



## **‘Spaces of Resistance’ – African workers at Shoprite in Maputo and Lusaka<sup>1</sup>**

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Hopes must instead be focused upon the liberation struggle in Southern Africa, the implications of which are bound to have truly continental dimensions (Arrighi and Saul 1973:87).

### **Abstract**

South Africa's reintegration into Southern Africa since 1994 has opened the way for renewed investments by South African firms in African countries. New shopping malls are one visible impact of this post-Apartheid development. This article is about the regional claims and the regional resistance of workers at the foreign branches of Shoprite, a South African retail multinational. Two shopping mall workplaces of Shoprite in Zambia (Manda Hill) and Mozambique (Centro Commercial) are the case studies for this analysis. The paper compares the experiences of retail workers at Shoprite, a South African food supermarket chain and Africa's largest retailer, in two cities – Maputo, Mozambique and Lusaka, Zambia, exploring the variations and similarities in the responses of workers to their South African work environments. While Zambia's 'expectations of modernity' have led to disillusionment, Mozambican workers accept South African investment as a necessary phase of Mozambique's recovery. I argue that a new regional moment is shaping the workplace experiences of African workers, opening up a new 'space of hope' in the region. South African retail multinational corporations are important agents of a new regional imagination amongst retail workers in post-Apartheid Southern Africa.

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## Résumé

La réintégration de l'Afrique du Sud au sein de l'Afrique Australe depuis 1994 s'est accompagnée d'une recrudescence des investissements de sociétés sud-africaines dans certains pays africains. L'émergence de nouveaux centres commerciaux est l'une des conséquences visibles de ce développement post-apartheid. Cet article porte sur les revendications régionales et la résistance régionale des travailleurs des filiales étrangères de Shoprite, une multinationale sud-africaine spécialisée dans la vente au détail. Deux centres commerciaux de Shoprite en Zambie (Manda Hill) et au Mozambique (Centro Commercial) sont pris comme études de cas. Cet article compare l'expérience des travailleurs de Shoprite (une chaîne sud-africaine de supermarché alimentaire, le plus grand spécialiste africain de la vente au détail) dans deux villes : Maputo, au Mozambique et Lusaka, en Zambie, en étudiant les variations et les similitudes au niveau des réactions des travailleurs envers leur environnement de travail sud-africain. Tandis que les attentes zambiennes « en matière de modernité » se sont muées en désillusionnement, les travailleurs mozambicains, eux, considèrent l'investissement sud-africain comme un passage nécessaire vers la reprise économique. J'affirme dans cet article qu'une nouvelle dynamique régionale est en train de changer les expériences professionnelles des travailleurs africains, ouvrant ainsi un nouvel « espace d'espoir » au sein de cette région. Les corporations multinationales sud-africaines de vente au détail constituent des agents majeurs d'un nouvel imaginaire régional chez les travailleurs de la vente au détail, dans l'Afrique Australe post-apartheid.

South Africa's democratisation in the 1990s heralded a new era for the Southern African region. South Africa's transition conferred a new respectability on the region's policies and projects, catapulting South Africa from pariah to regional liberator. Democracy, however, has had many unintended outcomes, coinciding with a global shift away from left-wing economic policies. At the same time as the incumbent President Thabo Mbeki declared his *African Renaissance* in the early 1990s, many Southern African countries deepened economic liberalisation and privatisation and released state enterprises for sale to mainly private, foreign investors.

Stepping into this opening provided by African liberalisation, South African multinational corporations levered their geographic advantage to take advantage of these new investment opportunities. These neoliberal economic policies of African governments converged with a period of restless, over-accumulated, South African capital. In the last decade, new shopping malls have been opened in at least fifteen African cities where none previously existed. While shopping malls and department stores are not a new phenomenon in Africa, new South African-owned shopping centres have extended the reach of malls in the continent. Against the backdrop of stark

economic statistics on Africa, the shopping mall materialises with all the glitz of the Manhattan mall – marble-tiled entrances, bright neon lights, wide aisles and offering a choice of thousands of new commodities. South African retail companies such as Shoprite Holdings are amongst the principal investors opening up these new malls.

South African retailers have built new gas stations, fast food outlets, furniture stores, video shops, clothing and general merchandise stores and supermarkets in shopping centres that sport key South African retail brand names (such as Woolworths, Truworths, Shoprite, Debonairs, Hungry Lion, Engen, Kwikserve, ProFurn and Game). In the uneven African cityscape, these bright, modern outlets are part of a new urban development, in stark contrast to the old central business districts, which are decaying. While Afropessimism emphasises Africa's economic stagnation, the shopping mall in Africa brings a new march of 'modernity', as promised by President Thabo Mbeki's 'African Renaissance'.

These changed African cityscapes are part of the new, post-apartheid moment in southern Africa. When apartheid rule ended in South Africa in 1994, it marked the demise of white settler regimes in southern Africa, re-linking the outcast South African nation to independent Africa (Simon 2001). This new regional moment has opened up a new regional space, where the 'definition of the possible' for the southern African region is changing. Emerging from decades of decline and despair, the new 'cathedrals of consumption' are a 'space of hope' for African workers, offering a source of jobs and wages, participation in commodity utopias, and reinsertion into the global economy. South African companies are changing the boundaries of the possible for African workers.

This paper argues that workers at Shoprite in two different locales – Mozambique and Zambia – have very similar regional claims, as I term them. Workers are implicated in a politics of scale where rights and claims might be asserted at local, metropolitan, regional, national and global levels. The case study below shows how Shoprite workers privilege the regional over the national scale in their reference points. While national and other levels retain importance for workers, regional claim-making becomes an important spatial strategy for workers at this foreign firm.

The paper examines the dispositions and scales of claim-making amongst retail workers at the supermarkets in two shopping malls – Manda Hill in Lusaka, Zambia and Centro Commercial in Maputo, Mozambique. I argue that a new regional moment is shaping the workplace experiences of African workers and leading to new, boundary-drawing strategies for African workers. Workers at Shoprite in post-apartheid southern Africa are implicated in a politics of scale where rights and claims may be asserted at local, metropoli-

tan, regional, national and global levels. I employ the concept of 'claim-making' to delineate these spatialised contestations and competing regionalisms. 'Scalar' translations – pragmatically shifting reference points between one geographical level and another – shape the ways that local resistance achieves national, regional or global purchase. Shopping mall workers are included in the 'space of consumption' through their position as company employees. Their claims, however, are directed at the regional company and its head-office in South Africa and to a lesser extent at their national governments and local managers.

Shoprite workers at the shopping malls in Lusaka and Maputo privilege the regional over the local or national scales in their geographic reference points. While national and other levels retain importance for workers, regional claim-making has become an important spatial strategy for retail workers at these shopping malls. The Shoprite workplace is an important agent of a new regional imaginary amongst these retail workers. Workers claim inclusion into the regional company on an equal basis with South African workers, privileging ties to South Africa that go through the company. The South African reference point in workers' claims is interpreted here as a geographic imaginary, expressed as regional claims.

South Africa has emerged as a universal standard for workers at these Shoprite stores. South Africa pervades both the national and local lives of Zambian and Mozambican workers in the formal wage sector. The first section of the paper provides a brief background to the shopping mall developments in Mozambique and Zambia. The second section discusses the similarities between workers at Shoprite in Maputo and Lusaka and is based on interviews with stratified samples of workers at the two shopping centres. The third section proposes the theoretical concept of 'regional claims' to characterise the regional claims of workers at South African-owned companies in other African contexts, drawing on the 'politics of scale' and the 'geographies of labour' to analyse this new regional moment. This section outlines the new hopes expressed by these workers and the contradictions that these expectations are generating. The fourth section cites cases of regional resistance and suggests that new regional contradictions between African workers and South African companies present fresh opportunities for African workers to make a political claim on post-Apartheid Southern Africa, hence shopping malls become a 'space of hope' in the African city.

### **New 'spaces of hope' for African workers in the city**

While regional observers contemplated stronger economic links between South Africa and Africa as one outcome of the new region, the predatory surge of South African capital into Africa has been an unanticipated outcome

of democratic South Africa. Seeking a 'spatial fix' (Harvey 1999) for overaccumulated capital in the domestic market, South African multinationals have expanded into Africa and beyond, in the search for new markets. At a time when African governments were desperate to attract foreign investors, a significant portion of new investment for these countries has been generated internally in the continent. Africa has become South Africa's fourth largest export market, and at the same time South Africa has become the largest foreign direct investor in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

While comparatively small, these new investments have an important qualitative impact. Key new investment sectors are retail and services, economic activities that are highly visible physically in urban environments. While the retail and wholesale sectors are significant growth areas in Zambia and Mozambique, they also have a broader cultural significance because of their global urban design and their diversified consumer choices – fast food, videos, cell phone services, banking, restaurants, general merchandise (duvets, curtains, door-knobs), music shops/CD distributors.

These economic developments coincide with new regional expectations that South Africa's high levels of economic development would generate benefits for other African countries after South Africa's democratisation. The new regional moment opened up by post-apartheid South Africa has signaled new possibilities to African workers. If anything new is happening in the midst of Africa's marginalisation, then these workers are at the helm of one dynamic process, what may be referred to as the 'mall of Africa'. To this extent they are like Bergquist's (1984) strategic workers in enclave economies, enjoying an enhanced status because of the importance of their sector to the national economy. Against the backdrop of Zambia's economic reversals and Mozambique's devastating civil war, the shopping mall becomes a symbolic container of a renewed stab at modernity.

Zambia and Mozambique are amongst the poorest countries in the region, emerging from phases of severe economic decline that structural adjustment exacerbated. Securing foreign investment is a central strategy of both these countries for future economic growth. In the 1990s, peace, democratic elections and relative economic stability have stilled the trauma of war and transition in Mozambique. With the lowest South African investment from the Apartheid era compared to other countries of the region, liberalisation of the Mozambican economy since 1985 has allowed a dramatic increase in South African investment.

At the height of Zambia's growth in the 1970s, workers were optimistic about the future. Modern life was within their grasp, particularly for workers on the growth-generating mines.

The failure of copper industrialisation and independence-led modernity has made Zambians look to foreign investors for Zambia's return to the 'modern' world. The turn to structural adjustment in the 1980s opened the way for South African and other multinationals to re-enter the Zambian economy on highly favourable terms. While independence and the struggles that emerged over the direction of the Zambian economy brought an awareness of the importance of the national economy, public discourse advocates the idea that external assistance is indispensable for the country's survival. South Africa has emerged high up on the list of external rescue parties. Workers focus on the principal international investors, who also hail from southern Africa.

Historically, Mozambique has been a pivotal part of the regional migrant labour system. Like in Zambia, workers in Mozambique have served South African multinational capital, mostly in South African mines as migrant workers. In post-war Mozambique and post-apartheid Southern Africa, however, South African capital is flowing inwards into Mozambique. Labour's outward flow as migrants to South Africa is now being superseded by a new segment of waged workers inside Mozambique working for South African multinationals.

Manda Hill Complex in the capital city of Lusaka is a centerpiece of Shoprite's Zambian investment, with a cost of US\$20m for the shopping centre. Employees and managers were drawn from state-owned wholesale shops when the company first started out in Zambia. The center takes up 22,260 square metres, of which Shoprite occupies 4,608 square metres (E-mail communication, Center Manager, Kangwa Mukuka, 5 October 2002). The complex is 20 percent owned by Zambia Venture Capital and 80 percent Commonwealth Africa Investment, the name under which Shoprite trades in Zambia. There are about 56 tenants at the store. Shoprite and Game (general merchandising retail multinational) – both South African-owned – are the two anchor tenants. Shoprite-Manda Hill (in Lusaka) is by far the largest of the firm's eighteen Zambian supermarkets. (The three other medium-sized outlets are in Lusaka and in the Copperbelt towns of Ndola and Kitwe. The remaining fourteen stores employ fewer than a hundred workers each.) It is not only Manda Hill's larger physical size that makes it Shoprite's Zambian flagship, but also because Manda Hill has been the only shopping mall of its kind to date in Zambia.

Modeled on the US shopping mall, the Shoprite Centre in Maputo – Centro Commercial – takes up about 12,500 square metres for the shops and 12,500 hectares for the car park of downtown municipal property. The Centre entailed an initial capital outlay of R5.4m (less than US\$1m at the time).<sup>3</sup> The Central Business District in Maputo is spread out rather than concentrated in

a cluster of shops. The Shoprite store is situated on the edge of the CBD, in the downtown area. It is located in an L-shaped, single-storey mall of shops, many of them South African-owned (Truworths, Pep stores). Flanked by a diversity of housing, the Centre is sandwiched between beautiful houses and middle-range apartments on its east – what Mozambicans have called 'cement city' – while to its north and west there is a sprawling, high-density township abuzz with people and informal markets.

Shoprite's food supermarkets in African cities are located in the suggestive ambience of the shopping mall. Being part of a shopping mall locates these Shoprite workers in the heart of urban capitalism. Working in this 'space of consumption' places the employee in the midst of this promise of modernity. Retail workers share this space of consumption, even when they are excluded as consumers. Unlike the dreary smokestack environs of the factory worker, the mall employees' labour power is consumed under glamourised conditions. Workers are aware of their relatively privileged position, not least because they were specially selected from around the country to make up the staff at this store. They are aware of the improved retail ambience of Shoprite. In the twelve stores that I visited in Zambia and Maputo, workers followed the uniform dress code of the company, projecting a pristine image that corresponded to the upmarket environs of the mall. Going to work links Shoprite workers to the country's newest economic developments, the 'developed' shopping mall, material evidence of new investment and the economy's new 'spaces of hope'.

*Centro Commercial* (Maputo) is smaller than Manda Hill (Lusaka) in both size and capital investment. Both centres are located on the outskirts of the central business district with a predominance of South African-owned retailers and a few locally-owned stores. Despite their geographic separation, different histories and languages, however, the similarities in the claims and perceptions of workers at these two stores were striking.

### **Similarities between workers at Shoprite in Maputo and Lusaka**

To the extent that workers at Shoprite in Lusaka and Maputo imagine a utopia on earth, South Africa is the geographic reference point and the standard-bearer of a better life. Respondents believed that conditions for South African workers are vastly superior. Shoprite workers believe that Shoprite-South Africa workers are able to afford cars and drive to work, get loans and own houses, whereas they cannot even own bicycles. 'Here in Zambia once you are seen with a car, then you are a suspect of theft. They'll definitely think you stole something from Shoprite.'<sup>4</sup>

When asked whether there was anything they liked about South Africa, workers praised South Africa as a country. When asked whether they expected help from South Africa, many workers answered in the affirmative. 'When we heard that President Mandela has won the election, we were very happy that South Africa was going to help us.'<sup>5</sup>

These views were echoed in the interviews with permanent, casual and female workers. Workers tied their future expectations for Zambia and Mozambique to South Africa and its ability to extend its development to southern African countries. They idealised conditions in South Africa. They realise that they are disadvantaged when things are taken at a national political or economic scale as the standard of living is relatively lower in their countries. They therefore wanted regional economic parity.

In this sense, their claim is one in favour of regional company-level boundaries rather than being based on regional political considerations. While they said that they were hoping for help from South Africa, they did not express strong feelings of political entitlement because of their countries' respective roles in the anti-apartheid struggle. Their main consideration was that they are serving Shoprite well, the company is prospering and therefore they deserve economic returns for their effort. All respondents believed that they should get the same payment and conditions as workers in South Africa, arguing, without exception, that everyone who is part of Shoprite falls 'under the same umbrella' or 'under the same roof', and therefore should be treated the same.

A number of reasons emerged as the main motive for seeking parity in conditions and benefits amongst workers in the region. Much of their sense of regional entitlement was market-oriented: they worked hard and therefore they should be rewarded. Workers demonstrated a desire to make the company succeed if it would improve their conditions. The geographical expansion of Shoprite showed that it was economically successful. They were contributing to Shoprite's profitability, they argued, and therefore should be treated the same as other workers. In so doing, they wanted to discount national variations and set up harmonised regional standards. Economic viability should entitle workers to the same or better conditions as workers in the same company in other countries, they contended.

Workers have knowledge of their South African counterparts through various means. First and primarily, at least 90 percent of the respondents in both countries cited the company magazine and its reports on workers as the source of their information when asked how they knew that South African workers had better working conditions. The newspaper is distributed regularly on the shop-floor: from head office and workers circulate amongst themselves the copies that they receive and what they have read. Images



such as the festivities attached to particular social occasions such as weddings, engagements and birthdays had a profound impact on workers in countries where these crucial social occasions are becoming an unattainable luxury. High levels of local poverty and unemployment and illness and death due to AIDs and other causes stretch workers' wages across extended family and friendship networks, causing stress and high levels of responsibility for these relatively younger workers. Many of the respondents lived together with their partners, lacking the resources for such celebratory luxuries such as weddings.

Second, training counterparts within the company – either employees from Shoprite in other countries that they have trained, or South African Shoprite employees who have trained them – exchange information on work conditions. Workers believe that they have played a major role in Shoprite's growth through their work and their training of Shoprite staff from other countries (for example, Malawi, Tanzania and Zimbabwe). As already mentioned, they have done the shop-floor sales and they are training workers from other new branches in Africa, including South Africa, and Zambian managers, who are heading up branches in other countries such as Namibia and Tanzania.

The social connections that both Zambians and Mozambicans have through friends and family in South Africa are a third source of information about South African conditions. They speak to friends and relatives by telephone and compare their working conditions. Some of the workers have visited South Africa, visited the Shoprite store there and asked workers about their remuneration. In one exceptional case, a supervisor in Maputo had access to the Shoprite intranet and used this as a source of information about Shoprite's larger operations. Most workers have not had earlier generations of relatives working in South Africa or in the region, so this historical connection with South Africa is absent amongst most workers interviewed.

Fourth, workers have been powerfully affected by Shoprite's geographical expansion. To them it proves a host of things – expansion equals profitability; Shoprite is a powerful regional and African company; Shoprite is part of the African Renaissance. Shoprite is also training workers from a variety of African countries to be managers or upgrading their skills levels. This expansion has been made possible through South Africa's democratisation. Centralised company control puts South Africa at the centre of employees' workplace imaginaries. Workplace interactions and casual chats between South African transport workers and local Zambians and Mozambicans were also another source of information.

As a relatively highly regulated urban space, the mall offers a more formalised work environment. This affects employees' working conditions

positively, with regular pay, formal job descriptions and clear lines of accountability. Some workers liked being associated with Shoprite because it is a big, well-known company with many supermarkets in Southern Africa. They had also learnt a lot about retailing by working in various departments, especially those in more skilled jobs in Lusaka and Maputo.

However, unlike the feisty proletariats of new companies and sectors historically, these newly proletarianised workers saw themselves as humiliated beggars. Their only current choices were Shoprite or the streets. Unemployment was an overwhelming sword of Damocles. Interviews with workers were an emotional outpouring. Across the categories of age, gender, skill and permanent or casual status, workers felt misused and mistreated by Shoprite management. While they had positive comments about the company's strength, its large size and its profitability, they felt that they were excluded from the benefits of work in a sound company. Wages, along with hours of work and overtime pay, were the principal grievances. While the evidence showed that Shoprite was paying well above the legislated minimum wage, the cost of living estimates reported by workers suggested that Shoprite's wages were insufficient for their basic needs.

Workers perceived Shoprite's work conditions as dehumanising. They felt that they deserved better treatment as human beings. This assertion of their bodily needs shows workers laying claim to different scales – that of the body and of universal human scales. These bodily claims were not directed at their national state, however, which they felt was too weak in relation to foreign investors and South African companies. Instead, these claims were directed at the company itself, entailing a process of regional boundary-making where all Shoprite workers, irrespective of national boundaries, should be included in equitable company membership. Casualisation and high levels of family dependency due to privatisation was pervasive. Most Southern African countries have no social security systems. Lack of pension, medical aid and funeral benefits are therefore a problem.

Like the Zambian workers, the Mozambican workers realised the extent of South African control over the workplace, with most respondents arguing that the shop-floor is controlled by South Africans. Like Zambian workers, they too argued that effective Mozambican management would be better than 'transmission-belt' local management.

I would like Mozambicans to have the liberty to do that job. All the administration is South African and the Mozambican doesn't have freedom or the right of expression. Mozambicans have a lot of limitations and depend on South Africa to take decisions. Mozambicans just take orders.<sup>6</sup>

Both sets of workers felt that the extent of South African control over the shop-floor undermines the autonomy and efficiency of local management for whom they had little respect, with only one or two exceptions. Mozambican workers, like Zambian workers, perceived the South African trade unions as militant and adversarial, and hence more successful in their demands.

Notions that South African companies are perpetuating regional inequality were widespread amongst those interviewed. All the workers interviewed said they would like to leave Shoprite if they had alternative work options. Respondents all criticised the perceived servility of the majority of the black local managers at Shoprite. Although they loved a number of things about the company and about working there, these failed expectations have made them increasingly bitter towards the company.

While Zambian and Mozambican workers use South Africa and the region as a reference point, internal differences in the conditions of retail workers in South Africa point to the idealised notions that workers in the region have of South Africa. Conditions of South African retail workers have worsened since the 1980s, highlighting some of the inaccuracies in workers' perceptions (See Appendix, Table 1). Although South African workers are part of a larger, more industrialised economy and have secured significant gains through their unions, workers' conditions have again deteriorated even after democratisation in the 1990s. At the same time as black South African workers were liberated from racial capitalism, they were plunged into neoliberal economic restructuring that produced growing internal differentiation in the South African working class. The number of permanent, unionised workers declined in the 1990s as the numbers of casualised, unprotected workers grew. Although they are not wrong about their inferior conditions relative to South African permanent workers, the conditions of South African casual retail workers are comparable to their own. Permanent retail workers also lack job security.

Conditions for retail workers – both permanent and casual – in South Africa have worsened in the last decade.<sup>7</sup> South African retailers are restructuring the labour process and making greater use of sub-contracted and casual labour. In the 1980s, most retail workers were permanents with benefits. Between 1987 and 1997, part-time and casual employment increased from 11.8 percent of total employment to over 19 percent, coinciding with the shift to longer store hours in the 1980s. Independent research suggests a much higher prevalence of casual labour, however, ranging from 45 to 65 percent. ('Casual labour' refers to those working 24 hours per week or less.) Growing fragmentation has occurred in South Africa's retail sector. Such workplace restructuring has eroded important gains made by South African trade unions.

The worsening conditions for workers at Shoprite in South Africa suggests that the South African reality diverges from notions of South Africa as a 'little Europe'. Wages amongst retail workers in the three countries demonstrate the uneven regional patterns, with better wages for South African workers (see Appendix, Table 1). While wages are higher at Shoprite in South Africa and workers in the region have a material reason to compare with workers in the same company in South Africa, these higher wages and improved benefits apply to an 'eroding core' who themselves feel increasingly more vulnerable.

Interviewed workers often cited the Shoprite uniform as one reason why Mozambicans and Zambians initially assumed that Shoprite staff were part of a labour elite. The suggestive, imaginary reach of the mall brings the expanded global consumptive universe within the reach of the retail worker. Any perceived or real deprivation due to wage levels is thrown into sharp relief when working in such commodity havens, a contrast that creates the equivalent of Hirschman's (1981) 'tunnel effect', whereby increased hopes for social mobility are frustrated by social inequality.

Claims for participation in these new shopping malls are not directed at the metropolitan scale, however. Workers are not protesting to the owners of the mall (Shoprite Holdings) and the municipal management against their exclusion from this new consumptive space. It is not through metropolitan citizenship but through company citizenship that they seek redress. For the workers, the company that has its headquarters in South Africa becomes the target of their desire for inclusion in the new commodity culture.

### **Differences between Workers at Shoprite in Maputo and Lusaka**

Despite the overwhelming similarities in the responses of workers in both countries to the same set of questions, there are differences between workers at Shoprite-Maputo and workers at Shoprite-Manda Hill. Unlike Shoprite-Zambian workers who reported an awareness of their mistreatment amongst the public, Mozambican workers felt that their plight was not understood by the public. The general perception amongst Mozambicans, according to informants, was that working for Shoprite was a privileged position, compared with other local and foreign companies. Without exception, workers felt that the perception from other Mozambicans is that they are a labour elite. Unlike Shoprite-Zambian workers who reported an awareness of their mistreatment amongst the public, Mozambican workers felt that their plight was not understood by the public. The general perception amongst Mozambicans, according to informants, was that working for Shoprite was a privileged position, compared with other local and foreign companies.

Conditions of Shoprite workers in Zambia appear to be the worst amongst the three countries (see Appendix, Table 1). Zambian permanent workers were doing the most overtime and unpaid overtime work for the least wages per month when compared with Mozambique and South Africa. Exploitation of Shoprite workers through the use of casual labour appears to be the pattern in Mozambique. Shoprite-Maputo workers are also paid well below the average for formal sector workers in the national labour market. Casual workers in South Africa are paid around 1.7 times more than their Zambian counterparts. Casual workers in Mozambique, although they earn more per month, earn less in real terms as they are working a full week of 49.7 hours. The category of casual worker ('eventuals') is being used in violation of the Mozambican Labour Law through the repeated renewal of these contracts.

Casual workers in South Africa and Zambia work between nineteen and twenty-four hours per week, so there is a relationship between their low wage rates and their under-employment. South African permanents are earning almost twice as much as permanent workers in Mozambique who also earn more than their Zambian counterparts. The cost of casual labour is cheaper in Mozambique but only constitutes a minority of the workforce, unlike in Zambia. This is possibly because these casuals are full-time equivalents, whereas in Zambia two casual workers make up one full-time equivalent. Mozambican workers earn less than other formal sector workers in their national labour market. Zambian permanent workers earn more than the \$59 minimum legislated wage for shop-workers in the grade of cashier. However, this does not indicate what the actual average minimum wage is in the retail and services sectors. (The wage rates are for workers in the rate of shelf-packers. Clerks earn higher incomes than those cited below.) An approximate regional geometry of standards suggests that Zambian Shoprite workers have the worst conditions when compared with South African and Mozambican Shoprite workers. This could be one factor in the strike that took place in Zambia in June 2003.

While most workers in Zambia were unionised and had a Recognition Agreement with the company, workers in Mozambique had been unable to get the majority of votes needed for a Recognition Agreement. The company was thus able to restrict wage increases and abuse labour legislation restricting the renewal of contracts for casuals. Uneven union representation did not, however, protect the Zambian workers from becoming the most exploited amongst Shoprite workers in the three countries.

There was a suggestion from Shoprite-Maputo workers that, while the status of workers has been elevated in South Africa, their status has been downgraded in Mozambique. While Zambian workers articulated a consistent lack of faith in the nation-state and a realisation that they were on their

own, Mozambican workers at Shoprite still seemed to suffer from feelings of betrayal and abandonment by the country as a whole and by the government. These differences could play an important role in the morale of workers and their capacity to strike, with the realism of Zambian workers aiding their resistance while the frustrated hopes and demoralisation of Mozambican workers disable their capacity for collective action.

There was a greater ambivalence amongst Mozambican workers about the positive impact of foreign investment for the country. They were almost unanimous that the foreign investors were a good idea, unlike their more critical Zambian counterparts who observed that South Africa benefits more than Zambia in the economic relationship with South African companies. Although both Zambian and Mozambican workers articulated the same regional claims for inclusion into the company, a more critical regionalist disposition was emerging amongst the Zambian workers. As their expectations of the foreign investors were being dashed, they demonstrated a willingness to voice a counter-hegemonic disposition to the regional freedom for foreign investors. For the Shoprite-Zambian workers, the interests of workers and the interests of the country had to correspond. They could not accept that their interests as workers were not the same as that of the country; hence their argument that the failure to treat workers as human beings necessarily meant the companies were not good for Zambia. The Mozambican workers, on the other hand, felt that they had to suppress their separate, sectional interests for the sake of the country. As workers, their problems were subordinate to the larger problems of the country's economic growth. The supermarkets appeared to benefit the country in a variety of ways, including that they embodied development for Mozambique. Their exploitation was one unfortunate outcome of a process that was essentially good for their country.

Different conditions and different national realities, however, create different capacities for resistance and the assertion of regional demands. Unlike Zambian workers, Mozambican workers did not cite racist attitudes amongst South African 'boers' as a reason for regional discrimination. This is perhaps because their contact with white management is mostly with Portuguese expatriates. When Zambian workers were asked why these regional inequalities existed, respondents pointed to South African racism. While they stressed that they were not racist themselves, both casual and permanent workers spoke about what could or could not be expected from 'these whites', although more clearly articulated answers were forthcoming from the permanent workers.

Unlike the Zambian workers, workers in Mozambique did not comment on the shopping mall ambience of their workplace or the wider choices

available to consumers. They recognised that Shoprite and South African companies were creating much-needed employment and that Shoprite was a large multinational company. They seemed to be less impressed with the 'cosmopolitan' space of the shopping mall and more aware of their uniforms and appearance in the community and the false impressions their neat uniforms created.

In Zambia, new foreign investors brought renewed 'expectations of modernity', and the failure of foreign investors to live up to these expectations has provoked militant criticism in the public sphere and even within the ranks of government.<sup>8</sup> Failures of previous 'expectations of modernity' such as that in the 1960s and 1970s have perhaps endowed Zambians with a greater realism and empathy for the plight of workers who bear the brunt of failed economic initiatives. For Mozambique, this is their first round of 'expectations of modernity', given a past of civil war and limited capitalist development. There are still illusions that capitalist modernity will lift the country out of its devastated national state, and the increasing growth rate in Mozambique and the rapid urban development underway reinforce these illusions.

In Zambia public discourse about foreign investors has shifted more rapidly. The disastrous effects of wholesale privatisation are already economically visible. The Deputy Minister of Labour attacked the role of private investors, saying they had raided the Zambian economy.<sup>9</sup>

His argument accused the Zambian government of paving the way for this 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003). Mozambican public discourse still points to the necessities of neoliberal privatisation and they are still very uncritical about the intervention of new foreign investors.

National differences in the responses of workers seem to suggest defeatism amongst the Mozambican workforce. While workers have the same regional claims, their regional dispositions and expectations vary. As demonstrated by the nation-wide strike in Zambia (discussed below), regional claims were cohering into regional demands in Zambia, while in Mozambique regional claims were leading to feelings of disempowerment and alienation. The regional claims of workers can therefore have different regional outcomes, depending on a range of contingent and historical factors. (The stores were opened within a year of each other, so neither store is significantly older than the other – Manda Hill in 1996 and Centro Commercial in 1997.)

### **Regional claims and regional geographic imaginaries**

While recognising the salience of race, ethnicity and gender as strategic boundaries for making class, the 'geographies of labour' suggest a different approach to the scalar politics that is such an important component of working class action. 'Scalar' translations – pragmatically shifting reference points

between one geographical level and another – determine how local resistance achieves national, regional or global purchase. The regional perceptions of workers are tied to a set of regional expectations that have grown out of a definite context. The new moment of post-apartheid regionalism produces southern Africa as a potential new boundary for workers in the region, with South Africa as the reference point.

Southern African workers construct idealised notions of South African workplaces and work conditions that often diverge from the actual reality of work in post-apartheid South Africa. Perhaps ironically, such idealised notions create perceptions of a ‘labour aristocracy’, where the privileged group of workers – in this case South African – are set up as the reference point for comparison, and feelings of ‘relative deprivation’ arise. These perceptions are ironic as they fail to recognise the poor conditions within the supposedly privileged group. Because workers think or know that another group of workers is being treated better than they are, they are motivated either to claim inclusion within the privileged stratum, or to take action against their employers to resist their exclusion.

To understand the geographical moment of worker imaginaries and class formation, it is necessary to pay attention to space and place. Geography and scale are strategically employed in the competing claims of different social classes. While invoking notions of justice, the geographical dimension of claim-making goes beyond a liberal sense of rights. Unlike the abstract universalism of rights discourses, such claims assert a definite geographical moment that gives definition to the strategic political choices that workers elect to make at any given moment, denoted here by the idea of ‘boundary-making’.

As revisionist labour scholars have stressed, ideas and imagination are critical in the fashioning of a working class (Berlanstein 1993; Chakrabarty 1989; Cooper 1996; Sewell 1993; Thompson 1966). Regional working class formation is not simply a reflection of transnational economic processes. The first proposition is that there is a reference-point, chosen in a meaningful, plausible way, in the comparisons that workers make. Reference points play an important part in constructing the boundaries of working class imaginaries. Perrot points to this referential moment in working class dispositions, arguing that workers construct their images of themselves in relation to some other. Examining the French working class, he asks a relevant question: ‘How did he [the worker] conceive of this whole over time and space?’ Dispositions and imaginaries are not simply determined by economic processes but are constructed relationally, with reference to dominant discourses and images. These constructs include some workers and exclude others, and ‘should not be taken as a report of its real and concrete condition’ (Perrot 1986).



Cooper's study of 'the labour question' in French and British Africa shows how the geographical idea of 'empire' was inserted into African working-class imaginaries in the first half of the twentieth century, thus providing useful cross-cultural insights. Through the rhetoric of universal rights and the consequent application of European labour codes to African workers, colonial administrators evoked the notion amongst African workers of equality with European workers. African trade unionists used European labour standards as a reference point for their own claims.

'Making' boundaries points to the geographical envisioning – or 'imaginary' – on the part of workers. Historically, race, gender, ethnicity and nationality were employed in various ways by workers and labour movements to exclude some sections of the global working class from this associational community. 'North-South' divisions and tensions between workers in Northern, highly developed countries and workers in less developed regions of the South are an example of the geographical contours of such boundary-making processes (Arrighi et al. 2003). Pragmatic solidarity strategies between workers of the North and South can be inspired by these differences in the geographies of labour. Making these exclusionary boundaries is often a defensive strategy actively employed by workers themselves, as Arrighi points out with reference to the early days of the neoliberal counter-revolution:

Whenever faced with the predisposition of capital to treat labour as an undifferentiated mass with no individuality other than a differential capability to augment the value of capital, proletarians have rebelled. Almost invariably they have seized upon or created anew whatever combination of distinctive traits (age, sex, colour, and assorted geographic specificities) they could use to impose on capital some kind of special treatment. As a consequence, patriarchy, racism and national chauvinism have been integral to the making of the world labour movement... and live on in one form or another in most proletarian ideologies and organizations (Arrighi 1990, cited by Silver 2003:22-23).

Thus, divisions within the working class are not only made by 'class enemies', but are actively constructed from within.

Adapting Perrot's question, we may then ask, 'How did she (the worker) conceive of this whole over regional time and space?' How do workers' notions of inclusion and exclusion take on a geographical character? If working class dispositions and the establishment of collective identities require a common set of values and goals, how do these common objectives become articulated at a particular geographical scale?

I employ the concept of 'regional claim-making' as a way to understand regional boundary-making processes. Claims are understood here as a demand for inclusion into a particular bounded entity. Claim-making is an active,

strategic process undertaken by groups of workers and based on political opportunity structures: in this instance the new regional moment and the regional firm. Claim-making is always contextual and referential. Workers construct their political identities through the inclusion of some workers and the exclusion of other workers, establishing a 'community of rights'. 'While capital may treat workers as so many interchangeable instruments of labour, workers actively construct internal differences' (Silver 2003:21).

### **Regional contradictions**

The Shoprite supermarkets represent a new phase in South Africa's relations with the region. The new Shoprite *Centro Commercial* heralded a new era in retailing for many ordinary Mozambicans who in the past were excluded from the hotels and stores developed for the tourists and foreign aid communities. Shoprite-Manda Hill has had a similarly dramatic effect on urban lifestyles and consumer choices in Lusaka, Zambia. This confers an enhanced status on workers outside of their workplaces, a status that does not correspond to their conditions within the workplace.

While workers at Shoprite tend to look to South Africa for inclusion, their perceived exclusion and the denial of their regional claims are producing contradictions that have made them turn against the company. As a result of the lack of national expectations, workers have pragmatically set their sights on the regional company. National demands have given way to regional claims. These regional claims are aimed at the company rather than the political institutions of the region such as the SADC (Southern African Development Community). The regional company is the place where their demands for fair working conditions should be met.

When Zambian workers began a 3-day work stoppage at the eighteen Zambian stores of Shoprite, a South African retail multinational, on 21 June 2003, this was surely no extraordinary event. But African labour has travelled a convoluted path. This strike marks a turning point in labour relations for Zambian workers. Cowed by chronic unemployment, a discredited ex-president who was elected into government office after being the trade union federation's president, a ravaged economy and aggressive, 'no-holds-barred' privatisation, risking dismissal would appear foolhardy for any 'rational economic actor'. Yet these workers put their livelihoods and the livelihoods of the extended families they support on the line. This was, indeed, a remarkable dispute. This strike marked a turning point in labour relations for Zambian workers and was one of the first strikes at the foreign stores of Shoprite, now Africa's largest retailer.

Regional trade union collaboration between South Africa and other Southern African countries emerged as one impetus behind the retail sector strike. In

October 2002, SACCAWU (South African Commercial and Catering Workers Union), the South African retail sector trade union affiliated to COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), organised a national shop stewards' council in Port Elizabeth. This 3-day meeting included the attendance of and presentations by company head office management on the first day. Represented at this meeting for the first time were trade union and worker delegates from six other Southern African countries (Lesotho, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and Namibia). At this meeting, SACCAWU's Research Unit made a presentation on Shoprite's African expansion. Perhaps more importantly, the Southern African delegation actively and informally exchanged information during their time together at this meeting. When the Zambian delegate returned to Lusaka, he was armed with a comparative analysis of wages at Shoprite in the region.

From this comparison, Zambian workers saw that the company pays them the least in the region. They corroborated this information with their own gathered while training new Shoprite employees from newly opening stores in other African countries. This information was an important consideration for workers when they decided to embark on strike action in June 2003. Workers and the Deputy Minister of Labour believe that the company should not have been given 'carte-blanche' when they came into South Africa.

It's maybe because of the way they came in. They were given a lot of respect. They were given the freedom to do anything... even if there's a problem they are able to stand; no one will convince them or chase them back to where they came from. So they've got freedom.<sup>10</sup>

When South African corporations extend their reach into the region, their social and political practices are also transported into this local environment. Flexible and discriminatory work practices under white South African and expatriate managers will renew tensions within the region. But if discriminatory treatment between South African workers and their regional counterparts was a source of tension in the past, in the present context a new sense of regional identity will make such discrimination untenable. With the expectations of an *African Renaissance* and the claims of global integration, such discriminatory practices will provide a new point of tension.

The new regional imaginaries that emerge out of the regional firm open up new possibilities and contradictions. The regional perceptions of workers are tied to a set of regional expectations that have grown out of a definite context. The strike at Shoprite's eighteen stores in Zambia, in July 2003, points to some of the potential outcomes of these new contradictions. Growing regional contradictions are embodied in this multinational dispute between

the multinational South African retail company, Shoprite, and its Zambian workforce. While the strike demands centred on workplace issues and wages, wage demands were pegged with a South African comparison in mind. Bi-national disputes have potential regional consequences, and influence how the local public reacts to disputes and controversy between host country nationals and South African companies. If the relations between South African companies, on the one hand, and host country workers or consumers, on the other, are fractious, this will undermine South Africa's anticipated leadership role in Southern Africa.

While not the outcome anticipated by South Africa's democracy, the new workplaces at South African-owned shopping malls are a new site of contradiction. Only one case study, the Shoprite example in Zambia and Mozambique, suggests that broader processes are at work. Post-apartheid South Africa has realigned regional power hierarchies. This dynamic regional moment has shifted political opportunity structures, opportunities also claimed by workers in order to realign regional power dynamics in their favour, creating new 'spaces of hope' in African cities. The new regional imaginaries that emerge out of the regional firm open up new possibilities and contradictions. The Zambian strike has given a fresh impetus to workers and unions in that sector.

The charges of 'Yankees of Africa' and South African 'sub-imperialism', articulated in discussions on South Africa's new investments in Africa, point to an unanticipated fault-line of political struggle in Southern Africa – a new tension between democratic South Africa and the countries and working classes who were to benefit from this political unity at the regional level. In a recent talk, one of NEPAD's architects, Wiseman Nkuhlu, cautioned African countries to tailor market-driven policies to their level of national development. After a decade of raider regionalism in which African countries were exhorted by South Africa to remove all protections and turn the continent into a safe haven for foreign investors, the NEPAD secretariat surreptitiously shifts its stance now to advocate appropriate liberalisation for African economies, in which embryonic industries and national development are retained. But the window opened to foreign capital in the 1990s has already been exploited, with South African capital as a leader in this foreign pack.

A new imprint has been left on the continent: one that potentially reproduces the global relations of Empire at the regional level. Uneven regional development and heightened regional expectations are already producing Hirschmann's 'tunnel effect' amongst retail workers at Shoprite, whereby increased hopes for social mobility are frustrated by social inequality. If South Africa is perceived by other Southern African countries as the primary

beneficiary of post-apartheid regional economic development, with deepened regional inequality as the outcome of South Africa's democracy, new regional resistances become both possible and likely. Such resistances may shift Africa away from its current self-defeating economic and political trajectories, opening new possibilities.

## Notes

1. This discussion draws on an article, 'New regional imaginaries in post-Apartheid Southern Africa – retail workers at a shopping mall in Zambia', in *The Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31(1) 2005.
2. South Africa's total investment in the SADC region has increased from 11.2 percent to 38 percent of total foreign direct investment; constituting a massive increase of 26.8 percent in the course of just three years. South Africa is also the most active investor in the region in terms of the number of deals it has concluded, hence its high visibility in the host countries. South Africa accounts for 40.7 percent of the number of new investments, followed by the UK and then the USA.
3. The Editor of *Metical*, a local faxed newspaper, estimated that the land cost \$2.20 per square metre. Land in the downtown area normally costs \$100 per square metre. The cheapest land in that area is \$30 per square metre (Interview, Carlos Cardoso, Editor, *Metical*, Sept 1999).
4. Interview, male permanent sales assistant, Shoprite-Lusaka, August 2002.
5. Interview, male permanent supervisor, Shoprite-Lusaka, August 2002.
6. Interview, male casual stock counter, Shoprite-Maputo, April 2003.
7. Clarke (2000); Kenny (2003); Kenny (2001); Kenny and Webster (1998); Rees (1997); Valodia (1989).
8. Interview, Deputy Minister of Labour, Zambia, August 2003.
9. Interview, Deputy Minister of Labor, Lusaka, Zambia, August 2003.
10. Interview, Focus Group, Shoprite Manda Hill worker (September 2003).

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## Appendix

**Table 1:** Comparison of Monthly Wages and Hours in Three Countries

	South Africa	Mozambique	Zambia
Permanent	\$271	\$142	\$100
Casual	\$82	\$112	\$47
Hours of work (permanent workers)	45.4	49.5	60

Sources: Kenny, 2001, Research Reports, Ministry of Labour, Mozambique; Statutory Instrument No. 2 of 2002, Minimum Wages and Conditions of Employment (General) Order, 2002.