

'Memory Objects', Identity and the Homeland: African Transnational Migrants in South Africa

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Abstract

Many South Africa based migrants from conflict zones and impoverished countries across the African continent consider their host nation the 'United States of Africa', perceived as a land of opportunities and high standard of living. The reality is often more sobering, characterized by xenophobia, crime, high unemployment, and other disappointments. In this context, migrants must struggle for survival, while negotiating their sense of belonging and memories of home/land. This paper explores how first generation African transnational migrants, refugees and asylum seekers create a sense of home at their new place of residence, focussing in particular on objects that were taken along the migration journey; gifts obtained from loved ones; significant items procured in the host country; or on subsequent temporary visits to the home country. The research is centred on the role of memory and primarily situated within the social sciences, anthropology, history and the emergent field of memory studies. It investigates the notion of tangible objects as 'containers of memory' in an African societal context widely characterized by the predominance of oral, performative memory cultures. Based on in-depth interviews with a small sample of migrants based in Durban, the paper investigates to what extent transnational migrants and refugees value preserving objects associated with their home/homeland; how memory is embodied in and enacted through items of material culture and how such objects are utilized to (re)create a sense of home, belonging and identity in the host country. Preliminary findings highlight significant differences with ethnographic research conducted in other societies, in that few migrants deliberately select and preserve mementoes of home. Further probing reveals the emergence of cherished memory objects over time, often functional, utilitarian items or 'transitional objects' taken among bare essentials by refugees in flight. Moreover, the role of treasured items of food and clothing is discussed as precipitates of memory, linking the migrant to remembered routines and cultural landscapes of home.