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Faith Atuhumuze

# The Place of Migration in the Deepening Divergence of Socioeconomic Class in Uganda

## Introduction

1 Spatial variations emerged in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Uganda due to colonial concentration in Buganda kingdom as the epicenter for commercial and industrial development. Buganda also acted as the administrative and political center for the British Protectorate government. This implied an upsurge in the number of labor migrants from neighboring areas of Ankole, Ruanda, Bunyoro, West Nile and Kenya, most of whose work was casual and based on task contract, commonly known as *lejjalejja* (one at a time !)<sup>1</sup>, (RICHARDS, 1952), a work arrangement that is still prevalent in most parts of Uganda whereby persons negotiate for defined portions of work on a daily basis. Migration was marred with ambivalence towards migrants as a source of cheap and efficient labour yet ridiculed as poor and a source of disease. With a majority of study institutions situated in Buganda region, comparatively more Baganda attained formal education, were involved in white-collar highly paid employment and attained a semiautonomous status as early as 1900. In the era of rapid industrialization, labor became a central factor for creation of class divisions between the educated indigenous Baganda and the uneducated migrants. During this time, large numbers of people traveled long distances to the Uganda protectorate to seek employment, often arriving when they were worn out and in a vulnerable condition. There was no motorized transport or rather ; it was very expensive for the ordinary migrant. As such, migrants trekked often-impassable terrains for several days on foot over the territorial boundaries into the protectorate. On arrival, the poor living conditions in the labor camps only worsened the situation. Owing to this, migrants from neighboring territories, as often described in literature, were rugged, poor and ridiculed as “disseminators of disease”. These patterns were reinforced and preserved as just another colonialist obsession with the social construction of class. Colonial political structures had systematically instigated polarized migrant identities. However, these constructs were made in such a careful and purposive way that most colonial literature on labor migration has no record of the British or European labor migrants, yet they were indeed workers in different capacities in the protectorate. This may have laid the groundwork for certain stereotypes used in reference to migrants in postcolonial-migrant-sending Uganda.

2 Richards (1952) concludes her study on economic migrants and development by saying,

“...It seems that in the future...government will have to decide whether it wants to encourage or discourage colonizing migration ; and whether it wants to facilitate the complete social absorption of migrants already settled on the land or to continue to treat them as people of inferior social status.”

3 This suggests that schisms between migrants and non-migrants were created as a government ideology stating that migrants were of a lower socioeconomic standing. Migration and mobility were a focus of differentiation rather than that of integration, equality and social inclusion. At one level, it created vertical ties of allegiance between migrants and their families at home that would traverse class loyalty and on another level, the labor market promoted proletarianization amongst migrants. In the colonial context, though migration was prevalent and even rooted for by the protectorate government through the Labour Department, structural categories were still considered over individual experiences as the emphasis for class analysis.

## Modalities of Representation

4 The local public, the government and the media have continued to cultivate certain stereotypes as regards to migrants by displaying indifference in reference to the diaspora community.

Migrants have been portrayed by the media in the form of either sanitized phenomenon, as “persons seeking for greener pastures” or the demonized “*Nkuba Kyeyo*” (MUWANGUZI and MUSAMBIRA, 2013). Though they are one of the two most productive classes of citizens in Uganda<sup>2</sup>, migrants are continually referred to, for example in public speeches and documents, in derogatory terms and denied some of their public rights such as the right to vote. In fact, this stigma has instigated bitterness and anger among the diaspora. One migrant in an article in a local tabloid says,

“We left our homeland in search of personal safety and economic opportunities. We live far from our loved ones, in strange lands and do whatever it takes to provide a decent living for our families. We smile when countrymen despise our jobs but not the cash we send back”<sup>3</sup>.

5 *Kyeyo* (broom) refers to the lowly jobs engaged in by Ugandans who travel abroad with the aim of earning a better living (KADUULI, 2008). The term “*Nkuba Kyeyo*,” a Luganda expression (Luganda is the major language spoken in Buganda ; a kingdom in Uganda that was the colonial capital of the British protectorate and home of the current capital, Kampala), literally translated to mean “I am a sweeper” or “I sweep the streets”, is an infamous and somewhat derogatory term used for economic migrants in Uganda since the Idi Amin<sup>4</sup> regime, qualifying migrant work in destination countries as odd and menial. However, according to Kaduuli (2008), this tag has since been stretched to include even migrants doing white-collar jobs. So, despite subsequent changes in the make-up of the migrant stream and evolution in levels of skills or position on the economic ladder, the identity *nkuba kyeyo* has persisted and come to represent all economic migrants. In fact, Kaggwa (2014) defines a *nkuba kyeyo* as a term used by Ugandans for anyone who leaves the country seeking greener pastures mainly in the Western world. He further posits that regardless of their nature of business or professional affiliations, due to the ease with which one can get odd jobs abroad, migrants have been grouped into the cluster of the “*kyeyo*” as long as they have been there for at least a year. The epithet “*nkuba kyeyo*” was in use since the 1970s mainly for exiled migrants. However, it was only popularized in the late 1980s and early 1990s National Resistance Movement, NRM era, when the principal migration factor was economically oriented. We note that though the composition of the migration outflow changed over the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, migrants were still categorized under the clichéd tag with the assumption that their nature of work abroad was fixed.

6 References used for economic migrants, particularly the tag “*nkuba kyeyo*”, have created resentment and tensions between migrants and residents. Kaduuli (2008) tends to posit that migrants have received the label with indifference saying, “this used to annoy many of them, but they have now gotten used to it.” Quite the contrary, the non-migrant community is unaware of how exactly stigma is attached to the migrant process, as one migrant laments :

“...Nevertheless, those of us who live abroad have embraced the concept of “*nkuba kyeyo*”. It is a demeaning, abusive term that more defines the ignorance of the sayer than the intended recipient...”<sup>5</sup>

## An analysis of the push factors and the origin of “*Kyeyo*”

7 Like many African states, the post-independence government adopted colonial authoritarian governance mechanisms. Instability and precariousness in the labor market fostered the creation of outward-looking economic and political structures. Ethnic politicization of power became apparent, leading to an influx of refugees in the mid-1960s. The period between 1966 and 1986 was marred by a constitutional crisis and wide-ranging instabilities (economic, political and structural) that prompted an “exodus of [the] Ugandan elite to live in exile” (HANSEN & TWADDLE, 1988). Former migrants in Buganda either returned home or chose the circular migration path. The biggest outflow was the extreme case of expulsion of over 80 000 “Ugandan Asians” in 1972. Aiming at “Ugandanizing” the economy (KADUULI, 2008), the then-President of the republic of Uganda, Idi Amin, expelled Ugandans of South Asian origin giving them an evacuation period of only three months (MULUMBA and OLEMA, 2009). The majority of the displaced were absorbed into different

European countries, the United States of America and parts of Canada. In fact, Mulumba and Olema (2009) further posit that the insecurity and authoritarian rule prevailing in the Amin regime triggered the first stream of professional brain drain and human capital flight by the elite. Educated and economically able persons fled to destinations in and out of Africa, mostly to the United Kingdom, because of colonial relations, as economic refugees, where they were initially involved in low skilled jobs “*kyeyo*”. These jobs were majorly facilitated by the neoliberal restructuring process of the 1980s in the global North that expedited an increased demand for “cheap” labor in the growing industrial sector and the transformation and developments implemented by the Immigration Reform and Control Act. For example, there was no visa requirement for Ugandans traveling to the United Kingdom at the time and a majority of migrants exploited this freedom of mobility to escape the instability.

8 A proportion of the non-migrant nomadic populations in Uganda joined the 1979-1985 Bush war with the Baganda as the smallest proportion in the army, since most were the educated elite and constituted the largest stream of emigrants, called “*kyeyo*” at the time. As one ex-veteran notes : “”

“...For the Baganda, their job was to go to school. There was no Muganda who’d join the army. They’ve joined just recently...”

9 Assumption of power by Museveni in 1986 and associated relative political stability sparked off a shift in migration dynamics. Social restructuring when the National Resistance Army (NRA) took over power was presumed to encourage migrants to return, due to restoration of peace and stability. However, emigrants were earning high amounts of money abroad, which was much less possible in Uganda, then recovering from a state of economic crisis. Under the National Diaspora Policy Draft, improved mobility and economic freedom has facilitated many Ugandans to go abroad for study purposes or to “search for greener pastures” (IOM, 2013). Migrants are no longer only blue collar but some are also involved in professional and formal employment.

10 The emergent stream of migrants consists of clusters that are diverse in terms of employment and though the term “*nkuba kyeyo*” is still in use, society has begun to create class differences between the migrants. For example, there is a class of the “*Aba-summer*” who are generally well-educated and involved in highly paid professional jobs outside Africa, or the variant “*Aba-sausi*” for migrants in South Africa. “*Aba-summer*” is a Luganda term coined to refer to economic migrants returning to Uganda from Europe and the United States for the summer holidays. These are generally portrayed as having a lot of money and extravagant spending habits. The related term “*Aba-sausi*” is a recent epithet qualifying Ugandan migrants in South Africa. Before the 1990s, a migrant in any other African country was not referred to as a “*nkuba kyeyo*” (KAGGWA, 2014). However, as South Africa became more politically stable, many Ugandans flooded its economic spaces. Most were known infamously for posing as witch doctors, “*Sangomas*”, regardless of the fact that only a few of them had the knowledge of the practice. With the proximity of South Africa to Uganda, and the flexibility of mobility between the two countries, many migrants were earning much more compared to migrants in Western countries. During the festive season, many of them dominated social scenes in the Ugandan capital Kampala and other areas with luxurious displays of money and power. Eventually, the epithet “*Aba-sausi*” was devised particularly for the South African migrant stream and has since the 2000s been popularized as a variant of the “*nkuba kyeyo*”. Kaggwa (2014) suggests that migrants prefer the later terms “*Aba-summer*” or “*Aba-sausi*” to “*nkuba kyeyo*” because they supposedly mirror this high socioeconomic status.

11 The recent migrant stream also includes cross-border and within-Africa migrants allegedly composed mainly of unskilled and semi-skilled persons. According to an IOM report, these south-south migrations are most prevalent, constituting over 80 % of total migrants living in other African countries and 12 per cent and 5 per cent in Europe and North America respectively (IOM, 2013).<sup>7</sup> However, these are not included under the clichéd tags as noted in one local tabloid :

“But you are not a “*nkuba-kyeyo*” if you are in Nigeria or Kenya”<sup>8</sup>.

- 12 These destination-tied attitudes have produced an imagined, graphically differentiated, picture of migrants having certain class loyalties.
- 13 Out-of-Africa and to-South-Africa migrations have become increasingly important because though they constitute the smallest proportion of migrants, approximately 20 % (IOM, 2013), they fetch the largest proportion of remittances. The question remains : why are these migrants who are evidently more economically relevant still referred to with menial stereotypes that suggest a low socioeconomic stature ?

## Understanding Divergences on the Internal Migrant Stream

- 14 Emigrants are, however, not the only ones suffering alienation of identity in Uganda. Internal migrants also experience stereotypical categorizations, which mirror regional and ethnic backgrounds. During colonial times, migration was unidirectional, contributing to socioeconomic divergences among different regions. Buganda, due to its colonial allegiance, achieved a head start in development over the rest of Uganda. Though other areas have experienced considerable growth, especially since 1986, Buganda, being the home of the capital Kampala, is still more developed, and as such attracts more migrants. Selectiveness of the migration process linked to economic and education status has fed into contentions that the migrant stream (internal and international) is composed of a larger proportion of persons from western Uganda in the current political context where being a “*Munyankole*” is allegedly synonymous with power and wealth.
- 15 Historically, cattle keepers especially from the south western part of Uganda “Banyankole” traversed the cattle corridor from Ankole to parts of Buganda in search for pasture and water for their cows in the era of unrestricted land tenure. This group of pastoralists was referred to using “sometimes interchangeable terms” in literature and verbal exchanges such as Bahima, Abalaalo, Abariisa. As an example, in 2014 during fieldwork in select areas of Buganda and Ankole, different persons gave different meanings to particular terms pertaining to migrants from the South West. What is interesting is that the migrants themselves have embraced these labels and use them to address other migrants from the same part of the country :

“You know “*abalaalo*”, that name was introduced by the Baganda [...] “*Omulaalo*” is a person who is working for a Muganda [...] He sleeps at that Muganda’s home [...] So they called them “*abalaalo*” [...] But a while back, the “*abalaalo*” were called “*abahima*” [...] The “*abahima*” or cattle keepers<sup>10</sup>.

- 16 For this respondent, being called “*Omulaalo*” (pl. *Balaalo*) was initially tied to the economic positioning of a migrant from the west as a worker in the home of a Muganda. Being cattle keepers, these migrants were involved in taking care of the cows of their landlords. Definition later shifted to include everyone engaging in cattle keeping due to a lack of differentiation, as workers eventually accumulated enough money to purchase their own cattle and started grazing on the then “free land”. Eventually, the term “*Omulaalo*” became synonymous with being called a “*Muhima*” and is sometimes in conversation used as an ethnic category. Another respondent says :

“[...] The “*abariisa*” are “*balaalo*” [...] It is culture. For Banyankole or “*bariisa*” [cattle keepers]”.

- 17 Migrants from the west, particularly those engaged in cattle keeping activities, have all been grouped into the category of the “*Balaalo*”, regardless of whether they are working for someone or taking care of their own animals. In a recent interview<sup>11</sup>, one respondent says :

“The word “*omulaalo*” originated from the phrase “*omuraragye*” which means “the one who sleeps well”. This was associated with a cattle keeper who had accumulated very many cows with enough land and water to take care of them through the season”.

- 18 He suggests that the word was a term for someone belonging to a higher income group. However, with migration to Buganda and cattle keepers working for the Baganda landlords, the phrase was transformed into “*omulaalo*”, but in this scenario, it represented a less-than comfortable lifestyle of laboring. In a recent turn of events, the term “*omulaalo*” has been used to refer to the whole group of Banyankole.

19 The assumption of power by the NRM government gave rise to an ethnic bias against the Banyankole, cultivated by dissatisfaction of regional economic and political discrepancy among other groups. It has consequently become commonplace to hear phrases such as “*Banyankole bali mu kintu*” (literally translated as “they are in things”) to mean that the Banyankole are in power (RUKARE, 2012). This has sparked both violent and subtle resistance against migrants from western Uganda. For example in Bunyoro, Banyankole migrant cattle keepers were evicted in 2010 under allegation that they were land grabbers following claims filed in 2006 stating that Banyankole cattle keepers were exploiting their political positions to grab land from Banyoro<sup>12</sup>. Bunyoro region hosts large volumes of migrants from adjacent Democratic Republic of Congo as well as neighboring districts. On why other migrants were allowed to stay and not the Banyankole, one elder had this to say :

Interviewer : “Why didn’t you send the Alur to go back like the Bahima ?”

Respondent : “What made them resist and settle here is because they had stayed here and married people from here, they kept moving in and blending in. They were not discriminative like these Balalo”<sup>13</sup>.

20 A second case is the October 2009 riots by Baganda youths in Kampala which aimed to destroy the businesses of persons who “looked like” Banyankole (CHALIN, 2014) and forcing them to sing the Buganda Anthem.

21 Other cases of migration are cross-border migrations associated with Uganda’s geopolitical situation at the center of an unstable and insecure region. The northern region, unlike the rest of the country, has since 1986 experienced a high volume of forced migration due to the 20-year LRA war. Violent upheavals left approximately 1.7 million persons displaced and turning to different regions within and out of Uganda, where they assumed entitlement to asylum, hinged on mutual social obligation. Uganda is an established refugee host and was in 1966 described by the UNHCR as a “natural country of asylum”. Between 2000 and 2010, the total number of refugees was estimated to be 3.9 per cent of her population. However, a larger proportion of cross-border movements are economically motivated. In some instances, cross-border migrants have faced open resistance. In 2012, Ugandan migrants in Juba, South Sudan, faced open revolt that left some dead or injured under accusation that they were worsening the unemployment problem (EDWARDS, 2012).

22 As presented, migration has faced severe opposition and controversy, but the number of emigrants in Uganda has been increasing with undeterred momentum : 153 per cent between 1990 and 2013 (UNDESA, 2013). Rutaremwa (2011) attributes it to the impact of globalization on labor mobility. The International Labor Organization (ILO) indicates that migrant workers in developed countries earn a median wage approximately five times higher than in their home countries.

23 Secondly, in the current political context where Uganda has experienced major cuts in donor aid, there is a new spark of interest by the government to encourage emigration and remittances to cushion its expenditure (RUPINY, 2012) by implementing such policies as those aimed at cultivating diaspora networks that are deemed crucial for development.

## Linking remittances and socioeconomic divergence

24 The World Bank estimates the Ugandan emigrant stock to be 2.2 % of its population as of 2011. The International Organization for Migration estimates a lower proportion of approximately 1.7 per cent as of 2013. 82 per cent of this is channeled to other African countries (Kenya being the biggest host with 43.1 per cent), 12 per cent to Europe and only 5 per cent to North America (IOM, 2013). Though emigration accounts for a rather small proportion of the population, it has sparked recent enthusiasm with the growing importance of remittances as a source of livelihood. As of 2013, remittances accounted for approximately 5.65 per cent of Uganda’s GDP with a growth of approximately 300 per cent since 1999 and have since 2010 taken precedence over foreign direct investment as the major source of foreign income (IOM, 2013). The United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Dubai are the major sources of Uganda’s diaspora remittances. Findings from the Uganda remittance survey (2007)

suggest that 36.9 per cent of remitters were based in Europe, 24.5 per cent in North America and 29 per cent were African-based remitters. According to the World Bank Migration And Remittances Fact Book 2011, there are 757 000 Ugandans recorded as working outside their country of birth, remitting \$ 773 million or SHS.77 trillion annually. This means that “*Nkuba Kyeyos*”, as they are known, are easily one of our most productive group of people, sustaining a considerable number of households with their direct cash injections. In all likelihood, the World Bank has not taken into account the many Ugandans who work in virgin markets like Southern Sudan. The corporate/working class, often referred to as the Middle Class, is the second category of productive Ugandans that must step up to the plate to help shape their country’s political, and therefore, economic fortunes. Reasons for failure to capture corporates in Uganda’s political process are the direct opposite of those for *Nkuba Kyeyos*.

25 The smaller proportion of emigrants outside of Africa remits higher volumes of income, which postulates a level of asymmetry between migrants based on emigrant destination. Findings further suggest a larger proportion of these incomes are utilized for household consumption, hence remittances provide a social safety net for the recipients. In fact, families of migrants have better standards of living by over 48 per cent. The idea is that such improvements create conditions for more migration hence further divergence in a situation where mobility has been portrayed as typical of the “global elite”, while the poor remain at home (BAUMAN, 1998), and in other cases as typical of the poor/landless looking for access to land.

26 Remittances have nurtured contentions that migrants are economically better-off breeding a consumption trend where migrant families expect future regular transfers and long-lasting reliability for survival. Muhumuza (2011) suggests a tug-of-war situation in Uganda where migrants are relatively wealthier by Ugandan standards but still ridiculed under the label “*nkuba kyeyo*” because they are assumedly relatively poor by the standards of their countries of destination. Therefore, the modes of social production through which remittances are generated are ignored (DELGADO-WISE et al., 2013).

27 In an alternative analysis, selectiveness of the migration process implies that most remittances flow to the migrant class while non-migrant families bear the negative effect on wages, demand and prices (DE HAAS, 2010). Migrants struggle to send money back home to afford the lifestyle that migrant families have become accustomed to. Foreign exposure and ties has created a dominant class of migrant families as the “current elite” socially and economically disconnected from local realities.

## Conclusions

28 Migration is a selective process (DOCQUIER and RAPOPORT, 2007) with such effects as increased socioeconomic divergence within countries. For example, the emergent elite class of migrant families have higher consumption propensity and a higher likelihood of sending other family members to study or work abroad because of diaspora ties and their ability to bear the cost of migration.

29 Internal migrations are ethnically-biased in a political context where persons from Western Uganda are lumped together as Museveni’s constituents, breeding contention and fear of dominance by migrants, instigating discrimination and fear in host societies.

30 Migrant stereotypes mirror divergence between nation states. The persistence of the label “*nkuba kyeyo*” is a paradox based both on actualities and make-believe whereby migrants in developed countries are assumed to be the poorest in host societies, thus partaking in the most demeaning though higher-paid jobs as compared to white-collar jobs in Uganda. Migrants to African destinations are not labeled under the “*nkuba kyeyo*” term, under the assumption that Uganda is at the same level of development as the destination society and that one will only decide to migrate if one is able to obtain employment matched to one’s level of skills and better paid. In the migrant equation, the government has found a solution to its employment problem while earning foreign income, while migrant families, by improving their socioeconomic positioning, have emerged as the “elite class” in society ; yet migrants bear the burden and are still branded with derogatory categorizations.



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### Notes

1 This work arrangement is still prevalent in most parts of Uganda whereby persons negotiate for defined portions of work on a daily basis.

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7 Orozco (2008) estimates a three million Ugandan diaspora with 30 % of this residing in the United Kingdom. This figure contradicts the IOM figure of a 5 % diaspora in Europe.

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9 A person whose origin is in the kingdom of Ankole in south western Uganda

10 Excerpt from an interview in Buganda with a migrant from Ankole region who has established a settlement in Buganda over 30 years ago (Interview by Atuhumuze & Chalin. 2014).

11 Field notes from a discussion with a return migrant in Ankole from Buganda region (Interview by Atuhumuze & Chalin. 2015)

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13 This is an excerpt from an interview in Buliisa (June 2012) on a different study “Multi-disciplinary study on poverty, resource allocation and spatial mobility in East Africa”. Note that the words Banyankole, Balalo, Bahima and Banyarwanda are in some cases used synonymously in reference to the cattle keeping activity.

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## *Droits d'auteur*

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## *Résumés*

Cet article propose d'étudier les stéréotypes péjoratifs ayant émergés dans l'Ouganda post-colonial et qualifiant les migrants, ainsi que l'impact, économique ou autre, de ces représentations sur les écarts toujours plus grands et les tendances discriminatoires qui se développent entre les migrants et les non-migrants. Ces représentations découlent de la nouvelle place que l'Ouganda tient sur la scène internationale en tant que pays d'émigration et de la perméabilité des liens entretenus avec la diaspora (RUTAREMWA 2011). De par la tendance croissante des migrants à vivre entre deux pays et à envoyer de l'argent à leurs familles, les familles de migrants et les migrants eux-mêmes sont vus comme appartenant à une autre catégorie socio-économique que leurs homologues non-migrants. Ces notions sont contraires à la sélectivité du processus de migration, qui se trouve renforcée par la concentration du pouvoir et de la richesse aux mains de quelques uns et qui est considérée comme une partie indissociable des processus migratoires dans l'Ouganda de l'après-indépendance. Cet article se penche sur la manière dont les nouveaux moyens de subsistance des migrants ont été (et continuent d'être) « communalisés » par la société. Cette communalisation a contribué à forger de nouvelles identités de classe et a créé de nouvelles institutions qui fractionnent les expériences de la mobilité. Nourri d'une analyse de la littérature secondaire et d'entretiens enregistrés en Ouganda, cet article explore la construction de classes sociales, telle que l'identité « nkuba kyeyo », qui se forment en opposition à la représentation des migrants comme incarnant une classe de la société faisant partie de « l'élite mondiale ».

This article proposes to investigate derogatory stereotypes pertaining to migrants that have been constructed in postcolonial Uganda and the impact, economic or otherwise, of these representations on the deepening divergences and discriminatory tendencies occurring between migrants and non-migrants. These are linked to Uganda's insertion in the international scene as a migrant sending state and the permeation of diaspora ties (RUTAREMWA, 2011). With the growing tendency of migrants to live transnationally and send remittances to their families, migrants and migrant families have been portrayed as belonging to a different socioeconomic category than their non-migrant counterparts. These notions run counter to the selectiveness of the migration process reinforced by concentration of power and wealth in only a few hands, which is considered an inextricable part of the migrant processes of post-independence Uganda. This article reflects on how the emergent livelihoods of migrants have been (and continue to be) "communalized" by society. This has formed part of the emerging class identities and given rise to institutions that fraction mobility experiences. Adopting an analysis of secondary data and interviews in Uganda, this article navigates the construction of classes such as the "nkuba kyeyo" versus the portrayal of migrants as part of a "global elite class" in society.

## *Entrées d'index*

**Mots-clés** : migrant économique, Ouganda, divergence socioéconomique, nkuba kyeyo

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*Géographique* : Ouganda

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