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Mamdani and the politics of migrant labor in South Africa: Durban dockworkers and the difference that geography makes

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Abstract

One of the more notable attempts to understand the civil violence that affected large parts of the South African province of KwaZulu–Natal in the late 1980s and early 1990s was that of Mahmood Mamdani. Mamdani framed the violence with respect to his arguments about the bifurcated state. In areas subject to the customary rule of the chiefs, Africans acquired identities around ethnicity, patriarchy, and the tribal. Experience as migrant workers in the cities of South Africa brought them into contact with different political agendas working against their own interests as migrant workers. It was in this context that the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) tried to mobilize them against supporters of the African National Congress through an appeal to these traditional identities. Mamdani has a geography, therefore, but it is a quite simplified one. In particular, he abstracts from the variable way in which migrant workers put down roots in the urban areas; there are also complications resulting from quite sharp regional differences in KwaZulu–Natal. Drawing on a sample of (migrant) Durban dockworkers, what we find is that support for the IFP is indeed related to traditional identities. The translation into voting is more complex, however. Regardless of identity or urbanizing status, no migrant workers from the south of KwaZulu–Natal vote for the IFP. It is only among those from the old Zulu heartland in the north of the province that urbanization seems to be related to voting preference.

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Keywords: Mamdani; Migrant labor; Urbanization; KwaZulu–Natal; Bifurcated state; Inkatha Freedom Party

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Introduction

In the dying days of apartheid, an important development in resistance politics in South Africa was the emergence of a cleavage between migrant workers and those blacks with rights of permanent urban residence. This was a cleavage which reached its most concentrated expression in the townships surrounding Johannesburg and Durban and took political shape in the form of a polarization between the party of Zulu nationalism, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the African National Congress (ANC). It is a politics which endures, though the bloodshed has greatly diminished.

Given its importance in South Africa's recent politics, it is perhaps therefore surprising that, with a few notable exceptions (Bonnin, Hamilton, Morell, & Sitas, 1996, chap 6; Freund, 1996, chap 7) so little is known about it, apart that is from anecdotal evidence, academic attempts to interpret those experiences and a very limited number of case studies (Minnaar, 1992). The major work on the 1994 election, for example (Johnson & Schlemmer, 1996) has very little to say on the topic. There are four references in the index to 'migrants, migration' and only one of these has to do with migrant workers. 'Hostel' does not feature at all. The entry for 'housing' refers to eight different pages on only two of which are there references to hostels.

Nevertheless, despite the paucity of the empirical base, interpretations have been made. Of these the contribution of Mamdani (1996) is noteworthy.² This is because of the way his argument draws strength from an understanding of how more enduring, long term determinants rooted in the form of the colonial African state combined with forces of a more conjunctural character in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For on one hand, there is a sense in which what happened can be understood in terms of a series of contingent events which built upon one another. But on the other, those events depended for their ultimate outcome on the vulnerability of the migrant worker to the way they sequentially combined one with another. And according to Mamdani, that vulnerability in turn derived from the deeply problematic nature of an urban–rural relationship that he seeks to embed in what he calls the bifurcated state: the particular form the colonial state assumed in Africa.

Significantly this vulnerability of the migrant workers was, he argues, decidedly at the level of identity: specifically their identities as holders of the customary rights to land, to patriarchy, secured for them by the bifurcated state in the tribal areas. As he wrote:

“Even when this right (of access to land) was significantly emptied of content, as when migrants clung to no more than a customary but nominal patch, the notion of customary rights – as of customary patriarchal privilege – was key to understanding the ideological baggage a migrant brought from the rural to the urban context. Inasmuch as a customary right was understood, claimed, and defended as a tribal right, notions of the customary overlapped with and reinforced an ethnic identity” (pp. 219–220).

Our purpose in this paper is to examine the validity of Mamdani's thesis from a very particular standpoint: that of his geography. There is a clear geography in Mamdani's approach: a differentiation between the rural and the urban, along with the relations between the two. But, as we wish to argue, this amounts to a quite incomplete understanding of the relevant differences and relationships. In the attempt to put the colonial experience of South Africa under the

² Mamdani's 1996 book *Citizen and Subject* is part of a much broader corpus of work on the African state going back to the 1970s. More recently this has included an interpretation of the genocide in Rwanda (Mamdani, 2001). It is beyond the scope of this paper to review this wider corpus of Mamdani's works.

umbrella of the bifurcated state which was, according to his argument, the prevalent form of colonial rule in Africa as a whole, he risks abstracting from other forms of differentiation, in particular differentiations between geographic areas or regions, as well as imposing on Africans an overly rigid distinction between the urban and the rural.

We wish, therefore, to present an argument that while not rejecting Mamdani's thesis in toto, seeks to qualify it in significant ways. For while it is true that with the data we have at our disposal his arguments provide some purchase on empirical outcomes, they also fall short. Attention to the *differentiae specifica* of regional variation within the hotbed of Zulu nationalism, KwaZulu–Natal, and also to the urbanization process helps provide a more complete understanding.

Our paper, therefore, is both theoretical and empirical. Our empirical base is decidedly modest: 129 Durban dockworkers who are all migrant workers of the sort who are the focus of Mamdani's analysis. Nevertheless the results, while confirming Mamdani in some respects, also suggest that his approach has been far from exhaustive of an understanding of the politics of migrant labor in South Africa. This is so not just with respect to the 'facts' of the case but regarding the sorts of theoretical constructs that should be brought to bear on the politics of migrant labor there.

We would add one qualifier regarding method. We do use statistics and some very simple statistical measures in this paper. It might be argued that, given the qualitative character of Mamdani's claims, that is, about the causal properties of the bifurcated state and those living under it, this might not be appropriate. Yet as Sayer has pointed out, a useful distinction in social science research is between what he calls 'intensive' and 'extensive' methods. Intensive methods ask 'why' and 'how' sorts of questions and typically draw on ethnography, relatively unstructured interviews, or documentary research. Mamdani's work fits fairly well into this category. Extensive methods, on the other hand, ask questions of a quantitatively descriptive character; how common are such and such practices or structures of social relations? To what degree are they apparent? There is also a relationship between these different approaches. The results of intensive methods give guidance to more extensive forms of assessment. On the other hand, statistical description can often suggest further areas for intensive research. The work we report on here falls into precisely the latter category.

The order of the paper is as follows. In the first section, the Mamdani thesis is recapitulated. In the second section, doubts are raised as to the completeness of his geography, explicit and otherwise. In the empirical body of the paper, we explore the link that he postulated between identities and political attitudes. Identity in the sense he intended is shown to fall short as a full explanation of the politics of our particular sample. We demonstrate the role that a more sensitive incorporation of geographic difference and relationships can play in deepening our understanding. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the implications of the analysis.

The Mamdani thesis

At the center of Mamdani's book is a thesis about the colonial state in Africa. All the colonial powers shared a common problem: how they could rule even though they were few in number. What they hit upon was what he has called 'the bifurcated state'. In geographic terms, this divided the state into two parts: one that would be subject to indirect rule through various forms of tribal authority; and one that would be subject to direct rule and that would include the settlers, migrant workers from the tribal areas, the permanently urbanized, the *evolués*, among the indigenous population. This sets up further dualisms in Mamdani's schema including urban/rural, civil law/customary law, centralized despotism/decentralized despotism, market/subsistence, and racialization/ethnicization.

In tribal areas, the indigenous population would be subject to customary rule in areas defined along ethnic lines, though Mamdani is quick to recognize that both the tribal affiliations and the body of customary law were significantly constructed by the colonial authorities. In the tribal areas, the major division was ethnic. Crucially land rights were customary, land was allocated by a tribal chief, and were dependent on membership of the tribe. Outside the tribal areas, race was the dominant cleavage: indigenous elements of the population there were subject to civil law and, unlike the whites, enjoyed no political rights. The link between the rural and the urban, the tribal and the non-tribal was through migrant labor. Those enjoying customary rights to land in the tribal areas would engage in circular forms of migration which would take them into the non-tribal areas of the country in order to supplement their subsistence, and obtain cash for taxes.

One of Mamdani's contributions is to demonstrate significant parallels in these regards between South Africa and the rest of the continent. Similar patterns emerged but, as he notes, were given a distinct concrete form in South Africa by a relatively high level of industrialization, along with a greater relative presence of non-indigenous populations. There were native reserves characterized by customary law, tribal tenure, a largely subsistence form of agriculture and an emergent sense of ethnic difference. Outside the reserves, the market ruled, populations were racialized and the suffrage was confined to whites. But the reserves were relatively much smaller than elsewhere in Africa. Furthermore, as the struggle against white rule took shape from the 1920s on, so there were attempts to strengthen the structures of the bifurcated state. These culminated in the ill-fated homeland project of the various apartheid governments and the policies of influx control and resettlement designed to redefine an increased proportion of the African population as citizens of the homelands rather than of South Africa. Moreover, in South Africa migrant labor was on a scale unknown anywhere else on the African continent and the reserves became from the standpoint of the South Africa state, primarily labor reserves.

As such, the migrant worker assumed competing identities. On one hand, he³ was a worker in a city, something that became more and more important as the reserves became less and less able to support him and his family. On the other, he also enjoyed a more traditional identity as a patriarch, an ethnic and as rural. This was an identity whose preconditions were the customary rights that he possessed by virtue of tribal membership. These tied him to a tribe, to the rural areas, and gave him rights over women and children through, for example, the practice of *lobola*. Identification with the rural, moreover, was strengthened by a sense of difference from township residents that was overdetermined by the attitudes of those residents to the migrant workers.

During the 1970s, from the Durban dock strikes of 1973 onwards, Mamdani describes a process of progressive incorporation of the migrant worker into labor union structures with the migrant hostel as a center of union organizing. At this time, the migrant workers were the most militant fractions of the black working class. But from the mid-1980s a sequence of events unfolded that made the migrant worker vulnerable to appeals on the basis of more traditional forms of rural-based identity; appeals which came from the IFP.

In the first place, there was the rise of the United Democratic Front or UDF. This was based in the townships, as opposed to the hostels, and among those who enjoyed rights of permanent residence — the Section Tanners: rights which the migrant workers did not have. Unlike the

³ The masculine nature of the migrant worker seems to be the assumption in Mamdani, though at the present time, based on evidence from the October Household Surveys, about one third of black migrant workers in South Africa are women.

union movement that had been centered in the hostels, moreover, the UDF was focused primarily on living place issues and the national struggle, the latter resulting in an alignment with the ANC. Central to understanding this turn of events is the 1983 Constitution Act. This had moved to co-opt Indians and Coloreds through granting a suffrage which would elect representatives to separate chambers. In the new political dispensation, the centrality of the homelands for blacks without Section Ten rights was reaffirmed. But for those who did have the rights, concerns for representation were to be taken care of through the establishment of black municipalities. Through the Black Municipalities Act of 1982, townships became 'black municipalities' with locally-elected councils responsible for housing, services and schools. They were also responsible, however, for finding the monies out of which to provide those services. This would have been bad enough but the establishment of the black municipalities happened to coincide with a severe economic downturn, which made the payment of service charges and rents significantly more onerous. It was the emergence of these living place issues that, according to the dominant interpretation, was the initial trigger for polarization between the civics and the migrant workers. Only subsequent to that did the civics become identified in the minds of the migrant workers with the ANC as a negative pole. But in order for this polarization to occur leadership of the black union movement had to shift from the hands of the migrants to Section Tennessees since the latter were much more sensitive to the demands of the populists of the UDF and for obvious reasons: unlike those living in the hostels, they too experienced, along with their families, the living place hardships of the increasing service charges and rents, poor schools and the corruption of the black municipalities.

The second significant element in this conjuncture of forces, therefore, was indeed a shift in the center of gravity within the union movement from migrants to Section Tennessees; in other words, from the hostels to the townships. This occurred as a result of a shift in the nature of industrial demand for labor. According to Mamdani changing labor processes, particularly increased capital intensity, opened up demand for semiskilled urban workers and reduced demand for the de-skilled. As this happened, the leadership of the manufacturing unions moved out of the hostels into the townships and this in turn allowed the conflict within the union movement between the so-called workerists and the populists to be decided in favor of the latter; a decision fraught with the most serious consequences.

This was because it opened the door to a strategy which would alienate the migrant workers. The particular strategy in question was the worker stayaway. In order to bring pressure to bear on the government on a particular day workers would stay away from work. But the effectiveness of this depended, as in the case of a strike, on maximizing participation. With township residents this would be relatively easy: they had a clear stake in township conditions. But for the hostel dwellers it was otherwise. They saw little point in involving themselves in issues from the resolution of which they themselves would derive little benefit and which would, on the contrary, take away a day's wages that would otherwise contribute to the flow of remittances. Frustrated, some elements in the civics resorted to violence, attacking migrant workers and burning down their hostels. This in turn made the migrant workers susceptible to the attempts of other forces in the township – the black councilors, the small business people craving stability – to organize them as a vigilante force against the militants who by then were becoming known as the young comrades.

This particular configuration of forces was one which the Inkatha Freedom Party or IFP now sought to exploit. Cleavages with township residents as well as an identity with the customary made the migrant workers vulnerable to its attempts to build a coalition that could bring about an end to apartheid but on its terms rather than on the terms of the ANC. In terms of its program

and appeal, the IFP is not easy to characterize. It had, and continues to have, an ethnic appeal for it mobilizes its supporters around a discourse of Zulu nationalism. It has major stakes in the preservation of tribal authorities, customary law, the role of the chiefs in the distribution of land and in local government, period. And, as it became clear that the ANC was to be legalized and would command wide support, the centralizing ambitions of that party became something that the IFP wanted to counter. This was because of the threat it implied for its power base in KwaZulu. If, as the ANC wanted, the homelands were to be abolished then what would that imply for the position of chiefs and the system of patronage that worked through them in order to ensure the IFP's electoral predominance within KwaZulu? It is this that explains their support for some sort of power sharing and federalism, even confederalism with a white homeland, that would have left more power in the hands of whites than the unitary state desired by the ANC.

For the IFP, the migrant worker was seen as a highly plausible component of its social base. Their antagonism to the civics, their willingness to act on behalf of the black councilors and hence, implicitly at least, on the side of 'reforming apartheid' rather than overthrowing it suggested that the ANC might act as a pole of repulsion in the field of forces to which they were being subjected. There was also what Mamdani has referred to as "the ideological baggage a migrant brought from the rural to the urban context" which accreted around the customary rights associated with the preservation of the tribal authorities: land rights, rights over women and the young in particular.

Amending Mamdani's geography

Explanations of this broad-brush nature, however, are always vulnerable to charges of over-generalization. Migrant labor in South Africa is a complex category. By no means is it reducible either to the former homeland areas or what are now known as the deep rural areas or to the blue collar worker/miners. Analysis of the 1996, 1997 and 1998 Household Surveys, for example, suggests that at least a third of migrant workers are *not* from the deep rural areas. Females now constitute over a third of all migrant workers. Furthermore among the males, mining and manufacturing are no longer the dominant occupations. Large numbers of migrant workers are now employed as drivers, in private security, in wholesale and retail trade. This suggests a rather different picture of the migrant worker than that which Mamdani suggests and fractions that are unlikely to have been so vulnerable to the blandishments of the IFP in the way that he argues.⁴

On the other hand, this does not mean that they might not have supported the IFP for other reasons. Mamdani's emphasis is squarely on a particular identity. There are reasons for thinking that in many instances this might not have been the case and that material interests independent of views on patriarchy, the tribal authorities and the redeeming values of the rural homestead, might have often been more significant. It is true that he talks about 'worker-peasants' but the sense is of alternate identities willing espoused rather than the possibility that support for IFP might have more immediate, material reasons. For the fact remains that the IFP seems to have gained much of its support in the urban and peri-urban areas from the most economically mar-

⁴ According to the data on migrant workers from the 1996, 1997 and 1998 October Household Surveys of the South Africa Statistical Office, only between 9.1 and 12.3% of male migrant workers could possibly be assigned to mining. A further 8.6% are in various forms of security work, both public and private, and 9.4% are drivers. See Cox, Hemson, and Todes (2004).

ginal elements: those who lacked employment and/or a place to live and access to urban services.⁵ As Shula Marks has observed, the assignment of blame for unemployment and poverty on the ANC, the youth and the unions by the IFP had a degree of plausibility. This is because it was their ‘calls for boycotts and sanctions and strikes (which) undoubtedly deprive frequently unconsulted migrants of vitally needed employment, and not surprisingly rouse their anger’ (p. 141). In a context of the struggle for a toehold in the city, moreover, conflicts around the control of space took on a new meaning. To the extent that the IFP gained control, then they gained the power to dole out permits to occupy land, licenses to operate street trading businesses, places in local schools, all in exchange for membership of the IFP and/or service in their *impis*, supposedly to enforce law and order but which were also turned against the UDF/ANC cadres as the struggle for territorial control continued. Furthermore, as Morris and Hindson have emphasized, this was a struggle facilitated by the weakening of state control in the period subsequent to the township disturbances of the mid-1980s and the correlative emergence of structures organized, respectively, by the ‘comrades’ and by warlords battenning on Inkatha patronage.

That said, what we particularly want to focus on in this paper are the difficulties generated by Mamdani’s geography. For a start, it is a curious fact of the history of the various sub-nationalisms that apartheid governments tried to nourish as part of the homeland policy that only the Zulu form acquired serious political bite. Accordingly, nowhere else in South Africa have there been regional parties with the considerable strength that the IFP has been able to achieve.⁶ However, even within its current heartland of KwaZulu–Natal there is evidence of considerable variation. The possibility of variation is hinted at in histories of the area. It seems likely that the early Zulu Kingdom emerged in the late 18th century in the area between Delagoa Bay and the Tugela river, bringing chiefdoms there into relations of overlordship. This was in the context of struggles for control of the increasingly lucrative ivory trade. But as control extended south of the Tugela there also emerged a difference in the relationship between those on the periphery of the kingdom and those in its geographic core: what has been defined as an outsider/insider difference. This corresponded with a stigmatization of the outsiders who while subject to tribute did not participate in the distribution of booty. With the arrival of the British, the Zulu Kingdom gradually retreated from south of the Tugela and the ‘outsiders’ in Southern Natal tried to differentiate themselves in their relations with the British from those still under Zulu rule. Lambert and Morrell (1996, chap 3) caution against the enduring significance of this difference:

“During these years (1890–1920) the beginnings of a Zulu ethnic consciousness was emerging which was beginning to transcend the old divisions between those who lived north and south of the Tugela and between traditionalists and *kholwa*. The process was largely in reaction to white domination and growing poverty and looked back to the Zulu past for inspiration” (p. 90).

However, the data from the 1994 election provide more than a faint suspicion that difference continues. Support for the IFP across the deep rural areas clearly varied considerably. Support

⁵ Cf. Bonnin et al (1996: p. 163): “The youth and organized workers tended to support the UDF, while the unemployed and squatters (mainly the most recently urbanized) inclined toward Inkatha.”

⁶ Thornton (1997) has written, significantly: “South African politics throughout the twentieth century has had little truck with tribal politics. This is a fundamental difference between South Africa and the rest of Africa where national politics is tribal politics, and where specifically tribal cultural and political organizations continue to exist as political actors. In South Africa, none of the major political parties have been premised on this. (This is even true of the Zulu-led IFP, although it has come closer to the African ‘tribal politics’ model than any others, despite vociferous denial on its part.)” (p. 14).

in the south was considerably lower than expected and the reverse applied in the north. In order to gain a sense of this variation we regressed the percentage support for the IFP across the magisterial districts of KwaZulu–Natal on a measure designed to capture the degree to which social conditions approximated those one might expect in the deep rural areas: high proportions of the population, African, high rates of unemployment and high ratios of females to males as an indicator of the migrancy one associates with those areas.⁷ The residuals from this regression were calculated and the larger ones mapped. Fig. 1 shows the residuals above and below one half of the standard error of the estimate for those magisterial districts most approximating to ‘deep rural area-ness’: those districts appearing in the top quartile on our summary measure. Fig. 2 does the same thing but now includes districts appearing in the second quartile as well. The distinctions are clear though quite how to explain them is not immediately evident. The history of the area suggests region as being a form of identity in itself. But it may well be that it is also linked to the intensity of the identities that Mamdani has put at the center of his analysis. At this stage of the enquiry, an open mind would seem desirable.

The second way in which we would suggest that geography makes a difference is through the process of urbanization, of slow detachment from the deep rural areas. This has been going on for years. It was the process whereby migrant laborers were sinking roots in the urban areas that aroused concern in the immediate post-World War II period and paved the way for the election of the National Party in 1948. Without it one could not talk about the fact that some Zulus are more urbanized than others and, indeed, provided the foundation for the ANC’s support base in KwaZulu–Natal today. As Robert Thornton (1997) has written:

“Mamdani ... characterizes ‘migrants’ as ‘free peasants in an urban industrial setting’ ... the collapse long ago of South African ‘peasant’ agriculture, and the vast and sustained flow of people between the cities and rural areas negatives this naïve view. Moreover, since most households are dependent on income earned in urban areas, and because many have lived there and adopted its styles, it is scarcely credible to call them ‘peasants’. The rigorous divide between rural and urban, the ‘peasant’ and the ‘working class’, the ‘citizen’ and ‘subject’, then, misses the point by ignoring the nuances of real complexity” (p. 5).

We can embellish further on this, for the sinking of roots in urban areas, the gradual shift in the center of gravity of a person’s life from the deep rural areas to the city needs to be viewed as slow, tentative, perhaps never fully completed in a person’s lifetime: a process of gradual dis-embedding from one and embedding in another, signified by changing patterns of association, visiting patterns, marriage choices, and the creation of new networks independent of the ‘home boys’ on whom migrant workers typically rely. But it is the gradualness, even tentativeness of the process that we want to emphasize here. There is, in other words, and *pace* Mamdani’s sense, no necessarily clear, hard and fast distinction between the migrant worker and the permanent resident of the city. True, there are people who would claim those end points of the spectrum. But there will also be many in between, in some sort of geographic limbo, albeit one that is slowly being resolved in one direction or the other.

In the context of the issue of urbanization, we should also note that there were peculiarities of the KwaZulu–Natal case that were glossed over by the fact that Mamdani’s empirical research was carried out in the rather different circumstances of the Reef. On the Reef, the

⁷ This was done through a principal components analysis of these three variables. Details are available from the authors.

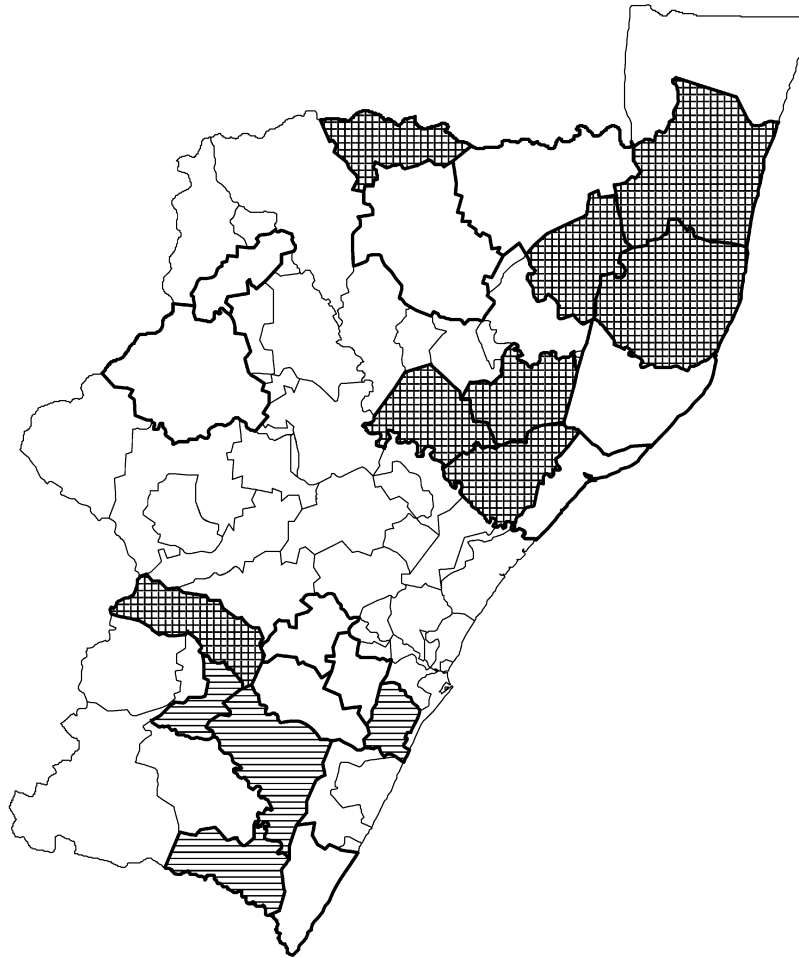


Fig. 1. Residuals from the Regression of Percent Vote for the IFP, 1996 on 'Deep Rural Area-ness'. Only residuals in excess of \pm half the standard error of the estimate and for magisterial districts falling in the first quartile of 'Deep Rural Area-ness' are shown. The cross-hatched symbols refer to those districts in which the residual value is above half the standard error of the estimate. The horizontal line symbols refer to those where it is below minus half of the standard error of the estimate. The Pearsonian correlation was 0.688.

conflict was between hostel dwelling migrant workers and township dwellers with Section Ten rights. In Natal, however, the unrest was largely in the area where formal townships and squatter areas came together. Furthermore, both of these were actually inside the homelands, in this case that of KwaZulu. This meant that the young comrades were brought directly into confrontation with a state that was inspired by a patriarchal ideology echoing widespread concerns among older blacks regardless of their links to the land; and whose very existence was dependent on preventing an ANC ascendancy in South Africa.

By no means is this exhaustive of the ways in which migrant workers can be differentiated in terms of their geographic experience beyond Mamdani's 'rural'. One that instantly leaps to mind is the distinction between those who have always lived in the deep rural areas and those who were forcibly relocated into them under apartheid. The numbers here, the relative proportions, are huge. So-called 'resettlement' involved the transplantation of former share croppers, labor tenants and wage workers from the 'white' rural areas along with those forcibly uprooted from what the apartheid authorities had defined as 'black spots'.⁸ According to Simkins (1983),

⁸ That is, areas of black settlement outside the reserves and inside that part of South Africa defined by the 1913 Land Act and its subsequent amendments as for white ownership only.

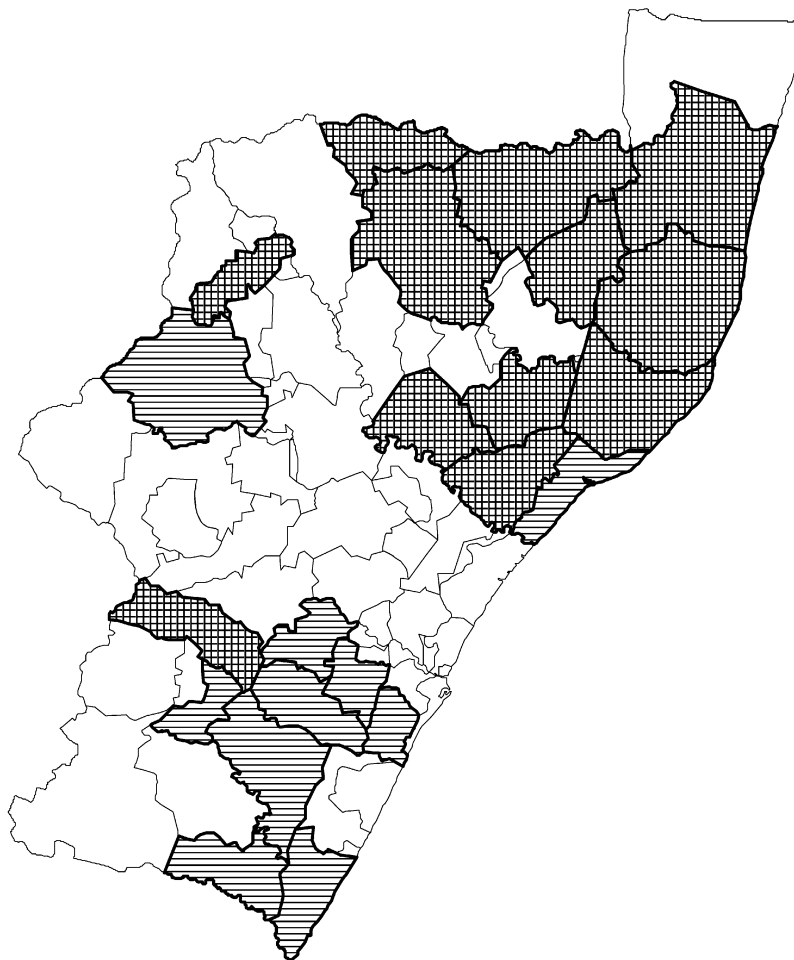


Fig. 2. Residuals from the Regression of Percent Vote for the IFP, 1996 on 'Deep Rural Area-ness'. The same qualifications apply as to Fig. 1, but now all magisterial districts falling in the first two quartiles of 'Deep Rural Area-ness' are included.

between 1950 and 1980 the proportion of all Africans in South Africa living in the homelands increased from 39.7% to 52.7%, and this was largely the product of relocation. Its significance from the standpoint of Mamdani's thesis lies in their relation to tribal chiefs. Most of the relocatees were not given any land rights and so the chief would have occupied a rather different position in their social world than was the case of the long term indigenes. Moreover, as former peasants removed from the centers of gravity of native life in the reserves, or what were later to become the homelands, it is considerably less likely that they would have been subject to the same sorts of processes of identity formation.⁹ Unfortunately, intriguing as are the possibilities that this source of differentiation opens up, it is not one that we can address given the data at our disposal. It is to those data that we now turn.

The data

The database for this study is a file of responses to a questionnaire originally administered to 183 workers on the Durban docks. The sampling assumed a snowball form with a view, however,

⁹ As Gillian Hart (2002) has pointed out, Mamdani's dichotomized categories — rural/urban, centralized/decentralized despotism "obscure key dimensions of the agrarian question — namely the dramatic dispossession that took place from the 1960s through forced removals and farm evictions, and the formation of huge townships with urban-like densities in rural areas" (p. 43).

to making the sample representative with respect to three particular categories: meeting a known breakdown of workers by job category (i.e., laborer, crane driver, clerk, etc.), of age (the general age distribution was established by a prior study) and of a known breakdown according to accommodation (i.e., in hostels and informal settlements).

Not all of the respondents originate from within KwaZulu–Natal, however. Given our interest in the significance of regional origin for identities and political attitudes, the sample had to be reduced to the 149 respondents who were in fact from within the area. Once attention was confined to those respondents who provided answers on all the survey items we were interested in, we were left with a sample of 129. About a quarter of these live in a compound on dock property. Others live in squatter settlements, lodge with township residents or share flats in areas that were formerly exclusively white. But all are domiciled elsewhere other than the Durban metropolitan region: they are all migrant workers who move back and forth, with varying periodicity, between some rural area or town elsewhere and the Durban area.

How Durban dockworkers differ

The first thing that we need to note here is the tremendous variability across the workers in the sample. On the key variable of party political preference, the vast majority, and *pace* what one might have expected from the received wisdom about migrant workers, expressed a preference for the ANC. Only about 24% opted for the Inkatha Freedom Party.

There is also implicit in Mamdani's treatment a relative homogeneity of identity across migrant workers. For the most part, it would seem, they tend to identify with the 'traditional' institutions of the tribal chief, to be patriarchal and to have the same sense of difference from the urbanized. [Table 1](#) suggests that with respect to this particular sample of migrant workers, this is far from the truth, but consistent with the fact that support for the IFP is in fact, far from universal among the sample. Consider in this regard those identity variables where respondents were asked to react to some statement. In the scoring for these, 'Strongly Agree' was recorded as one, 'Strongly Disagree' as five, 'Unsure' as three and a simple 'Agree' or 'Disagree' as two or four. The second column of [Table 1](#) records the mean responses to these statements. In three of these cases, the mean response falls just short of four: that is, very close to a mean response of 'Disagree'. Only in the case of the second identity variable – "All African people should show respect to the chiefs and elders" – is there anything that suggests a mean response close to 'Agree'. Yet judging from the third column of the table there is also quite a bit of variation. Some intuitive sense of what this means is provided in the fourth and fifth columns where the summed 'Strongly Agree' and 'Agree' percentages are arrayed alongside the summed 'Strongly Disagree' and 'Disagree' rates.

Mamdani, it will be recalled, also has a somewhat monolithic view of the urban–rural and relations between them. For his prototypical migrant worker, the city is where culturally he – for in Mamdani's thesis, the migrant worker is a 'he' – cannot feel at home. The city is a place of alien cultural values, and we tried to capture this in some of the questions indicated in [Table 1](#). Yet an argument can be made for somewhat more nuanced relations than this. There is, after all, a long history of migrant workers becoming urbanized on a more permanent basis. Some sinking of roots in urban areas, some distancing from the rural areas, over perhaps varying periods of a person's life, should not be surprising.

One interesting indicator here is the extent to which the dockworkers lived in compounds or hostels: the customary place of residence for migrant workers and one that Mamdani associates with traditional identities and support of the IFP. There is evidence elsewhere that compound or

Table 1
Identities: means and standard deviations

	Mean	Standard deviation	% Agree + strongly agree	% Disagree + strongly disagree
“There will always be a place for the chief and tribal authorities in South Africa”	3.350	1.099	15	38
“All African people should show respect to the chiefs and elders”	2.163	0.762	84	8
“City people are foolish in rejecting the leaders which migrant workers from the rural areas admire”	3.801	0.965	12	77
“City people are far too willing to accept the way whites want them to behave”	3.610	0.901	14	67
“Migrant workers are more fortunate than township blacks because they can get away from the white man’s world if they wish”	3.921	1.050	12	80
“Migrant workers would be wise not to wish their wives to join them to live in the city”	3.255	0.989	30	50

hostel living is a rejection of the city and its temptations. But in fact only about one quarter of the dockworkers (26.4%) lived in one or the other. Any argument in favor of the rural-ness of the migrant worker might take comfort from the fact that the percent planning to retire to the countryside, presumably to the traditional areas, was much higher at 76.7%. But eventual retirement to the rural areas is not incompatible with a working life spent mainly in the city and constructed around relationships in the city.

Visiting behavior gives a clue to the latter. The frequency with which workers visited their homes elsewhere varied very considerably (Table 2). Especially indicative, however, are attitudes to where children should be brought up. This is particularly the case given the intensity of the patriarchal attitudes associated with migrant workers. So while about 20% of the respondents were unsure, the remainder split between the city and the countryside. The fact that approximately 40% were not just happy, but actually wanted their children to grow up in the city flies vigorously in the face of the city-rejecting migrant worker, anxious to distance himself and his family from the evils of the urban. In this regard, however, it is consistent with the data in Table 1 and the fact that half strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that “Migrant workers would be wise not to wish their wives to join them to live in the city.”

Identities, geography and voting

Univariate analyses

We want to turn now and explore a very simple conception of voting for the IFP. Our argument is that the immediate conditions for voting preferences are identities: specifically the identities that we have tried to measure through the questions indicated in Table 1. This is consistent

Table 2

“How often do you usually visit your home in your district of origin, apart from public holidays?”

More than once a month	7.0%
Monthly	39.5%
After 2–4 months	27.1%
Once or twice a year	10.9%
Less than once a year	15.5%

with Mamdani’s argument. Given the relative economic homogeneity of migrant workers it makes sense. Identities in turn are conditioned by geographical circumstance. We would expect the more urbanized, for example, to be less traditional in their understandings of the world than those more embedded in the rural areas. And as far as regions of origin are concerned, those originating from Northern KwaZulu–Natal would be more traditional in their identities given the status of the area as the Zulu heartland.

Table 3 explores the relations between the various indicators of identity that we have at our disposal and preference for the IFP. Relations are measured by gamma coefficients. These are ideally suited to rank-ordered data of the sort we are dealing with here. Note that gamma has as the limits to its range -1.0 indicating perfect inverse correlation and $+1.0$ indicating perfect positive correlation. The first thing we should note here is that all the signs are as we would expect. Identity is indeed related to political attitudes in ways we would deduce from Mamdani’s discussion. Furthermore, some of the coefficients are of a more than respectable magnitude. Of the six coefficients, four are in excess of 0.5 and two exceed 0.7.

Table 4 focuses attention on the relations between, on one hand, our various indicators of urban-ness and on the other, both the various measures of identity and preference for the IFP. However, the relationship between ‘urban-ness’ and the different indicators should be carefully noted. Apart from the variable measuring preference for raising children in the city, all the indicators actually indicate a resistance to assimilating to the urban. So for these latter, we should find positive correlations with expressions of traditional identity. Those who express a preference for raising their children in the city, however, should demonstrate relative aversion to those measures of traditionalism. And as Table 4 shows, this is indeed what we find, and consistently so.

These coefficients are not quite as impressive as those in Table 3. Even so, out of the 24 in total, seven exceed 0.5 and half of them are at least 0.4 in magnitude. All the higher values are distributed fairly evenly across the variables except for ‘visits’ which seems to have the weakest correlations of all four variables. Correlations with preference for the IFP are also quite high, except in the case of ‘visits’.

Table 5 presents correlation coefficients for the regional split, between North and South, the various identity variables and party political preference. What immediately commands attention here is the very high correlation between region and IFP preference. In fact all IFP voters originate in one region, the North and there are none from the South. This does not mean to say that there were no ANC voters in the North; in fact their percent of the total was 59%. The fact that the correlation is unity, therefore, is an artifact of the method used.

However, to complicate matters further, there is a connection between region of origin and the tendency to put down roots in urban areas, as Table 6 indicates.¹⁰ What the gammas suggest

¹⁰ In interpreting this table, note again that North = 1 and South = 0. The first three variables actually express resistance to assimilation to the urban. In other words, Northerners are more likely to live in the compound, express a desire to retire to the rural areas and to visit often, but to express an aversion to raising their children in the city.

Table 3
Identities and party political preferences: gamma coefficients of correlation

	IFP preference
“There will always be a place for the chief and tribal authorities in South Africa”	0.809
“All African people should show respect to the chiefs and elders”	0.592
“City people are foolish in rejecting the leaders which migrant workers from the rural areas admire”	0.718
“City people are far too willing to accept the way whites want them to behave”	0.586
“Migrant workers are more fortunate than township blacks because they can get away from the white man’s world if they wish”	0.452
“Migrant workers would be wise not to wish their wives to join them to live in the city”	0.469

$N = 129$.

is that those from the North are much more likely to intend to retire there, have very traditional views as to where children should be brought up, visit often and are more likely to live in the compound. So assuming that, as per Table 4, urbanization tendencies appear to act as a crucible for the development of less traditional forms of identity, resistance to urbanization on the part of those from the North might explain their greater levels of support for the IFP.

Yet while urbanizing tendencies are less common among those from the North, they are not entirely absent. That raises the question of how urbanization might interact with region of origin in the production of identities. Is it the case that their influences are independent, as we implied in the last paragraph? Or is it that the effect of urbanization on identities varies according to region of origin? This, of course, is difficult ground on methodological grounds since we

Table 4
Identities, party political preference and degrees of urban-ness: gamma coefficients of correlation

	Compound?	Retire to rural areas?	Visiting frequency?	Children to be raised in the city?
“There will always be a place for the chief and tribal authorities in South Africa”	0.549	0.374	0.269	−0.575
“All African people should show respect to the chiefs and elders”	0.450	0.480	0.277	−0.286
“City people are foolish in rejecting the leaders which migrant workers from the rural areas admire”	0.314	0.413	0.176	−0.650
“City people are far too willing to accept the way whites want them to behave”	0.336	0.470	0.188	−0.673
“Migrant workers are more fortunate than township blacks because they can get away from the white man’s world if they wish”	0.372	0.519	0.376	−0.640
“Migrant workers would be wise not to wish their wives to join them to live in the city”	0.340	−0.497	0.218	−0.685
IFP preference	0.689	0.547	0.233	−0.634

$N = 128$.

Table 5
Identities, party political preference and region: gamma coefficients of correlation

	Region
“There will always be a place for the chief and tribal authorities in South Africa”	0.542
“All African people should show respect to the chiefs and elders”	0.317
“City people are foolish in rejecting the leaders which migrant workers from the rural areas admire”	0.419
“City people are far too willing to accept the way whites want them to behave”	0.395
“Migrant workers are more fortunate than township blacks because they can get away from the white man’s world if they wish”	0.412
“Migrant workers would be wise not to wish their wives to join them to live in the city”	0.262
IFP preference	1.0

$N = 128$.

are dealing with correlations and not unambiguous indicators of causal significance. On the other hand, it is of interest that urbanizers from the North are more likely to volunteer more traditional identities than urbanizers from the South. But in order to demonstrate this point, the data have to be presented in more summary form than through the variables on which the tables above are based. We also need to turn to more multivariate forms of analysis.

Multivariate analysis

The objective is to examine the relationships between three variables: region of origin, urbanization tendencies, and identities. Region of origin is simple enough: one is either from the North or from the South. The other two variables are more challenging. We have six measures of identity and four of urbanizing tendencies. Principal components analysis allows us to reduce the two sets of indicators to single dimensions of variation. Accordingly it has been used to reduce the six identity variables to one component of traditional identity. Another analysis derived an urban-ness component on the basis of the four variables indicated in Table 6. Scores for the urban-ness and identity components were then dichotomized at the zero point, so separating the negative from the positive scores.¹¹ These new dimensions were then used to organize the data in a 2×2 table (Table 7). The results are very clear. Those migrant workers from the South who put down roots in urban areas exhibit dramatically different identities, are much less likely to express more traditional attitudes than those who have retained their rural ties to a greater degree. For those from the North, however, the difference is not nearly as stark. So not only are migrant workers from the North less likely to sink roots into the urban area (Table 6). When they do, they seem considerably more likely to hold more traditional attitudes.

We can also use these new dimensions of variation – ‘urban-ness’, ‘traditional identity’, along with region of origin to re-consider voting preferences for the IFP. Recall first of all that any cross-tabulations in this regard can only apply to those from the North since none of our respondents from the deep rural areas of the Southern region expressed such a preference. What we can do, however, is evaluate the possibility that IFP voting is lower among the urban-leaning from the North due to a difference in the effect of identity. Table 8 shows quite unequivocally that that is not the case. Whether a respondent is urban-leaning in his activities

¹¹ In both instances, only one component satisfied the criterion of an eigen value above unity. The loadings on the variables for the two component analyses can be found in Appendices A and B.

Table 6
Urban-ness and region: gamma coefficients of correlation

Compound?	0.490
Retire to rural areas?	0.812
Visiting frequency?	0.412
Where to raise children?	−0.582

or rural-leaning — living in the compound, desirous of retiring to the rural areas, etc. — seems to matter virtually not at all with regard to the effect of identity.

What does this suggest overall, therefore? First consider the relation between urbanization and IFP voting. IFP voting for those sinking urban roots is indeed lower. This would seem to be associated in the first place with the fact that Southerners are more likely to be urbanizing than Northerners and no Southerners voted for the IFP; and in the second place, with a different balance of traditional and modern identities between those who remain committed to the rural areas and those who are clearly shifting towards a more permanent urban residence. Whether urban roots actually alter that balance rather than pre-formed identities selecting people in for putting down those roots is and has to remain, given the data at our disposal, unclear. Interestingly in this regard, among the rural-leaning, there is little difference in terms of the distribution of identities between Northerners and Southerners (Table 7).

Conclusions

One of the most provocative attempts to come to terms with the civil violence that wracked large parts of KwaZulu–Natal in the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly around the major cities, was that of Mamdani. He sought the necessary conditions for this in identities rooted in what he called the bifurcated state, a colonial legacy common to Africa as a whole. In his ideal typical conception, colonial states had been bifurcated in their political geography. A variable part of territory had been consigned to the indirect rule of tribal chiefs, and their particular areas of jurisdiction differentiated ethnically. Customary law prevailed and the chiefs and the headmen subordinate to them, retained rights of distributing land. There was also, however, a part subject to direct rule and civil law. This comprised the areas occupied in significant degree by settlers and/or by the European representatives of commercial interests, along with the colonial administration. These tended to be more urban, and civil rights were allocated by race as opposed to the ethnic criterion that applied to customary rights in areas subjected to indirect rule.

The rural and the urban, the civil and the customary, the racialized and the ethnicized, were not separate from each other. They were connected through circular migration. People left the areas subject to indirect rule for periods of time to work in the cities, the mines, or on white farms and plantations, all the time retaining land in the ‘native’ areas: land to which they enjoyed rights of access by virtue of their ethnicity. They were, as Mamdani put it, ‘peasant workers’. As such they were subject to conflicting identities: on one hand, those appropriate

Table 7
Region, urban-ness and traditional identity

	South	North
Rural-leaning	60% (20)	54% (54)
Urban-leaning	9% (32)	32% (22)

Table 8

Percent voting preference for the IFP, identity and urban-ness (those from the North only)

	Non-traditional identities	Traditional identities
Rural-leaning	16% (25)	69% (29)
Urban-leaning	13% (15)	71% (7)

to an industrial working class and, on the other, befitting rural patriarchs with strong loyalties to the customary and chiefly practice. In the circumstances of late apartheid South Africa and the early years of transition, the encounter with permanent black residents in the cities led to a decisive shift towards the peasant pole of their identity, making them susceptible to the appeal of the party of Zulu nationalism, the Inkatha Freedom Party or the IFP.

At the heart of Mamdani's conception, therefore, is a geography. But given the broader ambitions of his project, which include the desire to challenge the exceptionalness of South Africa and put it on a level with other post-colonial African states, this necessarily involves considerable abstraction from the concrete. In interpreting the politics of migrant labor in South Africa, this is a source of some weakness. The role of tendencies towards permanent urbanization in understanding identities does not receive the attention that it might deserve, for example. Influx control notwithstanding, these processes have a long history. One consequence is that far from being inter-ethnic as it was to a considerable degree on the Rand, the conflict in KwaZulu–Natal was intra-ethnic. Within KwaZulu–Natal, moreover, there were added complexities stemming from a longstanding regional division between the old heartland of the Zulu Kingdom in the north and those chiefdoms in the south that were quite definitely tributary to it and defined as second class.

Although our empirical base is a limited one, it is revealing. The sorts of traditional identities to which Mamdani attributed such significance, certainly help in understanding voting preferences. They are, however, not nearly as monolithic among migrant workers as one might have expected and this is a major reason why the data do not corroborate a majority support, on the part of these migrant workers at least, for the IFP. A considerable fraction of this variation in identities is attributable to the concrete geography of migrant labor within KwaZulu–Natal, though by no means all. Those from the South are much more likely to volunteer less traditional identities than those from the North and the same applies to those who show signs of shifting the centers of gravity of their lives away from the deep rural areas and towards the city. As we have seen, however, this is not an additive relationship. Rather the rural-leaning are likely to be equally traditional in their identities, regardless of region of origin. It is only among the urbanizing that differences emerge. Among the urban-leaning from the South traditional views are much less likely to be encountered than among the urban-leaning from the North.

As far as actual party political preferences are concerned, the most striking result is the fact that none of our sample of migrant workers originating in the South expressed a preference for the IFP, and regardless of whether or not they were sinking urban roots. The negative relationship between urbanization and IFP preferences is one that is confined to migrant workers from the old Zulu heartland.

Taken in toto, therefore, our data suggest a more nuanced account of migrant worker politics – at least in KwaZulu–Natal – than that provided by Mamdani. A political geography that suggests some unity to politics in post-colonial Africa, the heritage of the bifurcated state, appears to provide only limited understanding and needs to be supplemented by an awareness of more

concrete geographies as well as the — still to be determined conclusively — effects that the urbanization process has on identities.

Appendix A

Principal component^a for the identity variables

	Component Loading
“There will always be a place for the chief and tribal authorities in South Africa”	0.752
“All African people should show respect to the chiefs and elders”	0.442
“City people are foolish in rejecting the leaders which migrant workers from the rural areas admire”	0.835
“City people are far too willing to accept the way whites want them to behave”	0.774
“Migrant workers are more fortunate than township blacks because they can get away from the white man’s world if they wish”	0.792
“Migrant workers would be wise not to wish their wives to join them to live in the city”	0.532

^a Accounted for just less than 50% of the total variance. This was the only component with an eigen value exceeding unity.

Appendix B

Principal component^a for the urban-ness variables

	Component Loading
Intention to retire to the rural areas or not ^b	−0.807
Frequency of visits to the home in the rural areas ^c	−0.790
Compound residence or not ^d	−0.491
Preference for where children should grow up ^e	0.778

^a Accounted for approximately 53% of the total variance. This was the only component with an eigen value exceeding unity.

^b Higher values for intending to retire to the rural areas.

^c Higher values for more frequent visiting behavior.

^d Higher values for living in the compound.

^e Higher values for a preference to bring children up in the city.

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