

Postcolonial Nationality

By Johannes Kögel | September 8, 2026

Postcolonial nationality denotes the contested, historically sedimented process by which people inherit, negotiate, and navigate identity and membership in a political community whose boundaries and ideologies were forged by colonial rule and its afterlives. As a social construct that mitigates this process, it remains paradoxical: belonging and rights are often contingent, flexible, or partial, enabling political claims even as exclusions persist and identities operate in manifold ways.

Examining postcolonial nationality foregrounds how nation-building in formerly colonized contexts remains entangled with colonial legacies while colonial administrative logics continue to shape postcolonial governance. Consequently, nationality in this frame is a contested process and a dynamic resource that can empower individuals to claim rights, yet also constrain them within hierarchical structures.

The concept of postcolonial nationality seeks to reveal how belonging is produced, policed, and mobilized across borders, and how the colonality of power continues to structure who counts as a member, who can participate politically, and how resources are distributed. As such, it is a key concept for Global South Studies in its examination of the histories and continuities of empire, decolonization, migration, and enduring global inequalities. It aims to highlight nation-bound effects – such as identity, belonging, and citizenship – on Global South subjectivity and to illuminate how these effects shape shared transnational perspectives of global capitalism.

Nationality as a Paradoxical Way of Existing

In today's global order, composed of nation-states, nationality is largely conflated with citizenship. Consequently, some use "the terms 'nationality' and 'national' [...] to refer exclusively to legal juridical membership in a nation-state" (Chung 2017, 432). Stuart Hall, moreover, emphasizes a qualitative distinction between the two concepts, arguing that "a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings – a system of cultural representation. People are not only legal citizens of a nation; they participate in the idea of the nation as represented in its national culture" (1992, 292).

Nationality, then, encompasses two aspects: a sense of national identity and a form of formal belonging (Kögel 2025; 2026). It can be understood as highlighting a sense of belonging and affiliation – which has emotional dimensions – and serving as a source of identification. Qua citizenship, nationality stresses the formal or legal membership to a polity and underlines its related rights.

Nationality has always carried an ambiguous meaning, on the one hand, denoting common nativity and, on the other, signifying belonging to a constructed unity of territory, inhabitants,

and sovereign government (Joseph 2004). At the same time, the nation's ambiguity contains two dimensions, the pedagogical, which foregrounds the idea of an essential homogenous unit, and the performative, which requires nationality to be constantly performed and thereby affirmed (Bhabha 1996). Furthermore, the nation in its form is universal and particular at once, a universal container for collective belonging and ascription, the concrete exemplifications of which are necessarily distinct from all the others (Balibar 1990; Goswami 2002). As such, nationality demarcates inclusion and exclusion, conferring equal rights and a sense of belonging to some while maintaining the exclusion of others (Mamdani 2020).

The Postcolonial Condition

Nationality and coloniality must be understood as co-constituted. Aníbal Quijano (2000) and Mahmood Mamdani (2020) trace the origins of the modern nation-state to the year 1492. That same year witnessed the end of the Reconquista, culminating in the surrender of the Emirate of Granada to the Catholic monarchs on the Iberian Peninsula and followed by a campaign of ethnic cleansing that sought to create a homogeneous territory for Christian Spaniards, as well as the onset of the conquest of the Americas, which would be marked by equally violent efforts to create colonial territory for the "civilized." Through a process of "colonial reflection" (Branch 2012), the formation of European nation-states – a paradigmatic example being the Haitian Revolution's role in reshaping conceptions of French nationhood (James 1963; Magubane 2005) – was preceded and shaped by the colonial state (Bhambra 2014).

The misalignment of the nation as the congruence of people, territory, and sovereignty becomes particularly blatant in formerly colonized territories (Mamdani 1992; Laakso and Olukoshi 1996). In these contexts, nationality becomes overdetermined by colonial inventions of "ethnicities" (Ranger 1996) and "tribes" (Comaroff 1998), which were often used to set people against each other. Indirect rule helped shape twentieth-century nation-building by institutionalizing division through separate political communities and legal systems, making the postcolonial state a contested space for belonging (Mamdani 1996). Incomplete national consolidation produced conflicts over who could count as a citizen, who could vote where, and who could run for office, a process described as the "culturalization of citizenship," which created intranational foreigners and fomented legitimacy struggles (Geschiere 2011; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). While anti-colonial nationalism united diverse groups, postcolonial politics reignited ethnic and regional struggles, introducing autochthony as a new axis of division (Geschiere 2011).

Colonial boundaries and classifications lingered as nation-building lagged behind (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009) or preceded state-building (Chatterjee 2020) in different contexts. Often, the retention of colonial administrative structures gave postcolonial states both anti-colonial and colonial characteristics. Nationality often stood against other identities – language, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, or culture – while civic nationalism clashed with particularistic claims (Chatterjee 2020). Mobility in the Global South, frequently involving circular migration and informal labour, has differed from the North (Bakewell et al. 2009; Gagnon and Khoudour-Castéras 2012). Thus, nation-building had to unite diverse groups and reconnect populations separated by colonial tactics of divide-and-rule, even as neocolonial dependencies and global inequalities, the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000), persisted. Yet colonial domination remains a reference point, with national identities often seeking meaning in imagined

precolonial authenticity (Bhabha 1990; Chatterjee 2020). So, while nationality stands for liberation, for which “national consciousness” is a prerequisite, nationalism after independence often turned to authoritarianism rather than, as proposed by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), remaining true to its cause and moving toward international solidarity. The complex and contradictory realities of postcoloniality in relation to nationality are likewise reflected in various manifestations of postcolonial citizenship, which tend to be more contingent (Sadiq 2017; Chung 2017), encompassing forms of “flexible” (Ong 1998; Nyamnjoh 2007), “paper” (Sadiq 2009), “partial” (Ong 2006) or gradual (Neocosmos 2010) citizenship.

Postcolonial nationality is situated within the history of anticolonial liberation movements, whose political struggles were central both to the dismantling of formal colonial empires and to the emergence of postcolonial thought itself (Fanon 1963; Young 2001). As such it is important to distinguish between colonialism, understood as the direct political, territorial, and administrative domination of one people or polity by another, and imperialism, the broader system of political, military, and economic power through which domination may continue even in the absence of formal colonial rule (Said 1993; Harvey 2003; Loomba 2015). Reducing imperialism to colonial rule obscures the persistence of imperial relations after decolonization and limits our understanding of present-day global inequalities (Johnson 2026). Accordingly, the term postcolonial should not be understood as denoting a historical era “after colonialism.” Rather, it refers to the historical condition of people and polities shaped by colonial rule and to the continuing struggle over the political, cultural, and economic legacies of empire. As postcolonial theorists have consistently argued, the prefix “post” marks a critical engagement with colonialism rather than its disappearance (Hall 1996; Mbembe 2001; Loomba 2015; Gandhi 2020). Contemporary forms of neocolonial domination demonstrate that colonial logics remain embedded in the present (Nkrumah 1965; Mbembe 2001), including unequal economic relations, military intervention, extractive capitalism, debt dependency, and asymmetrical global governance (Harvey 2003; Khalili 2025). At the same time, the postcolonial nation-state occupies an ambivalent position. Although itself shaped by colonial institutions and often reproducing internal inequalities, it has also functioned, particularly under conditions of neoliberal globalization, as an important site for defending democratic sovereignty, social welfare, and collective self-determination against the expanding power of multinational corporations and transnational capital (Chatterjee 2020).

Examples of the Lived Paradoxes of Postcolonial Nationality

Puerto Rican nationality, for instance, displays several of the paradoxes referenced above. Puerto Ricans see themselves as a nation but are U.S. citizens without political sovereignty, creating a split between U.S. belonging and Puerto Rican cultural/national identity (Duany 2002). The island’s colonial heritage – combining Spanish, U.S., African, and Indigenous influences – intersects with ethnic and linguistic hierarchies, while its transnational character is evident in the fact that about half the population lives on the U.S. mainland, enjoying the benefits of full citizenship, whereas island residents lack full voting rights. By means of self-identification and othering, Puerto Ricans developed some form of Du Boisian “double consciousness” that emphasizes Boricua identity while retaining U.S. citizenship for its associated rights and benefits (Laó-Montes 2008).

Hong Kong's situation is similarly paradoxical. As a former British colony that is now part of the People's Republic of China (PRC), it retains some autonomy as a Special Administrative Region. Hong Kong's political trajectory can be explained by delayed democratization resulting from Britain's reactionary colonial administrative model, Beijing's opposition to democratization, and the reluctance of an enduring colonial bureaucracy, which has impeded democratic change both from the top and from the bottom (Sing 2004). Many residents reject both colonial and mainland political identities, culturally aligning with traditional Chinese heritage while politically cultivating a local Hongkonger identity within a Chinese sovereignty framework (Tang et al. 2022). Consequently, many identify mainly as Hongkongers rather than Chinese, creating tensions between state sovereignty and local belonging. Ongoing pressure from Beijing has intensified emigration and reinforced the view of Hong Kong as a stateless nation (Lu 2025).

In other instances, hostility toward foreign nationals such as that directed toward Black African migrants in contemporary South Africa bears the imprint of colonial and apartheid legacies and their enduring effects. These include a discourse of exceptionalism, the projection of historical fears of the "native" onto Black "foreigners", and the failure of land redistribution (Neocosmos 2010; Matsinhe 2011; Cousins 2016). Taking the example of Zimbabwean nationals, migrants respond to this discourse by countering it with positive self-stereotypes – educated, hardworking, humble, and morally upright – as a source of self-worth and self-defense (Kögel 2024). For them, nationality also carries practical weight: In a context such as South Africa, where political discourse ties belonging to citizenship, nationality provides Zimbabweans with their only formal claim to rights, opportunities, and inclusion. Even when nationality produces exclusion, it simultaneously grants a legitimate position in political and social discourse. Consequently, Zimbabwean migrants deploy nationality strategically, as a retreat, identity marker, basis for claims, and a standpoint from which to assert rights. The term "Zimbabwean" functions as label and identification, its content varying by speaker but consistently enabling equality, entitlement, and legitimacy in a hostile environment. Exclusion may arise from nativity or residence, with one criterion invoked when the other fails, producing paradoxical enactments of nationality. Thus, nationality becomes the primary strategic resource to articulate political claims in a discourse that equates belonging with formal citizenship, reframing a humane agenda as a national cause.

Nationality often promises belonging, yet many postcolonial subjects experience alienation, which they must manage creatively. Nationality as legal membership may be imposed on populations with divided ethnic, linguistic, or cultural identities. Identity feels "real," but membership in respective, politically engineered polities can feel artificial. Postcolonial citizenship laws often privilege certain groups, so identity may conflict with formal membership. A person may culturally feel "national," but legally be marginalized. Further, many postcolonial subjects live transnationally. Identity can remain strong across borders, while legal membership is contested or absent. Yet, despite its constraining and often exclusionary nature – what might be seen as a gruesome iron cage – nationality still provides a framework through which individuals make sense of their realities, hardships, and aspirations.

In postcolonial contexts, the two dimensions of nationality – identity and membership – often operate in tension, producing lived paradoxes. Legal recognition may render national identity

ephemeral, while strong national identity may exist without legal or political membership. Where the formal aspect is decisive – for example, citizenship in the case of international travel or employment abroad – national identity is generally irrelevant. Conversely, citizenship alone may not be enough for others to recognize a person's claim to a national group if they are perceived to lack certain markers of belonging. This interplay exposes the instability of national belonging in societies shaped by colonial legacies and ongoing social stratification. The postcolonial condition in that regard is particular, as formal membership (e.g. aforementioned formations of citizenship) is manifested differently, and national identity can be likened to a collective “double consciousness” (Du Bois 1903).¹ Postcolonial nationality denotes a social construct marked by paradox, both theoretically and as a lived experience.

[1] “Double consciousness” has been applied more broadly to describe the experiences of Black people and postcolonial subjects (e.g., Stuart Hall 1990, Paul Gilroy 1993, Dipesh Chakrabarty 2000). Relatedly, the concept of “hybridity” (Stuart Hall 1990, Homi Bhabha 1994) also denotes nationality as a collective phenomenon. In this context, hybridity describes less a phenomenological fact than a shared interpretive structure. Hall (1996, 228), for instance, illustrates this through the example of how “Martinique both *is* and *is not* ‘French’.” Postcolonial people and polities must navigate the legacies of the colonial past as well as representations of precolonial and anticolonial self-understandings. These legacies include neocolonial dependencies, which need not be directly tied to the former colonizer (e.g., Martinique as a department of France). They may likewise result from the broader economic effects of globalization (e.g., Zimbabwe's adoption of the US dollar as a currency). Certainly, both dimensions affect one another, as colonialism “distorts, disfigures and destroys” the past of the colonized (Fanon 1963, 210) while its authenticity is, at the same time, grounded vis-à-vis the colonizer or today's imperial and neo-colonial forces. The colonial was never merely adopted but was always translated and transformed. This process of hybridity constitutes national identity in the postcolonial context.

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