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Catharina Nord & Andrew Byerley


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Translocal Optimisation: Assembling Rural and Urban Spaces for Later Life in Urban Namibia and Uganda

CATHARINA NORD
(Blekinge Institute of Technology)

ANDREW BYERLEY
(Stockholm University)

It is often assumed that sub-Saharan African urban migrants return in later life to the villages from which they originated. This article challenges this model of circular migration by exploring the strategies of older adults who live permanently in urban areas. The empirical material comes from ethnographic case studies in two industrial towns formed by the apartheid and colonial housing policies of the 1950s and 1960s: Kuisebmond in Walvis Bay, Namibia, a former apartheid ‘location’; and Walukuba in Jinja, Uganda, a former ‘African’ rental estate. Older adults’ housing situation and its significance for their strategies and choices in later life provide the focus. The results show that even if many strategies appeared that are often associated with a return to the rural place of origin, for many the move back to the village was not a viable option. Participants in the study nurtured contacts with their places of origin, for example by making regular visits, sending remittances, contributing to housing in the village and receiving relatives in town. It is argued that these strategies, together with urban advantages – in particular a good housing situation – must be understood as translocal optimisation, in which potentialities emerge from an assemblage of various actors in different, connected locales. The optimal situation in which to age – in rural or urban areas – is a product of co-emergent actors and not necessarily an individual choice on the part of the older adult. The study concludes that urban living in later life seems to be an alternative choice for a group of older adults and must be acknowledged.

Keywords: potentiality; assemblage; housing; later life; urbanisation; migration; rural–urban connection

Introduction

Cultural expectations, governance and planning discourses often prefigure older adults’ spaces to be rural spaces and accordingly assume that urban migrants return in later...
life to the villages from which they came.\textsuperscript{1} While many older adults do return at retirement,\textsuperscript{2} research suggests that groups of older adults may also remain in the urban area to which they migrated for work when younger.\textsuperscript{3} In this article, we contend that this ‘circular migration’ needs to be challenged by more complex rural–urban relational concepts. A reason for this is that migration appears in innumerable versions and patterns involving different groups of migrants and diverse migration trajectories. Rural and urban relations are characterised by great complexity and embrace a multitude of exchanges and movements.\textsuperscript{4} A central argument in the article is that these diversities represent \textit{translocal optimisation strategies} in which various urban and rural places are simultaneously involved. Migration through a life-course need not begin with a move during childhood for schooling and end with return at retirement, if indeed ‘retirement’ has any practical significance at all.\textsuperscript{5} Migrants may return earlier in life as a result of unsuccessful migration experiences, or after retirement from successful careers or, perhaps, of particular interest to this article, not return at all.\textsuperscript{6} Furthermore, it is likely that there will have been considerable exchange between urban migrants and home places. Maintaining rural connections has been widely imagined as a rational strategy to prepare for future return. However, attitudes toward maintaining connections with places of origin vary significantly among those remaining in urban areas; some carefully maintain connections while others do not.\textsuperscript{7} This article has two related aims. In order to improve upon the general lack of research on older African adults residing in urban areas,\textsuperscript{8} it challenges the dominant focus on rural ‘return’ migration by focusing on older adults who remain in urban areas. We examine why this group remains, if they contemplate return to an original home-place or elsewhere, and how decisions are motivated. Furthermore, the article addresses the lack of research on spatialities and ageing in an African context\textsuperscript{9} by discussing the significance of urban place, particularly urban housing, and how these articulate with urban–rural relationality to influence ageing outcomes. While research often emphasises the importance of investments in rural house construction by urban migrants for anticipated return in later life, urban housing is then usually attributed less significance or considered only a transitory form of dwelling. However, an over-determined focus on

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item D. Potts, \textit{Circular Migration in Zimbabwe and Contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa} (Woodbridge, James Currey, 2010).
\item Falkingham \textit{et al.}, ‘Outward Migration’, p. 335.
\item Nyanguru, ‘Migration and Aging’, p. 25.
\item Peil \textit{et al.}, ‘Going Home’, p. 569.
\item Ferguson, ‘Mobile Workers, Modernist Narratives’, pp. 385–412.
\item Peil \textit{et al.}, ‘Going Home’, pp. 563–85.
\item Nyanguru, ‘Migration and Aging’, pp. 57–85.
\item Potts, \textit{Circular Migration}.
\end{thebibliography}
return risks neglecting the importance of urban housing for older adults, both for grounding everyday life in particular neighbourhoods, but also as assets for maintaining proximate and distant relations.

This article approaches these neglected aspects through a comparative ethnographic case study of older adults living in the former ‘black location’ of Kuisebmond in Walvis Bay, Namibia, and the former rental Walukuba African Housing Estate in Jinja, Uganda. Built almost at the same time in the 1950s and 1960s to regulate African productivity, mobility and subjectivities at a time of state-led industrial modernisation, their similarities but also differences render them appropriate sites for learning in and across cases.

To allow for comparisons, we carried out similar fieldwork over four months in 2016–17 in Kuisebmond (first author) and Jinja (second author), respectively. Individual interviews with older adults (55+) took place in the interviewees’ homes; there were around 40 individuals in each case, about two-thirds of whom were female. Six focus-group interviews were carried out in Walukuba. Translators and field assistants were used in all interviews, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In Kuisebmond, most of the participants were recruited through the Erongo Elderly Association, the Shackdwellers’ Federation and several others, using the ‘snowball’ technique. In Walukuba, participants were recruited from the Village Older Persons Council Voters’ Register 2015/2016 with the assistance of the local council chairman and field assistants. The physical environment, including its material aspects and use, were documented by observations, photography and fieldnotes. The second author had a long-standing relationship with some of the participants in Walukuba since they had participated in his doctoral work in the early 2000s; this provided valuable information about their lives when ageing. In addition, interviews were conducted with other stakeholders and relevant professionals, such as local councilors, representatives of the elderly and governmental and municipal officials such as town-planners, social workers and NGO representatives (one or two of each).

Urban Permanency in Later Life

As post-1960s research increasingly questioned modernisation theories, implying that there was a transition from circular migration to urban permanency, later life came to be firmly associated with rural return.10 The research preoccupation with impermanency among African urban residents and proposed causal factors has continued in various African contexts, albeit with disparate theoretical approaches, methodologies and findings.11 An important question is whether this focus has made the permanently urban-living elderly invisible, as an unexpected result that did not fit into the hypothetical assumptions of circular migration. Urban permanency appears sometimes very subtly and is found almost between the lines.12 Some scholars reveal complex relations between urban and rural living, including strategies performed by an urban elite13 or by poorer migrants who move between town and the village and do not return to the rural area permanently until after death, for burial.14 Many other case studies reveal groups of older individuals whose permanent urban living is unmistakable. All regions in sub-Saharan Africa are represented in this research: west

11 Potts, *Circular Migration*.
12 Gugler, “‘The son of the hawk’”, p. 31.
Africa (Nigeria), eastern Africa (Uganda, Kenya) and southern Africa (Zimbabwe, Malawi). The size of the remaining group of older adults in these studies is sometimes considerable: two studies showed 75 per cent and 41 per cent of the participants in the study, respectively. These figures do not necessarily indicate recent migration changes, which are a 21st century urbanisation phenomenon. A study by Odongo and Lea from 1977 found 30 per cent permanently urban-living elderly. There are a number of reasons for spending later life in the city or town. Long-term urban residence often makes people stay in later life. Other reasons are children living nearby and access to health facilities. This highlights how urban dwelling articulates with care in terms of receiving care both from urban health facilities and children. The apartheid governmental provision of healthcare in reserves and homelands in Namibia was highly inadequate and left to missionaries. Some reasons relate to conditions in the village: a fear of witchcraft in the village was one reason for not returning. Some did not consider a home return an option in later life because rural relations had not been properly maintained with remittances. This indicates the importance of being able to contribute to the village despite large distances. Even though a successful career might facilitate a return, higher socio-economic status seemed to be a factor for less likely return.

Research indicates that housing is an important factor in migration and rural–urban exchanges. Housing policies in urban colonial sub-Saharan Africa struck a blow to the extended family, doing little to provide for older adults. Colonial administrations expected that employees would retire to their rural areas of origin and that their care needs would thus be accommodated there, as well. However, although subject to colonial control of labourers’ movements, many of whom had migrated to town for reasons of work in Namibia remained illegally, including both men and women. The latter were not allowed to leave at all. This may have created a need for family housing at a later stage. Existing research argues for the importance of access to housing as a significant factor affecting migration careers and the choice of where to spend later life. Recent and earlier research indicates

18 Falkingham et al., ‘Outward Migration’, p. 335.
19 Nyanguru, ‘Migration and Aging’, p. 75.
the significance, not least from a gender perspective, of having constructed housing in rural home areas, possibly to facilitate return at retirement. However, this research, however, has limited scholars’ understandings of why housing construction takes place and how this articulates with plans for later life. Assuming that construction of rural housing inevitably signals eventual return may play down the importance of other motivations, such as deference to parents, display of status or nostalgia for the countryside. It has also meant that urban housing tends to be regarded as secondary or transitory, not least when this housing is informal. However, urban housing often functions as an important point of connection with networks extending into rural areas. The link between return and ownership of property in rural areas is not self-evident. The inclination to construct a house in the rural area declines over time, especially if the individual does not start construction in the early years of his or her stay in the urban area. The interest in investment in a rural house may then be redirected towards an urban house. Housing opens possibilities for improved sustenance in later life. Constructing urban housing and backyard shacks on one’s plot may generate rental income. However, many are dependent on informal housing. Bank critiques the ‘common perception that those who live in shacks must necessarily be temporary sojourners in the city’.

Existing research suggests points of articulation between housing and later life that significantly influence the choice to age in a rural or urban place. This article explores these articulations in more detail and, as is expanded upon in the following theoretical section, problematises framing the outcomes of these articulations using a rural–urban dichotomy.

Translocal Assemblages of Rural–Urban Relations

The extreme diversity of migration trajectories and rural–urban exchanges explored in existing research may be a reason for the emergence of different approaches to theoretically framing such heterogeneity. The modernist explanation of urbanisation supported the idea of linear development, in which migrant Africans necessarily should develop into urban-dwelling, modern citizens. This is a model that has been widely criticised. In Potts’s recent state-of-the-art work showing the diversity of migration trajectories, she nonetheless maintains the continued relevance of the circular migration model. We argue that the complexities of rural–urban migration seem to defy efforts of categorisation and theorisation in simple geometrical models such as a circular model. In a similar vein, Deborah James alerts us against conceiving of urban and rural areas as separate entities, a type of ‘continuum’ model with rural and urban poles, but rather argues for understanding the rural and the urban as two interlinked aspects of the same phenomenon in migration, identity formation and exchange.

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33 Greiner, ‘Patterns of Translocality’, p. 146.
40 Potts, Circular Migration.
We suggest that rural–urban relations should be conceived of as a dynamic field, a translocal assemblage. This concept moves the individual away from holding centre stage as an autonomous agent seeking to optimise material, human and spatial resources. Instead, these processes of optimisation are viewed as products of assembled resources and components made available by the circumstances in the flow of ‘nows’. Assemblage theory also affords attributing symmetry to different components such as people, artefacts and spaces, thus allowing ‘dead’ material to take on the role of co-actor. Thus, there is no ‘central head’ determining dynamic processes of ageing in an urban area. Rather, the older individual is one of these components, adapting to, altering and exchanging places with other components in the assemblage that constitutes later life, such as work availability, pensions, housing, children’s education, the presence of spouse, access to care etc., while the ageing person transforms himself or herself. These interlinked and co-working components are together embedded in greater contextual changes, such as de-industrialisation, urban land formalisation and political flux. By conceptualising rural–urban relations in this manner, return migration becomes one among other emergent spatial strategies in later life, such as moving to a new workplace or to a child’s house, buying a plot where land is available, initiating zero-grazing (feeding a cow/cattle with cut grass grown elsewhere) on one’s urban plot or building an urban house for retirement. The rural–urban are thus not two distinct and separate places between which migrants move but instead constitute an intricate translocal agglomeration of potentialities. For Agamben, potentiality signifies not only a capacity to act but also importantly, a capacity not to act. The negotiation of these two capacities in later life – for example, to build or not to build, to move or not to move – is a way of handling and creating potentialities that are deeply embedded in migrating and non-migrating Africans’ lives. Ageing is assembled by various material, spatial and human resources in rural–urban exchanges in highly uncertain situations where potentialities offer various trajectories that are possible to follow in a city yet to come. This can be conceptualised as translocal optimisation in which remote and nearby potentialities and resources are negotiated to aim for the most favourable situation.

The Cases of Jinja and Walvis Bay

A comparative perspective must include regional disparities in patterns of pre- and post-colonial mobility, forms of colonial incorporation into global capitalism and post-independence political and socio-economic trajectories. Kuisebmond and Walukuba are on their way from their origins in the post-Second World War colonial project of governmentally regulating the conduct of African urban labour in towns meant to act as motors of modernisation, where the provision of specific types of ‘African’ housing and residential areas was a central component. There are important discrepancies as well as similarities between these two cases that are generated by regional differences, historical and present-day, that we explore below. Basic economic and social differences between the two nations also form the basis for the choice of these two

43 Ibid.
45 Potts, *Circular Migration*.
48 Potts, *Circular Migration*, pp. 30–73.
cases. Namibia counts as a middle-income country while Uganda is considered a low-income country.49

In Namibia (formerly South West Africa), housing interventions aimed to separate ‘non-Europeans’ from ‘whites’ and sought to restrict the translocal mobility of African urban labour.50 Contract labourers, mostly Oshivambo speakers from northern Namibia, were confined to compounds, while ‘non-Europeans’ with quasi-permanent urban status resided in ‘coloured’ and ‘African’ townships.51 In the port town of Walvis Bay (with a population in 2012 of 79,50052), which was an industrial centre from the late 1940s and a South African enclave until 1994, such apartheid planning resulted in the housing areas Narraville, a ‘Coloured’ location, and Kuisebmond, an ‘African’ location.53 When Kuisebmond opened in 1966, apartheid was formally introduced in South West Africa; at the same time, South Africa lost the UN mandate.54 However, the black population had been subject to large-scale, forced removals to enclaves such as urban locations and reserves throughout the entire 20th century – first by the German colonial administration and, after the First World War, by South Africa in order to expand and accommodate white settlers’ need for agricultural land and a labour supply for industry and the mines.55 Kuisebmond, which upon completion in 1964 comprised 450 ‘non-European’ family houses and a 4000-bed ‘Ovambo compound’, constitutes the Namibian case in this article.56 Colonial states of various types, however, exchanged ideas of housing design for social engineering and labour-control purposes.57 Thus, although outside the apartheid sphere, similar ideas about industrial workers’ family life materialised in housing provision in Uganda. Jinja (with a population in 2014 of 76,00058) was transformed into an industrial centre after the Owen Falls Dam opened in

49 GDP per capita: Namibia US$5,200 (ranked 7 in sub-Saharan Africa 2017) and Uganda US$606 (ranked 37). HDI: Namibia 0.647, (ranked 129 in the world 2018), and Uganda 0.561 (ranked 162). However, it is important to note that the GINI coefficient in Namibia is the second highest in the world, 0.63, which indicates that there are groups with very low incomes (available on https://data.worldbank.org/, retrieved 8 August 2019). The average monthly income in Kuisebmond formal residential areas is N$2,700 (appr. US$2,400) Source: Walvis Bay Municipality, Integrated Urban Spatial Development Framework for Walvis Bay: Planning Proposals, Policy Guidelines and Implementation Projects (Walvis Bay, Walvis Bay Municipality, 2014), p. 7.


1954. Its ‘African’ residential areas included Walukuba African Housing Estate, with 1,638 family houses built between 1950 and 1960, which constitutes the Ugandan case in this article.59

Today, Kuisebmond (with a population of 34,000 in 2012)60 and Walukuba (with a population of 25,000 in 2002)61 manifest changes wrought by six decades of multi-scalar political and socio-economic flux. They have continued to be re-fashioned by residents and governments into significant places embedded in wider translocal assemblages in which they share similarities as major centres of in-migration. The focus of the following empirical section is to examine how this has yielded differentially accessible potentialities in translocal assemblages for older adults, particularly in terms of the role of urban houses and house-plots.

Walvis Bay was transferred to independent Namibian rule in 1994 after the democratisation of South Africa, which put an end to apartheid pass laws and employee control, violence and abusive arbitrariness. The importance of Walvis Bay to the Namibian economy cannot be underestimated; in particular the fishing industry is a major national asset yielding substantial returns.62 In-migration increased after 1994, and Walvis Bay continues to experience the most rapid urbanisation in Namibia, a yearly growth rate of 3.4 per cent, growing from 44,000 in 2001 to 79,000 in 2012.63 Growth is likely to continue, as economic and employment development in Walvis Bay and Erongo Region is expansive. The huge north-port development promotes the town as the SADC gateway, as well as for mining interests in the hinterland of Walvis Bay itself.64 Kuisebmond continues to serve as a principle reception area for new arrivals, and, despite significant provision of low-income formal housing by the National Housing Enterprise (NHE),65 housing demand exceeds supply and, for many, is blocked by a lack of affordability. The NHE and different donor-funded housing projects have expanded Kuisebmond to five times its original size by constructing dwellings of similar design to the original ones from the 1960s. The fact that the latter were sold to the tenants after 1994 changed the potential for translocalism. While some still have the original architectural shapes, many have been added to and reconstructed, sometimes resulting in the small, bland houses turning into colourful ‘palaces’ that fill the whole plot (see Figure 1). Because Walvis Bay council has restricted the development of informal settlements, housing demand has been met by formal plot-holders renting out spaces for backyard shacks. Currently, approximately 29,000 people live in backyard shacks. Thus, Kuisebmond is the home for an estimated 78 per cent of Walvis Bay’s entire population.66

The number of Kuisebmond residents aged 60 and over was 1,473 in January 2017.67 These older adults are eligible for a N$1200 monthly non-contributory pension. Most older adults in the study originated from places within a 200-kilometre radius of Walvis Bay, Erongo Region and beyond, primarily Usakos, or from distant northern regions – Oshakati/
Ondangwa is a major migrant source in Namibia. Many older informants had lived in the town for several decades, and nearly all of the people interviewed had migrated to seek employment. Some individuals had already migrated in childhood. Few had moved to town in later life.

Two translocal assemblages of rural–urban relations and ageing were discernible in Kuisebmond: one in which migration did not occur and one in which migration did occur. The first assemblage included the older elderly – aged 70 and above – who lived in the former ‘location’ houses provided by the South African government. The second was an assemblage that included the younger elderly – aged 55 to 64 – among whom a majority lived in backyard shacks. All of these latter informants still worked but were approaching retirement. No retired older adult in the study lived in a backyard shack (see Figure 2).

In the first assemblage including the older elderly, nearly all said that they were not going to move back to their place of origin. Time was possibly an important factor affecting this decision. Many had lived in Walvis Bay since childhood or youth. This strong commitment to Kuisebmond seems contradictory to the claim that it was a translocal assemblage, but, actually, many other components made it translocal. Most of the elderly interviewees had retained contacts with their places of origin. They had visited over the years and exchanged remittances. If this was not a strategy to pave the way for moving back, it may point to links of other kinds between rural and urban areas of nonetheless interdependent nature. These links will be explored as translocal assemblages of great potential in the following analysis.

Angela (70) had experiences that were common to many other participants in the study – she claimed that she did not want to move back even if she had retained contacts in her

Figure 1. Transformed house in Kuisebmond. (Photo: Catharina Nord)

68 Tvedten, “‘A town is just a town’”, p. 406. These patterns of participants’ origins mirror the places to which the black population was attracted in the 20th century. Usakos was a vital railway centre attracting workers from the entire country. When it went into decline, people began moving to the coastal cities to seek work. See Harris and Hay, ‘New Plans for Housing in Urban Kenya, 1939–63’; P. Grendon, G. Miescher, L. Rizzo and T. Smith, Usako: Photographs Beyond Ruins: The Old Location Albums 1929s–1960s (Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2015).

place of origin: ‘I like it when I go there [the rural area], but one month or so is enough. But I take care of them. Like the day before I sent them fish. Some packets of fish to the North’. She was of multi-ethnic decent and had access to two houses in different rural areas, adding to the complexity of the translocal assemblage to which she belonged. She commented on the possibility they offered her of returning, but no, she wanted to age in Kuisebmond; it appeared as if she found rural life too poor, and she referred to herself in the interview as ‘a town girl’. Regarding the rural area, she said, ‘There is nothing there’. She was engaged in a number of social activities in Kuisebmond; she was active in the church, in a group of elderly people and in a choir. She was also a member of the board of an important local association, linking institutions and organisations to the assemblage that rooted her firmly in Kuisebmond. However, her strong embeddedness in town did not exclude reciprocal exchanges of different kinds with the rural areas. The house where she lived was an important component linking other components to the assemblage. She was the legal owner by inheritance from her mother, and her son and his family were living there with her and her husband. In contrast to many others in Kuisebmond, she had not reconstructed her house and the two-bedroom house was original.70 However, she was now planning to take up some of the potential construction possibilities. A pile of concrete bricks stood behind the house in anticipation of the construction of an indoor bathroom, if she could get rid of the tenants living in her backyard. Regarding her difficulties in that respect, she stated, ‘This is a family house’. The concept of ‘family house’ appeared in many interviews with people living in these types of houses. This implied that everyone in the extended family, the rural or the urban parts, had a claim to that house. She laughed when she said, ‘I can’t say what I want here’. But she added more seriously, ‘They [the residents] are all underneath me, but I feel it is their house, it is all united, it is our house’. Ownership of the house obviously strengthened her position as head of family. The housing itself contributed strongly to potential multiple uses in the translocality of the assemblage; a number of different individuals from different places in Namibia had, at least in theory, access to her house and the possibilities of town life that this access afforded, such as job opportunities and

70 Angela’s house was a NE 51/6 house; for a drawing, see Miescher, ‘The NE 51 Series Frontier’, p. 577.
Angela’s house and two backyard shacks on her premises housed a considerable number of immediate or more remote relatives. At the time of the interview, three teenagers and two younger children lived with her, all of whom were sons and daughters of relatives. This was not an unusual situation. Many of the elderly in the former ‘location’ houses had several relatives living with them, in their houses or in backyard shacks. Grandchildren staying in Kuisebmond for schooling purposes were an important group. While Angela had many personal motives for ageing in Kuisebmond, these were not sufficient reasons to explain why she stayed. The family commitments attached to her house linked various more or less distant places and claims, forming a distributed agency in a translocal assemblage. The potential uses that the house added to the assemblage would be a considerable loss for the whole family if they no longer existed. Her house and the vested interests of many other family members did not allow her to return to her original home without securing the future of the family house. The construction of the bathroom shaped its potential uses as a family house and thus was contested by others. This responsibility, together with the embedded opportunities for a rich, urban life situation, made migration an improbable option for Angela. Thus, migration would be unlikely to emerge from this translocal assemblage.

The translocal assemblage of the younger elderly was quite different and to some extent directly the opposite. Most of these older adults stated in interviews that they planned to return to their places of origin after retirement; thus migration emerged from this assemblage. Unlike the older elderly, many had arrived after Walvis Bay was incorporated into Namibia in 1994. The length of residence in Walvis Bay was quite short for some of them, so the time factor was a much weaker anchor in the assemblage. Many had a spouse living in the rural home area, where they also often had cattle and a house, further reducing the attraction of the urban area and its agency in their lives. This was the case for Gabriel (55). As did most of the younger elderly in the study, Gabriel lived in a backyard shack constructed of whatever building materials were available: corrugated iron sheets, wooden planks, sticks, cement blocks or bricks, fabric and the like. His shack was constructed on private premises owned by his cousin. Gabriel had lived in Kuisebmond for 11 years, and, like many other interviewees, he had resided in other urban areas before arriving in Walvis Bay, altering the composition of his translocal assemblage over time. He had also rented from different landlords in Kuisebmond before his cousin allowed him to stay, quite recently – nine months before the interview. These rental agreements provided no security, not even for a relative. Interviews showed that a resident in a shack could be asked to leave at any time with short notice. The monthly rent for the place where the shack was constructed was frequently high compared to wages, about 30 to 50 per cent. With often many shacks on a single plot, crowding in the yards created a fire hazard that put the residents’ lives at risk. The shacks were hot in summer and very cold in winter. Many shack-dwellers only had access to the toilet in the landlord’s house during daytime.

All these material and spatial components made the town a weak constituent of this translocal assemblage. Extremely bad housing situations did not bond these older adults to Kuisebmond, and the rural home thus seemed to offer a much better housing option in later life. Gabriel was waiting for his retirement although he still had ahead of him several years of working in insecure and poorly remunerated jobs. At the time of the interview he was unemployed and was generating some income from the sale of sweets from his shack. He said, ‘For me myself I just want my years to come so that I can go home [to the north] to stay with my wife and children there’. Gabriel also looked forward to retirement so that he could avoid having to pay someone to tend his eight cows. Apart from the many urban adversities that created a highly unbalanced translocal assemblage, links to the rural north – such as the commitments Gabriel had to his house and family – contributed to the
emergence of return migration in later life. Gabriel was thus carefully nurturing potentials both for staying and returning at the same time.

In some interviews with this younger group of older adults, the issue of housing arose as a component that could add potential possibilities to any advantage that the urban might have in the translocal assemblage and, thus, alter the likelihood of the emergence of migration. Gabriel commented on the possibility of ownership of a house, ‘If I got a house maybe I would stay here [in Kuisebmond]’. Owning a house was more than an unattainable dream. As a member of the Shackdwellers’ Federation, saving schemes and loans for the construction of a small house were available to him and would perhaps eventually turn him into a home owner. An international organisation was thus a component added to the assemblage that could affect the emergence of migration and increase potential strategies for ageing. Home-ownership through the Federation materialised for two of the interviewees during the study. One of them was Barnabas (64), whose situation was different from that of most other younger elderly interviewees. Formerly a contract labourer who had lived in single men’s quarters in the compound for 19 years, he had gained tenure of a small municipality flat when the compound closed in 1995. He had a stable work situation, regular income and a public employer that would give him a decent pension in addition to the non-contributory pension. His wife lived in Windhoek and his daughter lived in Kuisebmond with her husband. Nevertheless, he had strongly considered returning to the north after retirement, or rather, he negotiated various potentialities in the translocal assemblage towards this aim. He saw himself as belonging to both ‘town and countryside’. A reason for not going back was that he worried about the distances required to reach medical care in the north, where the closest hospital was 20 km from his home. With only one year left before retirement, he could foresee medical needs that might emerge as he aged. Potential medical needs could obviously alter the assemblage in favour of the urban choice and perhaps inhibit migration. However, the plot that he had now received from the Federation had (almost) impeded return migration, and he said that now he would only go back for visits in the future. He also said that the possibility of giving the house to his daughter remained a potential option if he changed his mind. Gabriel’s and Barnabas’ stories show that translocal assemblages are fluid and mobile and have the capacity to modify internal positions when components alter. Access to decent housing, although only a potentiality for Gabriel, was a significant factor hindering or facilitating migration in these cases.

The path of post-colonial development in Walukuba was different from that of Kuisebmond, but likewise had great consequences for the people who had migrated there for work. Older adults today remember the effects of economic mismanagement during the Amin and Obote period of 1975–85. Jinja was an industrial hub of considerable size at the time, when economic disorder developed after the 1972 expulsion of Asians from the town.71 In 1986, which Reid terms ‘Year Zero’, Uganda faced a political turn when Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM) took power.72 Structural adjustment programmes required by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) dominated economic restorative measures from Year Zero onwards. While these programmes, including deregulation, privatisation and budget cuts, restored parts of the economy, they led to gains that were unevenly distributed. Reid notes that ‘most people remained “poor” by any normal definition’.73 These events pushed urban areas into decades of economic decline, industrial

73 Ibid., pp. 275–83.
closures and job-shedding, rendering most Walukuba tenants reliant on urban agriculture and informal business activities.\textsuperscript{74} Many retrenched workers were given retrenchment packages as compensation for the loss of employment. However, many others never received these packages, which left them in a state of ‘waiting’. Many workers who had come from distant places moved away, with the consequence that the vast majority of older adults remaining today originate from nearby eastern and central districts of Uganda. For those older adults in the study who had lived through these economic adversities in Walukuba African Housing Estate, everyday life became severely circumscribed and disrupted. The council ceased maintenance of estate houses and infrastructure.\textsuperscript{75} Nevertheless, the individuals in the study who endured all these difficulties had lived in their current houses for an average of 25 years and in Jinja for 38.\textsuperscript{76} Access to land, both urban and rural, has been recognised as an important means of survival for the urban poor in Uganda in times of economic distress.\textsuperscript{77}

For those holding tenancy rights in Walukuba, houses assumed new importance, and the urban area gained greater potential attraction because income could be earned by letting out kitchens and bathrooms. This could be of particular importance to the younger cohort of older Ugandans who do not yet qualify for the universal non-contributory pension. This trend toward greater lettings became even more pronounced after 2000, when, in line with the structural adjustment programme, the privatisation of municipal housing stock began. Original tenants who have finished paying off the subsidised plot purchase price are now urban land-owners and can alter or replace the original houses.

These fundamental changes in the relationship between people and urban plots generated emergent potentialities with implications for Walukuba’s importance as an anchorage point in older adults’ wider translocal assemblages. Although far from discrete, two broader forms of translocal assemblages can be discerned: one in which the potential to optimise urban and rural components (not least land) is evident, and one in which the potential to optimise urban and/or rural components is less evident. In either case, the relationship with the rural emerges as ambiguous, with the return to the village a highly uncertain outcome.

Frances (65) had lived in his house since 1985. This coincided with the start of his work as a teacher in Year Zero to ‘survive’ retrenchment from his engineering job at a textile factory. Teachers were then given staff housing in the estate, and today he also possesses a very rare assemblage component, a state pension. The translocal assemblage in which he was positioned has not only afforded resilience to economic challenges but also enabled him to actualise emergent potentialities. The purchase of the house, now worth many times the subsidised purchase price, opened up the potential for developing his urban house-plot to generate income. At the time of the study, privatisation was materially manifested by Frances’s substantial, new, partly built house on his double plot, which entirely cocooned his original estate house, which he planned to demolish (see Figure 3). The new house was expected to facilitate more comfortable multi-generational living than the congested conditions he currently shared with his wife, his eldest son and two grandchildren; a living arrangement approximating the norm on the estate. Behind his house, four cows are zero-grazed for milk for sale. This business is an emergent property of the assemblage generated by components such as a large customer base, a son who manages the zero-grazing, a


\textsuperscript{76} Residents aged 60 and over represent 3.3 per cent of the estate population, which compares to 3.7 per cent for the total Uganda population (National Voters Register 2015/16; Village Older Persons Council Voters’ Register 2015/16; UBOS, The National Population and Housing Census 2014, p. 14).

\textsuperscript{77} Amis, ‘Urban Poverty in East Africa’.
village-based brother who is a ‘vet doctor’ and a daughter who bought him the first cow following his retirement from 27 years of teaching.

Contemplating his plot development, Frances commented, ‘Yes, we stay well’. ‘Stay’, however, did not represent either immobility or a notion of place restricted to Walukuba. Rather, his plot was included in a translocal assemblage of other places between which he and others circulated. His home village in Soroti District where he has built housing, and land and further houses in Busia District purchased with an older brother who is ‘family land keeper’ constitute, alongside his Walukuba plot, the triple anchorage sites in this expansive assemblage. The successful careers of his sons, facilitated by Frances’ investments in their higher education, add further sites and resources to the assemblage: Kampala, Soroti Town and, not least, Gatwick, outside London, where his eldest son works as an aeroplane engineer. These translocal relations are reproduced through exchanges of reciprocity: Frances and his wife care for grandchildren while his children lend financial support. The assemblage is further strengthened by his wife’s involvement in neighbourhood-based rotating savings groups. Emergent from the economic instability of Year Zero, such groups represent a very important form of vernacular social institution in Walukuba (and beyond).

This sketch of Frances’s translocal assemblage suggests how notions of ‘return’, ‘migration’ and even ‘visit’ lose contextual grip. Indeed, Frances became confused upon being asked, ‘How often do you visit the village?’, replying, ‘But there is no timetable for going to chalo (village)! I live in the town but it is almost as if we are together’. However, this is not to suggest rural–urban similarity or equivalence.78 ‘Visit’ retained considerable significance regarding cultural practices believed to be exclusive to chalo, such as burials. This evoked an image of a future to Frances, who said, ‘My place is there although I live here […] But eventually, this is the town, and we shall end up where we are born’. The

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78 Greiner, ‘Patterns of Translocality’, p. 146.

**Figure 3.** A development of an estate housing unit in Walukuba. (Photo: Andrew Byerley)
assemblage seems to have anchored Frances in the urban area, where a potential return to the village may happen – though not before – as the last voyage, to the burial site. Yet, for older adults such as Frances, *chalo* was portrayed as arcadia. As he said, ‘When I sit in the village a brother comes past carrying cassava, and I say “you bring one here and we eat”, which cannot happen in town’. Among those elders in less expansive assemblages, however, contrary narratives of town and *chalo* dominated, a variation on a common theme being, ‘In town a good Samaritan can bring you soap if you need. Assistance in the village is not there, everybody cries, so who will give you?’ Such narratives, as well as near consensus at focus-group meetings that ‘town’ was the best place to age, suggest different dynamics in the translocal assemblages as regards potentialities thought to be afforded by rural sites. However, neither type of assemblage generates a return – a circular migration pattern – but instead engenders ambiguous relations to the village.

For Christopher (83), rural–urban dissonance appears as ‘chronic waiting’, a state that may exist in the aftermath of political or economic turmoil, in which people can wait year after year for basic goods, or even a future. Christopher was among thousands laid off in the decade following Year Zero who failed to receive retirement gratuities. He still waits for 20 million Uganda shillings, a gratuity from Steel Corporation, where he worked for 40 years. This trauma has an impact on translocality: a neighbour in a similar situation commented, ‘If we could get the money from those companies, we would also hope to go back home […] You cannot go home without a start [without money]. So we are waiting’. Christopher would rather be in *chalo*; in fact, he thinks he should be there as he is the family land-keeper, but he refuses to leave without his gratuity. Nonetheless, like the vast majority of elderly Walukuba residents, Christopher has maintained translocal relations with *chalo*, making twice-yearly visits to participate in clan functions, especially concerning land issues. Here we see how pressures facing older adults who decide to ‘wait’ prevent conforming with socio-spatially ascribed, age-based cultural obligations and exclusion from ‘objects of desire’. As Christopher’s case shows, the actualisation of the embedded potentialities in his translocal assemblage, rural and urban, remained as aspirations due to his situation of waiting. He cannot return to the village, and his house-plot, where he has lived since 1963, is undeveloped, with only the kitchen and bathroom of the house complete, accommodating an unemployed daughter, six grandchildren, himself and his wife.

For Christopher, ‘desired objects’ are a version of Frances’ translocal assemblage, including a ‘big house’ in *chalo* and a poultry business and rental blocks for his wife to manage on his Walukuba plot. The last-mentioned aspect illustrates the productive agency of Christopher’s waiting. His capacity *not* to act upon the potentiality of a move back to *chalo*, enabled largely by ownership of his urban house, makes new assemblage components (for example, urban rentals) potentially available. This has important potential implications for the spatiality of urban ageing, where on-plot rentals are becoming a panacea for attaining security at an older age. For most of the older residents this remained only a potentiality, but in the changing materiality of Walukuba, for some of them this became an actualised potentiality. Florence (65), a widow and retired midwife who did receive her gratuity, has built three rentals in her yard which she soon will upgrade, changing the wooden structures to ‘permanent’ standard (brick), thereby allowing her to charge twice the rent. Florence, who also operates a beer-brewing business from her house-plot, represents the female plotowners: many are divorced or widowed from former industrial or council workers and lack access to rural land but now own houses in Walukuba. As a result, many seemed not to want to return to the village. This is linked to the perception commonly expressed among female

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80 Ibid., p. 956.
informants in the study that the lack of ‘any development in the villages’ made income-generating projects there unviable. Indeed, while Frances and others in expansive assemblages praised the cashless reciprocity of chalo, older women did not praise this quality for they needed to sell mats, chickens, banana leaves, charcoal or alcohol to survive, activities which made the house in town and/or an urban agriculture plot into vital production spaces. Thus, rentals represent an emergent potential that transforms how house-plots are imagined and used following privatisation in the urban area. In a context where rentals are seen as a ‘pension’, this is likely to have consequences for the performance of translocal assemblages and the importance of an urban anchorage in later life.

These cases challenge the image of return migration by showing how managing housing and house-plots can make urban life more attractive. Thus, in expansive translocal assemblages, ideas of ‘return’ and ‘migration’ emerge as unpersuasive, or a supposedly desired ‘return’ is less evident or does not emerge at all. Meanwhile, in assemblages characterised by ‘waiting’, ‘return’ is desired but un navigable. The cases of Christopher and Frances show – from two different angles – that investments made to facilitate a return might promote the opposite situation, encouraging the elderly person to remain in town in later life. Florence had taken a more or less clear decision not to go back to the village.

**Translocal Optimisation**

The case studies analysed here reveal important aspects of how, and with what consequences, socio-economic and political processes articulate with the historically accumulated places which older adults navigate when making choices about a rural or urban future. A significant insight from this analysis is the need to acknowledge the difficulty involved in ‘sorting’, or separating out, the older adults who do not remain in urban areas from those who do. Sorting mechanisms defy capture, due to the mutability of the translocal assemblages in which the ‘urban’ and urban housing potentialities are imagined and practised vis-à-vis other significant sites. Both case studies reveal complexity, including shared traits as well as differences, both within and across cases.

Furthermore, ‘the rural’ may defy a common definition. All participants in the study indicated a place from which they originated, to which they did or did not consider returning. ‘The village’ – a concept frequently used in migration studies to indicate the place to which one may return – appeared clearly in the Ugandan case, as the word chalo. The village concept is more problematic in the Namibian case because of the traditional pattern of dispersed homesteads and the history of forced removals to apartheid towns, locations and reserves. Village names were indicated as the place of origin by some of the participants from the North; this corresponded to the local concept of village [omukunda]. However, the majority originating from the North indicated Ondangwa (constituency) as their place of origin – larger than a village, it is a central town created by the South African administration of the North and includes a surrounding rural area of substantial geographical size. It is a major place of origin for migrants in Namibia. In the southern region of the country, a ‘village’ is sometimes a population centre in an apartheid reserve. Pre-apartheid traditional villages – if they existed – may have been lost when people were coerced to move. Many participants originating from the southern region indicated Usakos as their place of origin; under apartheid it would have been a ‘white town’ with a ‘black location’. These older

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82 Tvedten, “‘A town is just a town’”, p. 406.
83 Greiner, ‘Patterns of Translocality’, p. 139.
interviewees may well have experienced migration to Usakos from a rural place to which they no longer had access because under apartheid it was redefined as ‘white’. These factors unsettle the concept of ‘village’ in this context. The places to which a person may return appear in many shapes and sizes within a broad range of circumstances.

The case studies lend empirical support to a recent critique suggesting that long-standing research assumptions have constrained possible ways of understanding the imaginaries, subjectivities and spatial practices of urban Africans. Bank argues that scholarly ‘obsession’ with mobility and ‘the migrant’ has meant that urban place-making practices tend to be understood either as the displaced rurality of localists ‘hankering for home’, or homeless cosmopolitans searching for a ‘global’ belonging. Bank calls instead for a deeper appreciation of the fact that place-making can be generative of ‘all sorts of localism’ which it is possible to understand as simply a wish to live in the town or city where one happens to be.84 The case studies also show that this anchored place-making can be combined with translocalism, suggesting the existence of relations of greater complexity without necessarily implying a return to a rural home.85 These study results propose that for older adults in both cases, urban housing rarely represented a transitory form of shelter or a singular or static imaginary. Nor was it understood – as the cross-case relevance of the term ‘family house’ seems to indicate – in terms of ‘possessive individualism’.86 Rather, housing is continually shaped and reshaped by ‘all sorts of localism’ and distributed agency and, thus, constitutes a vital infrastructure receptive to and generative of emergent potentialities. Some older adults in this study do approximate the ‘localist’ category in terms of seemingly hankering for home, particularly younger older Kuisebmond backyard-shack tenants and house-owning older, retrenched industrial workers occupying a situation of ‘waithood’ in Walukuba. However, emergent potentialities, such as the ownership of housing provided by the Shackdwellers’ Federation for the former case, and privatisation of formerly rental houses for the latter, give evidence of the volatility of both economic and social meanings of older adults’ urban housing and of its relative significance compared to other assemblage sites.

There are important situations where difference across cases is evident. While rentals are of importance to most older house-owners across cases, the possibility of informal economic activities taking place in the house-plot seems to have a more prominent place in Walukuba than in Kuisebmond, where formal employment for wages was dominant among the younger older adults living in shacks. This might be due to the relative economic prosperity of Walvis Bay and the associated employment possibilities, compared to Jinja. The presence of non-contributory pensions may have led to only a few retired adults in the study in Kuisebmond being devoted to petty trade and similar activities at home, which was not unheard of. Other research has indicated housing ownership as largely male-dominated due to traditional laws restricting women’s possibility to own land.87 The possibility of women owning land appeared in the Walukuba case, and it contributed to the women’s favourable assessment of the urban environment as an attractive place to age. In other respects, such as in terms of strategies for developing housing, gender differences in this study were very small. Women were house-owners and were actively involved in various businesses, such as the provision of rental housing, common to both Walukuba and Kuisebmond females, and in informal activities among older women in Walukuba – both house-owners and those married to house-owners.

If a significant mechanism can be identified that has sorted remaining from departed older adults in Kuisebmond and Walukuba over the past two decades, it is the

84 Bank, Home Spaces, Street Styles, pp. 15–16.
transference of formerly rental housing to individual ownership. This process, which was completed in Kuisebmond in the second half of the 1990s but was still being rolled-out in Walukuba at the time of the fieldwork, differs however between the cases in terms of timing and place specificities. Two aspects surface as particularly important. The first concerns timing, which contributed to the relatively advantageous position of older adults who were council house tenants at the time of privatisation, which involved subsidised purchase schemes. Echoing recent South African research, many older adults in both cases originally moved to town when council-built rental housing became more easily accessible. For the Kuisebmond case, those arriving later would have been much more likely to be accommodated in single-sex hostels or in backyard shacks. This seems to explain in part why many younger rather than older adults rent backyard shacks in Kuisebmond today. This has an impact on how housing and ageing will develop together in the future. A question is how older adults who lack access to decent urban housing will fare. Will moving to rural areas be the only alternative at retirement? Another significant issue is whether people born in urban areas will move to rural areas when they age if decent accommodation is lacking. It also puts the focus on the issue of how generational relations in family houses will develop, since the ownership of Kuisebmond’s former ‘location’ housing is on the verge of a generational shift. The ownership of private property may conflict with ‘possessive collectivism’ in which individual rights in fact are communal relationships and claims. This article highlights how, in both cases, ownership of house-plots has emergent potentialities for stable income from rentals. When combined with factors such as the widespread perception among older adults – in both cases – that health care and schools for grandchildren are superior to those in rural areas, this factor can further strengthen the attractiveness of ageing in the urban area. And this can alter the distribution of agency in translocal assemblages, as well as contribute to a new vision of ageing, no longer equated with rurality.

Conclusion

This study unsettles constructs such as ‘African urban migrant’ and ‘circular migration’, which have tended to keep individuals, analytically, in a perpetual state of migration into later life. We argue that assemblage theory makes it possible to gain a more complex understanding of why migration does or does not occur, or, as cases such as that of Frances suggest, to question if ‘migration’ is even a helpful term. An assemblage always tends to answer to the contingencies of its movements, which endow fragility and volatility to its components. From this perspective migration cannot be seen to follow linear or circular trajectories. No migration trajectory is based on the decision of a single actor, the potential migrant. Migration is thus always a possibility or a threat – a negotiated potentiality of the totality of components in which it is embedded – constituting a distributed agency in the translocal assemblage, sometimes not involving a human decision at all. Accordingly, while a growing number of older adults seem to be anchored in the urban setting, perhaps permanently, ‘return’ always remains potential in assemblages where possibilities are born, where doors are kept open and where new paths are paved in order to maximise the resources for moving or staying. We call these processes translocal optimisation.

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CATHARINA NORD
Professor, Department of Spatial Planning, Blekinge Institute of Technology, SE-371 79 Karlskrona, Sweden. E-mail: catharina.nord@bth.se

ANDREW BYERLEY
Senior lecturer, Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden. E-mail: andrew.byerley@humangeo.su.se