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Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Fesenmyer, L 2016, Deferring the inevitable return 'home': Contingency and temporality in the transnational home-making practices of older Kenyan women in London. in K Walsh & L Nare (eds), *Transnational Migration and Home in Older Age.* Routledge, London and New York.

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

(2016) *Transnational Migration and Home in Older Age.* Katie Walsh and Lena Nare, Eds. London: Routledge.

9. Deferring the inevitable return 'home': Contingency and temporality in the transnational home-making practices of older Kenyan women migrants in London

Leslie Fesenmyer

I joined Ann[1] and Lillian one Sunday afternoon for tea at Lillian's house in the London borough of Redbridge in 2010. Though they had not known each other in Kenya, the two women had much in common: they were mothers in their mid-50s, Luo women married to Luo men from western Kenya, and internal migrants who moved to Nairobi not long after marrying in the 1970s. They also shared a reason for migrating to the United Kingdom – they 'came to rest'. Hearing this, I jokingly asked how living in London was a 'rest' given that Lillian was enrolled in a Master's course in marketing and working as a cleaner, and Ann was studying for a child care qualification while providing elder care. When pressed about extending their 'rest' indefinitely by staying in London, they laughed, saying they were headed 'home in a few years'.

In this chapter I explore the contradictions between the discourse of returning home and the lived experiences of home among older women migrants from Kenya living in London, contradictions which in turn mediate their home-making practices. Though the narrative indicates the inevitability of return, not to mention its desirability, I will argue that returning home is contingent on the (re-)making of familial obligations and relations across space. Moreover, their lives are characterized by a particular temporality: living in London is experienced as a 'break', an interruption or suspension of their regular lives. This break gives rise to a liminal space in which such women continuously engage in preparations to go

'home', while deferring their return. In making these arguments, I aim to draw attention to the lived experiences of older women for whom 'home' is unequivocally with their families in Kenya, but whose transnational migration underscores the fissures within marital and wider familial relations that complicate their return. Throughout the discussion, I highlight tensions between personal, family, and historical time (Elder 1978; Brettell 2002) in their lives that are exacerbated by their status as migrants.

Transnational migration, home, and the life course: A processual approach to home-making

When asked why they migrated, my interlocutors said they did so to 'meet their family's needs', that is, to make possible a particular idea of a meaningful life in Kenya (Sorenson and Olwig 2002). Their migration transformed their families into transnational ones with their husbands, children, and extended kin remaining in Kenya. Such families 'live some or most of the time separated from each other…. [yet] hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely "familyhood"' (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002, 2). Their migration is seen as a temporary, though necessary, means of fulfilling familial aspirations such that their return 'home' to Kenya is considered inevitable. Importantly, this view is not explicitly linked to their migration status.

Transnational migration is understood here as 'the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement' (Basch et al. 1994, 7). As Hannerz points out though, transnationalism tends to 'draw attention to what it negates – that is, to the continual significance of the national' (1996,

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6). 'Home' among these women is less about their identification with a territorially grounded place: Kenya as a nation-state; Nairobi, the locality from which they migrated; or the rural villages in which they were born or into which they married (Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Portes et al. 1999; Basch et al. 1994; Kearney 1995). Rather, I argue that in this case an empirically grounded understanding of 'home' interweaves notions of obligation, identification, and affectivity. It is a 'conceptual space of identification' and a 'nodal point in social relations' imbued with culturally-specific rights and obligations (Olwig 1998, 236). More specifically, these relations entail identifications based on kinship, namely, spouse, (grand)parent, (grand)child, sibling, in-law, niece/ nephew, and cousin, which are culturally informed, shaped by the intersection of gender, generation, and age, and change over time. 'Home' is akin to 'household' defined as the 'basic unit of society involved in production, reproduction, consumption and socialization' (Moore 1988, 54). However, it is important to note that Kenyans often have rights and obligations, which are 'normally thought of as economic beyond the household in which they live' (Guyer 1981, 98). 'Home' is also an affective space that engenders feelings of love, belonging, and nostalgia, as well as shame, guilt, and frustration (Olwig 2002; 2007). While the notion of 'home' as nation is less salient for these migrants, their idea of home is located with their kin who remain in Kenya.

Given this multidimensional definition of home, it is important to understand the social dynamics within the families of older women migrants that informed their migration decision-making and travelled with them to London. I explore how personal, family, and historical time converged in their lives such that transnational migration emerged as a way of (re-)making 'home'. I then turn to the question of returning 'home' and consider their lived experiences of this 'inevitability'. Lastly, I consider how their continuous preparations to

return give rise to contradictory temporal experiences of delaying and biding time, deferring and anticipating their return.

Methodology

The chapter is based on 14 months of fieldwork conducted in 2009 and 2010 among members of transnational families who live in London, Nairobi, or peri-urban Kiambu District, Kenya. The subset of interlocutors featured here are all married women migrants with children in their teens to 30s; some are also grandmothers. Of varied ethnic backgrounds, including Kikuyu, Luo, and Luhya[2], most migrated from Nairobi to London during the 1990s to mid-2000s. They work as nurses, administrators, shop assistants, carers, and cleaners, among other jobs, and hold a mix of migration statuses, such as, temporary work or study visa-holders, permanent residents, British citizens, and overstayers. The research was conducted through informal conversations, open-ended, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. I visited with women in their flats and rooms, and together we shared meals and attended church services and social gatherings.

At the time of fieldwork, my interlocutors were in their mid- to late-50s. They can be considered old relative to life expectancy[3] in Kenya – 65 years old for women and 62 years for men in 2013 – and to the retirement age in Kenya's public sector – 60 years – in which some worked prior to migrating. However, I approach age here from a life course perspective (Brettell 2002; Gardner 2002), which highlights 'the intersection of life or family history and social history, between the life course of the family unit and that of individual members, and between the course of events in the family and other institutional sectors – the economy, the polity' (Elder 1978, 5). In Kenya where age-based seniority is culturally valued (Lonsdale 1992, 21), women are normatively understood to gain social status as they

age and have historically relied on their children and other (younger) kin to ensure they are cared for (Robertson and Berger 1986; Shipton 2007). Nonetheless, as we will see, migration has transformed their social role and status, revealing contradictions in their experience of growing older in a transnational social field and complicating their return. Moreover, their explicit impetus for migrating – to meet their family's needs – signals the importance of an event-oriented sense of time regarding their return, rather than, for example, when they reach an arbitrarily set age of retirement. In asking about their plans to return, my interlocutors responded with the following kinds of comments: 'when my youngest child finishes university' (Violet, Kikuyu, 54, nurse), 'after I've saved more money' (Jean, Luhya, mid-50s, care worker), and 'once I get a business started [in Kenya]' (Betty, Luhya, 56, administrator). The timing of such individual and family events is not wholly within anyone's control, and is shaped in part by historical time such that the question of when they will return is left open.

Obligations and opportunities, demands and tensions: Multiple 'times' converging in middle class Kenyan homes

Not long after meeting Jane in 2009, a 57-year old Kikuyu nurse with five daughters, I asked why she moved to London. She explained that she and her husband, a university lecturer, were not earning enough at the time their eldest daughter was ready for university, so she migrated for a better paying job. However, her daughter Rose who I met in Nairobi suggested that the reason for her mother's migration was less straightforward. Her parents did not lack the money, but rather her father was unwilling to contribute to such expenses. Though Jane had been offered a comparable position in Nairobi, according to Rose, she chose to migrate 'because she didn't want to deal with Dad'.

Rose's perspective on Jane's migration alludes to the interweaving of personal, family, and historical time in the lives of middle class women like her mother that re-shaped their experiences of 'home'. Along with Ann and Lillian, Jane is part of a generation of women, which came of age in post-independence Kenya when opportunities proliferated. Many migrated into Nairobi from the 1970s onward to find the kind of work for which their formal educations had trained them (Parkin 1975, 5-6). Working in such jobs contributed to the emergence of a nascent middle class in Nairobi.

By the 1980s, however, the Kenyan economy was struggling, a situation compounded by increasing political uncertainty. With the introduction of structural adjustment programs, unemployment grew, especially in the public sector, which employed the new middle class. These policies shifted public investment away from education, adding to the financial burden of aspiring families. Women's income, typically earmarked for everyday expenses for the household and children (Stichter 1987, 147-148), could not keep pace with rising costs. Moreover, while these urban women did not face the domestic burdens associated with the rural lives of their mothers, such as collecting firewood and fetching water, their middle class lives included modern conveniences like appliances, clothes and furniture, which required cleaning, ironing, and polishing (Stichter 1988, 195-197). They hired 'house girls' to help, but there were 'certain things a wife has to do for her husband or he will leave her', a lesson Ann's mother-in-law instilled in her through frequent criticism during the early years of her marriage. Meanwhile, men of their generation were expected to be 'providers', such that they were displaced when (some) wives assumed greater financial responsibility (Stichter 1987, 156). These pressures gave rise to gendered tensions among couples regarding how to sustain their middle class lives.

International migration emerged within this context not only as a means of meeting familial needs, but also as a culturally acceptable way of managing marital conflicts, a strategy with historical antecedents (see Bujra 2005, 124-125). Yet, unlike in the case of internal migration, women were the ones to migrate abroad as they were seen as 'flexible' and thus able to adapt to London. Husbands did not view their wives' migration as problematic since migrant men had historically retained control over their familial incomes despite their own moves into Nairobi (Oucho 1996; Parkin 1978). However, migration to the United Kingdom differed in a notable way from internal mobility – the distances were far greater, putting women out of reach of their husbands and extended families (see Nelson 1992, 124-125). Thus, it afforded women new possibilities for re-working familial obligations and relations and, thus, for re-making 'home'.

Returning 'home': The contingency of their home-making practices

Given the narrative of temporary migration prevalent among older women migrants, return is understood to be inevitable. However, as Ferguson argues in relation to internal Zambian migrants, 'instead of thinking of "going back" as something people can *always* do if wage-earning *fails*, … it may be more realistic to think of it as something they can do *only* if wage-earning succeeds' (1999, 127). Accordingly, returning 'home' is better conceptualized as contingent on two questions that are often at odds with one another in practice: how will these women support themselves in Kenya and to whom will they return?

To support themselves upon their return, they need to be able to save their earnings. Yet, in order to have people to whom they can return, they need to maintain social relations, especially with their kin. Doing so necessitates finding ways of materializing their presence despite their physical absence. While sending remittances, gifts, and goods are key ways to

sustain relations across space, they also use resources that could otherwise be saved. Compounding matters is the way in which migration has complicated women's social status. Despite their life stage, older women migrants have been transformed into 'providers' and sources of patronage for those who remain in Kenya, a situation that in part reflects the (economic) challenges many younger Kenyans face in becoming social persons by marrying, establishing households, and starting families, much less supporting their elders (Prince 2006; Frederiksen 2000). In other words, young Kenyans' realization of normative expectations specific to their life stage is in part dependent on their older women migrant kin *not* realizing their own expectations and instead remaining providers (Hunter, this volume). In these ways, intergenerational and gender relations continue to be re-worked within (transnational) Kenyan families and shaped by historical time (Musila 2005; Gordon 1995).

To ground this discussion ethnographically, I return to Ann and Jane. Ann did not earn enough to remit regularly and save money. She tried to limit her expenses by living in a shared house, commuting daily for four hours by bus, and only calling 'home' every few weeks. The difficulty of her situation paradoxically contributed to her longing to return 'home' where she 'would be treated like a queen'. Ann had recently joined a *chama* (Swahili for rotating credit and savings association) in London. By investing some of her earnings in this way, she gained a culturally intelligible means of saying 'no' to relatives who asked for financial assistance without being accused of selfishness (see Shipton 1995: 178-179). Faced with requests from her extended kin, Jane drew on the discourse of international development familiar to Kenyans after decades of such initiatives: rather than encourage 'dependence', Jane preferred to promote 'self-sufficiency' by investing in self-sustaining business ventures. For example, she gave her brother's daughter, who lived with her family in Nairobi while completing her studies, money to open a restaurant.[4] Both women's home-making practices

entailed trying to disentangle economics and affection in familial relations whereby they could have people to whom to return without bearing full responsibility for the latter's material wellbeing.[5]

If it is vital to have people to whom one can return, it is also necessary to have an actual physical dwelling in which to live. For many middle class Kenyan women of this generation, they often have two houses, one in Nairobi and one in the rural areas where their husbands were born. Among Kikuyus, Luos, and Luhyas who predominate among my interlocutors, descent was, and largely still is, reckoned patrilineally, and people traditionally followed virilocal residence practices whereby wives moved to their husbands' areas. At an ideological level, a woman's home – both symbolically and materially – among this generation is understood to be with her husband and his family and typically located in rural areas (Cohen and Odhiambo 1989, 9-24; Cattell 2005, 226-227). Notions of home are then gendered in that managing one's own household has been fundamental historically to normative ideas of uprightness and morality among men (Lonsdale 2003, 48-50).

Nonetheless, the maintenance of the physical house, particularly the dwelling in Nairobi, arguably falls within women's purview. Lillian told me she planned to return to Kenya after her youngest son finished university. She had made some preparations for her return by organizing the renovations of her suburban Nairobi house. Rather than rely on her husband, Lillian said she preferred to handle the arrangements herself. Her doing so fits within a broader gender ideology, discussed earlier, in which household expenses and, by extension, the house itself is the responsibility of women. In this way, she did not overtly undermine her husband's authority, while ensuring that the money was only used for renovations. Such

negotiations reflect a reluctance to upset gender dynamics within couples, even across significant physical distances.

Deferring return, suspending life: Contradictory temporal experiences among older women migrants in London

'I'll go home in two years, after the university fees are paid.' (Alice, Luhya, 58, care worker)

'When I get my 'red' [British] passport, then I'll go back.' (Nancy, Kikuyu, mid-50s, nurse)

'I need to fix my house first.' (Marcia, Luo, 53, nurse)

These comments are among the many I heard during my fieldwork. Though deferring their return 'home' is understandable – it is always possible to earn and save more money – and thus offers a culturally acceptable way to stay in London, the constant postponing leaves many in a liminal space. In his discussion of labor migration, Piore argues that migrants' perspectives on time affect their position in the labor market, that is, the temporary-ness of their migration predisposes them to take jobs with poor pay and/ or conditions that non-migrants would reject (1979, 54). A similar logic is at work in relation to notions of home among many women, though it plays out differently depending on their socio-economic status. Since they are always 'about to return' regardless of their migration status, they tend not to invest socially or emotionally in where they currently live. Instead, they work long hours, often through the night and on weekends when the pay is higher, leaving them little

leisure time. While some with better paying jobs have bought properties in London, none referred to them as 'home'; rather, they presented them as pragmatic choices that promised long-term financial benefits. The temporary-ness of their migration project permeates their lives, suspending indefinitely their 'real life'. Thus, their expected 'duration of stay' (Roberts 1995) ensures their liminality in London.

Moreover, in migrating to a different society, their social roles have been transformed. The 'rest' engendered by their migration is a break from the daily responsibilities and demands of being wives, mothers, daughters, and aunts in Nairobi, yet those responsibilities also gave meaning and shape to their lives, roles which have not been (re-)constituted post-migration. For instance, Beth, a Luhya woman with three children talked about moving back for many years but did not do so until more than a decade after she first migrated. When we met in Nairobi, she explained, 'I found it hard to pack up and leave. I had made a life in [the] UK…. It was a life I knew. I had adapted, I even started drinking English tea.' While recuperating from an injury, she realized that, with her children's education completed, she could no longer justify staying in London.

Beth's reflections underscore a fundamental difference between when these women first moved and when they (contemplate) return: the lack of a compelling reason to return at a particular moment. Though they may not have a pressing personal reason to leave and in fact face familial expectations to stay, some may be confronted with a legal imperative to leave in the form of an expiring visa or the prospect of deportation if they have overstayed. Given that the British migration regime has become increasingly restrictive since the 1990s, the possibilities for extending visas or applying for permanent residency have narrowed.[6] Nonetheless, most did not see their migration status alone as determining their decision about

whether or when to return.

At the same time, their delaying may collide with another inevitability – their own mortality. Since their migration was meant to be temporary, they did not consider the prospect of dying in London. Given the strong desire to be buried at 'home'[7], this eventuality creates its own existential pressure to return, one that is reinforced by their conviction that British society is not where they want to grow old because, according to some of my interlocutors, the elderly are 'not properly cared for [by their families] or respected'. In such sentiments it is possible to glimpse an instance when the idea of home is explicitly interlinked with 'place' understood in cultural and indeed national terms.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate how the discourse of inevitability is contradicted by the contingent nature of older women migrants' actual return 'home'. Returning entails being able to support themselves and to have people to whom they can return. In trying to satisfy both preconditions, their home-making practices contribute to the (re-)making of their kin relations and, thus, 'home', just as the interweaving of personal, family, and historical time is re-shaping it. Their liminality and ambivalence reflect what Olwig (1998) highlights as the intertwining of identification, obligation, and affectivity in ideas of 'home'. A processual approach to home-making then underscores the fact that the 'home' to which they (would) return is not the same as that which they left.

At this point, returning 'home' remains an emotive topic of conversation among older women migrants and within transnational families, rather than an imminent action to be taken. Despite reaching a stage in life when they would traditionally have been supported, they face

ongoing requests for assistance. While the high social status associated with being providers for their non-migrant kin may in part compensate for that which they lose as elders who are taken care of, their new role entails various pressures. Managing such requests is easier from London because, as I have argued elsewhere (Fesenmyer 2013), the physical distance generated by migration affords them possibilities for re-defining social distance. Equally, some at 'home' want them to stay in London in order to continue to earn and remit. Given the complex affective dimensions associated with home (Olwig 2002), members of these transnational families in both London and Kenya may prefer a state of 'permanent temporariness'.[8]

Among those women who do return, how will they be re-incorporated into the daily lives of their families? In many cases, their 'temporary' migration projects are already over 10 years old, with most women having spent limited time in Kenya since migrating. If returnees have permanent residency, the possibility of re-migrating to London is an option, as is spending time in both places. For women whose financial situation precludes sustaining kin relations and, thus, their return, it is unclear how their idea of 'home' might be transformed by staying in London without any kin nearby. Such questions remind us how 'home' in the context of transnational migration is constantly made and re-made in practice over time.

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[1] All names and places have been changed to ensure anonymity; in some cases, additional identifying information has also been changed.

[2] According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, they are Kenya's largest ethnic groups (2010, 34). The collective name 'Luhya' encompasses 16 sub-groups (Were 1967).

[3] CIA World Factbook 2013

https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2102.html.

[4] Although the nuclear family is the middle class ideal, the boundaries of these urban families are permeable, indicating the durability of reciprocal familial relations (Stichter 1988: 185-186).

[5] For a comparative example, see Fesenmyer (forthcoming) regarding how younger Kenyan migrants draw on Pentecostalism to re-work familial obligations transnationally.

[6] For example, at the time of fieldwork, it was possible to apply for permanent residency after 14 years of 'continuous residence of any legality', which includes periods of being undocumented. However, in 2012 a 20-year path replaced this route, thereby extending the waiting time to apply for migrants whose stay is already likely to be precarious (Home Office 2012: 64).

[7] Though discursively represented as a historically inviolate tradition, the practice of being buried at 'home' emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly among Luos, coinciding with

increasing urbanization; prior to that, people were typically buried where they died (Cohen and Odhiambo 1989, 57).

[8] While Bailey et al. (2002) discuss this idea in legal terms, I use it here in a more existential sense.