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The Country and the City on the Copperbelt

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Themes of rurality, or "the country," have often provided powerful metaphors for the construction of indigenous critiques of urban, capitalist, industrial encroachments. In a variety of settings, notions of "the country" as natural, pure, authentic, or whole have provided powerful alternative moral images to be contrasted with urban realities conceived as artificial, immoral, corrupt, and anomic. Thus, Raymond Williams (1973) has explored the way in which concepts of country and city in England over the centuries have provided central tropes for conceptualizing the social and economic changes associated with capitalist industrialization. In the same spirit, John and Jean Comaroff (1987) have shown in their work on the Tshidi of South Africa how, where historical consciousness is not formulated according to the conventions of "narrative realism," a set of dualistic contrasts involving notions of inside versus outside, work versus labor, and rural versus urban has provided an implicit critical commentary on the exploitative system of migrant wage labor.

Part I of this article will show how constructions of "the country" in Zambia have been contrasted with urban ills in similar ways, both by localist workers with strong links to rural areas, and by more cosmopolitan urbanites during the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s. Part II, however, will go on to show how such critiques of contrast tended to give way in the late 1970s and 1980s to a more inwardly directed critique that located the blame for urban ills in the supposed "selfishness" of Zambians. Part III explores some of the connections between a changing political-economic situation and these changes in styles of critical apprehension of urban ills. It argues that the shift in styles of critique is linked to changes in ideas of "the country" that have come about through political-economic shifts, as urban dwellers' life trajectories have increasingly been brought into conflict with places long imagined and idealized from a certain distance.

Part I: The Country and the City

People have often said "the city" when they meant capitalism or bureaucracy or centralized power, while "the country," as we have seen, has at times meant everything from independence to deprivation, and from the powers of an active imagination to a form of release from consciousness. At every point we need to put these ideas to the
historical realities: at times to be confirmed, at times denied. But also, as we see the whole process, we need to put the historical realities to the ideas, for at times these express, not only in disguise and displacement but in effective mediation or in offered and sometimes effective transcendence, human interests and purposes for which there is no other immediately available vocabulary. It is not only an absence or distance of more specific terms and concepts; it is that in country and city, physically present and substantial, the experience finds material which gives body to the thoughts.

—Raymond Williams
*The Country and the City*, 1973

A reading of ethnographies and other material from the 1950s and 1960s suggests that much popular commentary on the urban industrial order on the Zambian Copperbelt was organized by metaphors of rural and urban contrast similar to those described by Williams and the Comaroffs, cited above. Specific images of “the country” and “the village” seem to have been used to comment on urban life in at least two different ways, corresponding to two different modes of relationship to rural areas.

From the 1920s onward, workers have settled in the towns of the Copperbelt, often on a semipermanent basis—dwelling in town with their immediate families while maintaining links with rural “home” villages to which they may return upon retirement. The connection an urban worker may have with such a rural “home” ranges along a continuum, from one extreme (which I call localist) in which the rural home village is conceived as a primary home to which the worker returns at intervals, to the other (which I call cosmopolitan) in which the worker (often better off) regards the “home” village as a faraway place, rarely if ever actually seen or visited, to which one is connected more by nostalgia and sentimental attachment than by social and economic ties or life trajectory. Throughout the period in question, workers ranged between these two extremes (cf. Ferguson 1990).

More localist workers with a strong investment in the “home” village seem to have used a dualist scheme to implicitly critique the urban order in contrast with the rural, much as the Comaroffs have reported for the Tswana. Ethnographies from the 1950s provide many examples of moral thinking that opposed moral “village women” to immoral “town women”; rural generosity to urban selfishness; rural cooperation and social ties to urban competition and monetary ties; and, most generally, rural morality to urban immorality. Epstein (1981) supplies a number of examples of the ways in which an idealized rural tradition provided a point of contrast for such workers to the perceived immorality and disorder of urban life during the 1950s (see, e.g., 1981:65, 85, 351). Often this contrast was drawn most sharply in images of women, as in the following popular song of the period:

The girls of the railway line
Are destroying the country
They abandon the customs of home
And simply follow their own.

Painting one’s lips
Does not become a Black.
Look in the mirror,
You are an entirely different creature.

Tattoo marks on the temples,
*A lupande* shell about the neck,
And a string of beads around the waist:
These are the customs of home. [Epstein 1981:351]

A similar moral contrast between rural authenticity and virtue and urban moral decay was sometimes drawn in the legal sphere, as by one “‘Traditional Elder,’” who claimed a superior moral authority to the Urban Courts on the grounds that nowadays the people on the mine just live like animals in the bush. They have no big leaders [*ntungulushi bakalamba*]. If a man and his wife are having a tiff in the house, all they can do is go to the Compound Office, and there they are given a letter to take to the Boma. There they have to leave much money, for at the Boma [i.e., the Urban Court], there is no clarity, *uluse*. The Court Members just work on a ticket basis, not like ourselves who work for *ubuteko*, for the sake of governing just as we do in the villages, without receiving any pay. . . . We follow the law as it is in the village, but there at the Court they work for the salary they get every month. They do not follow the law of government as we know it at home. [Epstein 1958:59]

The moral contrast between an immoral urban world of money and an authentic, morally pure rural community of people was colored, too, by the judgment that the urban world was foreign, a creation of the Europeans, themselves often viewed as immoral (Powdermaker 1962:267).

More generally, Mitchell notes that, all over central and southern Africa during this period, “‘morally and aesthetically evaluative images of town life were common’” (1987:101), and observes that Africans often shared the dominant European judgment of African town life as disorganized and even morally degraded. Similar themes of town as locus of immorality have of course been reported for localists in other urban sites in Africa (e.g., by Mayer [1971:72–75] for East London; Parkin for Nairobi [1978] and Kampala [1969]).

Many images of town were, of course, positive, and these were perhaps the dominant ones, especially among women, for whom town life was often seen as a kind of liberation from the drudgery and social constraints of village life (cf. Hansen 1984; Parpart 1986). But such contrasting evaluations usually existed in a complex mix, as Mitchell has emphasized.

Derogatory images of town life and townsfolk are usually balanced by contrary images in which cities are perceived as the centres of development and change. In terms of this image the countryman is the ignorant and backward yokel as against the urbane and progressive townsman. The countryman is thus morally upright but unprogressive, the townsman is degenerate but an agent of change and development. [Mitchell 1987:102]

The same ambivalence is seen in tales from primary school readers from the 1960s, in which assertions of rural and moral superiority are balanced by stories
such as "Town Mouse Goes to the Bush" and "Bush Mouse Goes to Town," which emphasize the contrasting virtues and faults of progressive but morally degraded urbanites and morally pure but backward villagers (Higgs 1979:332). But, however ambivalent the final judgment, the moral contrast was always available as a resource for critique.

The growing and cosmopolitan urban middle class, meanwhile, was using an imagined, idealized rural "tradition" in a slightly different way: to attack colonial domination and to open up some space between their own cosmopolitan style and the specifically Western cosmopolitanism of the white settlers. In political terms, African nationalists in this period glorified rural folkways and explicitly sought to construct an authentic "Zambian-ness" out of ruralist themes as an alternative to "Westernism." Kenneth Kaunda was only an articulate spokesperson for a tendency that was shared by many cosmopolitans during this period when he declared:

I am a firm believer in a co-operative way of life as it was practiced in simple village-life fashion. Here family life was intact. The general rule was everyone helping their relatives and friends. The infirm were the responsibility of the entire village unit. The aged found hope and joy in their grand-children. The spiritual and moral side of life was the responsibility of grannies, uncles and aunts, mothers and fathers alike.

I refuse to agree with those who say this was all very well for a unit as small as a village, before the advent of the powerful forces that exist in the Western type of colony. Surely it is not beyond the capacity of man to devise ways and means—especially in a place like Northern Rhodesia, where we have a big country with a comparatively small population—that would make it possible for us to accommodate the powerful forces in the Western type of economy, as well as preserve the man that is found in the small village unit who is not de-humanized, heart, soul, mind and body.

I would like to be bold here and declare that to me independence would be meaningless if Northern Rhodesia is going to continue, just like any other country, a floating unit of human beings, travelling toward human destruction. [1966:321]

Notions of an idealized village life as a moral anchor for a new socialist society were in this way deployed by the most urbanized and cosmopolitan of Zambians in nationalist political discourse. A similar set of themes may be seen in the morality plays that are prominent in the fiction of the period, in which rural folk are almost inevitably cast both as backward in some ways, and as the bearers of wisdom and morality, which the typically young, urban, male protagonist ignores only until he sees the error of his ways and integrates their wisdom and virtue into his modernity (Reed 1984).

Similar themes were to be seen in the political struggles surrounding the workers' movements of the period. In the mining industry, workers had already, in the strikes of 1935 and 1940, challenged colonial attempts to channel workers' activism into such neo-traditional and ethnically local organizational structures as the "Tribal Representatives." The prolonged struggle in the 1950s between the emerging trade unions and the old Tribal Representatives revealed the split between, on the one hand, conservative and rurally oriented workers who saw rural community as the counterweight to urban exploitation and, on the other, progres-
sive workers who demanded urban, working-class structures as the only way to address urban inequalities (Epstein 1958). But after Independence in 1964, the new Zambian government consistently countered the wage demands of these organized urban workers with a moral geography that opposed their urban "greed" to supposedly more authentic national interests located in the countryside. The idealized images of rural cooperation and generosity that had informed the nationalist movement were in this way opportunistically yoked to a managerial ideology of worker motivation and wage restraint, all in the name of rural interests for which the state claimed to act as guardian (Ault 1981; Bates 1971; Burawoy 1972). As the minister of labor declared in 1967:

If we are to give way any further to demands for increases we would very likely place in jeopardy the programme of development on which we place our main hope for a better future for the mass of the nation, most of whom at present live in rural areas at far lower standards of life than the urban average earner. [cited in Bates 1971:38]

In the event of strikes, the President asked in 1965, "'Who is going to gain? Who suffers? . . . Your Mother, Father, Brother and the like at home will never forgive you for having failed to get a local clinic, school, roads, etc.'" (cited in Bates 1971:36). What was needed, he added in 1968, was for workers, whose real roots were in the rural areas, to be less selfish and to work harder for the nation.

If, countrymen, I can not move you on principles, I do not move you ideologically, morally, to hard work, then at least I can ask you if you do not want to work hard . . . [to] remember where we come from. The village. Your own mother is there. My own mother is there. . . . They are all there in the village. . . . If morally, ideologically, philosophically, I cannot move you to hard work, at least I can remind you now your own mother, your own aunt, your own uncle, your own father is there in the village, suffering. . . . What is your contribution? . . . What is your contribution? This is my question. [cited in Bates 1971:33]

The implications of all of these uses of ruralist themes was rather different than the localists' condemnation of immoral urbanism. For the point was not to reject modern urban life in its totality, but to make use of ruralist themes, first to reform or replace the colonial system, and then to legitimate the postcolonial order as a genuine African urban alternative. The critique was not of "urban civilization," but of the specifically white, colonial cast it had taken on; "the village" was invoked not as an alternative to the city, but as a moral image that should inspire or discipline urban behavior. For cosmopolitan African urbanites whose life trajectories were at this point quite removed from actual villages, the idea of an authentic, rural, African village life was a resource to be used in the projects of constructing an alternative urban modernity and of legitimating postcolonial rule.

Localist criticism, then, cast a moral indictment on the entire urban order as compared to an idealized rural order, and comprised an implicit and sometimes explicit critique of modernity. Cosmopolitan criticism, on the other hand, sought to undermine Western domination of the urban order (and later to undermine the
claims of urban workers) by invoking a cooperative Zambian tradition conceived as having its most authentic locus in the country. The critique of Westernism was here linked to the promotion of an alternative African modernity. In both strains of criticism, however, “the country” served as symbolic anchor for a critique of urban ills as external to, and imposed upon, the real country and its people.

Part II: The “Selfish Zambian”

Who must we blame for all these wild changes? Obviously it is the black man himself.

—Joseph Bantu
A Straw in the Eye, 1989

In recent years, the uses of ruralist themes in social criticism described above seem to have fallen into relative disuse, even in the face of the catastrophic collapse of the urban economy (associated with a decline in copper prices and a severe debt crisis) and the consequent decline in the quality of urban life. In fieldwork with mine workers in the Copperbelt town of Kitwe in 1985–86, I did find some social critiques still anchored in an idealized ruralism, and urban social and economic ills were sometimes attributed to such external or “foreign” origins as—in descending order of plausibility—the IMF, the South Africans, or the Indian merchants. But by far the more prevalent theme was a striking, inwardly directed moral critique.

Why are things falling apart? Again and again I was told, in a variety of contexts, it is because Zambians are “selfish.” On the job, Zambian supervisors are “only looking out for themselves.” Unlike the white colonial supervisors, many informants insisted, the black Zambians are corrupt and selfish and have no regard for their workers. What is more, there was wide agreement that these same moral flaws could be located in the workers, who, I was told, are “lazy,” “thiev­ing,” and “selfish.” The government, of course, received its share of the blame: informants considered civil servants corrupt and “out for themselves.” But such moral blame was by no means restricted to government and industry. Indeed, what was most striking was the way that the cardinal fault of “selfishness” was applied most vigorously to the “self.” The most sweeping moral judgments often began with the word “We.” Why has the country fallen on such hard time? As one informant put it, “We, the citizens, are to blame. Today, the collectivity is dead. There is nothing but selfishness. All we think about is ourselves.” This applied to personal life as well as public. Spouses were inevitably faulted for not trusting each other, and wives specifically (by male informants) for only being interested in money and selfish pleasures. Rural kin, too, were regularly denounced for their avaricious greed and selfishness, the significance of which we shall see shortly.

Coupled with these harsh denunciations of Zambian selfishness was often a conception of a future in which progress could come only through outside agency. These conceptions often found expression in embarrassingly regressive political fantasies. How might things get better? “If the Europeans would come
back . . .’ ‘If the IMF can help . . .’ ‘If they can bring in some people from outside, from Ghana, from Europe, whatever . . .’ There was the powerful sense here that a progressive moral trajectory could only come from outside. Indeed, it proved extremely difficult to elicit from most informants any morally positive images at all of a Zambian-made future. It is in this sense, I think, that we might understand the response of one mine worker who, when asked what the future might hold for Zambia, replied sadly, ‘‘We black people are unable to speak of the future. We can only talk about the past.’’ Without a credible moral trajectory, how, indeed, is one to talk about the future?

Strikingly similar themes are to be found in recent Zambian fiction. It is easy to find continuity with older themes of rural purity, and of lessons to be learned by arrogant young urbanites. But there is also, and unmistakably, a new ambivalence and pessimism about self and society—a sense of a selfish and morally corrupt world no longer redeemed through rural authenticity.

For instance, Matteo Sakala, a play created through group improvisation by a group of University of Zambia students in 1977 (Kerr and Shoniwa 1978), replays the familiar theme of the arrogant young man who rejects the counsel of his rural elders and learns only through his urban misadventures that he doesn’t really know it all. In a climactic scene, the protagonist, Matteo, opts for a criminal career, through the following dialogue:

**MATTEO:** I had a good job you know. And I wanted to improve. It’s a long story. Anyway, things didn’t work out. You know, when you’re up there, it’s like being in a little boat on the sea. There’s poor bastards swimming, and drowning and splashing and trying to crawl into the boat where it’s comfortable.

**STEADY:** But the sonofabitches inside push ’em out.

**MATTEO:** Kick ’em in the teeth.

**MATTEO:** Right. But even in the boat it’s not really so comfortable. Because you just make one careless slip, and they’ll push you out as well.

**STEADY:** That’s what happened?

**MATTEO:** Exactly.

**STEADY:** Friends dumped you?

**MATTEO:** Right.

**STEADY:** Tough!

**MATTEO:** Bastards! [Pause.]

**STEADY:** Anyway, brother, you don’t have to drown.

**MATTEO:** Hell no, I’ll crawl back into that boat.

**STEADY:** Even here in the water, mwanaw you do fine fine. You just become like a mother-rapin’ shark. Like me. No problem.

**MATTEO:** [Thoughtful] You mean . . . [Matteo stands and advances towards the audience while he contemplates the life of a thief.]

**STEADY:** Join our goondy. [Pause.] Me and my buddies . . . we need someone with brains.

**MATTEO:** Why not? [Pause.] It’s better than drowning.

**STEADY:** That’s right brother. [Kerr and Shoniwa 1978:52–53]

By the play’s end, Matteo has returned ignominiously to the village, but—in a striking contrast to the fiction of an earlier period—the village provides no
salvation. Not only is the chief himself a thief, but Matteo also finds no real community, and feels instead a social outcast. He concludes the final scene by reflecting on the boat image quoted above, and observing that although he has now had “to swim to land,” “yet I don’t really fit here either. Maybe I just belong in the water like a big snake” (1978:85).

Killian Mulaisho’s more recent play, *Tragedy of Pride* (1988), offers an even more bleak resolution of the same general plot line. Again the story revolves around a youth, Milimo, who has rejected rural ways and the wisdom of his elders, this time by spurning an arranged marriage with a village girl, Juliana. Milimo comes to town, where he lives a fast life and becomes known by the name “Poggy Wizard.” Eventually the fast living runs out, and Milimo loses everything. He sees his foolishness and plans his return to the village, where “all is at peace.” “Surely,” he reflects, “my salvation lies in the village and in Juliana, the village girl whom they hoped I would marry!” (1988:24). But again, there is a twist in the so-far conventional story line. For instead of learning his lesson and being reintegrated into society, Milimo finds that Juliana has married another man, and the village has no place for him. When he complains that he is “no longer a man of the city,” his own father tells him: “Yet you neither belong here my son.” The play ends with Milimo reflecting on his despair, and observing.

And the village—so cold and indifferent, sleeps soundly when I, its child is having a sleepless night. I had come to make amends, to lead a new life. But this [points to various places on the ground], this, this is all I get. . . . “You neither belong here” my father has said. [Mulaisho 1988:29]

The play ends here, with the following stage directions:

*Milimo lies prostrate on the floor and uncontrollable wailing is heard in the background for half a minute. Lights go off again and play ends. N.B. No mourners to come on stage. [1988:29]*

The same themes of selfishness and moral disintegration are captured even more sharply in Joseph Bantu’s complex novel *A Straw in the Eye* (1989). In this novel, the town is again a place of moral decay, where “man has lost his self-conscience and he does not know who he is or where he is going,” a place where Zambians have forgotten their own old cultures and blindly imitate an imported and inauthentic Western way of life (1989:116–117). But it is striking that “the country” is not here presented as a moral contrast, but only as another arena for corruption and immorality. The village is a place where witchcraft is rampant, where relatives are continually trying to kill each other out of jealousy and malice. Such practices are seen as widespread—“Nobody who has lived in Zambia can doubt that [witchcraft] throws its shadow over every activity of the country’s subjects” (1989:90)—and increasing—“Just as the white man is advancing in technology, the black man is advancing in witchcraft. It has grown tremendously” (1989:91). As the story unwinds, “the village” is gradually revealed not as a cooperative, moral community, but as a cruel and fearsome setting crisscrossed
by corruption, treachery, and murder. In the course of his adventures, the young, male narrator is abused and mistreated by a range of unsavory rural characters, including corrupt and selfish schoolmasters, bullying students, and a cruel and immoral uncle, who is himself eventually murdered in premeditated, cold blood by his neighbors and enemies (1989:88–92, 129, 133, 138, 144, 147, 170–171). Even more striking, the narrator himself is implicated in the same immoral order of things, both categorically ("The European is going, but our own people are just as bad" [1989:156]) and individually, as in the following striking passage:

Nobody by now, can deny the fact that most men lead two lives—a normal life and a secret life. Society is, of course, only able to judge a man’s character by his own normal life. If he makes a mistake, however, and his secret life becomes public, then he is judged by his own secret standards and is, more often than not ostracized as punishment. In spite of this, he is still the same man who, a moment before received the praises of society. At least he is the same man with one important difference: he has been found out.

By now, because of my complete frankness, you may have come to the conclusion that I am exceedingly unpleasant. You may even have decided that I’m unethical, dishonest, vain and worthless. These conclusions are not due to your own insight and perception. They are due to my own frankness. [Bantu 1989:159]

Recent Zambian works of fiction thus reproduce many of the same themes of "selfishness" and inner corruption that were discovered in the interviews with mine workers. They also hint of a connection between the moral standing of "the country" and the moral standing of the self, which I wish to explore in the final section.

**Part III: The Country and the Self**

For the wars that are raging again
Is African goodness good enough?

—Taban Lo Liyong

*Ballads of Underdevelopment, 1976*

The question I want to pose here is this: Why did the social critiques of the 1950s and 1960s—critiques that attributed urban social evils to an origin outside of, and external to, an African society conceived as authentic, morally pure, and essentially rural—give way to such a destructive and self-denigrating contemporary critique locating these evils in an internal and essential Zambian selfishness? What happened to the authentic, pure, morally centered "country" that served so long as a basis for critique? To explain this, I suggest that it is necessary, among other things, to examine the changing relationship between urban workers and their rural dependents.

Very schematically, the workers I have described as "localists" have strong ties to a rural nexus of dependents and kin in a "home" village, and they invest heavily in maintaining their social position there. They visit often, contribute clothing and money to their rural kin, and expect to return to the village upon
retirement at age 55 or earlier. The workers at the other extreme, the ones I have called "cosmopolitan," have more or less severed their social links with the "home" village and have made their life choices on the assumption that they will not have to retire to a rural village, but will manage to live out their lives in town. Today, with the urban economy in collapse, many of these "cosmopolitans," even at rather high socioeconomic levels, are finding it impossible to remain in town after leaving employment, and are facing the possibility (which they never expected or prepared to face) of being forced to return to the rural kin they have ignored and snubbed for so long (cf. Ferguson 1990).

What does this mean for the ruralist critique of urban industrialism? Given this set of relations between urban workers and rural dependents, as the urban economy continues its downward spiral, two things happen at once. First, of course, the need for a critique grows. The collapse of living standards and rise in social evils such as crime, hunger, and destitution must be in some way explained and blame attributed. And second, the antagonism between urban workers and rural dependents intensifies. The economic decline means not only that dependents have greater needs, but also that they have greater power, since workers must now count on returning "home," and are therefore under greater pressure to make their peace with their rural brethren. This new power in the hands of the rural dependents finds expression in new demands made on workers' earning power, even as workers' shrinking real income means that they are less and less able even to satisfy the old demands. Under the changed circumstances, even the most loyal localists feel besieged with unfair and impossible demands.

Meanwhile, cosmopolitans (who have largely cut their links with rural dependents) now must face a return to rural life for which they are wholly unprepared. Indeed, having defied rural opinion and denied rural claims for so long (in the mistaken belief that a return "home" would never be necessary), many of these squeezed cosmopolitans see "the village" as a potentially hostile and frightening environment. For increasing numbers, "the country" now no longer appears as a nostalgic fantasy, but as a terrifying real destination. The village, far from being the locus of an authentic morality, appears, rather, as an object of intense fear, often articulated as fear of witchcraft.

As the economic collapse worsens, then, "the country" comes more and more to appear as (in the first instance) the locus of selfish, greedy, parasitic demands on strapped localist workers and (in the second) as a fearsome and threatening site of potentially violent and vindictive acts against noncompliant cosmopolitans. The rural kin once invoked as the very paradigm of a morally centered world of love and reciprocity—"your own mother, your own aunt, your own uncle, your own father" (cf. Bates 1971:33)—are increasingly likely to be perceived as potential antagonists, or even enemies.

This creates a double-bind at the conceptual level, for the powerful forces demanding a critique of urban life are at the same time generating changed circumstances that undermine the suitability of "the country" to serve as the internal base for such a critique. As the economic crisis deepens, "the village"—long conceived as somehow constituting the moral heart of society, the "real Zam-
bia"—must come to seem more and more of a selfish and even sinister place. Such a turnabout in the moral standing of what had been understood as the true social locus of authenticity, purity, and wholeness necessarily undermines the effectiveness of the old critique that contrasted the artificial, urban, industrial immoralities of imposed capitalism with the authentic, morally centered social core located in rural life. With the urban image of “the country” increasingly dominated by themes of selfishness and treachery, it becomes more comprehensible that social critique should have nowhere to turn but inward, and that the failings of the urban economy should come to appear as attributable not to any external force, but to the internal moral faults of the Zambian character.

In the classical European pattern of urbanization, as Williams (1973) showed, urban images of rurality have often been remarkably free-floating, related strongly to the conceptual needs and political fantasies of urban society, and only weakly to actual rural conditions. Where country and city are socially and experientially segregated, it is perhaps easy for conceptions of “the country” to become largely, and sometimes almost completely, “deteriorialized,” insofar as “the country” figures in the lived world of such permanently urbanized populations principally as a metaphorical “other” to urban life, and only occasionally or secondarily as a lived social context in its own right. In Zambia, however, as in much of the rest of the world, “the country” as ideal and “the country” as locale are less easy to separate, and the deterritorialization of rural images may be in some measure checked or complicated by the intrusion of rural lived experience. It is in this way, I have argued, that in Zambia “the country” as imagined locus of moral purity and wholeness is today increasingly in tension with “the country” as the seat of actual and antagonistic social relations.

I suggest, too, that wherever “the country” is in this way partly, but not wholly, deteriorialized or free-floating, such tensions are always potentially present. Among migrant and semi-migrant urban communities, the way in which rurality is imagined (and thus the way it can figure in a critical apprehension of the urban) is necessarily conditioned both by the politico-symbolic demands of the urban present and, at the same time, by the political and economic character of the social relations linking the country and the city.

At a time when anthropologists are becoming more concerned with such things as displacement, migration, and exile, it is perhaps useful to remind ourselves that such conditions are rarely experienced as absolute, unambiguous, or final. There is a temptation to see displacement as a specific social condition, a form of life that follows from some definitive break with a social life rooted in ancestral places. Yet dislocation is more often a partial and conditional state of affairs, an uncertain predicament that entails neither a clear sense of membership in one’s community of origin nor an uncomplicated conviction of having left it behind. For the experience of displacement is full of ambiguity and indeterminacy; one may not know oneself whether one is a “temporary migrant” or a “permanent immigrant,” an “exile” or a “visitor,” an “urbanite” or a “villager,” since such fixed statuses may hinge on the unknowable dice-toss of the future. In such circumstances, the nature and significance of continuing connections with
places left behind may be extremely variable and may, as in the case discussed here, shift in unexpected ways over time. The empirical exploration of how such shifting connections may frame experiences of place, community, and society among the partially and provisionally dislocated would appear to be rich ground for future anthropological research.

Notes

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See also Kaunda (1966:14–15, 138, 232). Similar themes were of course developed by other African nationalists of the period, most notably Julius Nyerere, whose ideology of African socialism centered on an idealized picture of African village life governed by the familial, communal spirit of ujamaa.

Taban’s poems refer more to the Kenyan context than to the Zambian, but evoke powerfully the sense of ambivalence and self-doubt that seems to grip Africans all over the continent nowadays.

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