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‘Memory objects’: Material objects and memories of home in the context of intra-African mobility

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Abstract

This article contributes to the intersection of material culture and mobility studies by exploring the role of objects in fostering nostalgia and emotionally linking migrants with their home world. ‘Memory objects’ are conceptualized as special personal belongings that elicit deliberate or involuntary memories of homeland, home culture, social relations and episodes in one’s pre-migration past. Focusing on intra-African migration, the study is based on in-depth interviews with a sample of 40 migrants from 13 African countries, temporarily or permanently based in South Africa. Contrary to the extant literature, initial findings indicate most participants did not value keepsakes or sentimental mementoes of home. However, it emerged that some had developed a special relationship with specific utilitarian objects, mostly received as gifts, which essentially turned into memory objects over time, precipitating memories and emotional attachment through routine usage and performative action. It is argued that more attention must be paid to socio-cultural values and other locally specific factors.

Keywords

Africa, home, memory, migration, mobility, objects

Introduction

Artefacts, mementoes, souvenirs, heirlooms, personal keepsakes, or special functional objects and material culture in domestic spaces can play an important role in remembrance, emotional dynamics and processes of identity formation for individuals, families and communities. In contexts of mobility, relocation, migration and forcible displacement, such objects can represent links with home, loved ones and the autobiographical past, providing a sense of identity continuity. Some migrants recreate a homeland

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atmosphere through furniture and home decorations in their new domestic environment; photographs and small sentimental objects help people remember family and friends. Refugees, the forcibly displaced and those who can take little more than bare essentials often carry sentimental objects as personal mementoes that become 'linking objects' with their lost home and kin (Parkin, 1999; Winnicott, 1953). Even clothing and the most ordinary utilitarian objects accrue new meanings through mobility and can acquire mnemonic function for their owners and users.

As opposed to mementoes, keepsakes, souvenirs, photographs and other items defined by their explicit mnemonic use, Habermas and Paha (2002: 3) define 'personal objects' as cherished favourite things that an individual is attached to; this may include souvenirs, but also gifts and subjectively valued utilitarian objects. Examining such personal objects among first-generation African transnational migrants in the port city of Durban on the South African east coast, this article shows that some items of material culture, often everyday utilitarian things, have become very special in their daily lives, precipitating memories of home, loved ones and the pre-migration past. The term 'memory objects' is introduced to denote possessions without obvious mnemonic function that develop mnemonic characteristics over time and in this case through the experience of mobility and migration, hence distinguishing them from souvenirs and mementoes.

It will moreover be suggested that the participants' strong expectation of an eventual return to their home country, which influenced their attitudes towards the host country as 'home', impacted their relationship towards material objects in their domestic space. This constitutes an important difference with other studies in research contexts where first- and second-generation migrants perhaps do not expect to return and illustrates the need for context-specific research. The current study asserts the importance of testing theoretical assertions and concepts developed in the literature in very different locales and social settings, in this case the particularly neglected area of intra-continental African mobility.

'Memory objects'

Memory objects are special objects or personal belongings that elicit deliberate or involuntary memories of homeland, home culture, important places, episodes in one's own autobiographical past and significant social relations (kin, friends, colleagues) associated with home or origin. In a narrow sense, they are *aide-mémoires*, precipitating memory and facilitating the process of remembrance. Such special personal objects can be said to have agency in that they trigger emotional responses and stimulate social effects and actions (Gell, 1998; Harrington-Watt, 2014; Wall, 2010). They can evoke feelings, induce spiritual engagement, prompt bodily (re)actions, ritualistic behaviour or social interactions, stimulate thought and fuel the imagination; they have therapeutic value by causing consolation and feelings of well-being, and enforcing a sense of identity and belonging (Ahmed, 1999; Haldrup, 2017; Harrington-Watt, 2014; Marcoux, 2001; Miller, 2001; Svasek, 2012; Turkle, 2011; Turan, 2010; Wall, 2010). 'Evocative objects' as defined by Turkle (2011: 5) can become 'emotional companions to our lives'; they can become the focus of contemplative memory, generating a sense of love (Sarup, 1994: 94). Even salvaged objects in the shopping carts of the homeless can be used to rework personal and social identities and create a sense of home (Digby, 2006: 185).

An object's perceived value, meaning and emotional efficacy can change over time and especially through mobility, that of objects and subjects, e.g. through change of ownership or when their owner carries them to new places (Haldrup, 2017; Svasek, 2012). Objects become more important through relocations and transitions, such as the move to university or to a new place (Digby, 2006; Habermas and Paha, 2002). The use of photographs and objects as reminders has been shown to increase when loved ones are left behind (Habermas and Paha, 2002: 3). Familiar objects can become cherished as mediators in people's emotional relationship with changing environments or between the old home and the new place of residence, providing a sense of comfort, not only as sites of memory, but as a form of therapy (Harrington-Watt, 2014: 155; Svasek, 2012). Any move entails a re-evaluation of one's material belongings, a selection of what is discarded and what one carries along. Marcoux (2001: 70) argues that this process of 'sorting out things' is critical to the experience of mobility as it 'metaphorically relates to the sorting out of relations and memories'. This is arguably much amplified in the context of migration, especially when circumstances impose tight limits on what can be taken along. 'Bringing things with oneself', suggests Marcoux, 'is to make the choice of remembering' (p. 73).

While the intersection of mobility and materiality or the convergence of migration and material culture constitute a rather neglected field of research (Basu and Coleman, 2008), various scholars have highlighted the role of objects in fostering nostalgia and recreating a sense of home and identity in the context of migration and diaspora (e.g. Baldassar, 2001; Fortier, 2000; Tolia-Kelly, 2004). Migrants engage in 'home-building', i.e. building a feeling of being 'at home' through a number of affective blocks or 'homely intimations' (Hage, 2010), but also by shaping their environment – from the private dwelling to public community spaces – in the image of their remembered home/homeland. The production, circulation and consumption of objects, things, artefacts, or commodities shape social relations and forge diasporic identities (Crang, 2010). For instance, second-generation migrants firmly established in the host country might travel to the parental home country to acquire objects for their home in a quest to strengthen their sense of ethno-national belonging (Wagner, 2015). Such cases must not be conflated with first-generation migrants, who lead transnational lives, maintain two homes across borders or close ties to their place of origin, and for whom material objects embody memories of events and social relations based on personal experience in/of the erstwhile home.

Several studies have been conducted on the meaning and emotional significance of special material objects in the domestic spaces of such first-generation migrants. Uusihakala (2008) found that for white ex-Rhodesians relocating to South Africa (self-declared exiles) after independence, it was very important to keep cherished artefacts, symbols of patriotism and sentimental reminders of their life in Rhodesia. They carefully arranged these items for display in a special, shrine-like place in their homes, part of a culture of remembrance fostered within the community. South Asian women from Kenya who migrated to Britain treasured and dedicated special places in their London homes to selected pieces of furniture and home decorations brought along from Kenya (Tolia-Kelly, 2004). Even crafted artefacts that they considered 'tourist kitsch' while living in Kenya were now valued as touchstones of memory and symbols of identification,

testifying to their migration experience and life journey. Philipp and Ho (2010) examine everyday household objects brought to New Zealand by South African emigrant women and their use in home-making processes and self-expressions about 'being at home'. The items were displayed prominently and were well looked after; they held high emotional value for their migrated owners and helped them foster a sense of transnational belonging without travelling to their country of origin.

A culture of collecting and the practice of reminiscence through photographs and mementoes can run in the family (Bliss, 2014) or within a close-knit community and be passed on to others and the next generation. However, the current research illustrates that not all migrants move with their household items, value keepsakes, indulge in remembrance through artefacts or foster an emotional attachment to material objects from home. Ethnographic research confirms that some migrants are more interested in remembering than others (Hage, 2010: 423); cultural and societal factors influence individuals' relationship to objects and commemoration (Santino, 2006; Sturken, 2007); and class, gender and age or a person's life-stage have all been identified as factors affecting remembrance behaviour and the role that objects play within it (Habermas and Paha, 2002; Visser, 2012). The findings of this research both affirm and question the salience of such demographic factors. Most notably, they show how objects, including functional belongings can gradually accrue meaning through the spatial and temporal distance from home, hence becoming memory objects, as opposed to mementoes, souvenirs and photographs, which are deliberately chosen, preserved and carried along on migratory journeys as reminders of home and loved ones.

While recent scholarship thus attests to the greater recognition of material culture for understanding social life, as researchers we must ultimately acknowledge that we can never truly understand how members of other cultures relate to objects – a point forcefully made in Henare et al.'s (2007) seminal collection *Thinking Through Things.* Rather than thinking of meaning as being attached, inscribed or embodied in material objects, to be excavated, illuminated, decoded and interpreted by researchers, i.e. meaning as an abstraction separate from the materiality of the object, the authors advocate treating meaning and thing as an identity. Such a shift from epistemology to ontology collapses the experience/analysis divide. The ontological turn in anthropological research, a 'silent revolution' within the discipline, not only contests the authority of formulations and familiar analytical concepts derived from Euro-American philosophical traditions, but refutes the familiar idea of different world-views, replacing it with different worlds and the admission that our concepts must 'by definition, be inadequate to translate *different* ones' (Henare et al., 2007: 12).

Methodology

As mentioned earlier, this research is based on the case study of first-generation African migrants in Durban. Since the end of Apartheid, South Africa has become a regional migration hub due to the real and perceived opportunities presented by a more advanced economy, infrastructure and education system. The country's liberal asylum laws moreover permit refugees and asylum seekers (many of whom are essentially economic migrants) freedom of movement and access to employment and other services, including

higher education. This accounts for some blurring of boundaries between conventional categorizations of poor versus privileged or forced versus voluntary migrants.

Accurate up-to-date statistics about temporary migrants and permanently settled immigrants living in South Africa are not available. In 2011, the national census counted about 2.2 million people born outside the country, of which 71 percent were Africans (Statistics South Africa, 2011). According to a calculation by Stupart (2016), South Africa received over one million applications for asylum between 2006 and 2014, of which just under 400,000 were still pending in 2016. In 2013, approximately 65,000 persons were officially recognized as refugees (UNHCR South Africa, 2015). No figures could be found for the highly skilled and educated transnationals who take up professional employment opportunities or enter with a study visa to upgrade their educational qualifications. While most initially intend to return home after completion of their programme or contract, many end up staying as they get accustomed to the higher standard of living in their host country and benefit from better opportunities for themselves and perhaps their families.

This article represents part of a larger qualitative research project that investigates the role of memory in travel and migration, notably how migrants remember their home, social relations and home culture, and what role the mobility of people and objects plays in this process. The research design for the general project was based on in-depth semi-structured interviews, within which a set of questions was dedicated to exploring the role of material objects. For this reason, the researcher did not visit the participants' place of residence and the mentioned items were not presented during the interview. Of course, there is always the possibility that a different methodology, notably ethnography with home visits and participant observation, would have produced results different from those presented here (this could be verified in a future project). The concluding section will discuss strengths and weaknesses of the research approach chosen for this project.

Data for this article were obtained in two phases over a period of 3.5 years (end of 2014 to beginning of 2018). A total of 40 participants were interviewed, of which 30 were highly educated individuals associated with academia (academic staff, PhD candidates, post-doctoral candidates) based at two institutions of higher learning in Durban. Because migrants affiliated with academia tend to be fluent in English, articulate and self-reflective, 10 participants were deliberately sampled from outside academia, comprising both skilled and unskilled persons working in formal employment or as informal traders, to test for potential patterns of divergence.

As indicated earlier, it is significant to note that the boundaries between so-called poor and elite migrants or between refugees, economic migrants, foreign students and transnational professionals can be surprisingly fluid in South Africa. Highly trained migrants may initially struggle to find employment due to problems with the accreditation of their professional qualifications and (temporarily) survive by trading in informal markets, where they become virtually indistinguishable from unqualified economic migrants and the local poor. At institutions of higher learning, one may find lecturers or post-doctoral fellows who originally came to South Africa as refugees or economic migrants and then enrolled as students on a scholarship, while additionally supporting themselves through odd jobs. PhD candidates, most of them on scholarships, also emanate from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. One end of the scale is marked

by single individuals in their late 20s, the other by mature persons in their 40s, married with children and with professional experience; some come from severely underprivileged backgrounds, others from middle-class homes with parents holding overseas university qualifications. All participants of the current study had been in South Africa for more than 3 years, most between 5 and 20 years.

In the first phase, snowball and purposive sampling were used to ensure diversity in terms of gender, age, occupation and country of origin. Participants were approached at the two educational institutions, in public places (e.g. beachfront) and informal markets. To increase the rigour of the selection process, the second phase, which was exclusively focused on PhD candidates, started out with random sampling ($n = 10$) from a comprehensive institutional database ($N = 204$) and was then supplemented with purposive sampling ($n = 10$) from the same list to balance demographic characteristics. In total (i.e. phase one and two), the sample for this research comprised 27 males and 13 females, most of them aged early 30s to late 40s and emanating from the following countries: Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Lesotho, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

As part of the general research project, participants were asked about their personal background, the circumstances of their migration and their experiences living in South Africa. The section pertaining to material objects included questions about mementoes, gifts or special sentimental objects brought along on their initial migratory journey or subsequent return trips that reminded them of family and friends, home and home country, or important episodes of their own past. Follow-up questions were geared to probe whether any objects, including ordinary functional things, became precious to them once they relocated to South Africa, how participants preserved such objects and used or engaged with them.

All interviews were conducted in English face-to-face (two via Skype), lasting between 30 and 90 minutes; audio recordings were subsequently transcribed and coded. NVivo was used for first-level coding according to core themes and initial questions; second-level coding was then conducted to refine the data sorting and identify emergent themes that were subsequently analysed in relation to the literature.

Findings and discussion

Virtually all participants – irrespective of their personal history and purpose of migration – had come to South Africa with few belongings. They did not move their entire household and did not attempt to recreate the remembered familiarity of their home environment in their new place of residence through furniture, home decorations and collections of cherished symbolic artefacts brought from home or procured during temporary return visits. This is an important point of distinction from migrants described in other studies (e.g. Philipp and Ho, 2010; Tolia-Kelly, 2004). Economic migrants and higher education candidates brought only a few necessities and even professionals tended to arrive with relatively few possessions, preferring to acquire furniture and household items locally over the high costs of moving them. Married couples with children usually arrived initially without the family, not necessarily intending to stay for long. These parameters

suggest that most migrants engaged in the current research related to their domestic space in the host country in more functional and less emotional terms than those of some other studies discussed in the literature. Of course, the meaning of a domestic space as 'home' is socially constructed and culturally variable, affecting the relationship towards material objects and their role in recreating a sense of home. A closer examination of this dimension is beyond the scope of this study, given the ethnic and national diversity of participants.

No mementoes

The initial research assumptions and questions posed to participants were guided by the literature affirming the significance of mementoes and symbolic reminders of home in contexts of mobility. However, almost all respondents immediately asserted that they did not possess any such objects, apart from photographs of loved ones. Some explained that it is not part of their culture to keep mementoes:

> No, no, no, we don't have that kind of culture, taking things like that which remind us [of the] past, no, no, no … The past, you can remind it by … you know, thinking this is what happened to me, but not keeping something like that, I never think about that … (43-year-old Rwandan male trader)

> I come from a culture where we do not really attach a lot of importance to artefacts; something that represents a community or so … I think the only objects that I brought are objects that are national-based, you know; national objects like maybe I can bring the jersey of the Cameroon team just to remind me … Like I said, I don't come from such a community. (39-year-old Cameroonian female academic)

A 35–year-old male respondent, who had initially come as a refugee from the DRC, then studied at the university and was now enrolled as a PhD candidate, explained that he understood the value of keepsakes and the meaning of preserving things only after moving to South Africa. Here he became exposed to the country's insistent heritage discourse and ubiquitous messages about the importance of preserving material cultural testimonies to the past distributed by the media, the education system and government authorities. He hence resolved to keep and cherish certain personal items, notably a very special pair of shoes that connected him to his previous life, but he eventually found that he had lost them in the course of moving around.

A 38-year-old female academic from Kenya had a different learning experience. The emotional turmoil caused by the death of her mother and sister in short succession fundamentally changed her relationship towards keepsakes and attachment to objects.

> My sister, the one we travelled with to bury my mother, also passed on while we were here … I had to transport the body back home, so, because of those experiences, it taught me to detach from things. It taught me to detach from things because I learnt that you can have something and you can lose it … And for me I felt what is a material thing compared to the kind of loss I have gone through, you know my mother and my sister … So, it taught me to detach from things … I don't think I have anything which I have a sentimental attachment to …

The literature in the field of material culture, memory and identity abounds with discussions of heirlooms in some societies, emphasizing the importance of such objects as links with the past, the family and, in the case of migrants and exiles, the homeland and origins (e.g. Cieraad, 2010). Among the participants of this study, on the contrary, virtually no mention was ever made of heirlooms, even where respondents discussed the death of a parent. Only in one case, a male PhD candidate from Zimbabwe raised the issue, explaining prevailing cultural prohibitions against the passing down of heirlooms across generations. One can inherit directly from one's parents, but not pass that object on to a grandchild:

> It goes against our custom to inherit something that was inherited … It is believed if I take their [my parents'] inheritance, I can get bad spirits from that. I can only inherit things that they had personally acquired while alive. The objects are left to stay there and not be utilized.

Since this singular response emerged very late in the data collection process, the wider pervasiveness of this belief could not be ascertained. The current research did not conduct ethnographic research or even a literature review on the memory practices of diverse ethnic cultures across the African continent. This was not the aim of the present research, even if participants had not hailed from 13 countries, each with a myriad of distinct cultural traditions. Rather, what is significant here is the participants' self-identification and positioning within a particular culture, their own understanding of cultural norms and how these are used to justify and contextualize personal behaviour. In short, what counts is not whether or not heirlooms are permitted in specific localities and cultural groups, although this would be an interesting investigation in its own right, but the participants' spiritual beliefs and perception about the culture they identify with and how such cultural and societal factors influence their relationship to objects.

Personal living space and symbols of home

The vast majority of respondents across the entire spectrum explained that they made virtually no effort to create a 'home atmosphere' in their new place of accommodation by hanging pictures, displaying gifts and artefacts or keeping cherished personal objects in designated spaces. Three persons (two from Nigeria, one from Cameroon), however, mentioned bringing and hanging a national flag in their room. Similar to the 'jersey of the Cameroon team' mentioned above, the flags are generalized national symbols, expressing a sense of patriotism and rootedness in a particular national culture, but not highly personalized metonyms of home or personal memory objects linking one with one's autobiographical past. Only in very rare cases did participants bring artefacts typical of their country or symbolizing their ethnic home culture. One male PhD candidate from the DRC, for instance, talked about a locally characteristic artefact made of malachite and copper, but explicitly stated that he did not feel sentimental about it and he was in fact not sure where it might be.

The following quote from a male Nigerian PhD candidate is the most exceptional evidence of the desire to use objects in affirming ties with the place of origin and literally importing a piece of home into the 'foreign' environment of the host country:

> I also did bring a few art works; they are a symbol of my tradition and my culture. I try to make my home more African. A country where I spent 40 years of my existence … it's quite difficult to just change all of a sudden to a foreign country. Most of what I use at home is what I collected from Nigeria.

Somewhat related is the response from another Nigerian, who did not bring such artefacts from home, but bought a (presumably imported) wood carving reminiscent of the famous Benin bronzes at a Durban market, because it reminded him of home and he hung it on the wall in his room.

These were exceptional cases. The majority did not seem to value symbolic or sentimental material objects in creating a sense of home and familiarity in their Durban place of accommodation. Rather, most preferred looking at photographs and a few mentioned playing familiar music from their country to make them feel at home. The most overwhelming response related to food ways and the wearing of favourite clothes, discussion of which exceeds the scope of this article and will be explored elsewhere. When comparing specifically the PhD candidates of this study with the Dutch or German students discussed in the literature (Cieraad, 2010; Habermas and Paha, 2002), glaring differences become evident in their respective relationships towards their place of residence and the role of material culture in creating a homely environment or what Gosling et al. (2005) call 'personal living space'.

This pattern could be explained by demographic characteristics and logistical factors associated with the participants' mobility or personal migration history although, alternatively, one might have expected that the experience of living far away from home in an alienating environment precisely heightens the appreciation of 'linking objects' and symbolic reminders of home. More salient may be findings from Sarah Allen's (2008) research with geographically mobile couples, which indicated that many remained reluctant to embrace their new place or even resisted efforts at creating a home atmosphere, because 'they remained mentally, physically, emotionally engaged with another place' (p. 93). Almost all participants of the current study appeared deeply attached to their place of origin, what they considered their 'real home'. All retained strong relationships with social relations there, notably through mobile phone and WhatsApp; some embarked on regular return visits. In most participants' mind, South Africa remained a temporary place of residence, although many had accepted that a permanent return might not be desirable or feasible in the foreseeable future. The lack of interest in modelling their current accommodation into a personalized space dotted with symbolic reminders of their real home may be linked to the desire to uphold this myth of return.

Idiosyncratic personal objects

While most participants initially rejected the notion of bringing and keeping special sentimental objects, upon further probing and reflection, many were able to think of personal items that had accrued new meaning through the experience of migration and separation from home and loved ones. Some said they had never thought about this before, but indeed came to realize that they had kept some objects, mostly everyday utilitarian things and clothing items, because they had become very special to them and these

objects reminded them of their past. Once the interview focused on these objects, some participants began talking about their migration and pre-migration experience, affirming Wall's (2010: 379) observation that 'the stories told about domestic objects were vehicles for selfhood and a reflection of their owners' life …'

> I was a student leader when I was in DRC; then, when we went to the front … all the clothes that we had were … taken away by the soldiers … one day, [another student] said, how can you wear your uniform, your military uniform without a belt? Then, he gave [me] a belt and I kept that belt, I think, for more than 6 or 7 years. I brought it to South Africa, but today I can't find it … I even told my wife I want this belt … to be like something that I will be keeping for years, but after all moving from houses and so on and so on, I lost it but that was something very special for me. (50-year-old Congolese PhD candidate)

The belt can be considered a memory object that encapsulates and precipitates episodic memories of a momentous period in the man's pre-migration life. Having been received as a gift, it is a reminder of his fellow student-soldier, and in a wider sense the values underpinning the incident, the sense of humanity and care, dignity and respect, brotherhood and community manifesting themselves in the most atrocious circumstances. But it is equally significant that the participant eventually lost the belt; it was not kept in a special place, carefully safeguarded, or turned into a revered symbol.

All objects mentioned in the same vein by other participants had been received as gifts, mostly from parents; they consisted of ordinary, functional objects, including a wallet, a stress ball and a comb. One person mentioned his mother giving him groundnut and him keeping the plastic container as a reminder of his mother and of home (Zimbabwean PhD candidate). A 32-year-old Tanzanian woman (postgraduate student) had received a traditional style comb from her mother before moving to South Africa. She expressed her deep appreciation for the comb and how using it every day reminded her of her mother. While participants of this study were hence not prone to collecting and preserving keepsakes, heirlooms and symbolic mementoes of home, there was nevertheless evidence of 'materialization of memory through attachment to objects' (Bliss, 2014).

These objects are not consciously selected 'containers of memory' that must be preserved as a lasting symbol, displayed or safeguarded in a protected space, but they are utilitarian items that acquire mnemonic function over time. One could analyse such objects anthropologically from the perspective of gift giving, the special relationship and bond that the gift creates between giver and receiver, and the anticipation of reciprocal exchange. In the context of migration, where participants feel a deep attachment to the 'real home', and social and kin relationships are constantly maintained through phone calls, messages and return visits, the gift is another key in staying connected to home across time and space. However, it is important to note that all participants indicated utilizing the items as intended, even if that shortens their life span and results in their inevitable disintegration and eventual discarding, hence arguably affecting the inalienability and the lasting character of the social bond theorized in classic understandings of the gift.

What is important in terms of the current study is that the use and handling of the object, the process of combing the hair, the squeezing of the stress ball activate and

maintain memories. Even with respect to heirlooms and displayed keepsakes, scholars have drawn attention to the importance of performative action in remembrance: 'While dusting, cleaning or polishing, it could be argued that women communicate with the inherited objects and activate the related memories', observed Cieraad (2010: 97). Through sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015), one could investigate more systematically how the smell, sounds, tactile and visual qualities of such possessions become catalysts of memory, cause affect and emotional reactions and link a person with the past, but ultimately the present study contained relatively little evidence of such special relationships with material objects.

Importantly, the following statement will refute any essentialist claims about the relationship of African participants towards collecting, preserving material objects, and indulging in memory through objects, although this was a completely atypical, exceptional response. The participant was a 42-year-old middle-class professional woman from Zambia, employed in a South African government position. Married with children, she has been living in South Africa for over 20 years and is a permanent resident there. Her most cherished material link with home and her own past is her collection of teddy bears, which she carefully preserved from her childhood for more than 30 years. She brought her collection to South Africa and extended it there.

> I've got five from my childhood and they've produced their own children here. Yes, I collect … and I was hoping I will have a daughter that will take them over, because the boys just enjoy them when they are still young, then, they throw them away. [The teddy bears] sleep on my bed, when I'm sleeping … they remind me more of the love that I got from home, so, it's the warmth … When I miss home, I just hug them, then, I know okay, mum and dad are somehow close.

The participant did not give the teddy bears to her children for fear that they would play with them temporarily, damage and then discard them. The teddy bears are not toys; they are cherished memory objects of her own childhood and her life growing up at home, in her homeland. Her narrative reveals her emotional attachment and the humanized, personalized ways of relating to and engaging with these inanimate objects in her daily domestic sphere, even if the account was given somewhat tongue-in-cheek. The teddy bears are catalysts for memories about the warmth and love received at home; like a small child, she hugs them when she misses home, making her feel close to her parents. As an object of comfort and assurance, the teddy bear is a central icon in American (and more generally Western) commodity culture aimed at both children and adults (Sturken, 2007), featuring prominently in contexts of loss (Santino, 2006). The material and especially tactile properties of the teddy bear, its physical shape and softness of touch promote a physical engagement (e.g. hugging) that mimics human contact associated with affection.

One might say that this participant had carried over into adulthood a typical childhood relationship to a favourite toy, but the experience of migration with its associated sense of loss and need for comfort, prompted her to nurture this relationship and turn her teddy bears into a carefully preserved collection. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) use the concept of *cultivation* to understand how individuals foster relationships with objects:

> The same culturally legitimized object might provide only fleeting comfort to one person, whereas to another it signified complex emotional and cognitive ties to other people and ideas. Thus we concluded that the potential significance of things is realized in a process of actively cultivating a world of meanings, which both reflect and help create the ultimate goals of one's existence. (p. xi)

Mobile individuals far away from home may hence start cultivating a special relationship with some of their belongings, notably gifts that carry strong references to home and links with loved ones, even if they initially rejected the notion of bringing and preserving keepsakes. In a context of migration, where loss, alienation, xenophobia, cultural shock and nostalgic longing constitute new experiences, novel ways of relating to special objects can develop. Even individuals who profess not to have a sentimental relationship to material objects may discover how the possession, contemplation and especially physical handling of certain items precipitate happy memories, produce a warm sense of belonging, or a soothing feeling of comfort and well-being.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to contribute to scholarship in the field of memory and material culture in the context of mobility and migration, focusing in particular on the emotional efficacy and mnemonic role of special objects in the life and domestic spaces of migrants. The findings of this study differed considerably from those of related ethnographic studies on the meaning and perceived significance of furniture, home decorations, mementoes, symbolic artefacts and sentimental keepsakes in that most of the participants firmly rejected the notion of cherished material objects as symbolic links with home and loved ones. Further probing, however, revealed that certain functional items and gifts received from parents did over time become memory objects.

This research also differs from similar studies in methodological terms through the lack of ethnography and participant observation in the home. What characterizes such studies as that of Tolia-Kelly (2004) with Asian women in Britain or Uusihakala (2008) with ex-Rhodesians in South Africa is that the objects under investigation are clearly mementoes – artefacts that have deliberately been taken along and displayed in the home as a reminder. The participant can present and discuss these objects with the researcher in the home, show how they are displayed and handled, relate their story and share their memories. The objects in this research are not mementoes; they were not selected or displayed for the sake of remembrance, but they do – gradually over time – turn into memory objects as they elicit memories in the process of their handling. Remembering – as opposed to sharing memories – is a private internal process that cannot be observed by a researcher. While the Tanzanian woman mentioned above may show her comb to the researcher in her home and demonstrate how she uses it to comb her hair, the researcher cannot observe how this handling of the object brings back memories of her mother. Moreover, as explained above, some participants were not fully conscious about the mnemonic function of the artefacts and it appeared that the interview itself initiated reflection, insight and the emergence of a new consciousness. This may be an example of 'how material anthropology can inspire moments of ethnographic "revelation" … in

which unanticipated, previously inconceivable things become apparent' (Henare et al., 2007:1) – in this case not for the researcher, but for the participant.

It is important to note that the expanding literature in the field of material objects and mobility is very predominantly focused on case studies and research subjects either emanating from, or now residing in Western, developed countries, notably in Europe, North America and Australia. Many scholars limit their pronouncements about mementoes, preservation of objects and a culture of collecting to 'Western societies' or 'countries in the West', yet Visser (2012) illustrates fundamental differences even within European societies. Not enough attention has been paid to society-specific macro-level factors and socio-cultural value systems in individuals' relationship to material objects. Such factors include an institutionalized, media-visible memory culture that encourages the preservation of old buildings, artefacts and family heirlooms. Equally important is the influence of capitalist economic systems promoting consumerism and the notion of self-actualization, identity formation and expressions of individuality through consumption and materialism. Marita Sturken's (2007) research in the North American context, for instance, excellently demonstrates the seamless integration of consumerism, notably in the form of souvenirs and 'memory kitsch' into a societal culture of remembrance, mourning and comfort.

South Africa shares some characteristics with the materialist culture of the West, but the country's socio-economic situation, notably lack of prosperity for the majority, as well as traditional attitudes towards preserving old buildings and objects differ to some extent, especially among the black majority. The same is true for many other African localities from which participants of this study originated, but it is important to refrain from essentialist claims about 'African culture'. The diversity of migrants interviewed for this study, the variety and disparity of their cultural and personal backgrounds, represents both a strength and weakness of this research. In terms of the former, the cross-continental spread can indicate larger regional trends; in terms of the latter, lacking in-depth understanding of each individual's cultural norms, values and beliefs, especially in relation to the past, risks homogenization and generalization of findings in relation to studies in developed world contexts. In short, while many of the data presented in this article illustrate important differences with the extant literature, it is equally significant to note the examples of contrary responses presented above.

Within the context of migration, socio-economic status and the circumstances of the mobility experience influence an individual's relationship to material objects from home (Svasek, 2012: 25). Habermas and Paha (2002) suggest that persons of higher social classes are more likely to keep personal objects for use as mnemonic aids and women are more likely to do so than men (for the gendered relationship to objects in the domestic sphere, see also Pink, 2004). It is hence no coincidence that most of the Indian participants in the studies by Tolia-Kelly (2004) and white South Africans in Philipp and Ho's (2010) research were women and part of middle-class communities, whose migration history and experience differed markedly from the current study. Having thus, on the one hand, affirmed the salience of demographic factors as analytical categories in the interaction with memory objects, the findings of this research, on the other hand, revealed no significant differences between male and female respondents, between participants from

middle class versus severely underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds, or between economic and elite migrants.

It is suggested here that more significant factors, neglected in the literature, may be found in the socio-cultural construction of 'home' in non-Western contexts and in the mental relationship towards the place of origin, the desire and feasibility of a permanent return. Individuals who see themselves as temporary sojourners, irrespective of how long they have in fact lived in South Africa and who are in constant touch with 'home' may display a different reminiscence behaviour from those who emigrate with a sense of finality. It is understandable that the latter are more likely to literally carry along a symbolic slice of their former home (country) and value the preservation, display and engagement with such objects, not only as a mnemonic practice, but as part of their identity work. This is particularly evident in Uusihakala's (2008) study on ex-Rhodesians, who could theoretically return to the physical place of their former home, but never again to Rhodesia.

The fostering of an emotional relationship with selected personal objects, specific practices of interaction with such objects and notably their use for the purpose of remembering and sharing memories can arguably be fostered within a family and passed on to the younger generation. However, the meanings that individuals attach to significant objects in their lives and the ways they engage and interact with such objects is ultimately a matter of personal disposition. Even in communities and families that promote a remembrance culture around objects, there will always be individuals who have no interest in keepsakes and reminiscence behaviour. This is another point that deserves more acknowledgement and research attention. Findings in the extant literature tend to focus on majority behavioural patterns, but samples will invariably have included a few individuals – not further discussed – who provided completely atypical responses.

With respect to the participants who were found to indeed possess memory objects, it is significant to re-emphasize how they reacted to the interview question. Some specifically mentioned being unsure why they had kept these objects or never having consciously reflected on how the handling of these items may be linked with memory and notions of home, identity and belonging. Especially among migrants sourced from the academic sector, it sometimes became clear during the course of the interview that participants were beginning to re-evaluate their own relationship towards and interaction with specific possessions. This suggests that some object-based mnemonic behaviour occurs intuitively, without conscious reflection or analytical understanding. Connerton's (1989) seminal work on social memory, notably his observations about the embodiment and embeddedness of memory in daily routine behaviour and bodily automatisms, can also assist in understanding how individuals remember and foster relationships with specific material objects.

Gifts received from loved ones invariably carry a special meaning, representing an emotional link with the giver, the memory of whom is activated through the sight or handling of the object. Because the gifts were utilitarian objects, their daily or regular functional use is not consciously recognized as remembrance behaviour, as opposed to the deliberate placing, holding, contemplating or presenting of keepsakes in other studies. Yet, it is evident that some participants have indeed begun cultivating a special relationship with some of their belongings, turning gifts and ordinary utilitarian things into

memory objects. The findings of this study suggest that the value of keepsakes and developing an emotional relationship with special belongings can not only be learnt through exposure to different societal norms in the context of migration, but the personal gratification derived from mental and physical interaction with memory objects can also be individually discovered over time, under changing life circumstances.

Follow-up research with the same participants could in fact establish whether the interview itself may have initiated a process of awareness and more conscious engagement with objects, prompting some to more deliberately deploy special possessions in facilitating remembrance and fostering a sense of comfort, well-being, belonging and nostalgia. Of course, due to the small sample size and other limitations associated with qualitative case studies of this type, the findings discussed in this article cannot be generalized. However, they do establish indications that nuance our understanding of material objects in different societal contexts, while moreover contributing to the field of mobility and migration, especially in the comparatively under-researched intra-African context. There are a number of related aspects that deserve in-depth investigation: for instance, how precisely nostalgic feelings and episodic memories are experientially triggered through the sight or use of these memory objects. Whether it is possible that some of these items over time or through specific circumstances lose their added significance and revert back to their erstwhile status of ordinary, mundane daily-life objects could be explored through longitudinal research designs.

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