

## Dancing With[out] Simmel

**Fatima Bapumia**

Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, UDSM  
bapumia.fatima@udsm.ac.tz

### Abstract

*In this article, I examine how actors stage colour-blind sociability to demonstrate racial integration in the presence of the audiences. I argue that social actors acquire sociability when expected to do so. My assertions are grounded in the ethnographic field work carried out in secondary schools in Dar es Salaam, and a thorough step by step analysis using grounded theory analysis. I have thus found that young people in secondary schools identify themselves on the basis of race groups, namely, African group, “Indian” [South Asian] group, Arab group and ‘half-caste’ [biracial] group]. Also, students exhibit tendencies of exclusion across these groups. However, during the school events such as the parents’ day, the school authorities tactically bring together all race groups for joint performances. It is during such events that one may notice how the youngsters temporarily accommodate their differences through colour-blind sociability.*

Musing on an absorbing field work with secondary school youth, my article addresses how performances of polite pretense temporarily conceals racial differences in a plural society. I turn to the theory of Sociability (Simmel and Hughes 1949) to show how youngsters mask their differences for a mutual goal, depending on their perceived expectations of people surrounding them. Simmel’s theory of sociability refers to the act of engaging in a non-conflicting dialogue between two persons, despite the existing social differences between them. Accordingly, the interaction itself is the goal, free of any other intentions. Moving on from Simmel’s contention, I argue that sociability can also be employed as a strategy to meet the intended purpose, and that the otherness becomes conspicuous once the goal is achieved, or the intention is removed. The empirical findings informing this article constitute primary data collected from private secondary schools in Dar es Salaam during my PhD project. I used ethnographic methods of data collection and Grounded Theory Methodology (Strauss 1987). My study employed the concept of boundaries to analyse how young people reproduce ‘otherness’ (Barth 1969, 1994) and the concept of sociability to explain how they accommodate this ‘otherness’ within a shared social space (Simmel and Hughes 1949).

In this article, I examine how school staff and students cooperate in observing colour-blind sociability, during the extra-curricular activities in secondary schools in Tanzania in order to demonstrate racial integration when required to do so. Once the students are not obliged to portray the intended image, they resume to stressing upon ethnic differences, thereby socially segregating the ‘others’.

In exploring how sociability is strategically orchestrated for a common goal, I will first discuss the notion of sociability and how other authors have engaged with this concept. Next, I will describe the field site and the event which sets the conditions for this article. As a participant observer, I was actively involved in the arrangements of an annual prize giving day, for which

the students were putting together a number of stage performances. It is during the preparations of this event that the dynamics of racial differentiation between African and non-African students became clearer to me. There follows a general discussion on how the concept of sociability helps to examine the manner in which young people negotiate ethnic differences in the context where their expected behavior with each other is mutual. I thus maintain that colour-blind sociability is a strategy deployed to stage ethno-racial integration when required to do so. I thus argue that, much as sociability is an arbitrary process, the social actors can as well acquire and expect sociability from the others.

### ***Sociability and colour-blind sociability***

Sociability is a spontaneous act, and that sociability itself is the only motive for interaction (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie DGS) 1911; Simmel 1910; Simmel and Hughes 1949).

Accordingly, sociability is achieved when people relate to one another in a play form, purely on the basis of the content of the interaction itself. The projection of one's class and status, individual emotions, and personal values in the course of interaction can lead to the loss of essential qualities of sociability. Sociability creates an ideal sociological world, which is "an artificial world, made up of beings who have renounced both the objective and the purely personal features of the intensity and extensiveness of life in order to bring about among themselves a pure interaction, it is a game in which one "acts" as though all were equal" (Simmel & Hughes, 1949, p. 257).

A number of scholars have used this concept to analyse human interactions. For example, Schiffrin (1984) illustrates the sociable function of argumentative talk from the perspective of Jewish Americans. Furthermore, Pyörälä (1995) uses sociability to compare drinking experiences of young adults in Finland and Spain. She compares the narration of individual experiences to demonstrate drinking as the medium of sociability. Toiskallio (2000) illustrates how sociability is achieved between taxi-drivers and their clients by pretending certain social status. The pretense is to "produce social comfort and everyday luxury which makes taxi-ride something that provides for social need" (Toiskallio, 2000, p. 19). Additionally, Costa (2001) applies the concept of sociability to address the blend of modernity and traditional values during the festival of *fallas* in Valencia in what he calls festive sociability. He argues that "the central mechanisms of transmission of tradition lie in the "sociability" of the community that sustains and, at the same time, reflexively renews it by incorporating features of modern and contemporary life into the sociable framework of tradition" (Costa, 2001, p. 544). Schiller et al (2014) examine the role of sociability in religious practices that bring people together from across the globe thereby necessitating what the authors call 'cosmopolitan sociability'. This is a "form of competence and communication skills to create social relation of inclusiveness and openness to the world" (Schiller et al., 2014, pp. 4–8). These studies indicate that sociability is a non-argumentative tactic that one uses in the process of interaction.

By 'colour-blind' sociability, I extend Simmel's notion of sociability onto the issue of 'race'. During my field work I came across many expressions of 'race', mostly associated to physical features such as skin colour, facial features and hair type. However the most common and

obvious expression was the colour of one's skin. Thus colour-blind sociability in this context is an analytical term I use to show performances of an amicable social interaction, purposively orchestrated, between people of different 'races'.

### *Study site*

My main study sites were private schools in Dar es Salaam. The large composition of South Asian and Arab students in private schools provided a suitable field to examine interactions between youth from different ethnic backgrounds in school settings. In my study I refer to ethnicity as the social construction of ethnic boundaries, expressed through boundary markers; race being one of the boundary markers. Ethnic boundaries are thus "patterns of social interaction that give rise to and subsequently reinforce in-group members' self-identification and outsider's confirmation of group distinction" (Sanders 2002, p. 327).

Young people in secondary schools express ethnic differences through race and community markers. Race in this context includes, but is not limited to, physical features, particularly skin colour. The youth identified themselves on the basis of three race groups, namely African group, Arab group, and 'Indian' or South Asian group. The Arab group comprised youth who traced their ancestry to Oman or Yemen. Few said that they had contacts with relatives in Oman, Yemen, or the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, all of them spoke Swahili and English only. South Asian students identified with various communities they belong to. Notably, among South Asians, 'community' is a strong boundary marker *within* different South Asian sub-groups (Bharati, 1972; Nagar, 1997, 1998; Rietdorf, 2003; Oonk, 2006).

Historically, South Asian communities were primarily formed on the basis of religion and religious sects to function as Faith Based Organisations and the "daily lives of the Indians [South Asians] revolved around communal rather than racial institutions" (Brennan, 2012, p. 48). The same is observed even to-date (Bapumia, 2012; Bertz, 2015; Mesaki & Bapumia, 2015). South Asians form a 0.01 percent of the entire Tanzania's population, which explains their need to demonstrate strong in-group tendencies. According to their community records obtained in 2009, the figures were as follows: 7000 Bohoras; 4250 Ismailis; 15,000 Sunnis 12,000 Ithnaasharis (9000 in Dar es Salaam); 14,000 Hindus (7000 in Dar es Salaam); and 700 Goans (Bapumia, 2012, p. 13). However, South Asians of various sub-communities project a minimum sense of 'otherness' towards each other in everyday interactions. This is arguably due to a minimal impulse to exclude members of the same 'race' group. Comparatively, the sense of 'otherness' is much stronger between Arabs, Africans and Africans.

Similarly, in schools the everyday interaction of students reflects the racial boundaries between the African, Arab and South Asian 'groups'. In classrooms, for example, students sit according to these 'groups'. Since sitting arrangement in the classroom is not always pre-assigned by the teachers, students often sit close to their friends who are also part of the same 'group'. South Asian students sit on one side of the classroom, and African students on the other side, with a wide range of other ethnic groups in the middle. According to students, the middle group comprises half-caste, Arab, Somali and Balouch students. Among the South Asian students, 'community' is the next and most prominent category of classification. Although these

classifications are not fixed, they are very relevant. Students from same sub-communities tend to demonstrate close friendship with one another as compared to youth from different sub-communities. In this way, other ethnic markers such as language and religion play the role of either intensifying or loosening the boundaries of race.

It is further argued that “the persistence of ethnic groups in contact implies not only criteria and signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction” (Barth 1969, p. 16). Thus, in the private sphere, on matters of dating, the boundaries are flexible between Arab and Muslim South Asian in-groups, as compared to South Asian and African groups, or South Asian students of different religious backgrounds. In contrast, interaction in the public sphere, the structuring of interaction between Arab students and African students is more inclusive due to Swahili as a common language between them, while South Asians speak their own native languages amongst themselves. The ethnic boundaries turn out to be more intense during the preparation for extra-curricular activities such as sports, talent shows, and debate competitions. The school authorities seem to take up a drawn back position to such everyday exclusive behaviours among students. Ironically, when students are ready to present their performances on stage, the school authorities reinforce the need to perform together because the schools are expected to adhere to the national ethos of integration. In such a situation, where the expectation for ethnic integration is higher, ‘colour blind’ sociability is adopted. Consider the following observation of an open day that I attended during my field work in one of the private schools in Dar es Salaam:

*“During the extracurricular activities such as the talent shows and open days students from different ethnic backgrounds are encouraged to ‘stage’ ethnic integration. School authorities insist that in every activity there has to be a good ‘mix’ of students. Schools also invite African politicians to events for which students are deliberately selected to display a ‘racial’ mix. One day before the open day, the teachers in charge for the open day celebrations selected three performances; two items titled ‘Indian dances’ and one ‘Western dance’. The ‘Indian dances’ were performed by youth from the South Asian group and the ‘Western dance’ by Africans, Arabs and half-castes. The teachers were both expatriates from India. They come from different states in India, and also belong to different ethnic groups. Nevertheless, their mutually agreed choice of titles for the dance performances became even more interesting for me when I saw the performances on the stage. One of the Indian dances comprised ‘free-style’ dance moves performed on Hindi song from a Bollywood film, wearing Shalwar-Kameez (pants and tunic). The second ‘Indian dance’ was a free-style dance performed wearing jeans and T-Shirts. The ‘Western dance’ was also a free-style performance on Dancehall music with dancers wearing jeans and T-Shirts.*

*The same teachers also rejected some performances. These included English and Swahili songs from popular American and Tanzanian artistes, hip-hop dances performed on Tanzanian Bongo-flava music and one salsa dance. All these were performed by students from African and half-caste groups. On the day of the event, the open day celebrations began with the national anthem, followed by the opening speech from the Principal, who is also a South Asian Tanzanian, belonging to one of the many sub-groups within the South Asian community. The*

*Principal welcomed the event's guest of honour, a government official from the education sector and invited the audience to enjoy the "cultural items" as printed on the programme. These items included the three dances that were selected; songs from two former students (South Asians); classical Indian dance performed by an Indian expatriate; and a hip-hop dance by an independent African youth group which was introduced on the stage as 'African dance'. Following the cultural items, the guest of honour awarded certificates to outstanding students, and after the closing remarks from one of the teachers, the programme was brought to an end. As I was leaving the area where the event had taken place, Natasha, one of the organisers of the students' performances, called me and we had a lengthy talk. Natasha said that upon rejecting almost all the performances from the African groups, the teacher in charge for the open day celebrations allowed Natasha and her team to hold a separate party in the same venue after the official event. So I stayed back to attend Natasha's after event. Few South Asian students joined me. The rest of the audience were students from African, Arab and half-caste groups. All South Asian students present at the earlier event had already left. As regards to the teachers, only one African teacher waited for the second show.*

*On the following day, the school's Deputy Principal wanted to know how I enjoyed the event. The Deputy Principal is also an Indian expatriate from a different state in India- belonging to an ethnic group that is again distinct from the teachers who organised the dance performances. Responding to her question in a casual tone, I mentioned having spoken to Natasha about the performances and that Natasha and I felt that the three freestyle dances were boring and redundant for a school event. I had certainly not foreseen the consequences of an honest reply. Evidently, my reply upset the deputy principal. She brushed off my comments with a strong tongue-lashing that Natasha is an African and she does not know anything about Indian dances" (field memo 2013). During the open day, the performers strategically staged sociability to exhibit ethnic integration. The teachers planned to show to the government personnel that the school gives equal weight to all cultures. The student dances were, for instances, strategically named 'Western' dance and 'Indian' dance. More so, there was the African youth group to fill in for the 'African' culture. The school authorities pre-planned the performances in such a way that the audience are not only watching the actual dances, but that they are also witnesses to the extra layer of performance, that of dancing in a shadow world 'in which there is no friction' (Simmel & Hughes, 1949, p. 260); of 'Simmel on the stage'; of national integration; and of equal stage time for students of all races.*

In a similar ethnographic work, Pallock (2004) notes how talent shows in schools become the arena for expressing ethno-racial differentiations. Her study focuses on high school youth in the United States; and she illustrates that the students who identify themselves as "black kids" complain that the Samoan, Filipinos, and Latinos get the opportunity to perform during the school talent show even though "there were lots of black kids with talent" (Pollock, 2004, p.35). The stage time in this case is a symbolic expression of ethnic inclusion and exclusion. 'Black kids' feel they are excluded from the event because of limited stage time allocated for them.

Likewise, Baumann (1996) studied the South Asian community in London, highlighting the existing fractions within the South Asian community, at the same time demonstrating how the boundaries between various sub-groups dissolve in the context where they pose as one group against those considered to be the ethnic 'others'. Baumann takes his readers to a community centre in Southall London, where South Asians, Afro-Caribbeans and White Southallians compete for common space to carry out different cultural and recreational events (Baumann, 1996, pp 67-70).

There is a similarity in both examples; Pollock's stage and Baumann's community centre. Both are spaces for demonstrating ethnic negotiation, for exhibiting the heightening and loosening of ethnic boundaries; and for experiencing the Simmelian 'staging' of ethnic integration. Coming back to the example from my field observation, schools create contexts for sociability to work. Unlike Simmel's contention that the purpose of acting in a sociable manner is the interaction itself, schools purposively and tactically set the stage for sociable performances.

Coming back to my encounter with the school's Deputy Principal, it is clear that I did not comply with the non-argumentative essence of sociability. My value-laden comments provoked the Deputy Principal to step out of Simmel's shadow world, and in the process of making a counter argument, turning away from the expected display of sociability. Considering the content of the counter argument that Natasha is an African, ironically, in my view, the guest of honour too was an African, and according to the Deputy Principal's argument, would not know anything about Indian dances. Nevertheless, it was certain in the given context that the purpose of these students' performances was not to showcase dance skills as part of extra-curricular activities, but to showcase the school's efforts to encompass ethnic integration.

The African students are aware of the conscious efforts by the school authorities to create a race-balance. Much as they were side-lined from the main event, the African students did not react or resist. Instead, by participating in school dances, they also participated in staging sociability. As a result, they presented a unanimous 'shadow world' to impress the guest of honour, an official state representative from the education sector. More so, they traded one dance in exchange for two hours of an uncensored event in which they performed all the songs and dances that were rejected by the organisers of the official event. Such an exchange was carried out in a non-conflicting and polite manner. Students from African, Arab, and half-caste groups down-played the rejection of their performances in the official event and claimed the ownership of the second event.

### **Conclusion**

In trying to display equal opportunities for all race groups, the school authorities overlooked the risk of reinstating the existing boundaries. The open day, which was supposed to be one all-inclusive event, had split into two events, and ironically, on the basis of race. The organisational efforts for 'colour-blind' sociability were worthwhile in staging the image of this particular school as a non-racial, non segregational learning institution. However, the consequences of this tactically orchestrated integrationist approach proved the contrary to what

was taken for granted by the school teachers when it depicted the persistence of race differences among its students.

Young people in secondary schools view the members of the other race groups as socially distant and emotionally detached. Between these different race groups, sociability is the collectively expected and acquired guiding code of interaction. In the context of sociability, young people consider polite pretence as a taken for granted norm. As a result, they systematically contribute to the prevalence of racial differences. Thus, for as much as such sociability minimises aggressive confrontation and conflict, the counter impact of such polite pretence is that it condones the existing boundaries and differentiation.

## References

- Bapumia, F. (2012). *Rationalizing violence Domesticizing Abuse: South Asian Experience in Tanzania* (1. Aufl.). Saarbrücken: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing.
- Barth, F. (1969). *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.
- Barth, F. (1994). Enduring and Emerging issues in the analysis of ethnicity. In H. Vermeulen & C. Govers (Eds.), *The anthropology of ethnicity. Beyond "Ethnic groups and boundaries"* (pp. 11–32). Amsterdam, Hague, Netherlands: Spinhuis.
- Baumann, G. (1999). *The multicultural riddle: Rethinking national, ethnic, and religious identities*. New York: Routledge
- Bertz, N. (2015). *Diaspora and Nation in the Indian Ocean: Transnational Histories of Race and Urban Space in Tanzania*: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Bharati, A. (1972). *The Asians in East Africa: Jayhind and Uhuru. Professional-Technical Series*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Brennan, J. R. (2012). *Taifa: Making nation and race in urban Tanzania*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Costa, X. (2001). Festivity: Traditional and modern forms of sociability. *Social compass*, 48(4), 541–548.
- Mesaki, S., & Bapumia, F. (2015). The minorities of Indian origin in Tanzania. In M. Adam (Ed.), *Indian Africa: Minorities of Indian-Pakistani origin in eastern Africa* (pp. 349-360). Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers.
- Nagar, R. (1997). The making of Hindu communal organizations, places, and identities in postcolonial Dar es Salaam. *Environment and Planning D*, 15, 707–730.
- Nagar, R. (1998). Communal Discourses, Marriage, and the Politics of Gendered Social Boundaries among South Asian Immigrants in Tanzania. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 5(2), 117-139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09663699825241>
- Oonk, G. (2006). South Asians in East Africa (1800-1920) with a particular Focus on Zanzibar: Towards a Historical Explanation of Economic Success of a Middlemen Minority. *African and Asian Studies*, 5(1), 1–32.
- Pollock, M. (2004) *Colour Mute: Race talk Dilemmas in an American School*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Pyörälä, E. (1995). Comparing drinking cultures: Finnish and Spanish drinking stories in interviews with young adults. *Acta Sociologica*, 38(3), 217–229.
- Rietdorf, U. (2003). *Minderheiten und ihre Bedeutung für endogene Entwicklungen in Afrika. das Beispiel Tansania. Schriftenreihe Orbis*. Hamburg: Kovač
- Sanders, J. M. (2002). Ethnic boundaries and identity in plural societies. *Annual review of sociology*, 327–357.
- Schiffirin, D. (1984). Jewish argument as sociability. *Language in Society*, 13(03), 311–335.
- Schiller, N. G., Darieva, T., & Gruner-Dominic, S. (2014). Defining cosmopolitan sociability in transnational age. An introduction. In *Cosmopolitan sociability: locating transnational religious and diasporic networks*, pp. 1–20. Routledge.
- Simmel, G. (1910). Soziologie der Geselligkeit. In Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie (DGS) (Ed.), *Verhandlungen des 1. Deutschen Soziologentages vom 19. bis 22. Oktober 1910 in Frankfurt am Main* (pp. 1–16). Frankfurt am Main: Sauer u. Auvermann. Retrieved from <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-187880>
- Simmel, G., & Hughes, E. C. (1949). The Sociology of Sociability. *American Journal of Sociology*, 55(3), 254.
- Toiskallio, K. (2000). Simmel hails a cab: Fleeting sociability in the urban taxi. *Space and Culture*, 3(6), 4–20.