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MEMENTOES AS TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS IN HUMAN DISPLACEMENT

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Abstract

This article argues for a theoretical extension in anthropology from the post-Cartesian depiction of body and mind as one (rather than as separable) to the idea that this composite body-mind can be regarded as enmeshed in social trails created by the movement of objects. Movements of persons therefore occur with or in relation to the objects to which people attach themselves. Such everyday movements need to be contrasted with those dramatically resulting from forcible human displacement, in which refugees, for instance, take what items they can both for immediate practical use but also in order either to re-establish or re-define personal and collective origins. The article concludes by suggesting that, as mementoes of sentiment and cultural knowledge and yet also as bases of future re-settlement, the 'transitional objects' carried by peoples in crisis inscribe their personhood in flight but offer the possibility of their own de-objectification and re-personalization afterwards.

Key Words ◆ body-mind ◆ human displacement ◆ socio-material prosthesis ◆ transitional objects ◆ trauma

INTRODUCTION

Alfred Gell brings together in his theory of the art nexus (1998) a process that analysts of totems, so-called fetishism, magico-ritual objects as well as artefacts recognize: namely that social trails may lead up to and follow the use of physical objects which, insofar as they are sometimes associated with particular persons, extend that personhood

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beyond the individual's biological body. Thomas (1991), in coining the metaphor of human-object entanglement and assessing ethnographic literature on gifts, commodities and reciprocity, describes how personhood may be produced and distributed through exchanges. After some two decades in which the human body has provided a post-Cartesian focus of explanations of personal interaction, we have entered a field, equally phenomenological, in which we are investigating the social space and socio-geographical movements occupied by the person and their 'attached' material-object imprints, a kind of socio-material prosthesis (Parkin, 1993).

Dramatic and less metaphysical expressions of human-object movement occur in the increasingly documented cases of human displacement, including those of refugees, in which peoples carry not only what they need for subsistence and exchange purposes but also, if they can, articles of sentimental value which both inscribe and are inscribed by their own memories of self and personhood. While art, artefacts and ritual objects are conventionally located in predictable contexts of use, items taken under pressure and in crisis set up contexts less of use and more of selective remembering, forgetting and envisioning.

Such contexts may be prolonged. Elizabeth Colson recently made a disarmingly simple suggestion which has profound implications for the way we consider forcible human migration. She argues that those who have been displaced fear further displacement even years after resettlement. Referring to former European refugees in the United States who claim to live as though with packed bags even 40 years after their first flight, she says 'A settlement (for these people) is never a final settlement. Life is always at risk. Whether or not they suffer further displacement, once people have learned from bitter experience that life is uncertain, possessions transitory, and human relationships brittle, it is to be expected that their coping strategies will take account of such possibilities even though these conflict with other urgent goals that they wish to attain' (Colson, unpublished: 19). But, while emphasizing what is in effect peoples' emotional state of permanent readiness, she also urges us to analyse this not as the study of marginal peoples but as a recurrent feature of almost any form of social organization in which large-scale interests commonly clash with those of disempowered peoples. Our representations of such imbalance need to incorporate human suffering as an intrinsic feature (see also Davis, 1992: 158–9).

Three general areas of interest have emerged from this attempt to frame issues of risk, vulnerability and uncertainty attending people forced to move. One is the realization that so-called refugees, whether living in camps or among the local populations to which they have migrated, re-create viable societies to the extent that they are allowed to do so by authorities and the availability of resources (e.g. Cernea,

1996: 295). A second, less happy concern is the study of the post-traumatic stress disorders arising from violence to self and family, which may occur during or after forcible flight (Kinzie et al., 1990; Brett, 1996; Cernea, 1996; Endale, 1996; Parker, 1996; Zur, in press). Third is the queston of how people who return to the home area from which they have been ejected, cope with their own and their area's changed circumstances and perhaps status, and, in some cases, even adjust to them by adopting newly learned lifestyles and skills (Allen and Morsink, 1994; Allen, 1996).

I want to preserve this focus on the study of migrating peoples as part of our mainstream analytical concerns, however horrific the injustices and violence to which peoples sometimes become subject and which is, indeed, often beyond explanation and useful comment. While post-traumatic stress disorders and the adaptational problems of returnees may indeed be seen as resulting from, say, genocide and human displacement, what also may we learn at the very points of initial dispersal when, whether through urgent and rapid flight or more calculated departure, people are obliged to carry in their hands and heads, so to speak, the future frameworks of new settlement? In other words, which human-object attachments prevail.

Apart from those engaged in recurrent and predictable migratory cycles, there is, in fact, very little data on what people take and what they leave within the often minimal time for making such decisions and consultation and sometimes in the context of unspeakable violence. We have accounts in a few cases of individuals leaving property, cattle and children with relatives, and general descriptions of what people carry, but little on how the phenomenon of unexpected or rapid departure from home is part of the preparation, however hasty, for what lies ahead. Departing under such conditions is, after all, to be exposed to a vulnerability which is as existential as it is material, the two being fused, for it is through the skills and objects one may take that one's future may be given shape, at least from the perspective of the departee. Peoples' capacity to think and even prepare minimally for rapid departure and movement to a new place also challenges received ideas concerning the inviolability of home areas as in some way the expression of human autochthony, ideas which, for instance, link home territory with sacred rights of burial there. And yet, deplorable though the conditions may have become, peoples do manage to survive and later even thrive without such rights of sacred authochthony.

THE INEVITABILITY OF MATERIAL EXCHANGE

It is relevant at this point to emphasize the inevitability of society and social process, almost regardless of the desperation to which people may

be driven. Recent attempts at rethinking society as an analytical concept may have reformulated but have not dislodged this inevitability, which in turn presupposes material exchange, however minimal.

Thus, in Primo Levi's personally experienced description of Auschwitz, where he spent 20 months and survived, we learn of the complex social organization which can arise under even the most restrictive institutions (Levi, 1987). We also learn of the equally complex systems of production, distribution and exchange which develop despite the impoverishment of people and resources. Who can forget the account of the trade in the smallest of useful things: wire to tie up shoes, rags to wrap round feet, shoes and clothes themselves, and soup bowls and spoons? These items are traded but also always have to be carried around by the owner lest they be stolen, so precious are they. The spoons, for instance, are not normally supplied by camp authorities. How, then, to get them? They are either made from plate metal within the informal economy of civilians living outside the camp, with the handles sometimes sharpened to form a knife as an extra, or, in the camp, they are commercially recycled for profit by nurses taking them from patients, leaving the few patients who do not die having to start again and sacrifice some of their bread ration to secure another spoon.

The rules of control and exchange also create hierarchies which cross-cut the formal distinctions of prisoner, SS guard and free civilians living near the concentration camp, creating trading relationships between resourceful prisoners and guards, but also dividing inmate against inmate.

Again, who can forget the description of those prisoners whom Levi calls the drowned? Those, who from their very entry into the camp, either from inability, bad luck or accident, never make it in the competitively entrepreneurial world of accumulation, theft, purchase, chicanery, influence and power, and so sink rapidly into ill-health and death? Lacking relatives they are unmourned and too unknown even to be forgotten, their disability while they are alive being regarded as a wasteful drain on the very meagre rations. It is not that the prisoners are always without sympathy for each other, but such moments are inevitably few and cannot be sustained.

Primo Levi emphasizes that, in his view, it is only under such conditions as obtained at Auschwitz and other concentration camps that mutual regard becomes so privatized, ad hoc and fragmented, or is so situationally paired to the use-value of a particular exchange or exchange relationship to the exclusion of any other sentiment or consideration, as to challenge any conventional definition of morality itself. Outside the concentration camp and in 'ordinary life', as he puts it (1987: 94), even under the most adverse circumstances one is rarely totally alone and it is therefore 'exceptional for anyone to acquire unlimited power, or to fall

by a succession of defeats into utter ruin' (1987) and unmourned death. But, 'In the Lager, things are different: here the struggle to survive is without respite, because everyone is desperately and ferociously alone' (1987). There is no helping hand for the weak or potentially weak, he says, and he invites the reader 'to contemplate the possible meaning in the Lager of the words "good" and "evil", "just" and "unjust"; [he says] let everybody judge, on the basis of the picture we have outlined and of the examples given . . . how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire' (1987: 92). The extreme distinctiveness of Auschwitz and Treblinka, as purpose-built extermination camps, is stressed by Grubrich-Simitis (1981: 422; also quoted in Parker, 1996: 269).

As anthropologists we have been challenged this way before, in, for example, the account by Turnbull of the Ik, who are reported as being driven by impoverishment and devastation beyond sustained considerations of their normal moral system (Turnbull, 1972). And, as anthropologists, we have tended to respond, often ferociously, by invoking the remarkable adaptability of humans to formulate at least minimal rules for coping with even the worst conditions of existence. The rules may be temporary, ad hoc and exploitative but they appeal to a human propensity for rule-governed behaviour to which more than one individual must subscribe and so to that extent is social. Morality is thus the emotive fiction we create on the basis of some collectively agreed and sanctioned rules.

What is often missing in this anthropological response are the existential differences making up these ground rules. Moral arbitrariness and exploitation may characterize prosperous as well as poor societies. But while exploitative elites may provoke solidarity among the exploited in most such societies, there is no such possibility of oppositional solidarity in the Auschwitz of Primo Levi's description, since the passage of individuals in and out of the life of the camp and of life itself is too fleeting for any but the rules of production and exchange to survive the recurrent purges and disappearances.

Re-casting these questions of material impoverishment and impoverished morality in terms of differential power and tyranny enables us to see even Auschwitz as a variation, albeit an extreme one, on a theme of institutionalized, rather than random, human oppression, to which can be added a number of much less extreme, recently reported cases, including, say, aspects of the Ceaucescu regime in Romania, and even the Olum Holy Spirit Movement of Northern Uganda, whose sickening atrocities, so graphically described by Amelia Brett (1996: 283–92; and see also Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1997), might at first appear arbitrary and irrational but which, from the viewpoint of the movement's members, are codified responses to God's instructions. Of course we

know that the prolonged and systematized extermination carried out in Auschwitz and other comparable camps *is* a special case apart which seems to defy analysis or understanding, and which we may not attempt for reasons of decency and taste as much as anything. Yet, Barbara Harrell-Bond may be right to regard some of the situations of powerlessness into which refugees have been placed as tantamount to their becoming 'inmates' in a 'total institution' (Harrell-Bond et al., 1992: 210). The option is surely there for us to include these variations of socially sanctioned, systematized regimes of human brutality within common analysis. And perhaps out of this we can indeed rescue evidence of a striving towards social and not merely individual morality in even the most individually based struggles of life and death.

Reversing Durkheim, I would see this moral, life-sustaining capacity as emanating from the very wish on the part of an individual to survive, regardless of the methods used, which, while it may seem at first only to meet the needs of the isolated individual may also provide the foundation for continuity between individuals, that is to say, of society.

PERSONHOOD AND MULTIPLE PROVENANCES

I suggest that, when conditions are such that one's personhood cannot be vested emotionally in the trust of people around one, despite economic investment in and exchange relations with them, it is open to that individual to inscribe their sense of a personal future and identity in whatever remains to hand of impersonal physical, mental and bodily bricolage: to invest emotionally, in other words, in accessible objects, ideas and dreams rather than in the living people around one.

Not everyone will or can exercise this option, which is part of the human tragedy that Primo Levi expresses in his memory of the drowned ones of Auschwitz. But those who do re-inscribe their precluded social personhood within private mementoes of mind and matter become the dormant bearers of the recessive culture, transforming it perhaps but at least giving meaning to their own, personal survival, and able, if circumstances allow, to tell the tale afterwards, as did the Jewish old man in Wim Wenders's film, *Wings of Desire*, who kept himself alive lest the younger generation forget. And so, while not all refugees in Africa experience the degree of self-isolation of Auschwitz, many, whether as communities or as individuals, are confronted with the problem of how to convey the stories and emblems of self and culture, a problem that, while it may seem most evident during actual flight and re-settlement away from home, actually begins at the point of departure, when decisions have to made about where to go, what to take and what to leave behind.

Here, it does have to be acknowledged that few, if any, situations of

human population movement and displacement in Africa carry with them the conditions of concentration camp life described for Auschwitz. There usually are at least a few others to carry away memories of one's personhood and cultural background. Human displacement does not always produce genocide on the scale of Rwanda or Bosnia. Indeed, going even further in the direction of the view which sees some kinds of rapid, involuntary population movement as expected, Tim Allen and David Turton draw our attention to intensive local-level studies which show that, often, 'geographical mobility and wide-ranging networks are a normal rather than pathological aspect of life; [and] that the distinction between "refugees" and "returnees" may have no meaning for the people themselves (except as identities to be assumed in order to obtain access to relief)' (Allen, 1996: 5). In fact, 'returning' may be another form of 'fleeing', sometimes at the instigation of erstwhile protectors. Allen and Turton would also agree, however, that there are the contrary cases where people, dispossessed of their homes and in flight, are only too aware of the non-recurrent, unique and tragic nature of their displacement.

Rather than draw up a continuum of cases from the so-called pathological to normal, perhaps we should say that what is really at issue here is the element and degree of coercion in human population movement, whether and how much people see themselves as being displaced against their will and whether their notions of territorial attachment and autochthony can be retained and even extended to areas not necessarily adjacent to each other. In other words, may not the notion of 'home' and of 'origin' refer to many places and not one fixed locus, in a way perhaps similar to the undeniably contestable and yet fluid boundaries of ethnicity and even nationality?

For such fluidity to be conceptually viable, there must be continuity over space as well as time, linking peoples on the move. While noting the 'sometimes spurious distinction between "refugees" and "returnees"' (Allen, 1996) made by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in its attempts to deal with the mass of displaced people in north east Africa, the two major works edited by Allen on the problem of returnees rightly stress 'the economic and cultural continuities which underpin [peoples'] survival strategies' in some regions.

It is certainly clear that knowing something of these economic and cultural continuities helps us understand peoples' survival strategies and social organization while they are in the camps and, later, when they return home. The emphasis on returnees' problems as well as those of camp survivors is, then, of extreme importance.

But, and focusing now on Africa, I want here to go back somewhat to what happens at the original points of dispersal, when peoples, as groups or as individuals, are confronted with the necessity of having to leave their homes or what they have come to regard as their homes.

Following what has been said already, the very definition of home, especially home of first instance may be problematic. As described by Pottier, the population of Rwandan refugees in Mugunga camp in Zaire swelled enormously in the two years of its existence, producing an increasing number of make-shift dwellings, shops, craft ateliers, political party branches and places of worship. It had become a small town, increasingly riven by conflicts between northern and southern Rwandans but not, it seems, established long enough to be regarded emotionally and conceptually as a place to stay, even though many inhabitants were reluctant to leave too early (Pottier, 1995, 1996a, 1996b).

By contrast, peoples' attachments in other so-called temporary abodes may make return to an original home from which they or their parents fled, personally difficult, even if feasible and ideologically necessary or desirable. Referring to Eritreans, Jonathan Bascom talks, for example, of a '"stabilized population" where the short-term exigencies of flight have worn off during an extended asylum' (Bascom, 1996: 71). Douglas Johnson also describes how the Nuer refugee camp of Itang became a centre of commercial activity, whose success in alleviating shortages would have continued to help inhabitants who were nevertheless obliged to leave before they were ready (Johnson, 1996: 172–3). Or, as in the case of a number of nomadic pastoralists, different areas, each associated with distinctive landscapes, may successively be relived as partial birthplaces of the people as they pass through them on seasonal migrations, sometimes deviating from a preceding pattern and so producing in time an additional home-point.

There are, then, many possible points of 'original' dispersal, indeed of 'homes', both voluntary and involuntary, although observers from the richer, more settled parts of the world tend to assume that there can be only one such place of initial displacement. Call it, if you like, a Western-imposed predeliction for thinking of peoples as self-sealed cultural groups isomorphic with a single territory which is *ipso facto* their homeland. Gaim Kibreab offers a quotation from the International Institute of Humanitarian Law which conveys the force of this sentiment as a motivating principle in decisions about how to settle and re-settle peoples (Kibreab, 1996: 53).

The citation reads as follows:

> Fundamental to the protection of human well-being is ensuring respect for the fact of belonging . . . Belonging relates not only to a community of people but, normally, also to a land (the 'motherland' or the 'fatherland' or the land of one's ancestors). Man is not an ethereal spirit living outside space or time but a terrestrial creature with roots in a land and its history. A people is formed by physical propinquity, a native soil and a shared history that . . . has conferred on it an identity . . .

Few can doubt the political power of this appeal which has, in many cases, been invoked on the best of humanitarian motives and sometimes to good effect, though sometimes with disastrous consequences, for, in the end the isomorphy of people and unique home territory is a matter of interpretation which may compete with other interpretations.

Of the numerous anthropological accounts that can easily dissolve this essentialization of people with place, David Turton's on the Mursi of Ethiopia specifically addresses the problem. He says, 'An indigenous account of Mursi origins can take one of two forms. It can either focus on a journey of five "original" clans from Thaleb, a "land of dreams" which cannot be identified with any known place, or it can focus on the relatively recent occupation of an "actual terrain".' (Turton, 1996: 106). But note that the occupation of the terrain is recent and that the clans undertaking their distinctive journeys are not even wholly exclusive to the Mursi. I have myself described how the Giriama of Kenya also trace origins to a place which can no longer be identified and that they can alternatively refer to a place of more recent creation as their origin, or, as we may gloss it, one of their origins (Parkin, 1991: 227–31). We are clearly dealing here with notions of origin which are flexible and speak to a different epistemology, one more in keeping with Nietzsche's distinction between single-source origin and multiplicity of provenances (1991).

Moreover, as Turton emphasizes, the thinking behind the Mursi and other peoples claiming multiple provenances is that of an ethnic unity that is 'recent, temporary and fragile' (Turton, 1996: 106). It contrasts with that of the nation-state which may be seen as 'the triumphant end product of an historical process of "nation-building"' (1996). The two may also be seen as differences of tendency and alternation both in indigenous thinking and observer's analysis.

There are here two overlapping distinctions: of dispersed versus fixed originality on the one hand, and of fragile versus long-established unity on the other. An older anthropology would refer to these as broadly denoting non-centralized polities and kingdoms respectively. Nowadays, of course, the notion of cumulatively created nation is thought to encompass and include the supposedly more fragile make-up of its constituent ethnic groups. The distinctions tell us about the cultural and economic continuities of identity that may be re-articulated after flight to re-form a society. They are the continuities that the anthropologist is eminently qualified to describe and perhaps invoke in strategies of survival. But, in a sense, this task is for later description, after peoples have undergone the trek from one area to another, and when the adviser then seeks to evaluate the community's social organization for the distribution of aid and eventual return.

PERSON INTO OBJECT

The great social and cultural leveller at the point of ***forced*** displacement, however, is not the nature of a refugee's national or ethnic identity, nor whether this comprises ideas of fixed or multiple provenance and a tradition of serial settlement, but whether he or she has the time to gather together enough of what is needed for practical uses as well as for perpetuating a personal and thence cultural identity.

It would seem to follow, therefore that, given only minimal notice, refugees will quickly take what is thought to provide for the best chances of personal and family survival. In fact, forced population displacement encompasses a broad spectrum of possibilities. Geographical spread and the scale and complexity of the social situation in which expulsion notices are given may affect the speed and efficacy of response, and so threats and orders of eviction do not always affect a population evenly. Jerry Eades notes how the way in which refugees time their response to expulsion orders may affect profoundly what they take with them, what they leave and how, eventually, they fare.

When issued with orders to leave Ghana in 1969, those Nigerian Yoruba who

> . . . sat tight, weathered the storm and waited before disposing of their assets were the ones who were able to salvage most from the situation . . . The people who really suffered as a result of the exodus were the poorer traders and their families who lacked the resources to stay. After they had sold their goods at knockdown prices, the low rates of exchange and the high costs of transport home ensured that they finally arrived there penniless. (Eades, 1993: 175)

In between are those who have time to arrange for their property and livestock to be left with trusted relatives. Eades speaks of some Yoruba entrusting marketing stalls, houses and goods to Ghanaian friends, who only sold the property on behalf of the exiled Nigerians when prices had risen after the Yoruba exodus (Eades, 1993: 171).

Where violence developing into genocide accompanies expulsion orders, timing one's departure and what one should sell and take is hardly an option. We refer here to those individuals and groups for whom it is a matter of hours before they must leave or, as in the case of the Uduk villagers described by Wendy James in the Sudan (James, 1996: 187), are forced by militia to flee immediately into the bush, later to die of thirst if not by gunfire, or, as described by Jeremy Jackson in his personal case histories of the independence war in Zimbabwe, must, as individuals wanted by the security police, abandon their spouses and children together with their property (Jackson, 1994: 158).

It is such reports and images of abandonment and material dispossession that the Western media, and sometimes ourselves as scholarly

observers, have focused on. As witnesses are the familiar, disturbing photos of victims bearing children, baskets, cloth bundles, and even items of furniture. The images in fact capture the difficulties individuals have, in the face of the threat of total dispossession, of trying to select and carry with them minimal items of basic need.

Even under these conditions of immediate flight or departure, people do, if they can, seek minimal reminders of who they are and where they come from. Alongside the items to sell or use in defence en route, and the food, farming tools, mattresses, blankets, medicines, protective amulets, and children carried on shoulders or running alongside, are sometimes the compressed family photos, letters and personal effects of little or no utilitarian or market value. In rare instances these take precedence: thus, one man is reported as carrying nothing more than a bible, as if to indicate its importance as being greater than that of other property.

More often, small personal items are fitted in with other more practical ones. Francesca Declich (personal communication) reports that among Muslim Zigula women fleeing Somalia and making their way south to Tanzania, many made sure that they wore around their waists and under their clothing their *usala*, consisting of beads and given to a woman at marriage and constituting a precious, if discreetly non-visible, validation of married status. The women would also include at least one dress or cloth of good quality in their belongings, hiding it under other clothes or bedding, with the intention of wearing it on arrival at their destination. A number of women also wore small keys on chains around their necks, in the hope of one day opening boxes of personal effects on their return to the homes they have left behind. Also bearing heavy loads of a practical nature, men would also put pieces of paper with names and addresses into their shirt top pockets together with money, with at least one man including a cassette of *dhikr* religious community songs.

It may seem obvious and of little consequence that people about to flee should, if they can, take at least some small item linking them personally to their life before departure. Yet, writ large among the individuals of a fleeing and sometimes disparate population, these personal mementoes provide the material markers of templates, inscribed with narrative and sentiment, which may later re-articulate the shifting boundaries of a socio-cultural identity. One is reminded here of Wendy James's description of the Uduk of the Sudan, where she turns to Foucault's notion of an archaeology of knowledge to explain how an Uduk identity can be created and re-created. What I want to emphasize is a more general process of self-inscription in non-commodity, gift-like objects which, through their association with stories, dreams and the transmission of skills and status, temporarily encapsulate precluded social personhood.

Returning to Primo Levi's account of Auschwitz, we note that many of those about to leave – for a camp, from one camp to another, or from camp to unknown destination and death – respond in a variety of ways, through prayer, heavy drinking, lust or paralytic fear. But, unlike them, it is the mothers who stand out by the deliberation and care which attend their preparation for departure. They pack food and luggage, having washed the children and their clothes, and include not only diapers but also toys and favourite cushions, treating with tenderness what is in effect also a rite of anticipatory mourning (Levi, 1987: 21–2). Those entrusted with the continuity of society, the mothers, are those deputed to mark most powerfully the possibility of its end. More generally, of course, it is not only mothers but any persons for whom social continuity is valued who perform these tasks of tender enfolding.

PERSON–OBJECT AMBIVALENCE

My reference here to rites of mourning takes us to what I believe is a necessarily ambivalent feature of the process of encapsulating precluded social personhood within objects. Thus, the personal mementoes taken by persons in flight may indeed re-articulate socio-cultural identity if and when suitable conditions of resettlement allow for the retelling of the stories that they contain. But the objects are also, I suggest, archetypal possibilities for the commemoration of the death of those in flight and even of a community, in the event that resettlement is never achieved by that person or that group. In what sense do I mean this?

From Mauss onwards, and through the study of cross-cultural variation, we have long become used to the idea of the lives of persons and objects as becoming mutually constituted, not in an organic but in a phenomenological sense through the use of metaphor and through perception (Parkin, 1976). That is to say, a person lacks a fixed, decontextualized essence but is made through social interaction and by taking on the meanings of things standing in a special relationship to him or her. It is only ascetics who, by definition, reverse this process and achieve their non-selfhood by denouncing objects and withdrawing from social relationships. But the reversal only serves to accentuate the more prevalent mutual fusion of object and person.

When people flee from the threat of death and total dispossession, the things and stories they carry with them may be all that remains of their distinctive personhood to provide for future continuity. Take those away, that little which they have, and social death looms closer, making more possible biological death itself, perhaps preceded by trauma.

While noting the problems of delineating the effects of trauma cross-culturally, Melissa Parker describes some recurrent features, some of which are reported independently in their own language by victims. Apart from nightmares and avoidance behaviour, there is also the sense

of estrangment, alienation, depersonalization and bodily numbness and sometimes immobilization and even 'robotization' (Parker, 1996: 264–9; Brett, 1996: 282–5). The references in the literature are numerous. One of the many quotations speaks of 'Some refugees suffering from repressed expression of bereavement or grief [who] complain of psychosomatic ill-effects but also of depersonalization, *one said he felt like a stranger everywhere*, others that for a long time they had felt numb' (Harrell-Bond, 1986: 291, my bracketed inclusion).

Here the body has become a lifeless object incorporating traumatized personhood. Recovery from this condition is often very slow and, reverting to Colson's observation, may never be complete. We may then speak of it as irreversible objectification. I would contrast it with that other process which I have referred to, where people in flight store, so to speak, their precluded social personhood within mementoes of mind and matter, including cherished small objects, songs, dances and rituals, which can, under favourable circumstances, be re-articulated (even re-created) as the bases of social activity. Let us call this reversible objectification. In practice, reversible and irreversible objectification reflect the ambivalent power of memories to evoke either pre-traumatic hope and life or post-traumatic morbidity unresolved by mourning.

The recoverability or otherwise of personhood from an objectifed state may, then, depend not just on the severity of trauma but on how much memories of life before trauma can become an acceptably realistic link with the present, bridging the gap between past loss and future potential. That these memories may sometimes be best inscribed in personal mementoes and formulaic behaviour is a kind of material antidote to what is a material loss, both bodily and in terms of posessions.

It is curious that it is in literature, art and the media that this human condition of loss of self through material and bodily dispossession has been most directly addressed. And yet it is as much a social fact as any other, being recognized institutionally and in language.

In social anthropology, for all its insistence on the detailed study of the lives of a small number of people over a long period, the total isolation and dispossesion of an individual, as distinct from a group, has been treated as perhaps too rare to be of more than peripheral social relevance. But this is to confuse incidence with relevance. Rare it may be, but as a potential condition governing the fate of individuals and ultimately affecting socio-cultural continuity, it is surely a background motivating factor of considerable importance, as is evident from its use in political tyranny in the form, for instance, of isolation cells, which characteristically dangle life in the face of death and in which, as again we know from our literature, the dispossesed prisoner may retain some minimal purchase on acceptable reality by clutching secretly a miniscule, hidden object linking him or her to the outside world.

I think we get a clue as to the ambivalent life–death properties of

mementoes in flight or under duress by extending our attention to the question of funeral memorabilia among refugees. The leap from hand-clutched mementoes to, say, funerary posts may seem a large one but, as Barbara Harrell-Bond and Ken Wilson (1990) show in their discussion of the experience of death and dying among refugees, placing a physical memorial to the dead who died in flight and whose bodies are not available for burial, is more important than whether or not the memorials are located on a piece of land associated with the dead person, desirable though this may be. It at least allows for mourning. There is, in other words, a bottom-line acceptance that the memorial to the deceased may, in principle, have any home and perhaps even be movable. The memorial reproduces the possibility of lineal continuity from past to future but also is an attempt to accommodate grief, in a way not dissimilar to the life-sustaining and yet death-reckoning attributes of private possessions snatched before flight: the photo of the loved one may be all there is of him or her and testifies to their memory for as long as it exists and can be seen, but, being vulnerable also to the threat of total dispossession, can be the occasion of compounded grief at the visible irrecoverability both of the loved one and his or her image. Funerary memorials can be made to last longer but are themselves still vulnerable, which is why it must be possible to reinstate new ones, or the original ones, elsewhere if necessary. Here, we enter into an area which is not specifically tied to the plight of refugees but covers what I believe is a more general concern with the contradiction between inevitable human population movement, including involuntary displacement, and the quest to preserve for eternity memories of the combined self-otherness of a family within such encapsulating objects as tombs and wooden or stone memorials.

Like many peoples, the Giriama of Kenya denote their ordinary family dead up to about three generations by commemorating them in short posts made of soft wood, which are styled as male and female and positioned in genealogical relationship to each other. By contrast, a few key men of influence are incorporated, it is said, in hardwood memorials of much greater ornamentation and size. While they stand, both kinds of wooden memorial contain part of the spirit and body of the deceased and must be treated with appropriate respect, and are given food and drink, and may be spoken with and appealed to.

But while the small posts of ordinary people may be re-erected, or new ones placed, each time a homestead moves to another area, this can occur only once for the larger hardwood posts. The difference is explained by the fact that the hardwood posts and spirit guard at least one place of early origin, while the softwood posts of ordinary people partake of the lives of their immediate descendants, affecting them adversely or favourably according to their own condition and treatment, but never without emotion. Even if they are not actually carried from

one homestead to another, for sometimes they are too rotten for this, the softwood posts are nevertheless thought of as portable objects consubstantial with the family and its health and future viability. They literally make the death of loved ones bearable.

I would suggest that the hardwood posts denote an idea of territorial origin as emanating from early but alternative provenances, while the softwood ones provide for present and future continuities. That is to say, the hardwood posts stay put, though not necessarily in one indisputably fixed place of origin. But the softwood posts can be moved and carried to as many places as is required and for as long as the members of a family retain an interest in these particular forebears, as has consistently happened either as a result of migration and resettlement or when, earlier this century, they fled from the British during their war with them. But there is a curious paradox concerning this difference between the posts. Contrary to expectations, it is the softwood rather than the illustrious hardwood representations which exude most day-to-day sentiment, accompanied by daily libations and prayer, and which exact the most serious response should they reveal themselves in a dream by a member of the homestead. The hardwood posts, which after a hundred years can still be found standing, can, after all, be abandoned as enduring guardians of past territory for they have the strength to do so. As in the relationship of aristocrats to peasants, they evoke few homely sentiments.

When, as is increasingly the case, Giriama migrate to areas outside their homeland, including towns, they cannot easily carry nor re-erect the familial softwood memorial posts in the more restricted confines of an urban house or on alien land. They are beginning to take instead photos and personal effects associated with the deceased members of their family, and to use these to tell stories about them, even though this modifies the traditional restraint on mentioning dead kin by name. The change is an adaptation of their methods for linking past with future under conditions of migration and population movement.

Such adaptations are bound to vary cross-culturally. We may however understand more of what I perceive to be a more general process of such individual and cultural continuity through human displacement by knowing what it is that people take and leave at the point of departure when the choice is available to them, and to what extent these include non-utilitarian items alongside practically useful ones.

CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS

I suggest that, under the conditions of rapid and sometimes violent flight and dispersal, private mementoes may take the place of interpersonal relations as a depository of sentiment and cultural knowledge. In object-relations theory they resemble Winnicott's 'transitional objects' yet

clearly stand for more than parents (Grolnick and Barkin, 1978; Winnicott, 1991). They are more like ancestral memorials encoding continuity between and across the generations, while depending much less than ancestral memorials on fixed territorial reference points.

Land is of course fundamental to anyone's rural economy and livelihood but not, it seems, to their ideas of interpersonal and intergenerational continuity. This may explain why, cross-culturally, peoples' ideas of ethnic or cultural origin do not always unambiguously point to a single point of dispersal but, instead, to several provenances, not necessarily expressed in chronological sequence. Later, when flight and dispersal give way again to reconstituted settlement, interpersonal and cultural continuity are made possible not just through the recitation of knowledge and skills, crucial though this is, but because persons may now reverse the process by which they have objectified themselves in their most private possessions, formulaic acts and dreams, and re-enter social relations. Recovery from trauma may, in fact, figure among such attempts at de-objectification, as one unravels oneself from one's possessions.

For Mauss, the donor of a gift imparts part of their personality in the gift and expects it to be returned. Perhaps in my description we have something of the reverse: persons may withhold selfhood when faced with the possibility of collective annihilation, merging it in the materiality of concrete objects, hoping that in due course it should again be socially presented when and if the threat is lifted.

Whether the old or a new version of selfhood then emerges partly derives from individuals or groups rejecting their pre-refugee selfhoods, as sometimes happens after trauma, and partly from whether or not their map of social relations is regarded as external to them or as compositely part of them (the latter having been argued by Strathern for Melanesia, 1988). I would hypothesize that in societies advocating high individual autonomy and social relations as external to the person, there is more opportunity to read into the object a new identity which a person may then reach out for. In societies in which the person is viewed as a kind of matrix of social relations, the entanglements within person–object make the selection of new identities more difficult, for they already mutually presuppose each other.

At the least, I would suggest that this is an area worth investigation for the light it may throw on the many manifestations of what I might call forcible rather than voluntary being-in-the-world. You may protest that, philosophically, it is impossible to draw a distinction between voluntary and forcible movements and states of being, since elements of both are always involved and it is all a matter of degree. However, as anthropologists rather than philosophers, the distinction is likely to be held by those we study and so is for us a social fact of fundamental significance.

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