a backlog of passport applications since 2021, leading to delays in the issuance of passports (Jengwa and Rukanga, 2024). Likewise, in 2019 *The Guardian* reported that the Zimbabwean government had been experiencing challenges in processing passports, resulting in massive backlogs and applicants having to wait for months to get their passports (Chingono, 2019). More recently, *Pindula* (2024), an online news platform, reported that Zimbabwean residents in South Africa will be required to pay a premium fee of US\$270 for passport issuance, as their applications will be processed as "express" or "emergency" cases. Unlike in Zimbabwe, where an ordinary passport takes seven days to process and costs US\$150 plus a US\$20 application fee, the Zimbabwean Consulate in Johannesburg will not offer this option to residents in South Africa. Instead, they will need to pay US\$250 (approximately R4,550) and a US\$20 (R364) application fee, equivalent to the cost of an emergency passport in Zimbabwe. Subsequently, these systems frustrate citizens who either become impatient to wait for their passports or fail to afford the application fees, prompting them to acquire counterfeits or to resort to other irregular ways to cross borders (Macheka et al., 2015).

For South Africa, as with other countries globally, a thriving illicit market for immigrant documentation exists. Irregular migrants rely on it to obtain passports and other documents that legitimize their stay and open doors to opportunities and services (Alfaro-Velcamp et al., 2017; Chekero, 2023). Resultantly, as migrants seek to regularize their stay or evade the prying gaze of border control and other international migration regulators, different methods are devised. Working through a web of street-level state bureaucrats and enterprising fake-paper merchants, irregular migrants try to obtain (il)legal documents. They also pay hefty to "service" the documents to secure their residence in a foreign territory. Arguably, these "papers" carry "power and efficiency" in as far as they secure passage or enhance opportunities for undocumented migrants (Alpes, 2017); hence, their omnipotence in migrant lives.

Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa find themselves deeply entrenched in the bureaucratic hurdles and paperwork challenges they must navigate and negotiate. According to the 2022 South African census, over one million Zimbabweans reside in South Africa, comprising approximately 45% of the immigrant population (StatsSA, 2022: 31). However, obtaining accurate data on the population of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa is challenging because of various factors. These include the government's inadequate record-keeping practices, border porosity, and the fluctuations in migration patterns as socio-economic conditions change in both Zimbabwe and South Africa (Chekero and Ross, 2018; Chekero and Morreira, 2020). Zimbabwean migration has been motivated by diverse political, economic, and social factors, resulting in various experiences and challenges (Crush et al., 2015; Zanker and Moyo, 2020).

This study addresses a crucial gap in the literature by focusing on the complex and often underexplored challenges faced by Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa in acquiring and maintaining valid passports and other essential documents. While existing research has extensively covered the broad issues of irregular migration and bureaucratic obstacles, this paper specifically examines the intersection of passport-related difficulties with daily life and well-being, a niche that remains insufficiently addressed. By employing a multi-sited ethnographic approach, the study not only highlights the empirical realities of passport acquisition but also integrates concepts such as nimble-footedness, conviviality, and *hushamwari* (friendship) to offer a nuanced understanding of how migrants navigate these challenges. This comprehensive exploration is distinct from previous studies, as it focuses on the socio-political dynamics affecting migrants' interactions with the passport system, the impact of evolving global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resultant adaptive strategies employed by migrants. In doing so, the paper contributes new insights into the lived experiences of migrants, emphasizing the role of informal networks and adaptive strategies in their survival amid increased border control measures and bureaucratic hurdles.

To understand the complexities faced by Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa, this article adopts a multi-layered approach. First, we present a brief overview of Zimbabwean migration patterns to establish the contextual background. We then examine the challenges migrants face in obtaining passports, detailing the bureaucratic obstacles they encounter. Finally, we analyze the coping and adaptive strategies employed by migrants, particularly focusing on how they mobilize conviviality, *hushamwari*, and nimble-footedness to navigate these difficulties.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: NIMBLE-FOOTED NEGOTIATION, CONVIVIAL NETWORKS, AND *HUSHAMWARI*

This paper delves into the intricate realities of irregular migration among Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa, employing three interconnected conceptual frameworks: nimble-footedness, conviviality, and *hushamwari*. By integrating Nyamnjoh's (2013,

2015, 2017, 2019, 2020a, 2020b) concepts of nimble-footedness and conviviality with Chekero and Morreira's (2020) concept of *hushamwari*, we seek to provide a nuanced understanding of how migrants navigate and negotiate their precarious existence within a complex socio-political landscape.

Nimble-footedness, as articulated by Nyamnjoh (2013), captures the agility and adaptability required of migrants to maneuver through the convoluted postcolonial border politics. This framework reflects the migrants' capacity to swiftly and effectively traverse various obstacles, such as bureaucratic barriers and police roadblocks, which shape their daily lives in South Africa. Drawing on Erving Goffman's exploration of social performances, as exemplified in Chekero's (2023) study of refugees in Cape Town, we recognize that migrants strategically employ tactics of visibility and invisibility. These strategies are essential, as they adapt to their shifting environment, allowing them to contest, evade, or circumvent barriers imposed by the state and its representatives. Nimble-footedness underscores the importance of temporal and spatial awareness in the migrants' navigation strategies, illustrating their ability to adapt to the ever-changing dynamics of border control.

Conviviality, as developed by scholars such as Illich (1973), Nyamnjoh (2017), and Nowicka and Heil (2015), refers to the everyday interactions and co-existence that define social life. In the context of Zimbabwean migrants, conviviality encompasses the relationships they forge with fellow migrants, local bus drivers, and even immigration officials. These relationships, built on reciprocity and shared experiences, provide essential support and resources. Conviviality highlights the significance of these networks in offering information, assistance, and opportunities amid the challenges of irregular migration (Bhanye, 2024; Mushonga, 2024). However, conviviality's focus on positive interactions and harmonious co-existence may obscure the underlying tensions and conflicts within these relationships. While conviviality emphasizes cooperation and mutual support, it may overlook the power imbalances, systemic inequalities, and discrimination that have an impact on social interactions. This limitation calls for a more comprehensive understanding that incorporates *hushamwari* and nimble-footedness.

Hushamwari, a Shona concept of "friendship" elaborated by Chekero and Morreira (2020), extends beyond conventional notions of kinship. It embodies a deeper form of mutual aid and belonging, offering a critical extension to the framework of conviviality. The Shona saying "*hushamwari hunokunda hukama*" (friendship surpasses kinship) underscores the profound significance of these relationships in providing social support and stability. For Zimbabwean migrants, *hushamwari* represents the solidarity and mutual assistance that transcends national and ethnic boundaries, fostering a sense of community and safety. In this study, we investigate the disconnect between Zimbabwean migrants' interactions with a bureaucratic state apparatus – characterized by police roadblocks and restrictive visa regulations – and their adaptive strategies based on social relationships, particularly through the lens of *hushamwari*. This endogenous idea, which is profoundly rooted

in the wider framework of Ubuntu, offers a critical viewpoint on how migrants overcome structural constraints.

Chimuka (2001) defines Ubuntu as a belief in community solidarity and humanity's interdependence. It claims that personhood is not an independent trait, but is inextricably tied to the humanity of others, going beyond close communal links. This communal ethos serves as the basis for *hushamwari*, a fundamental idea in our study. *Hushamwari* denotes more than just social connection; it represents a kind of relational solidarity that crosses traditional bounds (Chimuka, 2006). Examining the interaction of *hushamwari* with conviviality and nimble-footedness reveals a framework that goes beyond basic interpretations of Ubuntu. While Ubuntu and conviviality stress peaceful co-existence and social integration, *hushamwari* provides a more nuanced and practical perspective for understanding how migrants navigate the daily hurdles presented by bureaucratic processes.

Despite historical and modern efforts to maintain boundaries along “tribal” and national lines in Southern Africa, a common metaphysical substrate remains across these divides. This similarity offers fertile ground for understanding how *hushamwari* functions as a practical strategy for overcoming systemic barriers. It allows migrants to create and use social networks to get access to resources and paperwork, therefore minimizing the consequences of a restricted bureaucratic environment. Our argument contends that *hushamwari* goes beyond the basic ideals of Ubuntu and conviviality. It offers a tangible framework for examining how migrants negotiate their difficult conditions using a defined system of connections based on mutual help rather than difference. By focusing on *hushamwari*, we emphasize an important aspect of migrant agency and resilience, providing fresh insights into how social interactions may be used to confront and overcome bureaucratic obstacles.

The intersection of nimble-footedness, conviviality, and *hushamwari* offers a holistic view of how Zimbabwean migrants navigate their challenges in South Africa. Nimble-footedness allows migrants to strategically maneuver through bureaucratic and physical barriers, while conviviality facilitates the creation of supportive social networks. *Hushamwari* further enriches this framework by emphasizing the depth of mutual aid and solidarity that can exist within and beyond these networks. This integrated approach reveals that while conviviality provides a foundation for social cohesion and support, it is insufficient on its own to address the full spectrum of migrants' experiences. Nimble-footedness highlights the need for adaptability in navigating obstacles, and *hushamwari* underscores the importance of deeper, reciprocal relationships that enhance social resilience. Together, these frameworks illustrate the dynamic interplay between adaptability, social support, and mutual aid in the lives of Zimbabwean migrants.

By employing this comprehensive conceptual lens, our analysis not only illuminates the lived experiences of Zimbabwean migrants but also provides insights into the broader socio-economic and political dynamics shaping their lives. This

framework challenges conventional views of migration by emphasizing the agency, resilience, and strategic adaptation of migrants amid systemic constraints.

METHODOLOGY AND STUDY APPROACH

This study emerged from four PhD and postdoctoral research projects by the authors, all centered on migration issues. While our academic journey and research were not exclusively focused on Zimbabwe, the challenges surrounding passport acquisition and maintenance consistently arose during our various fieldwork experiences. These recurring issues provided the foundation for this study, drawing insights from our diverse migration research efforts. To unearth the nuanced realities of Zimbabwean migrants' passport experiences in South Africa, we embarked on a multi-sited ethnographic journey, guided by the methodological insights of Marcus (1995). As Marcus (1995: 105) argues,

Multi-sited ethnography is designed around paths, chains, conjunctions, threads, and juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some kind of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posit logic of association or connection among sites that define the argument of ethnography.

With the conviction that the interplay between territorial, social, and affective realms shapes migrants' quotidian encounters, we traversed diverse locations to establish a physical presence and forge convivial connections with participants. Navigating the difficult dynamics of access and trust, we grappled with the challenge of engaging study participants amid their suspicion and apprehension. Operating within the nebulous terrain of unresolved citizenship status, we unraveled the lived experiences of young Zimbabwean men and women in their 20s and 30s, emblematic of the gender and age dynamics prevalent in irregular migration to South Africa. Recognizing the inherent mobility and multi-situatedness of the participants, we actively tracked and engaged with them across diverse locations, forging convivial connections to gain deep insights into their lived experiences. To select study participants, we leveraged key contacts to snowball out to the Zimbabwean migrant population in South Africa. Even though we were operating on "home turf," it was difficult to access participants, because of their suspicion that we were linked to the police or the South African Department of Home Affairs (DHA), their reluctance to be interviewed, and their ambiguous status in South Africa in what Bhanye and Dzingirai (2019) term "unresolved citizenship status."

Four cities (Bloemfontein, Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Pretoria) were used for this study, each offering a unique perspective on the complexities of passport usage and mobility. We conducted the research over 12 months. We immersed ourselves in the everyday lives of migrants by engaging with them in informal settings such as salons, Uber or taxis, and long-haul cross-border buses. This approach allowed us to attune to the nuances of their interactions and negotiations. The flexibility of

informal interviews proved invaluable in eliciting detailed insights without disrupting the daily livelihoods of migrants, many of whom work in the informal sector.

Originally, we planned to conduct 20 interviews, but due to the mobile nature of migrants and changing circumstances, we ended up with more. These informal interviews often led to impromptu focus group discussions (FGDs), as formal FGDs were challenging to organize given the migrants' mobility and busy schedules. Conversations frequently emerged spontaneously in crowded places like restaurants, barbershops, and salons, where participants were more at ease. With their consent, we recorded some of these discussions and transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. We then used an inductive approach to identify emerging themes and patterns in the data.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were paramount. We navigated the ethical terrain with care and sensitivity, ensuring that informed consent and confidentiality were upheld. Each author obtained ethical clearance from our respective universities, and our supervisors were aware of our pursuit of this study. We prioritized the autonomy and dignity of participants, safeguarding their identities and personal information. As a result, the names of respondents cited in this paper are pseudonyms, used to protect their privacy.

The Beitbridge border post emerged as a focal point of inquiry, where through shared stories, we accompanied migrants on their journeys to and from Zimbabwe, scrutinizing the ephemeral stamps adorning the owner's or proxy-held passports. Through immersive interviews and meticulous observations conducted "on the move," we unraveled the clandestine economies and strategies underpinning border crossings, from the exchange of illicit funds to the covert acquisition of counterfeit stamps. Using semi-structured interviews, we engaged participants in fluid conversations that traversed socio-demographic landscapes, probing into the intricacies of their occupational pursuits, living arrangements, and familial ties. We applied thematic analysis to discern emergent patterns and themes.

Demographic profile of study participants

The profile of study participants included a diverse range of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa in terms of gender and age distribution, reflecting the gender and age dynamics of irregular migration from Zimbabwe. The duration of stay in South Africa also varied among participants, encompassing both recent arrivals and migrants with longer-term residency. The duration of stay of participants in South Africa ranged from several months to several years, enabling a comprehensive analysis of the experiences and challenges faced by Zimbabwean migrants at different stages of their migration journeys. The duration participants lived in South Africa revealed varying experiences and perspectives between those who had recently arrived compared to those who had been residing in South Africa for longer.

Another key aspect of the profile of study participants was their occupational pursuits in South Africa. The study uncovered a diverse range of occupations and work arrangements engaged in by the migrants. This encompassed formal and

informal sectors, including employment in construction, hospitality, domestic work, agriculture, and informal trading. Understanding the occupational pursuits of the participants provided insights into the economic circumstances and opportunities available to them, as well as the potential impact of passport-related challenges on their employment prospects. The study also explored the living arrangements and familial dynamics of the participants. This aspect revealed whether participants resided in solitary domiciles or cohabited with family members or other individuals. These demographic aspects of study participants (summarized in Table 1) provided a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the passport experiences of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Study Participants

Participant Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Location in SA	Duration of stay in SA
Brian	Male	37	Construction	Bloemfontein	5 years
Locadia	Female	34	Domestic worker	Johannesburg	3 years
Ranga	Male	27	Farm worker	Johannesburg	1 year
Ruth	Female	33	Domestic worker	Pretoria	4 years
Tafadzwa	Male	40	Vendor	Johannesburg	10 years
Chipo	Female	36	Vendor	Pretoria	4 years
Tinotenda	Male	28	Taxi driver	Cape Town	1 year
Vuyisile	Male	36	Construction	Bloemfontein	5 years
Mary	Female	29	Hairdresser	Bloemfontein	2 years
Tamia	Female	32	Hairdresser	Bloemfontein	4 years
Obey	Male	35	Cross-border bus owner and passport broker	Cape Town	7 years
Abby	Female	34	Domestic worker	Cape Town	5 years
Fred	Male	28	Self-employed	Cape Town	3 years
Given	Male	36	Dealer	Cape Town	8 years

Source: Authors' own work

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Participants' experiences in acquiring passports from the Zimbabwean authorities

Migrants in South Africa face significant challenges related to passport acquisition and the role of intermediaries, which impact their daily lives and well-being. Key issues include administrative delays, inefficiencies, and corruption within the Zimbabwean embassy system. Many migrants struggle with the online appointment

booking system, which is often inaccessible, and endure long wait times at passport offices, causing frustration. Corruption and exploitation by intermediaries, who promise expedited services for a fee, further complicate the process. While intermediaries can sometimes facilitate faster passport acquisition, they also risk fraud and exploitation, highlighting a dependence on informal networks as a result of bureaucratic inefficiencies.

High passport fees add to the financial burden, making it difficult for many migrants to afford the necessary documentation. This economic strain is compounded by the complex and expensive visa application processes in South Africa, which involve extensive paperwork and high costs, often leading to delays and difficulties in securing work or residence permits. The mistreatment of migrants by South African officials exacerbates their struggles, with reports of hostile and discriminatory behavior from officials, contributing to a hostile environment.

The reliance on intermediaries reflects a broader trend where migrants navigate bureaucratic hurdles through informal channels, sometimes facing both benefits and risks. This system's inefficiencies and the high costs associated with documentation affect migrants' mobility, access to services, and overall quality of life. The constant uncertainty and fear of deportation further strain their mental and emotional well-being. To address these issues, there is a need for a more streamlined, transparent, and equitable system for passport and visa processing, alongside efforts to mitigate the reliance on intermediaries and improve treatment by officials.

Administrative delays and the role of brokers/intermediaries

Migrants in this study shared varied experiences when acquiring passports from the Zimbabwean embassies in Pretoria and Cape Town. Some used brokers, while others followed the formal procedure. Participants lamented that they struggled to access the online application portal. This system, run by the Zimbabwean Consulate in South Africa, allows applicants to book appointment slots to collect passport forms, before submission at the Registrar General offices in Zimbabwe. Bookings are available only on Wednesdays at 4 pm, but many found the system "always" fully booked. Participants highlighted numerous challenges in the application process. These included long waiting times at passport offices, leading to frustration and delays in obtaining the necessary documentation. Ranga, a 27-year-old man working at a farm in Johannesburg, shared his frustration:

Ugh, getting a passport in Zimbabwe was a total nightmare! Imagine standing in line for long, only to get to the front and they tell you to come back another day? It repeatedly happened, like some bad dream. It felt like I was stuck going in circles and never getting anywhere.

Apart from administrative issues and delays, participants also highlighted significant inefficiencies and instances of corruption in the passport issuance system.

Participants shared experiences of seeking assistance from individuals who claimed to have connections or knowledge of expedited processes. The role of intermediaries and brokers in facilitating passport acquisition was reiterated by the participants. While some found success through these intermediaries, others reported negative experiences, including cases of fraud or exploitation. This highlighted the existence of an informal network surrounding passport acquisition, which could both assist and exploit vulnerable individuals seeking passports. Tinotenda, a 28-year-old taxi driver in Pretoria, highlighted his experience:

So, I was like, “forget this line” and decided to try this *marunners* (intermediaries) thing everyone was talking about to get my passport faster. Indeed, I got my passport quicker. But man, they charged a lot of money, and the whole time I could not help but worry they might be ripping me off or giving me some fake passport.

Accounts of intermediaries or brokers assisting migrants in obtaining new passports through embassies were frequently shared by participants. This phenomenon is not unique to our research. Scholars such as Jones et al. (2023) and Infantino (2023) note that intermediaries in migration can take various forms, including smugglers, brokers, employment/placement agencies, coyotes, village heads, teachers, and travel agencies. These intermediaries may be companies or individuals, legally registered entities paying taxes (e.g., employment agencies facilitating international recruitment), or they may have no legal standing, being considered “undocumented” under existing legal frameworks (e.g., brokers, smugglers). Migrants in our study often used different terms for these intermediaries depending on the context, such as *madealer* (dealers), *marunner*, making it challenging to develop a clear operational definition of intermediaries. It is also crucial to consider who is using the term and in what context. In this context, nimble-footedness plays a crucial role, enabling Obey – a prominent Zimbabwean runner residing in Cape Town, to forge social networks with embassy officials, thereby fostering conviviality. Subsequently, *hushamwari* enhances these networks by cultivating trust and support essential for migrants to navigate the complexities of acquiring a passport. Fred, a self-employed resident of Kraaifontein in Cape Town, shared his experiences working with Obey. Obey, operates various businesses, including cross-border buses and food trucks, and serves as a runner and dealer. As a dealer, Obey assists individuals in Cape Town to obtain passports without needing to return to Zimbabwe. He has established connections in the Zimbabwean embassy in Cape Town, leveraging these connections to help people bypass the lengthy waiting period typically associated with embassy appointment bookings.

Booking an appointment online to apply for a passport at the Zimbabwean embassy in Cape Town can entail a waiting period of three months or even longer. Obey’s expertise lies in facilitating appointment bookings for individuals, allowing them to avoid this prolonged waiting period. During our research, one of the authors

had the opportunity to speak with Fred, who shared his personal experience of being assisted by Obey. Fred narrated:

I met Obey through my cousin, who knew him through her friend. Obey charged me ZAR800 (approximately US\$50) for assistance in getting a passport quickly. He promised to speed up the process and avoid the long wait. After I paid him, he arranged for me to go to the embassy the next day. Upon arrival, I called Obey who told me to meet someone in a BMW car parked a few meters from the consulate. This person asked for my birth certificate and Zimbabwean ID, made copies, and gave them back to me along with a note in Shona saying, “*ndatumwa na Obey*” (Obey sent me). Then, I showed the note to the security guard at the embassy gate, and he let me in. Inside, one employee at the embassy helped me to skip the line and complete my passport application. After the officials signed and stamped my forms, they told me to send them to Zimbabwe for processing. I gave the forms to Obey’s contact in the BMW. Two weeks later, Obey told me my documents were on their way, and soon after, I got my new passport.

To corroborate Fred’s story, one of our authors went further to ask Fred’s cousin whom he said connected him to Obey. His cousin, Abby, echoed the same sentiments about Obey – she went through the same process, as outlined by Fred. Participants sought Obey’s assistance because of the recent changes in South African immigration policy, notably the stricter requirements imposed by the Border Management Authority (BMA) Act (Engel, 2024). Enacted in 2020, the BMA centralized all border functions under the DHA, establishing a single authority to manage the entire border environment. This policy shift has heightened the risk of deportation for many Zimbabwean residents, especially since early 2024. As a result, most participants have expressed doubt about the Zimbabwean authorities’ ability to meet the year-end deadline for processing passport applications necessary for South African residency permits. Consequently, they turned to Obey as a trusted intermediary to expedite the passport application process. This aligns with Fernandez’s (2013) observations on the growing importance of intermediaries in facilitating transnational migration, reflecting their increasing global influence.

A recurring theme emerged in digging deeper: the critical importance of valid Zimbabwean passports. As Vanyoro (2023) observes, obtaining new passports presents a significant hurdle for undocumented Zimbabweans, regardless of their migratory status (labor or asylum seeker). The process is often fraught with delays, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and precarity that significantly impacts their aspirations and life trajectories (Vanyoro, 2023). Alongside the numerous accounts shared by participants who have benefited from Obey’s assistance and other intermediaries, one of the authors interviewed Obey directly. When asked about his passport-related business, he responded:

I help a lot of people. What Abby and Fred have told you is true: Abby also refers many clients to me. I work with people inside the embassy and also, I have people outside. You will never find me near the embassy. I work with a team; it is a company, if I may put it that way. I also have a cross-border bus. It also carries both documented and undocumented passengers. I help them acquire passports and the bus also helps in transporting not only immigrant passengers but also passport application documents and processed passports from Zimbabwe.

Several participants in this study confirmed receiving help from Obey and other similar intermediaries. This growing reliance on intermediaries can be attributed to the increasingly complex issue of immigration regulations and persistent delays in the Zimbabwean passport and South African visa issuing systems. These bureaucratic hurdles make it exceptionally difficult for migrants to navigate the process and acquire essential documents efficiently. In this context, Jones et al. (2023) argue that in many societies, migration without the assistance of intermediaries – including friends, family, recruiters, travel agents, and “smugglers” – is virtually impossible. Here, we observe the nimble-footed strategies of migrants, paralleling the concept elucidated by Nyamnjoh (2013) in his discussion of the Mbororo Fulani. Nyamnjoh (2013) introduces the concept of “nimble-footedness” through his study of the Mbororo Fulani in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. These communities navigate complex postcolonial politics involving borders and boundaries, where juridico-political citizenship is often contested by local and regional claims of autochthony. In our study, we adapt this concept to describe how migrants develop the ability and agility to navigate and negotiate the challenges and opportunities involved in acquiring and maintaining passports. Just as the Mbororo Fulani adeptly maneuver through political dynamics and citizenship issues, migrants learn to engage with intermediaries effectively. They skillfully leverage relationships and negotiations to overcome bureaucratic hurdles, ensuring their ability to obtain passports or visas and secure their ongoing survival.

Brokerage is thus viewed as a normalized and entirely legitimate practice for navigating many aspects of everyday life. Although the involvement of intermediaries in migration is not new, the nature of their roles has dramatically transformed over the past 50 years (Fernandez, 2013; Jones et al., 2023). Currently, intermediaries are significant actors, influencing how migration occurs, shaping migrants’ experiences, and affecting developmental outcomes. From migrants’ perspectives, intermediaries make mobility possible in a world where immobility is often the norm. Fernandez’s (2013) analysis – employing a decentered approach to regulation – elucidates the role of intermediaries in the migration process. This perspective challenges the notion of exclusive governmental control over regulation, highlighting the interconnectedness of various social actors in shaping regulatory realities.

While many participants recounted positive experiences with intermediaries at embassies, a contrasting perspective emerged from Locadia, a 34-year-old domestic worker in Johannesburg. She traveled to the Beitbridge border post solely for a passport stamp renewal. She recounted using connections, or intermediaries, to expedite the process. She expressed frustration with the inherent inequality in the system, where access to such assistance appears contingent on personal connections. As Locadia stated, “It bothered me that not everyone had equal access to such assistance. It should be a fair and transparent process for everyone.” Locadia’s experience reveals the potential for exploitation within the system, highlighting the ethical considerations surrounding the reliance on intermediaries. Further research is needed to explore the broader dynamics of this phenomenon, including the potential impact on vulnerable populations in the migrant community.

Within the framework of Zimbabwean migration, as exemplified by the narratives and experiences shared by the participating migrants in this study, intermediaries can be categorized into two main groups: unlicensed brokers and individuals in the social networks of potential migrants, such as relatives or friends. The various strategies and approaches employed by these intermediaries, as demonstrated earlier, highlight the crucial interconnections among the participants in these networks (Jones and Sha, 2020). Additionally, these observations emphasize the inherent challenges in regulating these intermediaries, given that a significant portion of their activities often bypasses or directly challenges the established Zimbabwean regulatory framework, rather than adhering to it.

In addition to the challenges and delays associated with booking appointments for visa applications at embassies, there was also significant concern among most study participants regarding the steep fees for obtaining a Zimbabwean passport. They expressed deep dissatisfaction with the high costs associated with passport applications. The Government of Zimbabwe implemented a passport fee increase, resulting in the standard passport fee rising from US\$60 for a three-day passport to US\$150 plus \$20 application fee, while an emergency 24-hour passport remained priced at US\$250 plus \$20 application fee. Many participants voiced their desire for the Zimbabwean government to reconsider these passport prices. They lamented that the amount is a financial burden not easily manageable for many Zimbabweans who aspire to cross the border, as many were struggling to raise the required US\$170. Mary, a 29-year-old hairdresser from Bloemfontein, shared her experience:

As someone with limited financial resources, it was an enormous challenge to afford such a high amount. I had to make significant sacrifices and save money for months just to be able to pay for the passport.

Adding to the formidable challenges associated with obtaining passports, participants in the study highlighted significant difficulties in securing work or resident permits (officially known as visas). They outlined a comprehensive array of obstacles

encountered in fulfilling the stringent criteria established by the South African DHA. These authorities encompass the Visa Facilitation Services (VFS) – a private entity appointed by the South African embassy to process visa applications through the DHA. Notably, participants emphasized the onerous paperwork requirements, expressing dismay over the convoluted process of submitting the necessary documents.

Furthermore, the exorbitant fees levied by the visa authorities emerged as a substantial financial burden. These costs compelled participants to prioritize visa application expenses over other essential expenditures. Vuyisile, a 36-year-old construction worker residing in Bloemfontein, exemplifies this challenge. He described the process of obtaining a visa as a “long, winding, and arduous” experience. The sheer volume of paperwork required for the application was overwhelming. He elaborated on the various prerequisites, including birth certificates, proof of residency, and letters of recommendation, highlighting the impossibility of securing a visa without all these documents. Collecting all necessary documents took Vuyisile several weeks. Additionally, processing delays compounded the frustration, as the VFS office reportedly handled many applications. His case exemplifies the months-long wait often endured by applicants. This arduous process showcases the “horrendous journey” migrants traverse to legitimize their stay in South Africa. Such bureaucratic complexities often drive individuals toward irregular migration strategies, potentially resorting to illegitimate methods to secure residency. The research suggests a need for a more streamlined and accessible visa application process in South Africa, addressing the financial burdens and bureaucratic hurdles faced by Zimbabwean migrants.

Getting to grips with officialdom

Beyond the stringent eligibility requirements and financial burdens of visa applications, participants highlighted the harsh treatment by South African officials at the DHA and VFS offices. Chabal (2009) describes this as “calculated violence,” where government and state officials deliberately neglect their duties. Tawodzera (2014) likens these officials to “frontier guards” whose mission is to keep migrants out, violating constitutional rights and professional ethics. Ruth, a 33-year-old domestic worker in Pretoria, shared her upsetting experience with rude and dismissive visa officials during her passport renewal in Zimbabwe. She recalled, “the visa officials were disrespectful and made derogatory remarks toward applicants, adding to the distress of an already difficult process.” Similarly, Tamia, a 32-year-old hairdresser in Bloemfontein, faced significant bureaucratic obstacles in gathering the necessary documentation for her visa application. She noted, “Each submission was met with more requirements, causing frustration and exhaustion. The repeated bureaucratic hurdles were both vexing and draining.” Moreover, many participants expressed frustration over repeated failures to obtain passports, severely limiting their mobility and opportunities for advancement.

In response to the challenges and predicaments faced by migrants when trying to obtain work and residence permits, many have resorted to using ephemeral stamps to remain in South Africa. This approach aligns with what Mutendi and Chekero (2023) describe as the “nimble-footed migrant” in their study on migrant mobility during the COVID-19 lockdown. Another participant, Brian, exemplifies this concept, relying on ephemeral stamps to extend his stay in South Africa after being unable to secure a work visa. He recounted:

I've been able to survive because of these temporary stamps. Every time my stay is about to expire, I get another stamp that lets me stay a bit longer. I know it's not a permanent solution, but it's what keeps me going for now. Without these stamps, I wouldn't be able to stay here or take care of my family. They're the only thing that's allowing me to keep everything together.

The process of obtaining passports and visas for Zimbabwean migrants is complex and multifaceted. Challenges such as lengthy waiting periods, extensive paperwork, and high fees create significant barriers that impede migrants' mobility and access to essential services. Scalabrini (2024) echoes these challenges, highlighting societal tensions surrounding migration. The report suggests unsupported claims, such as migrants harming the South African economy and taking jobs from citizens. These sentiments reflect the perceived insufficiency of resources in South Africa to accommodate non-citizens. See also, Kariithi (2017), Banda and Mawadza (2015), Mawadza (2012), Danso and McDonald (2001) for a detailed characterization of migrants by the state and other actors in South Africa) Migrants in our study corroborated these claims, noting that such societal tensions and economic fears often result in prolonged delays in the visa application process. This has led many to turn to intermediaries and brokers for assistance. The involvement of these intermediaries yields two distinct outcomes. First, intermediaries can effectively assist individuals in obtaining passports, leading to success stories. Second, their involvement can complicate the process, resulting in mixed outcomes reported by participants. The disparities in success rates among participants in securing passports and visas highlight the unequal impact of administrative procedures on migration experiences.

Intermediaries, often organized through informal social networks, play a crucial role in facilitating the acquisition of passports for many Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. As Jones et al. (2023) note, contemporary international migration patterns would not occur without migration intermediaries. As noted by Spener (2009), in Mexico, migrants seek help from coyotes to start the migration process; in Eritrea, from *delaloch* (Ayalew, 2018); in West Africa, would-be migrants speak of lines, connections, and *dokimen* (Alpes 2017); in Asia, Syrians may refer to *muharrib* and *haji* (Achilli, 2018); in Bangladesh and Nepal, to *dalals* (Rahman, 2012). In all these places, engaging with one or more intermediaries to assist with migration projects is a highly normalized and entirely legitimate practice (Jones et

al., 2023). The dependence of migrants on intermediaries is not new. Friends and kinship networks have long been recognized as pivotal in helping migrants organize their journeys, find jobs and homes, and establish friendships and civic structures (Jones et al., 2023). As exemplified by several migrants interviewed, expediting the passport acquisition process often relies on intermediaries with established connections to family members and friends who have prior experience navigating this complex process.

Zimbabwean migrants navigating precarious mobility through nimble-footedness and conviviality

Our ethnographic exploration reveals the complex interplay between migrants' passport experiences, border dynamics, and regulatory frameworks, providing nuanced insights into the complexities of mobility and legal status at the Beitbridge border post. In understanding such a multifaceted interplay, we embraced the concepts of nimble-footedness and conviviality. As we have shown, nimble-footedness encompasses migrants' ability to interpret and respond to the actions and expectations of border officials and intermediaries as well as to adjust their strategies based on the prevailing legal framework. Migrants must possess an understanding of when, where, and how to move, or conversely, when not to move (Mbembe, 2017; Mutendi and Chekero, 2023). They employ intermediaries and engage in bribes to ensure their continued crossings into South Africa.

As the study has demonstrated, they also establish networks with fellow migrants, immigration officials, border patrol agents, and residents (Nyamnjoh, 2013) to facilitate these crossings. However, it is not a matter of indiscriminately forming connections or networks; migrants must exhibit a sharp sense of discernment in these interactions (Morreira, 2020) lest they get arrested. To evade the risks of arrest, detention, or deportation, they must make informed decisions about whom to form relationships with – they must display nimble-footedness. In this context, cultivating appropriate social networks becomes imperative for facilitating successful border crossings.

The findings also revealed that regardless of the challenging passport experiences faced by Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa, they engage in various nimble-footed ways to secure their way in South Africa. One notable example is that a migrant can have their passport stamped at the exit when departing. For example, an enterprising woman, Abby, learned strategies that enabled her to avoid having to cross the border monthly to renew her status as a visitor to South Africa. In conversations with other women at the border gate who were also traveling to South Africa, she learned that she should first have her passport stamped at the exit as departing the country, only to sneak back in before actually crossing South Africa's borders, thus without any visa. The bustling activity and restlessness at the border post would assist her in doing this. Migrants used different ways and means of entering South Africa: some used work and residence visas, others bribed immigration officers,

and yet others entered unnoticed, “cloaked” in the same way as Abby. Once Abby’s passport was stamped with “Departure,” the South African system recorded that she had returned to Zimbabwe, while she was in fact in South Africa. In this manner, she became an undocumented migrant with a passport but an invalid presence in South Africa according to the 2004 Immigration Act of South Africa.

The recent amendments to the Immigration Act, 2002 (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2024), reflect a judicial response to procedural shortcomings in the detention and deportation of illegal foreigners, as previously critiqued by the Constitutional Court. These revisions mandate that detainees be presented before a court within 48 hours of arrest, where the court must evaluate whether continued detention aligns with the principles of justice, and ensures that detainees are informed of their rights and afforded the chance to make representations. However, a recent pronouncement by the newly appointed Minister of Home Affairs, Dr Leon Schreiber MP, which imposes a six-month sentence and subsequent deportation for those found without proper documentation, introduces a new layer of complexity to migrants’ experiences. This pronouncement, regardless of its constitutional validity, significantly impacts how migrants perceive and navigate their legal status and daily lives, particularly concerning the acquisition of passports and visas.

The case of Abby, who is documented but deemed unlawfully present due to procedural constraints, exemplifies the broader vulnerabilities faced by Zimbabwean migrants. Our study explores the adaptive strategies employed by migrants like Abby, who, under increasing pressure to obtain valid documentation, engage in various forms of improvisation to avoid harsh penalties and exclusion from the immigration system. The amendments thus exacerbate the urgency for migrants to secure passports to avoid punitive measures, highlighting the intersection of legal reforms and everyday survival strategies in migration contexts.

Migrants without work or residence visas often rely on temporary visitor visas, usually valid for 90 days. However, these rights to cross borders and enter host countries, as highlighted by Mbembe (2017), are increasingly regulated, subject to suspension or revocation at the whim of authorities, contributing to a tightening of immigration control measures. Despite the increasing movement of migrants, South Africa’s migration policies have persistently excluded Zimbabwean migrants, leaving them with limited livelihood opportunities (Northcote, 2015). This trend toward stricter policies is evident in South Africa, despite its history of facilitating immigration. For instance, migrants often receive entry visas for shorter durations than the entitlement of 90 days, posing challenges in securing employment and supporting families back home. In response, migrants demonstrate nimbleness, adapting to these restrictive regulations.

Drawing on Nyamnjoh’s (2013, 2015, 2019) insights into nimble-footedness, migrants quickly learn to navigate bureaucratic hurdles by engaging with brokers, immigration officials, police, and bus operators. For example, when seeking to extend their stay, migrants may strategically choose border posts like Beitbridge, known

for granting longer durations compared to others. Brian, residing in Bloemfontein, recounted his journey to Beitbridge after receiving only a seven-day extension at the Lesotho–Maseru border. Mary similarly relied on informal convivial networks to obtain passport stamps, highlighting the necessity of intermediaries in ensuring safety in South Africa.

Ranga's experience revealed the dependence on informal arrangements, such as paying bus drivers for visa extensions, a practice observed by Chekero (2023) as part of the "Vaya Vaya" culture—moving swiftly and adaptively amid legal constraints. Despite the risks, migrants prioritize livelihood sustenance over legal documentation because of the disruptive impact of enforcement measures, as observed by Moyo (2022). Our findings demonstrate the imperative for migrants to cultivate convivial networks, as articulated by Chekero (2023), which enable survival amid passport-related challenges. This resilience reflects a broader phenomenon of adaptability, where individuals maneuver within abnormal environments to normalize their circumstances.

The Beitbridge border post, cushioned between Zimbabwe and South Africa, emerges as a pivotal junction for Zimbabwean migrants embarking on journeys to and from South Africa. Our ethnographic engagement with migrants during their border crossings provided rich insights into passport-related practices and interactions with border officials. Through keen observation and in-depth interviews, we uncovered intriguing dynamics surrounding passport usage, the issuance of ephemeral stamps, and attempts to circumvent border regulations. A notable observation at the border was the announcement by bus conductors, delineating different categories of passport holders: those needing stamps, overstayers, holders of phased-out passports, and those without passports. This categorization reflected the diverse passport-related scenarios encountered by migrants navigating the border crossing.

This study sheds light on the significance of ephemeral stamps, and temporary endorsements granted to individuals for limited stays – typically three months – in the host country. These stamps serve as a provisional measure for migrants lacking valid passports or facing renewal challenges. While offering temporary relief, they also amplify the precariousness of migrants' legal status, necessitating prompt departure before expiration to avoid legal complications. Brian's account exemplified this, as he received a three-month ephemeral stamp but had to plan his exit before expiry to maintain legal compliance. Ephemeral stamps entail specific requirements for temporary stays, obliging migrants to adhere to stipulated durations and depart within the allotted timeframe. Chipo's narrative revealed the consequences of exceeding the three-month limit, which could entail penalties such as passport damage, bribery, or deportation orders. Tinotenda's testimony highlighted the complexities and risks associated with navigating the passport system through informal channels, emphasizing the punitive measures imposed on non-compliant migrants.

The stories of migrants shared above showcase the ingenuity, resourcefulness, and nimble-footedness of individuals in navigating the complex system. They also

highlight the vulnerabilities and risks associated with such practices. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that borders are experienced differently by migrants seeking to enter and exit South Africa. Convivial social networks play a pivotal role in shaping how individuals encounter these borders, and *hushamwari* in deepening our understanding of migrants' strategic navigation of life in South Africa through their responses, practices, and social encounters. They give rise to disparities in the enjoyment of rights and access to basic services, often excluding migrants from full participation in society, complete with responsibilities and proportionate liabilities in the event of any wrongdoing (Landau, 2014; Landau and Wanjiku, 2018; Landau, 2020; Misago and Landau, 2022). Even something as basic as using public spaces or simply moving about can be a challenging experience for migrants, particularly when they lack work or residence visas and have limited days on their entry visa. In response to these constraints, migrants devise strategies to challenge borders, hence the concept of nimble-footedness. According to Erving Goffman (1959), migrants' actions result in practices where visibility and invisibility become strategic choices they must adopt to adapt to the South African reality. These strategies may also enable them to exploit the state's ambivalence toward migration. Drawing on the insights of French philosopher Michel de Certeau (1984), in such situations, migrants develop tactics that are contingent on time, necessitating constant vigilance for opportunities that must be seized. Consequently, these tactics and methods for challenging borders assume a fundamental role in the lives of migrants. By integrating the concepts of nimble-footedness, conviviality, and *hushamwari*, we provide a comprehensive analysis of Zimbabwean migrants' experiences in obtaining passports in South Africa. Through their adept strategies and convivial practices, these migrants exhibit resilience and agency in the face of precarious conditions and irregular migration.

CONCLUSION

This ethnographic foray into the liminal space of the South African border post exposes a complex social choreography. Here, passport experiences, imbued with frustration and precarity, intertwine with the dynamics of the border itself, heavily influenced by restrictive immigration policies. We move beyond documentation of these experiences to analyze the interplay between passports and the embodied realities of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. Formal application processes for passports transform into complex obstacles, particularly for those lacking digital literacy or Internet access. This paves the way for a shadow economy, with intermediaries and brokers acting as both facilitators and potential exploiters. This highlights the urgent need for streamlined accessible passport issuance systems alongside robust anti-corruption measures.

At the heart of migrants' negotiation of this sophisticated landscape lie two pivotal strategies: nimble-footedness and conviviality. Nimble-footedness extends beyond mere physical agility, emerging as a defining characteristic for these migrants. They adeptly navigate the bureaucratic terrain, decoding the actions and

expectations of border officials. This array of strategies encompasses a spectrum of actions, from forging social networks with diverse actors within the border space (Nyamnjoh, 2013) to resorting to “illegal” pathways and bribery (Mutendi and Chekero, 2023). This continual negotiation with the boundaries of legality highlights the precariousness of their existence. The concept of precarity equates to what Nyamnjoh (2022) terms incompleteness, becomes salient in this context. According to Nyamnjoh (2015), the human condition is characterized by “incompleteness.” He argues that conviviality serves as a more effective strategy for “frontier Africans” to enhance themselves and foster better relationships and sociality (Nyamnjoh, 2015: 1) than emphasizing differences. Nyamnjoh’s core argument posits that everything in the world and life possesses a degree of incompleteness: nature, the supernatural, humans, and human action and achievement. Recognizing and embracing this inherent incompleteness constitutes a crucial aspect of conviviality. As advocated by Nyamnjoh (2017), Nowicka and Heil (2015), and Nowicka and Vertovec (2014), conviviality – the cultivation of supportive social networks – emerges as a survival strategy. Abby’s narrative exemplifies this concept, as her manipulation of passport stamps demonstrates the resourcefulness and vulnerability intrinsic to such tactics. These informal networks serve as a lifeline within a system structured to exclude.

Our research lays bare the exclusionary nature of South African immigration policies (Lefko-Everett, 2007). Limited access to work visas forces dependence on temporary visas, with authorities tightening control measures (Mbembe, 2017). This translates to shorter visa durations, hindering employment opportunities. Migrants then navigate this landscape by strategically choosing border posts known for leniency, using informal networks for acquiring passport stamps, and relying on practices like “Vaya Vaya” extensions (Chekero, 2023) – all testaments to their “swift and adaptive” responses to legal constraints.

Despite the inherent risks, securing a livelihood often takes precedence over legal documentation. This prioritization demonstrates the migrants’ agency and their constant challenge of the borders that seek to constrain them (Landau, 2014). However, these experiences are far from uniform. Social networks significantly shape encounters with the border, leading to disparities in access to basic rights and services (Misago and Landau, 2022). Those lacking visas face constant hurdles in navigating public spaces and basic movement. While this study hails the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Zimbabwean migrants, it is crucial to move beyond mere admiration. Their strategies expose the vulnerabilities inherent in the current system. Understanding nimble-footedness and conviviality is a critical step toward crafting policies that acknowledge the realities of migrant experiences. Only then can we move toward a more just and inclusive society at the border and beyond.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the experiences of Zimbabwean migrants, it is crucial to streamline administrative processes by enhancing the efficiency of online passport appointment

systems and increasing staff and resources at passport offices to ensure timely application processing. Additionally, implementing regulations to oversee intermediaries and brokers can prevent exploitation and fraud, while educating migrants about legitimate application channels will help reduce reliance on these intermediaries. Strengthening anti-corruption measures within embassy and consular services, and ensuring transparency in passport and visa processes, are essential for addressing inefficiencies and unethical practices. Advocating for reduced passport fees will alleviate financial burdens, and training officials to handle migrants respectfully, alongside establishing robust complaint mechanisms, will improve treatment. Developing support services to assist with bureaucratic challenges and fostering community networks for guidance will aid in migrants' legal and social integration. Further research on intermediary use and policy advocacy will inform necessary reforms, moving us toward a more just and inclusive society at the border and beyond.

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