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# **Dr Bronwen Manby: Identification in Africa**

[CERTIZENS Africa Podcast](https://nyheder.ku.dk/podcasts/certizens-africa-podcast/)

Episode 2 transcript

**About the podcast**

This is the podcast of the [Certifications of Citizenship in Africa (CERTIZENS)](https://teol.ku.dk/english/dept/certizens-certifications-of-citizenship-in-africa/) project, which considers how politics, policy and practice relating to citizen classification, certification and identification shape both citizens and states in selected African contexts. The project is led by [Professor Amanda Hammar](https://teol.ku.dk/cas/staff/?pure=en/persons/186095) from the Centre of African Studies (CAS), University of Copenhagen, in collaboration with teams at CAS and the University of Ghana, Legon, and Makerere University in Uganda.

Through conversations, interviews and debates among scholars, practitioners and policy makers, the CERTIZENS Africa podcast provides a platform to explore the complexities, challenges and implications of current and emerging systems of citizen classification certification and identification, and the forms of ID they generate, both in African and global contexts.

**About Episode 2**

Dr Bronwen Manby (LSE Senior Policy Fellow and CERTIZENS Scientific Advisory Board member) introduces the key themes and concerns of the CERTIZENS Africa project. She asks: Why is CERTIZENS important in the current moment? How does the project fit into the existing literature on identification globally? And what is particular about the Africa context?

More about Bronwen Manby: [Academic profile](https://www.lse.ac.uk/middle-east-centre/people/bronwen-manby)

**Links to academic works cited**

Keith Breckenridge and Simon Szreter, [Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History](https://britishacademy.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.5871/bacad/9780197265314.001.0001/upso-9780197265314)

Keith Breckenridge, [Biometric State](https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/biometric-state/4A38EA25FF753A196560D6CFB8091E8D)

Robtel Pailey, [Development, (Dual) Citizenship and Its Discontents in Africa](https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/development-dual-citizenship-and-its-discontents-in-africa/B96CB2D100CFEC03EE476D103F46348B)

**Other scholars mentioned**

[Peter Ekeh](https://www.africanbookscollective.com/authors-editors/peter-ekeh), [Mahmood Mamdani](https://anthropology.columbia.edu/content/mahmood-mamdani), [Stephen Ndegwa](https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/people/s/stephen-ndegwa), [Peter Geschiere](https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/ASC-community/members/peter-geschiere), [Jean Francois Bayart](https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/academic-departments/faculty/jean-francois-bayart), [Francis Nyamnjoh](http://www.anthropology.uct.ac.za/san/people/academic/nyamnjoh), [Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja](https://aaad.unc.edu/faculty-staff/georges-nzongola-ntalaja/), [Crawford Young](https://aaad.unc.edu/faculty-staff/georges-nzongola-ntalaja/), [George and Gloria Bob-Milliar](https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203725030-16/mobilizing-african-diaspora-development-politics-dual-citizenship-ghana-george-bob-milliar-gloria-bob-milliar)

If you have comments, suggestions or would like to be part of a future CERTIZENS podcast, write to us at [certizens@teol.ku.dk](mailto:certizens@teol.ku.dk)

**Transcript**

**Amanda Hammar**

From voter registration to accessing health care and other public services or getting a SIM card, ID documents are indispensable to everyday life on the African continent. The number of people living without ID documents has reached an epidemic scale: they make up 50% of the estimated 1 billion people living worldwide without formal proof of identity.

My name is Amanda Hammar, professor of African Studies at Copenhagen University, and you're listening to the CERTIZENS Africa Podcast. In this episode, Doctor Bronwen Manby, Senior Policy Fellow at the London School of Economics and CERTIZENS Scientific Advisory Board member, discusses the key themes and concerns of the CERTIZENS project. Among other things, she asks: Why is CERTIZENS important in the current moment? How does the project fit into the existing literature and thinking on identification globally and what is particular about certifications of citizens in the African context?

Bronwen’s talk was part of the launch of the CERTIZENS research project in March 2021. The talk was recorded over Zoom, so please bear with the occasionally patchy audio quality. Enjoy the listening.

**Bronwen Manby**

Thank you very much, Amanda, and it's a real pleasure to hear about the other projects in this enterprise and it’s a great pleasure to be here. Thank you for inviting me to speak and thank you for inviting me to be on your Scientific Advisory Board.

My talk has got four parts really. I'm going to say why is this project important to start off with, set it a little bit within the context of comparative literature on identification globally; then look at why the African context is particular, different, important? What are the particularities? And finally, why is the current moment important for this research?

So, starting with why the project is important. The question of who belongs is a critical question for the functioning of any society. Who is a member of the broader national family who can participate in government and culture? All societies have these rules and have always done so. Who can farm this land? Who can marry my daughter? Who can get support if they fall on hard times? Who can use the village hall? Who must fight for the country or the community if they are called upon to do so? Who can vote? And of course, most importantly, who has the right to live and remain undisturbed in their place, in the certainty that they are recognised as being a part of the community with a right to engage and participate in those community affairs?

Historically, of course, documents were largely irrelevant to this question. Most people over most of history were not registered and issued documents to certify their membership of a particular society. Nonetheless, the history of registration and certification goes back further than you would think. Ancient Egypt and Ancient China both had registration systems. And civil registration systems evolved in the European context from the parish registers kept within the Catholic Church. In the British context, going back to the 16th century.

There's a fascinating book which Keith Breckenridge, who is one of the other members of the Scientific Advisory Board for this project, edited together with Simon Szreter called Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History, which looks at some of these processes across geographies and over time in a fascinating way, showing really how documentation of identity is essential to the functioning of so many societies, of any formal government structures really.

Over the past couple of 100 years, certification of identity through centralised registers has become ever more important. It's become practically impossible to take part in the formal life of many societies without identity documents of one sort or another. And of course, over the last couple of decades, that process has only accelerated and immigration controls have become ever stricter and ever more dependent on holding the right documents.

And other controls around money laundering, concerns over terrorism, mean that it's impossible to, for example, open a bank account without an identity document. A formal identity document to get a SIM card for a mobile phone. The new technology and benefits of mobile telephony depend on having an identity card. They didn't initially, but they do now. And you don't just need an identity document, but increasingly you need the right form of identity document with biometric details registered. So in the past, if a bank, for example, was concerned whether you’re a good credit risk, a letter from your employer would do. Now, a letter from your employer is not enough. You need a biometric identity document, and this is coming true all over the world, including in Africa.

The African continent has a particular history in this trajectory about identity documents. The development of registration and identification in the colonial state leaves the postcolonial state with particular challenges. Documentation in Africa is inextricably linked to the history of surveillance and control of the movement of natives by Europeans. That is to say, the history of Pass Laws, and the control of movement of Africans. Civil registration – birth registration, death registration, marriage registration – was for Europeans and for those handful of Africans with full civil status. This was encoded in the early Births and Deaths Registration Acts of the British Territories, which explicitly stated that birth registration was for Europeans, Americans and ‘Asiatics’ – the term used. This language was in place in Malawi until the last decade. In most of the other countries, of course, birth registration has become universal across the populations after independence, whereas natives were required to carry passbooks of various kinds if they wanted to move about. This was of course most exaggerated in the countries with large white settler populations, of southern Africa and Kenya in particular.

And while birth registration globally and in African countries everywhere has a focus on universal access, the procedures that were developed for adult identification often retrained that feel of security and control rather than the idea of recognition of identity and welcoming to the membership of the community.

Second aspect in Africa: the forced recruitment of labour and the arbitrary drawing of borders through pre-existing political and cultural communities, which meant that nation-building – the creation of Benedict Anderson's ‘imagined community’ – has in postcolonial states required the melding together of multilingual, multicultural, multireligious communities into at least something resembling a whole. The question of who became a citizen on succession of states, on the transfer of sovereignty over the territory from the European powers to newly independent governments, was mostly, or often at least, not carefully regulated, and even if that question of who became a citizen as independence was regulated in law, the law was often not implemented in practice. So this question of who became Ghanaian and who became Ugandan, who became Ivorian, and who became Zimbabwean at independence, remains a problem until today.

Most of the commentary at the transition to independence from the European side was about those of European, Asian and Middle Eastern descent. And from one of our two country case studies in this project, the Ugandan Asian crisis of course got massive coverage around the world. Largely, however, from the British perspective about the ‘wave’ of Asians who were going to arrive in Britain, but also in the East African context, the status of what was the Asians who had come into East Africa on the coattails of empire remains a question that is live in politics still today.

But what is often disguised in this discussion is that by far the largest numbers affected in this question of who became a citizen at independence are other Africans. The status of farmworkers in Zimbabwe; people brought us forced labour to work on cocoa and coffee plantations in southern Cote d'Ivoire, to work on other types of plantations in eastern Congo, from Rwanda and Burundi by the Belgians. These populations – tea workers in Kenya and Uganda – who came from other African countries, they’re far larger and have been much less visible.

The other factor is that the initial frameworks of law and identification and legal citizenship that applied after independence – those born after the transition – are largely copy-pasted from European models, really not taking into account national context. This is true for the British territories, for French territories, for the Portuguese territories. This means both that the strengths and weaknesses of those different legal traditions have had a profound impact on the way that citizenship and certification of citizenship has developed in different African regions since independence. But it also means that the law, and especially the procedures, they were based on European models that imagined, for example, that there was 100% birth registration. They did not take into account national contexts. And while we have seen a lot of amendments to the substantive law of citizenship since independence, the procedures have remained much more constant. But largely unstudied. That's beginning to change, as I will come to later. But that question of how it is determined who is a citizen, is pretty much unstudied. There are huge gaps.

So then, with that foundation, looking towards the comparative literature on identification and citizenship. This is a massively multidisciplinary area of study. I have some sympathy for the PhDs setting out on this journey because it can seem completely overwhelming. You need to engage with the legal research, understand what the law says. There's the vast quantities of sociological anthropological study about the idea of belonging. There’s political science looking at voting patterns in elections and how people get voter registration. There's management documents, there's civil registration. There's development studies. It is a massively multidisciplinary area of study.

But foundational to this is the essential framework, the relationship of increased state capacity or the level of state capacity to the registration and documentation of the population. If the state wants to provide services or recruit soldiers or guarantee inheritance rights for its population, or make sure that all of the children who should be in school are in school, people need to be registered. The literature about this dates back essentially to Weber on the inherent connection between increased state capacity and increased bureaucracy. And this literature, as Amanda has already stated, brings out the dual nature of identification systems of tools, both of empowerment and of control.

Identification systems, like the law in general, reflect existing political and economic power. But they also provide the recognition of a person who is inside the system, with the ability to mobilise at least some of that power from the bottom. If you don’t pass that initial barrier of being recognised as a member of society or ability to change that society is compromised.

Where the global literature touches on documentation as the bureaucratic foundation of citizenship – and citizenship both in the legal sense but also in the sense of participation in society – it often assumes that the division between citizen and non-citizen is clear, and thus that the certification question is technical. There may of course be discrimination and injustice, and this should be studied and challenged, as a matter of practice and as a matter of scholarship. But as a matter of law, it's often assumed that it is known if a person is or is not a citizen of the place where they are living. So, for example, there's literature about undocumented migrants in Europe, in the United States, and elsewhere, that looks at how those without papers engage in ‘acts of citizenship’ to claim a citizenship space and their right to belong and contribute to those societies, even if they are in irregular status. And this organisation and claiming of spaces of course then blurs the category boundaries over who is a citizen. It creates the argument that a contribution to society should bring recognition of citizenship. But nonetheless, legally speaking, the analysis usually assumes that it is clear whether or not a person is a citizen at the outset. There may be some anomalies or stateless persons, but fundamentally it is known that this person does not currently have legal citizenship of a society and they are claiming those spaces. And the urge to say that citizenship is deserved regardless of that legal status or those documents can lead to a certain blindness about the importance of recognised citizenship for those who do not have it. The scholarship is written by those who are comfortable in their own passports, even if the passports are for another country, and even recognising the situation that people in the country concerned may not have documentation of where they are, but they have a passport somewhere else, so if the worst comes to the worst, there is somewhere to which they can be deported.

But what about the people who do not have anywhere to be there to be deported to? And what about their status in the country of origin in that context. And the African context is really quite different, because it is often unclear whether a person is a citizen or not because of this history. And this can be true for hundreds of thousands or even millions of people living in some countries.

In Cote d'Ivoire we have maybe a quarter or a third of people who are described as foreigners in the national census, are treated as foreigners, and yet multiple generations living in Cote d'Ivoire. What is their status? How do we recognise that? They have in the past, perhaps, been recognised as citizens but the turn of politics meant that they stopped being recognized as citizens. Their status is thus unclear. And this is therefore not just an anomalous handful of people. And of course this question of who is a citizen has been at the heart of many conflicts in Africa, including in Cote d'Ivoire, but also in Congo, in other countries as well.

The question whether you are a citizen determines control of resources and access to political power and therefore, as has been sent been said already in this series of contributions, it's extremely political. It's not just legal, it's not just technical, it's also deeply political.

And there's a huge literature about the crisis of citizenship in the postcolonial African state. The challenges of nation-building, independence, indigene-settler divide, the return or intensification of primordial identities with the return of multiparty democracy. And we can mention Peter Ekeh, Mahmood Mamdani, Stephen Ndegwa, Peter Geschiere, Jean Francois Bayart, Francis Nyamnjoh, Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, Crawford Young, I could go on. There are libraries of books on this question.

But there's very little scholarship on a particular regime of identity documents. And the exceptions to this rule relate mostly to the colonial foundations of these systems. So we have Frederick Cooper on civil registration in Francophone West Africa, Keith Breckenridge again on the fascinating role of South Africa as a laboratory for the development of biometric identification techniques. Some writing on the role that identity cards played in the Rwandan genocide dating back to the Belgian era, and the situation of Nubian and Somalin communities in Kenya, again dating back to colonial categories of citizenship.

More recently, there's a growing literature on voter registration in African states as multiparty democracy returned in the 1990s. But voter registration has become, in many countries, the primary document that recognised a person citizenship, in the absence of a national identity card – because, of course, to be a voter is to be a citizen. The two are supposed to be coterminous.

And what are the processes by which a person is or is not admitted to a voters roll? There's literature by Nic Cheeseman and others looking at the bureaucratic gatekeepers, what are the adjudication methods and so forth. There's also a literature about refugee registration and identification and the identity of refugees. For example, work by Lisa Malkki in Tanzania.

But there has been limited study of the legal framework for citizenship on which documents are based. The national level studies here are largely around dual citizenship. There’s an excellent edited collection by George and Gloria Bob-Milliar looking at comparative studies around dual citizenship, a very recent book by Robtel Neajai Pailey on Liberia just came out this year. But these are mainly focusing on the legal recognition and continued connection and citizenship of the far diaspora. Not so much the near diaspora over the border. Robtel’s book is an exception there. But also not looking at the many thousands of people with mixed parentage. So [in the case of] dual citizenship, it is presumed that you acquired American citizenship or citizenship of a European country, but what about the dual citizenship of the people who live in African countries and they have a parent from over the border?

My own work has looked at the evolution of legal frameworks for citizenship more broadly. But the literature around identification documents is still limited, though growing. There’s a project at Science Po in Paris on the social life of identity papers that's produced some work in this area. But nonetheless, there's very little study of the detailed procedural nitty gritty of certification procedures and the implications of those procedures for identity and belonging, more broadly defined, and for ideas of citizenship as participation. And this is true not only in the former British territories which have *not* had national identity documents historically, but also in the French territories which *have* had identity national identity documents following the French model. Although in the British territories that had white settler populations – so in Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa – there is more because of that history, but even so limited amounts.

So finally, why is this project important right now? The current moment really is a critical one, as has always already been touched upon. We have the rapid expansion of identification systems throughout the the African continent, and they're upgrading if they already exist, but new identity cards, if they did not previously exist. We have the Sustainable Development Goal target to provide ‘legal identity for all’, including birth registration. Everybody knows what birth registration is. Nobody is quite clear what legal identity means. Although there is now a definition, which reflects the convoluted nature of the definition adopted by the combined UN agencies, and the difficulty in understanding what exactly we are talking about. We have the World Bank Identification for Development Programme, the Identification for Africa initiative, which is more engaged with the private sector, and there are many other initiatives.

ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States) and the East African Community have both adopted common formats for biometric national identity cards, which will be the basis for free movement throughout their regions. On parallel tracks we also have major efforts to improve birth registration and civil registration generally, led by the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS). There’s a programme led by UNICEF with the African Union, focusing above all on birth registration. And there have been a series of ministerial conferences at the African level. There's something of a low-level fight between those favouring birth registration and civil registration and adult identification going on about which model is the best way of creating effective documentations of populations and more inclusive versions.

The policy emphasis in all of these initiatives is the importance of identification for inclusion in society. Identity documents as the basis for access to services, to vote, and especially for financial inclusion, given that those without a biometric identity document effectively cannot open a bank account in today's world or get a SIM card.

It's always been the case that ability to prove identity has been critical to economic development, but these new systems are increasingly centralising and securitising previous identification regimes, and the stakes for entry are ever higher. In the past, it could be possible to live in many African societies without documents at all, although difficult once you wanted to engage with a formal state. But you could live without voter registration, for example, as long as your children were in school. But now everything is being linked, and as we’ve just seen, if you can't get a Covid vaccination unless you have an identity document, the critical nature of inclusion becomes ever more important.

And as these new systems are being becoming more pervasive, the old forms of ID are not accepted, including voter cards. And this is particularly important because we saw, since the 1990s, a massive drive across African states for independent electoral commissions to be established. With the drive for national identity cards, the independent oversight of identification as a citizen is being taken out from those independent bodies and put underneath the Ministry of Interior, usually an institution not focused on empowerment but more on control. So this dual nature is always there. But the current moment is really important to look at. The balance between empowerment and control, and the ways in which the specific procedures are influencing that development.

This research project has the opportunity to make a real difference. There are huge gaps in our knowledge about how identification systems work. And there are also urgent policy questions to address, especially around the models for identification that work best for African societies and for their varied realities. What would an African model for certification of citizenship look like, designed with respect for tradition, but to overcome the lingering colonial legacy and to move towards a more rights respecting agenda?

And I shall finish there, thank you very much.

**Amanda Hammar**

The CERTIZENS Podcast is produced by Amanda Hammar and Alice Troy-Donovan with the support of the Centre of African Studies at the University of Copenhagen and the Danida Fellowship Centre. The theme music is Resonance by Air Tone. This podcast is released under a Creative Commons licence.

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