The current literature on the South Asian diaspora has tended to focus on its orientation towards India as the homeland, yet Ugandan Asians as twice and forced migrants tell a different story. Traditional accounts of South Asians in Uganda emphasised their relationship to India as the prime source of identification. As Twaddle claimed, ‘many a Ugandan Asian kept his man (heart) in India and his dhan (wealth) in Britain whilst still managing to retain his tab (body) in East Africa (1975: 13). Whilst this captures the dilemma of divided loyalties and diverse allegiances of Ugandan Asians their emotional ties were clearly seen as with India. This was part of wider narrative in which South Asians were characterised as socially exclusive and culturally conservative and combined with their visible economic dominance has been consistently sited as the main reason for their expulsion.

Research on Ugandan Asians in Britain is more limited and confined to sociological accounts produced in the 1970s and 1980s which tend to focus on their experience of settlement in Britain in the aftermath of the expulsion. (Twaddle 1975; Kuepper et al 1975; Marett 1989). Yet research on East African Asians, more generally, has begun to reveal complex belongings. Bhachu’s (1985) research on Punjabi Sikhs from Kenya most notably questioned the assumption that all South Asians in Britain subscribe to the myth of return to India and emphasised their commitment to Britain as the homeland. More recently Tolia Kelly (2004, 2006) examined multiple connections by drawing on material and visual cultures, such as artefacts from East Africa, to explore East African Asians emotional connections to ‘home’ and revealed their complex relationships to Britain, India and East Africa (see also Ramji 2006; Burholt 2004). Inspired by this recent work, this article draws on forty oral history interviews to explore how Ugandan Asians developed complex transnational belongings in both Uganda and Britain which were changing, contested and often ambiguous (see Karim 2008).

Making homes in Uganda

Ties with India varied considerably between the respondents and within families, but overall they tended to emphasise their sense of distance from India. Some were surprised to be asked about how they viewed India whilst in Uganda and simply stated they were ‘not born there and had never lived there’ or ‘didn’t know much about India’. Others explained how their
grandfather had migrated to East Africa at a young age and consequent ties to his place of birth had gradually faded whilst some claimed that their parents maintained transnational links through sending letters to their family or via visits, though frequent trips was curbed by the high cost of steam ship travel. This sense of emotional detachment was reinforced by return visits. Typical comments included, ‘we didn’t feel part of them’, and ‘I couldn’t fit into the system there’, whilst several claimed how their distinct language created a barrier between themselves and subcontinental Asians. For some this was based on their incorporation of Swahili words, whilst one woman remarked that her particular ‘Queens English’ acquired at her missionary school in Jinja marked her out as a ‘foreigner.’

Rather than cultivate emotional ties with India as a homeland the respondents recalled their attachment to Uganda as their home. This was emphasised particularly by those born in Uganda. A typical comment was that ‘I think it was home because there wasn't any other home besides that .. home where was we were being brought up and we were born and, you know, so that was home. There was not even other thought of making a home somewhere else.’ This identification with Uganda as their home was shaped by several factors. As scholars have noted the relationship of the South Asian diaspora to India was shaped by official policy and it was not until 1999 when India refashioned itself as a homeland by introducing the people of India origin card (Raj 2004, Sutton 2007). Following India’s independence in 1947, the Indian government pursued nation building and sought to distance and exclude the South Asian diaspora by encouraging them to settle in their country of residence and identify with the local population. So several respondents recalled visits from the first Indian Commissioner who sought to promote South Asian allegiance to East Africa.

Yet their links with Uganda were also inextricably linked to their economic and social position and the economic success of South Asians in East Africa. That is, migrating to Uganda had enabled South Asians to move away from an under-employed and rigid labour market in India to a place of plentiful and desirable opportunities, where they became upwardly mobile and acquired status and respect (see also Bates 2000). Rather than looking to the Indian subcontinent as a source of prestige and status, they came to identify with Uganda. In particular the male respondents emphasised how they felt that the crucial business role established by their parents had secured their place within the nation. For example, Jayanti explained of his father: ‘He’d established himself in the Uganda, he'd made his businesses, made his name you know, and he settled all those years. And then he was being thrown out of his own country. To him it was his country.’ The respondents were keen to emphasise their crucial economic role and comments such as ‘the economy was in Asian control’ and
‘we were the middle class and we controlled the commerce, the retail, the wholesale manufacturing of the country. We employed majority of the Africans’, were typical. Thus, they had a strong consciousness about their position and place in Uganda.

The respondents also conveyed that Uganda was not simply ‘home’ due to official policy or economic success, but rather they had fashioned new spaces of belonging, based on a configuration of western, Indian and African influences to form a distinct East African Asian culture (Brah 1996, Oonk 2004). The interviews were replete with references to their British education, to visits from the Royal family, English novels and magazines and American films, but also to their adventures as children exploring the landscape, spotting hippos and crocodiles and eating boiled cassava on family picnics by the bank of Lake Victoria. As Nisha explained,

But even then we felt we were very proud of our culture, an Asian culture, this thing about we love our beliefs, our religious beliefs, our religious gatherings or religious festivals and everything was celebrated, but at the same time we also embraced things like Christmas. I mean, we sang hymns, I know more hymns and things like that than I would know my own, you know, songs and things like that. But I learnt to appreciate the western way of life as well as my culture things and I had liberty to choose what I wanted.

This cosmopolitanism and hybridity has been noted by other scholars in relation to East African Asians (Ramji 2006), but it was also reinforced by their travel. The respondents described how their lives in Uganda were characterised by mobility as their family frequently moved for schools within Uganda yet they also travelled to other parts of East Africa, to Kenya and Tanzania for short trips or on a longer basis for work. Many also travelled to India and then from the late 1950s to Britain for their degree education though others travelled to these countries as tourists or for marriage. Whilst travel does not always promote openness to cultural differences, it could be argued that throughout their lives their sense of belonging and self identity was more mobile and fluid than the term ‘twice migrants’ suggests. Overall, rather than focusing exclusively on maintaining a culture from India, they incorporated elements of other cultures into their daily lives to create a new sense of home and place in Uganda.
Loss of home and remaking homes in Britain

Whilst prior to 1972 the respondents emphasised how their lives were characterised by mobility and multiple connections with Britain, India and Uganda, following the order by Amin to expel all Asians from Uganda, they emphasised the restrictions and distance imposed on them from these countries. Not only did they lose their home in Uganda and encounter road blocks and constant checks from an increasingly hostile and sometimes violent Ugandan army, but Kenya and Tanzania, followed by India and Pakistan closed their borders (Westin and Nyberg 2005). For those Ugandan Asian citizens who were now deemed stateless, temporary camps were opened in Italy and Austria. Canada and America limited their intake to academics and professionals, whilst the UK accepted those who could prove they were British-protected (Read 1975).

Many described the sense of panic, injustice and frustration they felt that as they made frequent visits to the British embassy to resolve citizenship problems. This proved most difficult if one family member held a Ugandan passport and could not stay in Uganda but did not have settlement rights elsewhere. They relayed the hassles of queuing for days and emphasised the inhumanity of unhelpful bureaucratic systems. As Sumi claimed ‘the queues were so long and four or five deep again and every morning you come there and people crying, you know, the women, and that was a sight I can still remember and that was the terrible, terrible part of it.’ She added ‘that was the biggest nightmare for us’, whilst Mashru reflected on his experiences and commented ‘I don’t think it’s fair to the human race.’ Alongside this struggle to be admitted to the UK some were also aware of the growing public opposition towards to their admission in Britain with Leicester in particular advising potential settlers to go elsewhere.

So how did the respondents cope with their multiple and yet contested belongings in Britain? For many collective remembering through reunions or internet forums has helped to actively maintain their belonging to Uganda. However others stressed that they felt a bond to Ugandan Asians and that ties to people rather than place was paramount. Not all sought to reaffirm their affiliation with Uganda and some emphasised their strategy to forget rather than reminisce, whilst others claimed that their conscious decision to see Britain as their permanent home was not immediate or easy but the outcome of a lengthy process. Ranjan for example, came to Britain aged 19 and described her family’s aim to stay in Britain to accumulate the funds so they could eventually settle in India. She claimed,
And I know for a long long time although other relatives in the country were buying their own houses, we didn’t buy our own house, we stayed in a council house because we just didn’t want to put our roots down here. We just thought this is a phase we have to get through you know some experience, gather some experience and then we'll be going back to India.

In the 1970s she felt that South Asians lacked their own sense of identity and belonging and that Britain was ‘never our country’. She added, ‘we didn't feel part of the country no, and it was always this thing we're going back and you know always, at the time also, why should we suffer in this cold country when you can actually go and live in a warm place?’ The birth of her son in Britain irrevocably changed her perceptions. In her words, ‘he's born here; we're going to stay here. And there was nowhere else to go, you know, this is home now, we have to make home here. Even now I mean wherever I go in the world whether it's Uganda, India or America wherever, home is Leicester, you know, nowhere else is home.’ This shows that their commitment to Britain as a permanent home was often a complex process which challenges previous claims that East African Asians were unequivocally orientated to life in Britain from the moment of their arrival.

Finally, whilst several respondents often emphasised the value of their multiple belongings in creating ‘rich’ experiences and a more cosmopolitan and eclectic outlook, for many their multiple affiliations posed particular dilemmas. That is, their families remained divided and scattered in different countries and they felt they belonged nowhere. One woman whose husband had returned to Uganda whilst she lived in London claimed ‘Indian people they never sort of considered us Indian. We are the people from Africa. It's like, sometimes when you think about it you feel you don't belong anywhere. Like people like us who are born in Uganda, Uganda didn't want us, India didn't want us, here they didn't want us, so we didn't belong anywhere.’ Another woman explained,

It's really strange 'cause you go back to either of the places, well all three really, even here, you're not accepted, you--., you never quite know where you fit in, and I think you'll find that a lot of people are in that boat, not quite sure where they belong. You see what I mean? Yeah I'm Indian, yes I'm Ugandan, I was born there, I'm dead proud of that, you know I'm Indian. Hmmm, when you go there you're not quite accepted 'cause you're not--, you're English, and then you get here and you're not quite English,
you're seen as Asian or Indian or whatever, you're kind of nowhere, you know, you're kind of just there, not quite sure.

To summarise, this paper has shown that whilst diaspora is often portrayed as a linear link to a homeland, belongings for the British Ugandan Asian diaspora are multiple and complex. In Uganda they developed connections to Britain, emotional ties to Uganda and a gradual distance from India. The expulsion challenged their connections and in both Uganda and Britain, their belongings were not freely chosen, but grounded in particular material and historical realities, economic and social contexts and shaped by government responses. Moreover the interviews reveal that though 35 years since their expulsion, the process of negotiating these different affiliations remains, for some, an unsettling and unresolved concern.