

# The Cultural 'Therapeutics' of Sovereignty in the Context of Forced Migration

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/08/29/the-cultural-therapeutics-of-sovereignty-in-the-context-of-forced-migration/>

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Anti-asylum policies continue to be characteristic of contemporary European Union (EU) countries, as politicians attempt to placate public anxiety and hostility against perceptions of an asylum 'influx' (Chandler 2006, 71). This hostile treatment of asylum seekers and refugees has fallen short of the EU's commitment to 'universalising the political subject' and duty of care to victims of political repression who are not their citizens (Chandler 2006). As the recent United Kingdom (UK) election and EU referendum have shown, anti-asylum and immigration rhetoric tends to heighten as political elites seek to present a 'fortress Britain' immigration stance to win political campaigns. There is a presumption that electorates tend to be anti-immigration and anti-asylum, and to win a mandate to govern, political elites make attempts to resonate with the anti-asylum sentiments of their citizens (Nolan 1998, 241). Consequently, successive UK governments have formulated restrictive and assimilationist policies like 'citizenship classes and tests', deportation and reduced welfare provision for certain immigrants, such as asylum seekers and refugees. The intention is to convey a message that the government has the capacity to control the asylum-migration 'crisis' (Rudolph 2005), and the 'influx' does not pose a threat to an 'imagined' Britishness and state sovereignty (Dwyer 2010). In this sense, policy-making has evolved into a therapeutic process of state legitimisation by which political elites demonstrate that they are in sync with the electorates' beliefs about immigration (Nolan 1998, 20).

Notwithstanding the hostile asylum policies and cultural assimilation, asylum seekers and refugees, as immigrants and aspiring UK citizens, continue to retain and express multiple identities, and are not restricted to a singular 'imagined' British national identity. This paper explores this internationalisation of cultures and identities through the experiences and views of asylum seekers and refugees in Edinburgh and Glasgow in Scotland, UK across a range of topics including naturalisation and statelessness, participation in 'British' citizenship classes, and transnational cultural practices. The chapter considers the futility of UK governments' formulations of restrictive and assimilationist policies (on immigration and citizenship) to assert British cultural homogeneity and state sovereignty (Dwyer 2010). In addition, the paper draws from Nolan's 'therapeutic state' to explore the tensions between the UK state's mandatory citizenship classes and tests, and asylum-seeking migrants' identity formations (Nolan 1998).

### **The Cohort, Citizenship Classes and the 'Therapeutic' State**

The research for this chapter is drawn from fieldwork among asylum seekers and refugees residing in Edinburgh and Glasgow in Scotland on the topic of media communication, asylum-seeking migration and citizenship. The evidence for the chapter is based on in-depth, semi-structured, individual face-to-face interviews with twenty-three asylum-seeking and refugee migrants. The sample is composed of twelve males and eleven females, aged between 26 and 65 years. Eight of the participants, four men and four women, self-describe themselves as Muslims. Each individual describes their experiences as asylum seekers/refugees in terms of fleeing persecution from countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle-East and South America. Each person had been dispersed as an asylum seeker to Edinburgh or Glasgow, where they became aware of the UK's citizenship policy involving citizenship classes, tests and oath. The citizenship classes and tests were introduced into UK law in 2002, and have since been repeatedly amended. The

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citizenship classes and tests incorporate knowledge of life in the UK and language classes and tests. The designated main language is English, although immigrants can choose Scottish Gaelic or Welsh, which are national languages of UK territories of Scotland and Wales respectively. The content of citizenship consists of British history and accomplishments, politics, geography and civic life, although such content may reflect the realities of the UK homeland territories (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) where it is administered. The oath element occurs at a citizenship ceremony, usually taken upon successful completion of the language and citizenship tests. Oath-taking involves swearing or affirming a citizenship oath of allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen at a citizenship ceremony. The oath swearing is to God, while affirming the oath does not have any religious context.

The sample of participants was generated by 'snowballing', 'convenience' and non-random techniques. This means participants were selected for ease of access and ability to speak English. Additionally, participants were either known by the researcher or were asked to recommend others to participate in the study. This sampling method also entailed opportunistic recruitment of participants through accidental or off-chance encounters. Employing snowballing, non-random and convenience techniques enabled the recruitment of participants to be on-going throughout the research. However, I used different networks for accessing participants including attending public and private meetings, social functions and other activities organised for asylum seekers and refugees by gatekeeper agencies, including Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs). Four participants were known by the researcher prior to interviewing through common participation in IKAZE, a theatre group run by asylum seekers and refugees in Edinburgh. One participant was known in advance of the interview through common membership of the then Exiled Journalists' Network (EJN), a UK wide organisation for exiled journalists.

All 23 participants were informed of the researcher's refugee status prior to being interviewed. In order to control potential researcher bias in collecting and analysing the interview data, measures employed included 'respondent validation' and note-taking of contextual information to cross-check the accuracy of views and to inform the analysis (Creswell 1998; Beresford and Evans 1999; Arthur and Nazroo 2003; Small and Uttal 2005; Kezar 2005). Note-taking involves recording background information, emotional accounts and practices that are relevant in understanding the issue being investigated. For example, I sometimes gleaned information from 'back-stage' chats, including whilst travelling with participants on the bus to and from an interview session. Through 'respondent validation', I got feedback on the accuracy of participants' views, and asked them to provide their own definitions of concepts or words to mitigate misunderstanding. Note-taking of contextual information was, therefore, useful to inform the analysis, and mitigated against bias.

Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity to facilitate participation (Powles 2004). Verbal consent was sought to use recordings and take notes, and to let me know of any issue they would not like to be recorded (Powles 2004). Seeking consent was not only done before interviews, but was also reiterative (Mackenzie et al. 2007, 308).

## 'Cultural Therapy' as Locus for Sovereignty

Nolan's (1998) book *The Therapeutic State* is a US case study that provides interesting insights on government (and allied institutions) attempts to connect with society at the individual level. He argues that policy-making has a therapeutic basis in which political elites seek legitimacy from their electorates and citizens. In order to respond to citizens' concerns, political elites resort to formulating policies that acquire symbolic significance but yield less or no material impact on the issue of concern (La Fond 1992). The ensuing 'therapeutic culture' becomes an institutionalised practice of formulating laws aimed at averting or stopping a perceived problem whilst communicating to the public that political elites are responsive to the concerns of citizens. By so doing, 'therapeutic culture' is a symbol of political power with ambiguous outcomes; whilst individuals embrace the therapeutic culture, it could also be incapable of solving the perceived problem (Jones 2009; Nolan 1998).

However, Nolan's analysis of cultural therapy as a political tool for social control of citizens by political elites is silent on its relevance for non-citizens like asylum-seeking migrants residing in liberal democracies. Yet, the concept of 'therapeutic culture' has explanatory value for understanding governments' assimilationist citizenship policies in countries like the UK. This is because policies like citizenship classes are a manifestation of the visible assertion of

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state authority on non-citizens in two respects: the imposition of a 'pathological identity' and controlling access to citizenship, and moral panics on asylum. Cohen (1987) observed that a 'moral panic' can occur when 'a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values or interests' (Cohen 1987, 9). The moral panic generates a state of impending crisis emanating from uncontrollable asylum-seeking migration, resulting in portraying asylum seekers as 'folk devils' or as 'bad citizens', and an embodiment of 'evil' (Rothe and Muzzati 2004; Ejarvec 2003; Hall 1997; Cohen 2002). The 'folk devils', in this case asylum seekers and refugees, are perceived as bereft of responsible social actions, and blamed for the breakdown of social cohesion, and a threat to an 'imagined' Britishness and the national citizenship order (Gifford 2004, 148; Bruter 2004; ICAR 2004; Ejarvec 2003; Speers 2001; Bloch 2000; Anderson 1991). The 'pathological identity' ascribed to asylum seekers and refugees is further reinforced by the citizenship classes policy in prescribing 'cultural competence' in and 'normative commitment' to an 'imagined' Britishness, as a prerequisite for admission into national citizenship (see Nolan 1998). By so doing, the policy pathologises non-citizen immigrants as afflicted with a 'disease': that of not being British enough (Veit-Brause 1995).

In the context of Nolan's 'cultural therapeutics', the citizenship classes become the 'technocratic' treatment of this disease. This is because they are used to ground into the psyche of immigrants, the language, histories, values, traditions and achievements of the British nation-state (Camilleri 1995, 220; Crick 2000). As the current Prime Minister, Teresa May argued when she was the coalition government's Home Secretary, content of citizenship that prioritises the learning of British history and traditions would instil 'British patriotism' among immigrants (Jones 2011). Through this, the state aims to control the behaviour, and social and cultural values of minority populations in line with those prescribed by policymakers. Citizenship classes, therefore, constitute what Tyler referred to as a 'biopolitics', meaning a set of legal, moral and social strategies to control and shape the behaviour of individuals (2010, 62). More importantly, the prescribed behaviour and values are predominantly those of the mainstream or the majority white population (Byrne 2007; Gillespie 2007; Fortier 2010; Lentin and Titley 2011; Khan 2012).

At the same time, in legislating the citizenship classes and tests, political elites signify that they are responsive to citizens' concerns and the moral panic over the perceived perils of uncontrollable asylum-seeking migration. In this regard, citizenship classes, as a cultural therapeutic intervention, are intended to manage public unease about a perceived asylum seeker 'influx' posing a threat to an 'imagined' Britishness. Yet, as the UK referendum on leaving the EU reminded us, we know that migration into the UK continues unabated because under its international humanitarian obligation, the UK cannot gratuitously refuse to grant asylum. To do so would evoke a political backlash, as occurred with US President Donald Trump's ban on refugees and Muslims. In this sense, policymaking has involved a therapeutic process of state legitimisation by which political elites socially control non-citizens and show that they are accordant with citizens' beliefs about immigration (Nolan 1998, 20).

From the interviews, it is clear the participants' opinions of this policy are nuanced. On the one hand, participants perceived this policy as a practical opportunity to learn more about citizenship rights and responsibilities in a British context. Thus, the classes were viewed as protocols of life necessary for the migrants to manage everyday life in a new environment, for example by improving their communication skills and social interactions among both the linguistically diverse asylum-seeking migrant population and indigenous British citizens. The participants also perceived the classes in therapeutic terms similar to official policy: as a tool that would facilitate immigrants' social engagement, inclusion and integration (Home Office 2001).

On the other hand, participants felt coerced into accepting that, as non-British citizens, they lacked the language, values and histories of 'Britishness':

It [learning about citizenship and English] doesn't have to be a forced matter. They are putting pressure on people, if I may say so (110, Zimbabwean, Glasgow).

Since I have been in Zimbabwe, born and bred there, and colonised by the British, I speak fluent English. I didn't have to go to school to study their English' (110, Zimbabwean, Glasgow).

The participants raised serious questions relating to using citizenship classes to exert sovereignty. Although the

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policy excludes immigrants from selected English-speaking territories, participants, like 110, from former British colonial territories where English is the official language of schooling, perceived the policy as discriminatory against the 'ex-colonial other'. Many participants attributed the perceived discrimination of the policy to a deliberate attempt by the state at differentiating newcomer non-UK citizens from UK citizens:

I have got friends, who are Scottish, Isabel that was here. She says: 'Some questions in that book [citizenship study material] you know them better than me'. They [policymakers] say to be a British citizen you have to know the geographical area of the UK, but the Scottish, they know nothing. We know more than they [Scottish friends] do. So [knowing about] the geographical area of the UK should apply to every citizen living in UK soil not just asylum seekers and refugees (121, Angolan, Glasgow).

This person's recounting of the views of a UK citizen, particularly a Scot, highlights the policy's discriminatory potential in mandating ethnic minority immigrants learning about British culture, history and geography whilst native-born UK residents are exempt. Others, like 102, felt the policy typifies asymmetrical power relations in the West in dealing with non-Western states and their citizens:

Europe also had their troubles [wars]...millions were displaced and went all over the place: in Latin America, in Africa. And the governments there gave them land, gave them opportunities...to succeed...and the good thing about that was nobody was asked even for a passport, and they were just very welcomed in these places (102, Chilean, Edinburgh).

The post-colonial critique of the policy was based on the belief that UK citizens were not subjected to similar policies of cultural assimilation and sovereignty when they migrated to former colonial countries. Participants, therefore, perceived the compulsory element of the policy as an expression of coercive state authority:

You don't need to force people to become citizens, you know. It has to be natural; it has to be a natural process. I think, to some degree, it is coercive and it shouldn't be like that. Citizenship is a natural process...(112, Cameroonian, Glasgow).

Citizenship classes and tests were also viewed as part of a government hidden-agenda to control access to national citizenship:

I think behind it, there is a concern in the way it [classes and tests] is being applied. It could be used as a way to refuse people full integration. What about people who can't read and write? How are you going to integrate them into the citizenship programme? So, I think there are some anomalies with regards to the issue (112, Cameroonian, Glasgow).

Thus, one participant described the policy as a 'symbolic gesture' to communicate to UK citizens that something was being done to contain the threat posed by asylum-seeking migration to British values (111, *Cameroonian, Edinburgh*). In this case, as others have argued, immigration and citizenship policies are predicated on the assumption that native-born citizens will only tolerate and support immigration if they believe in their government's determination to control migration (Kofman 2005, 459; Rudolph 2005).

Participants' assessments could also be unpacked in Nolan's therapeutic terms. Firstly, the policy functioned in part as an antidote for public hostility and moral panics on asylum, and as a therapeutic form of state legitimation to socially control non-citizens (Nolan 1998, 293). In this case, immigrants felt that they were expected to prove that they have the knowledge, and values of an 'imagined' Britishness beyond that required of British citizens (McGhee 2009). Given that some Scots, as UK citizens, see themselves as ethnically and nationally different from other nationalities within the UK, such as English, Welsh or even British (Lord Goldsmith 2008), 121's experience suggests that citizenship classes construct ethnic minorities as the source of social problems afflicting communities. Secondly, immigrants often ascribe to a utilitarian pragmatic logic with respect to citizenship classes and tests that is different from the state's therapeutic logic. Although participants comprehended the classes and tests as a cultural therapeutic intervention by the state, they nonetheless pragmatically subscribed to them to the extent that the classes were useful to their British citizenship formation, particularly in enabling their social inclusion and ending their

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'refugee-hood' and statelessness. This area, and its relevance to challenging sovereignty, is discussed below.

## Statelessness, Naturalisation and Sovereignty

All 23 participants described themselves as victims of social and political injustices in their homelands. Many were from so-called 'failed states' where their government was either unwilling or unable to protect them, or was itself responsible for oppressing them (Tickner 1995; Chandler 2006). Seeking asylum shows that challenges to state sovereignty include citizens' 'exit' to escape state repression (Moses 2005). At the same time, 'exit' constitutes making claims to human rights and international solidarity, and loyalties to political membership are not restricted to territorial borders (Joppke 1997). Asylum seekers' actions constitute an 'exit' from the oppressive sovereignty of their homelands (Hirschman 1970) and a challenge to the UK to exercise its sovereignty to uphold its responsibilities to protect international humanitarian norms (Joppke 1997). Although asylum is not a legal obligation under The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and is therefore not prioritised over state sovereignty, participants perceived the UK as morally obligated to grant them asylum (Guiraudon and Lahav 2000; Chandler 2006, 55):

In fact, these countries, so-called developed countries, promote the problem. Like the British are responsible for the arms trading and promoting wars, like the Americans do. So they see this human disaster and they don't want to take responsibility for it (102, Chilean, Edinburgh).

All of the participants also partly blamed a protracted and often unsuccessful asylum process for their statelessness. Their general perception was that having rights to naturalisation would end their statelessness and attendant threat of deportation. More broadly, participants attributed their statelessness to their exclusion from rights of residency and naturalisation in the UK and threats of deportation:

At the moment, I just see myself as okay. Legally on paper, I am a Zimbabwean citizen. But personally I just see myself as a person in a dilemma. I don't know where to go. I can't go to the right. I can't go to the left (107, Zimbabwean, Glasgow).

If [the UK government] talked about bad things, deportation, I am not feeling good. Last year I remember in my work they take, early morning, they take about four or five ... a Kurdish family... they deport them.... (119, Eritrean, Glasgow)

You have to think about your home first, where you are coming from is not good for me, you understand me? So I just have to bear it (108, Nigerian, Glasgow).

These comments suggest the emotional consequences of exclusion from the rights of residency or statelessness. Consequently, asylum seekers choose to continue holding on to their homeland national citizenship. This embodies the problematic choice confronting many asylum seekers: to either continue being stateless, while anxiously awaiting the outcome of their asylum claim, or be deported to their homelands to face further persecution. All of the participants chose the former, as the lesser of two evils. Consequently, some chose to evade deportation either by legal challenge or by 'going underground', 'under the radar' or being 'illegal', which are metaphors for resisting the sovereign state's authority to exclude them from membership in the polity.

Some spoke of their homelands' policies that proscribed them from attaining dual citizenship. Four participants said they would forfeit their homeland's citizenship if they were to acquire any other citizenship including that of the UK. Three of these individuals were from Somalia and one from Sierra Leone (with the latter repealing its law prohibiting dual citizenship in 2007). In this case, the acceptance of dual citizenship policies by nation-states like the UK is an act of recognition of transnational citizenship rights, with attendant dual citizenship responsibilities for émigré nationals (Sales 2007, 234). As such, immigrants in these host and origin countries are allowed multiple national identities, while also submitting to multiple state sovereignties.

This has both internationalist and multicultural components. Morally, it is consistent with international human rights norms of free movement and an individual's freedom of choice with respect to country of residence. Culturally, it is an

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acknowledgement by host states like the UK that immigrants, as citizens of their homelands, continue to maintain emotional attachments and cultural ties to their countries of origin. In this sense, acceptance of an immigrant's dual citizenship is a practical government response to the ethnic and cultural diversity within contemporary Western states. Yet, this is at odds with the state's promulgation of assimilationist citizenship classes to assert sovereignty over an 'imagined' British cultural identity.

The next section further considers how the participants' opposition to the assimilationist citizenship policy was expressed through cultural and technological practices. It is another reminder that forced migrants do not succumb to the way they have been pathologised by the cultural therapeutics of officials.

## Cultural Production and Sovereignty

The participants' opposition to the UK state's attempt to assert cultural homogeneity and 'Brito-centric' national identity through citizenship classes was more directly channelled through organising social, cultural and artistic events. Seven of the eight women participants were also involved in organising and delivering art and cultural activities facilitated by refugee advocacy networks such as Oxfam-Scotland and the British Red Cross. The activities were often targeted to grass-roots local residents and schools:

While we respect the [British] culture, the law of the land, we equally keep our own culture, and that in itself will make our children understand where we came from (112, Cameroonian, Glasgow).

These events served two identity functions that are relevant to appraising cultural sovereignty. First, the events represented the participants' acceptance of British cultural diversity; and second, the events were used to educate UK citizens about their plight and cultures (Khan 2008, 13). The events therefore embodied immigrants' expression of cultural attachment and identity with their homelands. In this regard, transnational identity expressions (Morrel 2008) constitute a challenge to the authority of the state to prescribe or impose its cultural and national identity preferences.

Further, the participants used the internet for a similar purpose, specifically as a technological instrument for political mobilisation, and engagement with other asylum seekers and their interlocutors including UK citizens. For instance, one participant stated that:

The computer has given me the opportunity to write and express myself and communicate with others in South America and the world over (102, Chilean, Edinburgh).

In this case, fifteen of the participants were either members of, or involved in running, internet-based networks, while three owned websites that were devoted to political, social and cultural participation in the UK and beyond.

One participant belonged to the Exiled Journalists' Network (EJN). The organisation was founded by asylum-seeking migrant journalists residing in the UK to respond to their exclusion from the mainstream UK media, and provide a 'voice' to counter the negative coverage of asylum seekers in the UK media. EJN also contests the repression of free speech and other human rights abuses perpetrated by states against their citizens around the world. Another participant participated in FABULA (Forum of Arts for Better Understanding of Latin American Culture), which contests misrepresentations of Latin-American cultures in UK media and cultural spaces.

Additionally, both EJN and FABULA aim to mobilise support among UK citizens to influence the UK government to act in support of their claims-making for cultural, political and social rights within and beyond the UK. This shows that the asylum-seeking migrants prefer to view the UK state in humanitarian terms, as a community of solidarity for persecuted individuals and a facilitator of rights and responsibilities at the international level (Joppke 1997; Murphy and Harty 2003, 187). It shows, too, that a number of the participants recognised that public support for non-citizen asylum seekers was crucial in influencing policy-makers to be more asylum-friendly. As such, these websites function as self-organising technological instruments and virtual spaces for political and cultural mobilisation, contestation and participation at cross-border levels. In this sense, they are spaces by which the participants make

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claims for recognition of asylum-seeking migrants' human and cultural rights and identities within and beyond the territorial borders of the UK.

## Conclusion

This UK case study shows that asylum-seeking immigrants and their cross-border activities challenge the ability of the state to restrict territorial access and impose an 'imagined' identity (Veit-Brause 1995, 69). UK citizenship classes and tests assume a social contract in which non-citizen immigrants accept certain obligations of 'British' core values of the state. Yet, mandates on cultural assimilation are at odds with immigrants' expressions of an internationalisation of cultures which pushes their political and cultural identities beyond the nation-state (Kofman 2005, 464). The unintended effects of multiple identities and transnational political and cultural activities contradict the goal of the policy, which is aimed at asserting its authority to control immigrants' orientation to an 'imagined' Britishness.

It has also been discussed that immigrants seeking asylum challenge the UK state to honour its international humanitarian obligations to grant asylum, and question the potential excesses of its policies regulating inward asylum migration and deportation. Recent anti-immigrant legislation in the UK and other Western states highlights the exclusionary power of sovereignty. At the same time, by accepting the right of immigrants to have dual citizenship, the state compromises its sovereign authority to assert a Brito-centric national and cultural identity. The assumption by the sovereign states in the West that members of the polity should share a common national and cultural identity, and an 'ethnic' conception of formal membership, is therefore precarious. It is also precarious for the state to assume that all members of the state should have allegiance to a dominant cultural identity. As evidenced in this paper, the multiple identities and citizenship formations by and among immigrants are at odds with assimilationist policies. Immigrants could make claims to and contest official identities that are prescribed to accompany membership of the political community. These actions confront the territorial construction of citizenship and raise serious questions about the efficacy of using restrictive and assimilationist policies to include or exclude asylum seekers.

Yet, the way this cultural therapeutics is experienced by asylum seekers and refugees is nuanced. In one sense it is futile because asylum seekers and refugees, as aspiring UK citizens, would acquire knowledge of the language, and British cultural values and histories for pragmatic reasons of their own volition. On the other hand, as others reminded us, participants claimed that they are supportive of some aspects of this form of 'cultural therapeutics' insofar as it gives them knowledge of the cultural, social and linguistic resources to enable their social inclusion in the polity (La Fond 1992, Nolan 1998). Additionally, immigrants are opposed to the state's therapeutic conceptualisation of Britishness that is skewed towards the majority white population, and where exclusion on ethnic and religious basis is the locus for British citizenship and the rights enjoyed by British citizens. Immigrants construct Britishness as culturally and ethnically diverse, to which they aspire to orientate. State therapeutic apparatuses such as assimilationist citizenship classes are, therefore, based on a false premise that immigrants are incapable of acquiring the behaviours, language and cultural values of the host country (see Jones 2009).

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## About the author:

**Amadu Khan** is an independent researcher and consultant on forced migration, international development, the news media and social policy. He has contributed to teaching and research at the University of Edinburgh and Njala University. Amadu Khan is a human rights journalist and storyteller-performer artist. He is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Nomoli Media Group.

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