Towards a psychoanalytic migration studies: A son, a brother, a father, an American, and his house in a Cameroonian village

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Abstract

Around the world, migrants are building houses in their countries-of-origin. For the women and men who create them, these houses are unambiguously significant. Yet, in academic migration studies, they are often seen as peripheral—interesting rather than important. This article follows recent work that aims to show why these houses really do matter. These houses are where migrants can seek to process the trauma of the disconnection that is inherent in migration and are how they repress the anxieties that arise from transnationalism. Migrants' emotions are externalised onto the house. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Cameroon between 2013 and 2018, this article develops a case study about one transnational migrant, his family, and his house. It uses the example to develop two arguments: first that these houses sit within transnational networks, but the networks are subject-centred so a theory of the subject is needed to analyse them. Secondly, that human subjects make a deal when they exchange infantile egocentrism for collective inter-subjectivity, which is similar to the deal made between transnational migrants and their ancestral home when they receive permission to leave in exchange for continuing to connect—a link that is materialised in the house. Both these arguments combine to support an underlying claim that migration studies in general, and studies of migrant housing in particular would benefit from building further on existing work that draws on psychoanalytical approaches.

Keywords: transnationalism, migrant houses, remittance houses, name-of-the-father, psychoanalysis, cameroon

Ìyá ni wúrà, bàbá ni jígí (Mother is gold, father is a mirror)—Yoruba Proverb

1. Introduction

Clement[1] pulled the pick-up to a halt and leant forward on the dashboard, his head on the backs of his wrists. 'Sometimes I ask myself why I do it. What is it for?' The 'it' to which he referred was a house. The house is being built in Ambeh, in rural Cameroon and Clement, an IT consultant, lives on the East Coast of the USA. He has gone freelance so that he can travel to Cameroon at least twice a year to supervise construction. He was born in Cameroon, but not in Ambeh, indeed he has never lived there. It is his ancestral home. So, the 'why' he asks seems reasonable: he has devoted time, money, and energy to building a house on the other side of the world that he will use only occasionally. In his own words, it is a crazy thing to do, but he does it anyway.

Clement is not short of convincing answers to his own question. He is building this house because his father told him to. He is building this house because some of his brothers have already built in the village. He is building this house for his American kids so that they can feel at home in Cameroon. He is building this house for himself. This is where he can relax on vacation and can entertain friends during ceremonies. He specifically wants to have it ready for a key anniversary of his father's death. This is where he wants to be buried when the time comes. He is building this house to modernise the village and support local craftsmen. All of these conscious answers seem entirely plausible but still he asks himself 'why'? His answers to his own question are insufficient, there is, he feels, something else niggling away that needs explanation. Alongside the conscious list of rational explanations that Clement can provide, lies the unasked-for-world of the unconscious.

Research on international migrants building houses in their country of origin is a field full of vim riding on the back of the even more vigorous building work going on around the world (Boccagni 2020). From Macedonia to Mexico to Madagascar and Manila (Lopez 2010; Faier 2013; Freeman 2013; Lozanovska 2019) migrant's houses speak difference and sameness across the whole globe: pillars, porticos, and invocations of relationships wherever you look, yet every place has its own iteration of the narrative.

Migration studies are increasingly open to discussions of emotions, traumas, and fantasies as useful ways to enrich the analysis of key concepts such as belonging (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015). A sense of belonging is, after all, as much about 'feeling' as it is about 'citizenship'. Baldassar illustrated what can be revealed by addressing emotions when she revisited interview transcripts in order to reflect on the guilt migrant children articulate when talking about their obligations to care for left-behind elderly parents. But such discussions rarely engage with the psychoanalytic tradition. When they do, they are generally published by psychoanalytical scholars who are interested in migration (Akhtar 1995; Beltsiou 2016; Bolognani 2016; Csillag 2017; Sperry and Mull 2021), rather than migration studies specialists who are interested in psychoanalysis (cf. Faier 2013; Lozanovska 2019; Yang 2018, 2019). This article argues that this is a missed opportunity. To paraphrase Kingsbury and Pile (2014: 5), psychoanalysis does not just offer migration studies a model of the personal psyche, it offers the field a way to understand the unconscious on the outside, for example, in the migrant's houses that are out there in the world. Feelings can be externalised onto houses and still retain their authenticity and weightiness. Following Lozanovska (2019), the article argues that the houses built by migrants in their

countries of origin are key sites for the psyche to process the human subject's traumatic experiences of separation.

This article weaves two migrations together. First, it tells the story of a journey I took with Clement across Cameroon to the village. This took us to the house itself—an accumulation of materials, design choices, labour, norms, and ideas in the ancestral home. This story argues that Clement's global network moves as he moves, bringing relationships to life as he goes. Transnational networks are embodied and mutable; they are subject-centred not place-centred. Understanding such networks, therefore, requires us to theorise the human subject. The house in the ancestral village is not the network centre, Clement is—but his feelings are externalised onto the house. Secondly, there is a story of an earlier journey in the opposite direction. Over three generations, Clement's family has moved from Ambeh across the world, leaving (but sometimes also not leaving) the ancestral village behind. This story argues for the significance of understanding intergenerational family dynamics and their legacies on the formation of the adult subject. Most human subjects, it is claimed, make a deal when they exchange infantile egocentrism for collective inter-subjectivity, which is similar to the deal made between transnational migrants and their ancestral home. The license to leave (Freeman 2013) is granted in exchange for respecting the taboo against total disconnection. Again, the house itself is not a mere adjunct to this negotiation, but is integral to it.

Starting from Clement's house and the Lacanian concept of *Name-of-the-Father*, this article claims that there is an affinity between the psychoanalytical story of subject formation and the migration studies story of transnationalism. This is not to suggest synonymy between the two, but to use this proposition to explore what these stories share and how they interconnect. The houses built by migrants speak invitingly, but awkwardly, to a reading of transnationalism that relates ideas of the split personality to split lives and split communities.[2]

The article is based on fieldwork in Cameroon in 2013, 2015, and 2018 and is part of a wider project looking at more than 20 house-building projects (Page 2019; Page and Sunjo 2018). It is the story of just one house, one man, his father, his brothers, and his kids. Having worked in Cameroon for few decades, I argue that it is a dramatic example of a common Cameroonian familial narrative of upward social mobility. Migration is at the centre of these stories—first within Cameroon and then overseas. The man around whom the story hangs also has a mother, a wife, and sisters. The silence of women in this account is not an unreflective endorsement of the idea of man as the producer of the house with woman trailing in his wake ready to consume these domestic buildings. Rather, the focus on men here is a function of the ethnographic trail I was sent on by my interlocutors. However, relaxed the dynamic between the researcher and the researched, it is inevitable that an account like this one, which relies extensively on the account of a single interlocutor gathered over an intense but relatively short period of research, will reflect that participant's conscious performance of their self and so will be partial. To address this, all opportunities were taken to triangulate Clement's account either online or by talking to other people I met during the time I spent with his family. Yet, to some extent, the trust Clement placed in me when inviting me into his life for few weeks knowing that I would write about our time together is returned here in terms of the trust I place in the authenticity of the account he gives. After this introduction, there are three sections: a

review of the literature on migrants building houses in their country of origin; an ethnographic account of a specific house-building project in Cameroon; and a reading of that house-building project using a framework that leads back to the core argument that psychoanalytic concepts have much to offer migration studies.

2. Thinking about 'the migrant house'

Academic interest in migrants who build houses in their country-of-origin is not new. Odongo and Lea (1977) reported that *intra-national* rural-to-urban migrants in Kampala, Uganda were remitting money to their villages to pay for houses. New versions of this story can still be found today. For example, Chétima's (2019) work on house building by urban-based elites in rural northern Cameroon focuses both on how they transform architecture and also on the feelings of abandonment among villagers who gaze at the new domestic structures.

Nor is the story of *international* migrants building houses in their country-of-origin that new either. Work in Sylhet (Gardner 1992) argued that the rural construction boom funded by remittances from Britain and the Gulf did not translate into local economic growth. Instead, these homes were empty monuments to departed migrants. At the same time, Diko and Tipple (1992) traced the process and costs of housing development in urban Ghana funded by migrants in London[3] and Mansour Tall (1994) provided a similar analysis for Senegalese migrants in France. Their conclusions were more positive than those emerging from Sylhet and raised the idea of developing policies to steer the migrant house-building process to reduce housing problems in West Africa. This set up an on-going normative debate about the local impacts of migrant-built housing.

Over the last decade, work on this topic has proliferated. Much of the analysis rests on the distinctions between the economic utility of these houses (a way of saving or making money, injecting capital into local economies), the practical utility (places to stay during visits, means of asserting ownership over land), and the social utility (meeting obligations, status symbols) of these houses. Ethnography suggests that from the builder's perspective, explanations are rarely so clear cut (Sinatti 2009; Dalakoglou 2010; Melly 2010; Erdal 2012). For example, Smith and Mazzucato (2009) showed how return migrants use their homes not only as somewhere to live (practical) but also as business premises (economic) and as potential sites for burial (social).

Many economic studies see migrant houses as a form of remittance (Karley 2012; Ajefu 2018). They are seen as low-risk investments and quasi-productive assets (Kiiru 2010; Jena 2018; Siwale 2018). Using data from 1970 to 2008, Kagochi and Kiambigi (2012: 262) identify 'the positive role remittances from abroad play in enhancing housing construction demand in Kenya'. Occasionally, there are claims that migrants are investing for the purpose of generating rental incomes (Kuuire et al. 2016: 450), but most research finds that when their owners are overseas, these homes are occupied by family members on preferential terms (Obeng-Odoom 2010). Still, Osili's (2004) authoritative quantitative analysis of migrant housing investments in Nigeria concluded that securing community membership rights and signaling individual success are more convincing explanations than seeking to help families directly.

Other researchers claim that the economic analyses fail to capture all the social nuances of house-building (Aguilar 2009; Carling 2008). Presence and absence are often key themes: Dalakoglou (2010) talks of houses as a proxy presence for migrants, while in contrast Freeman (2013) finds newly built but abandoned migrant houses are a deliberate flaunting of absence. Using the example of Kabyle (Algeria), Loeckx (1998: 98) argues that 'the entire village lives in a field of tension between staying and leaving'. Migrant houses can be private places to vacation or retire (Erdal 2012) or a means of escaping from tense familial relationships (Pauli 2008). Though the emotional obligations to accommodate family members are widely identified (Leinaweaver 2009; Faier 2013), international migrants are not always altruistic participants in local property markets (McGregor 2014). There is plenty of evidence to suggest that houses are used as a sign of success (Ndjio 2009), but there is a risk here of reducing the analysis to over-determined accounts of social positioning. Furthermore, international migrants have no monopoly over using houses to demarcate social boundaries (Mercer 2014; Page and Sunjo 2018).

Research on migrant housing has also contributed to conceptualising transnationalism. In some cases, it has asserted the significance of the country-of-origin nodes of a transnational network in the production of meanings of home (Taylor 2013). In others (Kuuire et al. 2016), it shows how engagement with housing markets in the country-of-residence signals successful integration. Elsewhere there has been a careful focus on the materiality of these transnational homes, which are read as expressions of an individual's alignments to multiple places (Boccagni 2014).

Boccagni and Pérez Murcia (2021) argue convincingly that there is a need to move beyond compiling case studies of these 'remittance houses' towards developing a systematic analysis that can reveal why researching these buildings is meaningful. They propose a framework of four 'fields of interaction' between migrants and their local counterparts: time (then/now), space (here/there), status/taste (them/us), and knowledge (exterior/interior), which is extremely useful—particularly for comparative work. This article shares their ambition to demonstrate the conceptual value of researching migrant houses, but queries the way they conceptualise the human subject at its centre—in particular by building on the psychoanalytical idea of the subject as 'split'.

Boccagni and Pérez Murcia's framework rests on and wrestles with the distinction between an individual human and the social groups of which they are part (the intrapsychic/interpersonal distinction). But it still takes for granted the idea that the scale of the human subject is the human body. It treats the social world of migrant houses as an agglomeration of separate but related human subjects whose edges are coincident with the edges of their bodies. Both 'migrant' and 'stayer' are imagined as an individual person in their body. In contrast, psychoanalysis sees the elision of the body and the subject as an illusion because it is claimed that a general characteristic of subjectivity is that the subject is experienced as split: it is always divided internally by contradictions (e.g. the contradiction between recognition and denial of the limits of self-knowledge). It is also divided externally: part of the self is outside the body; the subject is alienated from their self. That is to say that the subject cannot ever know themselves completely because of the presence of the unconscious. Lacan invented the term extimacy to capture the sense that there is something alien (from outside) that inhabits the innermost parts of the subject—something that is both a stranger to the self and at the heart of the self.

So for example, seen from this perspective, Clement will never be able to fully answer his own question about his desire to build his house. Internally, there is a contradiction between his recognition that this question cannot be answered ('I know it's crazy' [alien]) and a denial of the claim that the question cannot be answered expressed in the determination to continue with the project ('but I do it anyway'). The craziness of the project speaks also to the externally split subject: the unconscious drives behind the house-building project are not only part of Clement's interior psychic world but are also part of an intersubjective world too (the unconscious is outside). These houses are elucidating because (among other things) they are hard-working metaphors that substitute for the unconscious. His desire to build the house is always a desire for something else, its meaning is therefore always perpetually deferred. In this sense, the idea of split subject captures the problem of what is inside and what is outside. Is Clement (a second-generation emigrant who returns whenever he can) inside or outside Ambeh? His house is visibly the house of an outsider, yet it (and therefore he) is permanently present inside the village. Just because somebody's body is no longer in the village, have they migrated? Alternatively, is it that the village has moved? Is the centre of this village now outside the geographical village and somewhere within its diaspora? The trauma the house represses is both Clement's own and the village's. In this sense, the article tries to move beyond a framework that rests on a distinction between those who stay and those who go imagined as coherent subjects.

Others have already gone some way down this path. Faier's (2013: 383) rich discussion of the houses built in Manila by Filipina women living in rural Japan (where they are married to Japanese men) is concerned with questions of how affect, desire, dreams, and the project of 'crafting a virtuous sense of the self' are played out in the construction of these transnational homes. More extensively, Lozanovska's (2019) monograph on migrant homes in Melbourne and Zavoj (Macedonia) is built on psychoanalytical foundations[4] 'The house' she says 'becomes a significant object for the migrant because it mediates the imaginary and unconscious relations of the human subject' (p. 35). It is on these rare excursions into the register of the unconscious in relation to migrant houses that this article now builds.

3. Migrating backwards and forwards: a case study from Cameroon

The stories start in the small city of Buea, high on the slopes of Mount Cameroon, with views of the Atlantic Ocean far below. We are on a veranda in front of a bungalow in the family compound of Pa Daniel, who had died two years earlier. I am 'interviewing' Clement, one of his sons, who had just arrived from the USA. This is the first time I have met him in person, though we have corresponded a little via email. We had been introduced by another Cameroonian who had read my earlier research and had suggested that Clement would have interesting things to say for my current project. This house was where Clement grew up. We started chatting at breakfast, beers appeared in the afternoon, and I rolled down the hill to my own place at night. In between I listened as my host entertained the many friends who chatted (as if for my convenience) about his life in the

USA and his role in Cameroonian diaspora organisations, which had taken him right to the White House. I sat back and watched what happens when a transnational migrant touches down in Cameroon.

For his part, Clement insisted that, after an intense period of work in the USA, he was not leaving the veranda for at least a day. He joked that his only exercise was lifting a bottle to his lips. Clement is a big man (in a literal sense) and even when sunk down in an armchair his latent energy was obvious. When he needed someone to do something for him he sprang up ready to bellow out instructions. He had travelled ahead of his mother, wife, son, and daughter, but a team of women had appeared to cook for him and his guests. By the time the evening meal came, there was a crowd of visitors and a full range of Cameroonian dishes ready. Though, as Clement told me, there was nothing that he could not get in the USA. All I had to try and do was to disappear into the background. Weeks later Clement told me he had never seen anyone do research by drinking other people's beer all day. Our rapport was built on his openness and my understanding of Cameroonian social mores as well as on our shared interests (both in debates about the diaspora's contribution to Cameroonian development and also as parents with children of a similar age). His generosity was a great gift to me.

This compound in Buea had been a key family site for at least four decades, but it was not the ancestral home. In front of the main bungalow is a neat rectangle of grass and an immobile car—a memorial to Pa Daniel, who had been a driver and mechanic. Local government planning officials, anxious to tidy the town before a presidential visit, painted the word 'REMOVE' on it. The family just laughed at this bureaucratic impertinence; they have no intention of obeying. Pa Daniel had educated his whole family on the back of his work with vehicles. His descendants continue to take care of his cars.

Pa Daniel had been born in the village of Ambeh, 300 km inland from Buea in the high Grassfields. As an adult, he never lived in Ambeh, but he had supported development projects there while living on the coast and had built himself a village house. In the 1960s, he was involved in founding the Ambeh Cultural Association—a typical hometown association that provided welfare to Ambeh emigrants and maintained connections with the village (Mercer, Ben, and Martin 2008). Clement continues to be involved in one of the US branches of the same association today.

Clement was born in Cameroon and spent his childhood in Buea. After secondary school, he moved to the USA where he did his university studies and then began work in the health sector. He has four siblings on the East Coast in the USA (who supported him when he first left Africa). He met his wife, who is also from Cameroon, in the USA. Clement and his family are now very well established in the USA. They own a comfortable house in a prosperous suburban area. They travel widely in the USA for vacations enjoying typical US leisure activities with their kids and also to maintain their family and diaspora network. They are actively involved in US politics, campaigning enthusiastically for Barack Obama (indeed Clement's vehicle in Cameroon has an Obama bumper sticker) and they are also engaged with a wide range of Cameroonian diaspora organisations in the USA that are focused on development at home. After many years as an employee, Clement is now sufficiently well networked and financially comfortable to be self-employed, which gives him greater flexibility to follow his transnational interests, though the USA is clearly the base from which he operates for now. Clement was in the last stage

of completing his own house in Cameroon adjacent to his father's in Ambeh, more than 9,000 km from his US home. And it was there that he had agreed to take me.

Three of us left Buea together: Clement, myself, and 'The Impressionist'—another brother whose real name I never learn, who performs a dual role as in-car entertainment and general dogsbody. As we speed north along the tarred road, I learn from Clement about his father's first slow journey in the opposite direction on foot (it is always on foot in these stories) 70 years earlier. Pa Daniel, whom I never met, was born in the 1920s, a few years after this part of Cameroon became a British-administered League of Nations mandate territory. As a child, he was orphaned so he left the village and made for the coast, which was the centre of the colonial economy. Around 1940, he did a driving apprenticeship and then worked for the British administration travelling extensively across Cameroon and Nigeria delivering supplies. Later, he worked on vehicle maintenance. He continued to serve the postcolonial state until retiring in the 1980s. After that, he ran a private car repair service from his compound in Buea until he emigrated to the USA around the Millennium. According to his sons, he was justifiably proud to be a self-made man.

Pa Daniel had two wives and brought up 15 children, many of whom have left Cameroon to pursue their careers. Some (such as Clement) regularly return to Cameroon and others do not. Many of Pa Daniel's children now live in the USA working in a variety of professions. Two more are in Europe. Other children (and grandchildren) are working in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Ivory Coast, and Cameroon. All the sons to whom I have spoken attribute their success to their father's commitment to education, though Pa Daniel had no formal schooling. It is a family story of striking social and spatial mobility: from peasant farmers in a Cameroonian village in the 1920s to globe-trotting professionals in three generations. After his death in USA, Pa Daniel's corpse was returned to Cameroon and he was buried in his house in Ambeh. The open space in front of this house will be the focus for the next stage of his death celebrations. Clement is anxious to get his own village house (which looks down on his father's) finished in time for the event. Clement is also planning to smarten his father's compound so his mother can stay there; and he will repaint the house of another of his brothers too.

Clement inherited his father's commitment to Ambeh. His father often took him there and he allocated specific plots of land to each of his sons. He ordered them to build. He planted eucalyptus trees on the land so that they would have timber for construction. Though there was no village water supply at the time, he laid water pipes to these different plots with specific T-junctions for each son. So far, five of them have built modern structures and the paternal imperative remains strong even after his death. But the plot next to Clement's house is still undeveloped. Clement is unconcerned saying simply his brother 'will build when he is viable'. Those brothers who *have* built now put pressure on those who *have not* using a joking register that questions their masculinity. The humour barely masks a deeper sentiment.

Pa Daniel spoke (according to Clement) of building as a means of binding people together using the Pidgin term *tie ton* (tied to the town). The construction of a village house by a son of the soil reconnects him to his ancestors. Clement is impelled to build not only because it is his duty as a son, but also as an act of fatherly optimism in relation to his own children—knowingly weaving the generations together. Through his new house, he

hopes his own children will feel affection for both Ambeh and Cameroon. Not only will it have satellite TV, but each child will have their own private space where they can retreat if village life gets too much. Clement is continuously, consciously reflective about why he is building this house. When he thinks about it, he is sometimes reduced to laughter at the apparent ludicrousness of the task and yet he also says 'I have no choice'. Finally, though, when explaining why he is building he keeps coming back to one line—'This is the house where I will spend most of my life, because most of your life is after you are dead'. Which is a sort of joke.

On our way to Ambeh, we had one overnight stop in Bamenda, the regional capital. While there Clement received a text from his wife in the USA. There was a problem getting visas from the Cameroonian Embassy in Washington for the kids, who are US citizens. She needed an invitation from Cameroon, validated by a notary and stamped by a policeman. Despite the fact that it is a Sunday a lawyer is found, he writes the letter, which is stamped by the police, then it is digitally photographed, uploaded to the laptop, and e-mailed back to the USA. Of course, this short sentence with its implication of instant global communications hides an afternoon spent rushing around and a whole set of personal relationships that allow you to find a willing lawyer and policeman on a Sunday. Transnationalism is the ability of a human subject to mobilise glocal relationships wherever you are. This archaic physical thing (letter, signature, stamp) is as much a prerequisite of global mobility as an e-ticket on a mobile phone.

On the final leg of the journey, Clement's pickup leaves the main road, climbs over the grass covered mountains, and descends into the valley beyond. Ambeh is densely farmed with Arabica coffee at higher levels and oil palms below. Everywhere maize fields and vegetable crops are dotted among the houses, while the village of several thousand households sprawls over several kilometres—a mixture of mud-brick and cement-block houses, mostly bungalows and a few two-storey homes. There is electricity and (intermittently) piped water, but there are no tarred roads. Ambeh is divided between multiple quarters, each associated with specific families, but not monopolised by them. Clement started to notice changes since his last visit. A tree had been cut down here, a new fence erected there, crops were commented on. Jokes were made about the best-kept compound and who was hard-working in the village. It was months since he had last been here, but he knew the micro-geography inside out. He tells me that this is the only place where he can really rest. He also tells me that since his father has died, the first place he must go to is the house where his father is buried.

And so to Clement's own house. This was not a *nouveaux riches* mansion as often described in the academic literature on migrant's homes. Rather, it was a modest house: block built, with a zinc roof with a shallow pitch on a generous plot. It was distinctly larger and smarter (in terms of materials, style, finish) than the homes of the peasant farmers who lived in the village and the use of interior and exterior space was different too, but there was also overlap: like Clement, the Quarter-head also decorated his parlour with elaborate plaster cornices.

As the days passed and I began to learn more about the challenges of building in the village the achievement of Clement's construction projects became increasingly remarkable. It took significant emotional resources (resilience, patience, a capacity to dream) to bludgeon this building to life. Clement had initially hoped to leave a project manager in

charge while he was in the USA, but a series of disappointments changed his mind and work now only happened when he was on site himself. Getting materials and labour was a logistical challenge: he transported his own materials, which meant his pickup needed a specially reinforced chassis and raised body. He would corral his labourers, feed them, and oversee work on a daily basis. He wanted to support local craftsmen, but he equally despaired of them. So instead, he paid for skilled Ambeh workers living in the big cities of Cameroon to come back to the village. The work had taken several years, including a delay when he had diverted some of his funds to a project renovating Ambeh's health centre. On the evening when we arrived, he walked around the house complaining about the quality of the work that had been done in his absence.

The building plot presented a challenge because it was on a very steep slope and the groundwork had to be done by hand. Because of the gradient two horizontal steps had been prepared in the red earth for the foundations. So, the house, though a bungalow, was split over two levels with the rear section built on the higher step. Clement was proud of this innovation stressing both the fact that it was his own idea and that it made his house distinct from those of his brothers. It also neatly divided the public social space in the lower front part from his nuclear family's higher private space at the back. Before work began, he had walked round the plot to find the location of the best mobile phone signal, then he had declared that that precise spot would be his bedroom and everything else was designed outwards from that point. (A year later, the mobile phone company put a new mast on the hill behind the house.)

The design reflects the house's particular functions and connects specifically to social norms in the village. As well as being a family holiday home and a future burial site, the other main job the house has to do is to enable participation in village occasions. During Pa Daniel's death celebrations, each of the brother's houses will operate as an autonomous 'cry-house' where they entertain their own specific guests. (Without a building you cannot act as a host so, humiliatingly, you must borrow a house for your guests.) During these large occasions, hosts have to provide places for large numbers of people to sleep so bedrooms are like dormitories with multiple bunk beds side by side and piles of mattresses in the corner. Most guests will be entertained outside the house, where the dancing also takes place, but more important guests will be entertained inside, so parlours are designed to seat large numbers with a ring of settees around the perimeter. Clement has also added an additional 'private parlour' to his home. This has its own external entrance and provides more privacy and is used for particularly senior guests, such as the traditional ruler (the *Fon*). It is not socially permitted for the Fon to eat in front of his people, so adding a private space like this allows Clement to meet obligations of hospitality to the Fon (who is a personal friend) while respecting the historic mores of the village.

Both the interior and exterior decoration and design choices are heavy with consciousness. Clement talks about the floor tiles in his parlour—chosen because they are the same colour as the soil outside. He does not want his wife and children to have to spend their holidays sweeping to keep the floor looking nice. He talks about the curtains—brought from USA and too heavy for the local curtain poles, illustrating contradictions between his two worlds. He talks, with pride, about his locally made bamboo furniture. (Weeks later his wife rolls her eyes when I mention his enthusiasm for these not-very-comfortable seats.) The decorative exterior tiles that give the house the appearance of having been built

out of bricks rather than cement blocks were manufactured by the Fon who needs a business to supplement the Traditional Ruler's income supplied by the government. The Fon can be permanently resident in the village and oversee village affairs if he has an income, so Clement is keen to support him. He admires the work the Fon is doing to modernise the village. He sees his own house as part of that modernisation.

One evening, the Impressionist takes me on a tour of Ambeh. He lives in Cameroon and appears to be unemployed. We look at the different houses being built around the village and end up drinking palm wine in a dark village bar as a small market finishes for the day. The raffia palm is sweet, but not strong. It is the first time we have been on our own together without Clement. His tone changes from jocular to something a little more serious and thoughtful. He positions himself as a spokesman for the village (even though he lives in Buea) and those who are neither socially nor geographically mobile. We admire Clement, he says, because even though he lives in the USA he has shown that he 'loves his people', by building here in the village, by marrying well (by which he means marrying another Cameroonian from the area), by bringing his children home to the village, and by getting involved in family and village affairs. Not all bushfallers[5] are like that. If someone marries a European, he continues, can you be sure that those children will want to come here to tend the grave? Through his labours building his house here and bringing the family home, Clement is now licensed to leave the village (Freeman 2013).

4. In the name-of-the-father: dealing with separation

The story of Clement's house shows how global networks can be imagined as subject-centred and how the practice of being transnational, therefore, relies not only on the emotional, social and material capacities of that subject, but also on their unconscious drives. The second part of the article argues that the psychoanalytic idea of subject formation as a bargain (agreeing to social prohibitions in exchange for social belonging) has affinities to the bargain struck between a transnational migrant and their ancestral home—in a context where the village is struggling to reproduce itself.

The Name-of-the-Father[6] is a good place to start reflecting on the story of Clement's house within Lacan's elaborate conceptual architecture as it makes a claim about the inter-generational quality of the relationship between society and the psyche.[7] It describes the influence of cultural regulations on the formation of human subjectivity. As Lacan put it 'the effects on a human being of the fact that he becomes a subject of law are, in short, that he is deprived of what matters to him most, and in exchange for it, he is himself delivered over to the texture, which is woven between generations' (1960–61: 380–381, cited in Žižek 1996: 178). The Name-of-the-Father treats the socialisation of the subject as a psychoanalytical phenomenon; it describes a pivot, a transition, an injunction, a pact.[8]

The claim Lacan makes is that at a key moment in the development of the subject (and therefore the formation of the unconscious), a deal is made: the individual must turn away from the simple, solipsistic intimate pleasures of infancy ('what matters to him most') and in exchange they are admitted to membership of a social collective (humanity, family, community, nation...).[9] They submit to all the prohibitions of that collective

('becomes a subject of law') in exchange for the (more limited) pleasures of inter-subject-ivity: language and belonging ('the texture which is woven between generations').[10] In the gendered language of the time, they exchange nature (mother) for culture (father). The good father helps to make this exchange happen; the bad father (the 'anal father') perpet-uates infantile behaviour among their children by disregarding the Law themselves.[11] A successful transition is marked by the subject's increasing, if illusory, autonomy. In what ways is this story of a deal through which a subject is made similar to the story of how a transnational house is made?

In his discussion of the Northern Batsileo of Madagascar, Freeman interprets the village houses as expressions of their builder's autonomy. These large, modern houses that tower over the homes of villagers are deliberately allowed to fall into disrepair—a visible sign that their owner is somewhere else; that he or she has broken free from the obligations of the village. In contrast, Clement seems firmly bound to the commands made by the village: Return! Build! Remember us! Honour your father! Never sell this land! Bring us your children! In return he experiences the pleasures of belong-ing—this is where he comes to 'truly rest', this is where he feels most at home, this is where he is confident that he will be cared for after he is dead. This is the deal he has struck: he accepts the prohibition (You may not leave!) in exchange for participation, in-ter-subjectivity.

The emotional language Clement uses to describe the house is of pride, fulfilment, satisfaction. This hardly suggests a neurotic inability to detach. Rather, when he talks about the house he describes a kind of paradoxical state of simultaneous angst and relaxation. If this house is a symptom of the death drive, then he is certainly enjoying it. There is a kind of excessive pleasure articulated through the house that includes transgression (the irrational use of his resources, the fact he has spent so much time away from his nuclear family) and glee in suffering (the disappointments of trusting local builders, the long, hard slog of producing the house, the worry over whether his kids will look after it).

Clement though is no passive follower of social rules in all contexts. He brags to me, for example, about wearing baseball shorts and sneakers when meeting Cameroonian Government Ministers in the capital Yaoundé, revelling in offending their conservative dress code. Yet, he builds a whole extra room in his new house to enable the Fon of Ambeh to eat and drink out of sight of his people in the village. Is the Law he is bound to only his father's law, the village law? The Name-of-the-Father is, in the common language sense, always a metaphor.[12] Just as a child in a patriarchal society takes their father's name as a sign of family membership so we all take the name of a culture when we submit to its prohibitions in order to enter into social exchange with one another. But where, in a transnational life, do we draw the territorial boundaries of culture? Managing the range of prohibitions in a transnational life means choosing which father's name to take at differ-ent times and in different places. In so far as the ancestral homeland is given a primal role (the culture whose rules I *really* follow), it is ideological—a partial truth—I know it is a bit crazy to build a house in Ambeh and call it home, but I will do it anyway.

But there are also times when the Lacanian literature seems distinctly less useful in exploring the experience of transnationalism. What happens when the social consensus in the village about the right and wrong ways of being is changing? What happens when we

address not the minimalist list of prohibitions in the Law but the dizzying array of cultural differences in actual places? Loeckx (1998) nuanced ethnography of Berber migration and changing domestic architecture in Kabyle, Algeria provides a deep account of such differences for example without recourse to psychoanalytic theory. Yet, lurking beneath his stories are questions about desire—questions that could usefully be analysed using Lacanian ideas. To be fair, if psychoanalysis is primarily a theory of the human subject and of the unconscious why should it address the sociological questions of cultural changes and differences? But if, as has been suggested here, the Name-of-the-Father describes the influence of cultural regulations on the formation of human subjectivity then it must be the case that different cultures have different effects, and that as people who live across diverse spaces, transnationals have to manage this difference.

Villages such as Ambeh are struggling to sustain their current social arrangements. The prohibitions that make up their local norms are under pressure from a multitude of factors: Christianity, a predatory nation-state, violent conflict, integration into global coffee markets on ever less favourable terms, and the telecommunication technology that allows alternative norms to permeate the space. Above all the exodus of young people is integral to questioning existing social values. Of course, emigration from Ambeh is not new, so the idea that living with emigration involves adaptation at home is familiar. Nor are all the local principles dissolving—ideas about land (and in particular a resistance to selling it), chieftaincy, burial, and death are robust. The very process on which the reproduction of Ambeh now depends economically (emigration and remittances) is one it disavows as antithetical to its own continuity.

Many researchers interested in these houses focus on the relationship between migrant and non-migrant, but what this reading adds is the claim that that relationship is bound into the process of subject formation: specifically into consciousness of the split subject. The Name-of-the-Father is the point at which consciousness of the divided self emerges; when the subject becomes aware that it is not entirely in control of its own destiny. Increasingly, there is a sense that the unconscious (and its influence over actions) relates to something other than the self we know—something beyond knowability. Figure 1 tries to capture this: these migrant houses reveal something about the unconscious, but the unconscious is something that resists being known in full—these houses show us the outline of the unconscious, not the totality. As Loeckx (1998: 92) wrote: 'The old village still outlines the contours of the desire for a new one'. Now this idea is inverted: the new house outlines the contours of the desire for an old one. This picture is an outline of a desire that cannot finally be explained.

Lacan challenges the core humanist belief that 'man is at the centre of his own history and of himself...[that] he is a subject more or less in control of his own actions, exercising choice' (Mitchell 1982: 4). Something similar happens in the experience of transnational house-building. Clement clearly made the choice to build his house, just as some brothers (who do have the resources) have chosen not to. But he also speaks freely about his lack of choice when building. He was compelled to build. This paradox, this void in the explanation, it seems, is of the unconscious. This takes us back to the initial *why*, the puzzle Clement has at the outset. He feels there is something outside himself, something he cannot name, that must explain this obligation to build.
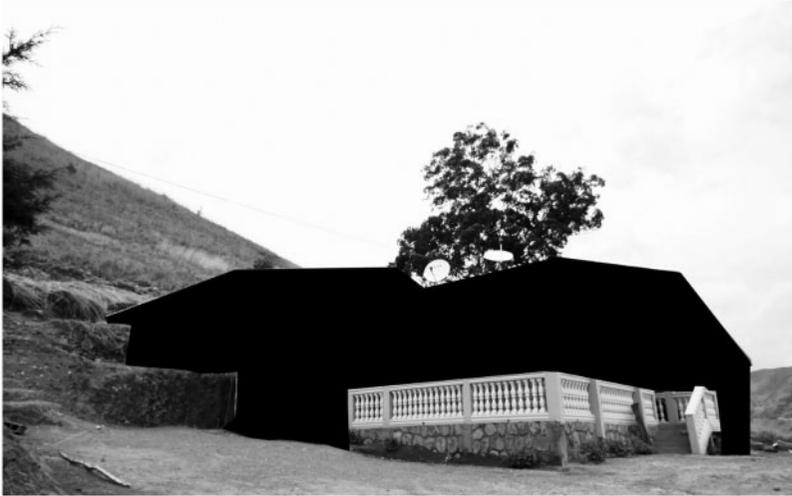
Figure 1. Clement's house. Like the unconscious, it actively resists representation, but its outline can be intuited by its various effects. (Photo: Author's own, edited with help from Miles Irving, UCL).

5. Conclusion: in the name of the father go! (but you must stay in touch)

This article set out to sustain two core claims. First, it used an ethnographic story to show that migrant houses sit within transnational networks, which are subject-centred not place-centred, so analysing them needs a theory of the subject. When subjects move, the network is brought to life, reflecting not only the subject's conscious, but also their unconscious actions. Yet, transnational networks are generally imagined geographically in the literature and are often centred on an empty spatial signifier: home (Mercer, Page, and Evans 2009). Looking through a psychoanalytic lens the idea of the house in the ancestral space as the primal home can be seen as an unconscious defense mechanism that helps manage the anxieties of transnationalism. Yet, the contradictions and inadequacies of the ancestral home need constantly to be repressed by the transnational subject. Mystical invocations of ancestry and of a connection to the land provide an ideological language to bulwark the myth of the village as the *real* home, the centre of the network. The Name-of-the Father provides an alternative account: the Law is indifferent to the ego-centric aspirations of an individual who is subject to it. The aim of the critique of ideology is to identify the kernel that the ideology disavows, but which it also needs to function. In this case, from the perspective of the African village, the idea of emigration is disavowed, but the survival of the village depends on emigration.

The second claim drew on the concept of the Name-of-the-Father to argue that the deal that every human subject makes with their collectivity when they exchange infantile egocentrism for inter-subjectivity is similar to the deal made between transnational

migrants and their ancestral home: permission to be autonomous, the license to leave, is granted by the village in exchange for respecting the taboo against total disconnection—signified by house-building. Clement's house, now it is built, is a labour-saving device. It saves him from the trouble of connecting and allows him to get on with his transnational life; it does his connecting for him. It is central to the deal he has struck.

At the start of the article, it was suggested that psychoanalytic concepts (such as 'the Name-of-the-Father') have much to offer migration studies in general and studies of migrant houses in particular. But as the review of the existing literature on these houses showed, the conversation is already conceptually diverse—what does this approach really add? First, it seems to me that it escapes the normative debates about whether such houses are good or bad for the places where they are built. The global enthusiasm for building such houses speaks to a passion that does not sit well with a dreary balance sheet of pros and cons. We show migrant house-builders disrespect by reducing our account of their achievements in that way. In contrast, the approach developed here shows what work these houses do for their builders and their neighbours.

Secondly, there persists a sense within migration studies that these houses are a peripheral phenomenon, just one of those things that go along with the expanding number of people on the move—interesting but not really that significant compared to debates about integration or xenophobia say. In contrast, the claim here is that they are really important, indeed for their creators they are centrally important. Listen to a house-builder speak about their project, sit in their house and you quickly get a sense that these buildings really matter to them—so they should matter to those who study migration too. The migrant-house matters because it is a key site for the psyche to process the human subject's traumatic experiences of separation (Lozanovska 2019). Without a theory of the psyche, it is hard to grasp their significance.

Thirdly, this approach can contribute to the effort to find a productive analytical framework with which to analyse these houses. Migrant houses epitomise the idea of extimacy, the exteriority of the intimate unconscious, the idea that the unconscious is out there on the surface of the globe not buried in the heads of humans (Lacan 1977a: 123). 'Our most intimate feelings can be extremely strange and Other to us. . . Our feelings can be radically externalized on to objects without losing their sincerity and intensity' (Kingsbury 2007: 235). Houses are not just the realisation of dreams, they do the dreaming. Beyond his conscious list of reasons for creating an intimate personal space, Clement *feels* a strange compulsion to build. As we acknowledge the importance of emotions in migration studies (Baldassar 2015), we can explore diverse frameworks for thinking through feelings, which is precisely what is offered by psychoanalytic approaches (Yang 2018, 2019). By claiming that the inside 'self' is present in the outside world (and vice versa), Lacan not only offers up objects (such as houses) as revealing things to study, but also problematises binaries such as those used by Boccagni and Pérez Murcia (2021) in their analytical framework for studying these houses. If the unconscious is not situated purely within the individual subject's interior but is also located trans-individually, then it is hard to distinguish between movers and stayers for example. Their schema (time, space, taste, knowledge) is elucidating, clarifying, and useful. It is easy to see how it renders different case studies comparable. In contrast, adding Lacan renders that clarity opaque and challenges the very distinctions, which they use to organize the analysis. It is reasonable to

be wary. But this approach does acknowledge that there is something that does not sit neatly within the embodied subject (migrant or otherwise)—the alien that is the unconscious. If human life is influenced by the unconscious, then our understanding of migration will be deepened by addressing it directly. Migration Studies would benefit from a theory of the subject that accounts for feelings, thoughts and processes that are, typically, unconscious. Accounts that acknowledge these drives and the split subject will provide a more accurate simulacrum of empirical observations, even though conclusions in this tradition can be ambiguous or incomplete (Clement's desire to build the house is always a desire for something else, its meaning is therefore always perpetually deferred). Loeckx suggested that all the different players in these migration games 'share a deep ambivalent desire. A desire to be here and elsewhere, for return and departure, preservation and change, structural cohesion and deconstruction' (1998: 92). What psychoanalysis offers is a set of tools for thinking directly about that unconscious desire.

Funding

Endnotes

1. The names (of people and some places) have been anonymised. I would however like to acknowledge the extraordinary generosity of my anonymous interlocutors.
2. Different psychoanalytic traditions use different terms, but they all share a conception of the human subject as somehow heterogeneous, multiple, conflicted or, in the word used here split. Different traditions theorise 'splitness' in varied ways including in their discussions of transnational subjectivity. For example, see Salman Akhtar's (1995) much cited discussion of these splits seen through the lens of American Ego Psychology.
3. In 2010, Obeng-Odoom calculated that it took six years to save enough capital in Australia to build a home in urban Ghana.
4. Lozanovska uses Lacan's 1955 L-schema to argue that emigrants in Melbourne connect with their unconscious via the relationship between Zavoj (the ancestral village) and the migrant house. The Subject (S) becomes the emigrant/immigrant, the Other (A) becomes Melbourne, the ego (a) becomes Zavoj and the little other (a′) is the migrant house.
5. Bushfaller is an idiomatic term for an international migrant. Sometimes it is used generically to mean all international migrants (as in this instance). Sometimes it is used to refer to a subset of international migrants—specifically wastrels and chancers (mostly young men).
6. In the 1950s, Lacan used 'names-of-the-father' (with an -s and lower-case letters). Later, this was replaced by the more declamatory Name-of-the-Father. Žižek (1995) retains the distinction to remember that Woman is one of the names-of-the-father.

Though the symbolic father can be anyone—father, mother, uncle, aunt, colleague—Lacan chose the term 'father' precisely because in patriarchal societies it is the father who is expected to lay down the law. Despite assertions that a mother could occupy the paternal function it is hard to escape the feminist critique that the term reinscribes patriarchy by relying on it metaphorically. Lacan developed a three-layered pun: *le nom du père* (coming under the Law), *le non du père* (the prohibitive 'no'), and *les non-dupes errent* (those who are not fooled into submitting to the father are the ones who get it wrong). The first two terms were developed in the 50s and 60s, the third emerges in Seminar XXI in 1973–4.

7. For a more authoritative introduction, which seeks to position the concept in relation to the orders of the Real, the Symbolic and Imaginary, see Žižek (2001), especially endnote 37.

8. This occurs around the age of five or six. The prohibition against incest is central to this moment in the development of the subject, but equally it is '*merely* its subjective pivot' (Lacan 1977b [1966]: 66).

9. Žižek (2001: 171) argues that the exchange is asymmetrical—a minus without a plus. 'In thanks for handing over "everything" for sacrificing the very kernel of his being, the object in himself...the subject himself is made into an object... in exchange for the lost object-cause of desire, the subject himself becomes object.'

10. What is the Law? The set of planetary principles that make social existence possible, the structures that govern all forms of social exchange, what separates humans from other animals. The Law creates desire because it creates prohibitions, and desire is concerned with transgressing prohibitions. Since the most basic form of social exchange is communication, the Law is fundamentally linguistic. The Law and the Symbolic Order (sometimes treated as synonymous in Lacanian thought) are a totalising network of symbols (or a chain of signifiers) outside subjects, which is there before their birth and after their death. What adds to the complexity in this case is whether the Name-of-the-Father is any old signifier or a privileged signifier (because it is through this exchange that the Symbolic Order functions).

11. The 'anal father' refuses to take their obligations as father seriously and fails to use their power to assert the prohibitions of the Law on their children, preferring to indulge in the fantasy of the primordial father and see their children not as progeny to be separated from the mother but as siblings to be competed with. The argument developed at this point is not so much about the biological father as the role of the paternal function in the formation of the subject. Even when the biological father is brought into the argument the father is still mediated by language—it is a signifier. 'Clement's father' are words.

12. Lacan has a different and very specific understanding of metaphor (the substitution of one signifier for another), which is contrasted with metonymy (combining signifiers).

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