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MIGRATION AND THE SACRALISATION OF NEW HOMES

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As transnational migrants settle in a new country, they transplant and naturalize cultural objects, performances and categories, not simply because this is their tradition or culture, but because as active agents they have a stake in particular *aspects* of their culture. 'Culture' as a medium of social interaction confers agency within a field of sociality and power relations. Against the essentialist critique of community and culture, this essay suggests that in conferring *agency*, the performance of culture creates a field of transaction and relatedness; second, that culture as performance, in being *embodied*, contains inescapable experiential force; and finally, that culture as a *discursive imaginary* of selfhood, identity, subjectivity, and moral virtue constitutes a field of power. The domestic rituals that immigrants celebrate in distant and alien places are thus usually elaborated with cultural images and objects derived from their homelands. This transfer of images from one cultural context to another is an evident feature of the migration process. It enables migrants to sacralise their new homes through events that involve nurture and sociability within the home and which bring together newly emergent circles of trust forged in the migration context: kin, friends, and neighbours. The present essay discusses such rituals comparatively across different migrant groups settled in different countries.

Keywords: immigrants - culture - domestic rituals – homes – images – agency - performance.

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If the migration process frequently starts with the arrival of lone migrants, male or female, the translocation and naturalization of culture usually begins when they are joined by their families. Perhaps the most emotionally compelling events for migrants away from home involve nurture and sociability within the home, whether seasonal holidays like Christmas, Passover, or the Chinese New Year or rites of passage and rituals of sacralization and votive offerings, which bring together emergent circles of trust: kin, friends, and neighbors.

One of the most detailed studies of the preparation of immigrant food as integral to the sense of self and emotional well-being in the diaspora is Harbottle's exploration of Iranian immigrants' food. For Iranian immigrants, she says, "the process of cooking is one of transformation and enhancement, in which the sight, smell, taste and texture of the meal served 'speak' of the labour of the labour, love and expertise invested" (2000, 27). They derive their status and prestige from their ability to prepare elaborate, highly valued dishes.

The special ambience of family seasonal holidays and rites of passage is embodied in the tastes and smells of absent homes created by immigrants in their new homes. Immigrants often sacralize these homes, creating another kind of transnational bridge to their countries of origin. Among Hindus in Southern California studied by Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2008), home is sacralized with religious artifacts and landscaped with significant trees and plants through which immigrants renew their connections to home. Before moving into a new home, an altar is created for the deities on an auspicious day, and a *puja* offering of music

and food is made, attended by invited relatives and friends. In the ritual, overflowing boiling milk symbolizes the abundance and prosperity of the new home; a priest sprinkles the rooms with holy water while the sacred camphor flame is lit and passed to congregants. Its smoke is believed to drive out evil. The owners decorate the entrance to their house with coconut, rice, and sacred objects, and anoint the doorway with sandalwood and turmeric in elaborate designs representing flowers or the goddess Lakshmi. Southern Californian Hindu homes are thus transformed, the authors argue, into “sacred microcosm[s]” (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2008, 259; see also Raj 2003, 95–98). Home altars are replete with pictures and statues of gods and goddesses, some of them heirlooms or imported substances like Ganges water, and multiple statues of gods and goddesses are distributed throughout the house. Sacred plants, bushes, and flowers are planted in the garden and used for ritual events, when relatives and friends are invited for devotional singing and music-making on special occasions. These gatherings, with their food, fragrances, visual aesthetics, and sound, offer participants a multisensorial spiritual experience, connecting and re-creating homes away from home.

Like Hindus, Vietnamese migrants to Australia invest in the sacralization of their homes and gardens. The process of choosing an auspiciously proportioned house and a garden planted with herbs, sugarcane, and bananas evokes a “landscape and physical environment are imbued with meaning for diasporic Vietnamese” (Thomas 1999, 42). Their new homes are “crowded with echoes of the past,” including an ancestral altar, that allow them to express a

Vietnamese cultural aesthetic and cope with their sense of loss as uprooted refugees. Some place ashes of family members carried from Vietnam to Australia at the altar, alongside pictures of deceased relatives (Thomas 1999, 52). On death anniversaries, weddings, and other family occasions, special prayers, food, and drink are offered at the altar.

When Pakistani migrants to Great Britain move into a new home, they call a *khatam qur'an* ritual, a communal Koran reading followed by a ritual offering and commensal meal (Werbner 1990/2002, ch. 5). *Khatam qur'ans* are held on other occasions also—to thank God for recovery from illness or accidents, when starting a new job, or to commemorate the dead. Hosts and guests are often women friends, kin, and neighbors. They sit on a clean sheet spread on the floor, heads covered, and read all thirty *siparas* (chapters) of the Koran in one sitting, each woman reading one or two chapters. Participation in such ritual events is regarded as a meritorious service on behalf of the convenor "for the sake of Allah," requiring no reciprocation. *Khatam qur'ans*, like other such domestic rituals, create circles of trust for incoming immigrants, allowing the incorporation of newcomers and strangers. They are often neighborhood events, especially in immigrant residential enclaves, but they are also held among higher-class elite migrants living in suburbs and can include men as well as women.

The Bene Israel, Indian Jews who have migrated to Israel, hold their own unique version of this immigrant ritual of offering, thanksgiving, and purification. The *malida* invokes the Prophet Elijah, believed to be still alive, followed by an offering containing a sweet rice mixture, five kinds of fruit, scented twigs, and

flowers, placed on a large platter. A wine libation is spilled on the ground, and the prayers are followed by a festive meal. Gabriele Shenar, who studied the ritual, makes the point that Bene Israel immigrants create “emotional continuity” with India in their “understanding of emotions as foods . . . elaborated in terms of nourishment, cooking, ingestion, digesting, and life.” Food rituals are thus a concrete means of experiencing and re-experiencing homage to the prophet or a gift to a deity (Shenar 2004).

Food is also central to Algerians in southeast France, whose rituals follow a set pattern: opening rite—prayers—meal—songs and dances—closing rite (Andezian 1990, 201). The food at such gatherings is blessed, containing *baraka*, and *dhikr* is performed, inducing ecstatic trance (202). The female leader, the *mukadma*, presides over the rituals, conducts the supplicatory prayer (*dua*), mediates requests to saints, finds solutions to personal afflictions, and accompanies women on Sufi pilgrimage to Algeria. Such invisible neighborhood events, convened in the privacy of homes, link immigrant women of all ages in family, neighborhood, and friendship networks.

The desire to sacralise one’s home, however ephemeral, is also found among single migrant workers. Filipina Catholic female domestic workers in Israel join together to form block rosaries. They carry a figure of the Virgin Mary acquired in Jerusalem through the streets of Tel Aviv from one shared apartment to another. Mama Mary is then enshrined, each week in a new home, as the women gather to pray over their rosaries and celebrate with a festive meal. She is set up in the home altar, lovingly dressed, kissed, and prayed over. Liebelt

reports that each week the Virgin blesses "homes and their surrounding neighbourhoods, hears hundreds of the women's petitions, creates a community of devotees, and performs miracles." Against the backdrop of south Tel Aviv's "raucous Friday night life and the devotees' own life turbulences," she says, "'Mama Mary', as she is tenderly addressed, comes to stand for compassion, refuge, and protection." The block rosary, like the

> devotion of Mary more generally, can be understood as a performance of the sacredness of the home and the family. As the powerful mother of the Holy Family, tenderly called "Mama," the figure blesses the homes she stays in. Within the context of migration, this consecration of the home and the family has the undertone of remembrance, nostalgia and yearning. As they pray the devotees, almost exclusively mothers of children far away, remember family members they have been separated from for years and sometimes decades, suffer from homesickness and feelings of exclusion from belonging in Israel, while they hope for miracles, salvation and healing. (Liebelt, 2013)

Rituals of offering and sacrifice have been regarded in the anthropological literature as taking place in the context of "natural" groups of kindreds or locally based communities. The very structure of the ritual dictates that its efficacious performance is contingent on the mediated support of significant others: kin, friends, neighbors, the poor. For labor migrants, as the preceding examples illustrate, this "natural" community cannot simply be "renewed"; it must be reconstructed. Moreover, its very reconstruction is problematic, for it implies a shift in commitments from migrants' natal home to their new place of domicile.

The holding of sacrifices and ritual offerings, hitherto associated with "home" in its broadest affective and moral sense, in migrants' new place of settlement is predicated on the reconstruction of a moral universe. To achieve this reconstruction, crucial categories of the person must be reconstituted. Until such a stage is reached, money is often sent by migrants for sacrifices to be made at home in their names. Pakistani migrants, for example, sometimes send home money because they express doubt at the efficacy of offerings made in the absence of an act of expiatory giving to the poor (Werbner 1988; 1990/2002, ch. 5). Once reconstructed, however, rituals of offering and sacrifice come to be powerful foci for sociality. As immigrants put down roots in their places of settlement, homes are sacralised, and newly naturalized communities of trust form around them. In particular, women's "worlds" are renewed.

Large-scale family rituals, like weddings and funerals, are indexical occasions, which register the full range of a family's network of acquaintances, friends, and kin. Often these events consist of a series of rites that effect crucial transitions. For example, the Pakistani all-female *mehndi* (henna) prewedding ritual is the most elaborate within a complex cycle of rituals. Through feeding and cosmetic treatment with substances, the symbolic transformations effected during the *mehndi* move the bride and groom from a state of culturally constrained "coldness" to framed, safe "heat," in anticipation of the consummation of the marriage (Werbner 1990/2002). Equivalent female henna rituals, known as *kina gecesi*, *laylat al-henna*, or *mehndi*, are held by Turkish, Moroccan, and Surinamese Hindustani Muslim migrants in the Netherlands (Dessing 2001). The

female dresser, *negaffa*, paints the Moroccan bride with henna and plays an important role in the wedding reception, at which the bride changes her clothes several times and is carried around the hall amid singing and ullulating. As among Pakistanis, weddings involve elaborate exchange relations. Importantly also, much as in India (Raheja and Gold 1994), the Pakistani *mehndi* is an occasion for bawdy singing, sexual clowning, and transgressive masquerade, in what may be conceived of as a resistive or counterhegemonic commentary on both the status of women in Muslim Punjabi society and of Pakistani migrants within British society. Such clowning is not simply reflexive; it fulfills a symbolic transformational role in the ritual process, occurring at a key liminal moment, before the clown is banished amid gales of laughter from the women (Werbner 1990/2002). *Mehndi* rituals allow for creative inventiveness and culturally hybrid objects, songs, and dramas, while revitalizing through aesthetic performance the substances, foods, music, and dance of the homeland. The groom is subjected to hazing, sexually suggestive joking, and forced feeding by the female bride receivers, underlining the power and control of Punjabi women over the domestic domain. As Raheja and Gold (1994) also argue, such rituals highlight the uninhibited expressive sexuality of South Asian women. Not surprisingly, *mehndis* are disapproved of by Muslim reformists and Islamists.

The centrality of women in “pre-political contexts of everyday life” is stressed by Alund in her study of Bosnian women in Stockholm (Alund 1999). She argues that “rather than being passive victims, women who have migrated actively employ the complex cultural symbolism of their histories to challenge

contemporary forms of subordination and, in the process, they create new solidarities" (150–151). Just as in Bosnia, in Sweden cultural events enable women to host and sustain informal networks and foster cross-ethnic local solidarities.

An important feature of family and domestic rituals is their socialization of second generation migrants into the intricate concrete details of their parents' culture through the medium of objects, substances, and performances; of images, sounds and tastes – as lived experience rather than theoretical dogma or text. Young girls and women figure prominently in Pakistani *mehndi* celebrations. They are the ones who dance, sing, and clown, supporting the bride. So also are networks of second generation girls and younger women formed around such interdomestic rituals and celebrations.

But "culture," once taken as axiomatic in the natural context, can also come to be questioned in the migration context, such as when Sierra Leonian Muslim women in Washington, D.C., challenge practices of polygamy or agonize over the rights and wrongs of female circumcision, while men adopting stricter forms of Islam challenge traditional child-naming feasts (D'Alisera 2004). So also may young South Asian women question arranged or "forced" marriages, accusing their parents of mistaking outmoded Punjabi "culture" with Islam (Werbner 2007). Quite often in Britain, pubescent girls' movements are restricted and they are chaperoned, with family honor and female modesty repeatedly invoked. Fear of gossip is highly potent in close-knit Pakistani communities, although illicit love affairs do occur (Shaw 2000, 172–173).

Whether because of global trends toward Islamicization, or the maturation of second generation migrant women, the spread of the *hijab* (veil) has become increasingly marked in Muslim migrant communities across Western Europe, from Norway, Denmark, and Sweden to France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom, along with the proliferation of Islamic study groups (*dars*), as noted by Afshar (1998) and Schmidt (2004). These groups rotate among women's homes or meet in mosques to interpret Koranic verses or learn classical Arabic, often guided by a woman expert in Islamic studies. Some "born again" women belong to national and international networks, such as the Al-Huda women's network, which has its headquarters in Pakistan (see Ahmad 2009). Such networks use e-mail and have their own Web sites and chat rooms. An increased knowledge of Islam allows young women to resist traditional customs as un-Islamic and to demand the right to make their own marriage choices (Dwyer 1999; Schmidt 2004; Werbner 2007).

In addition to weddings, funerals, or birthday parties, most immigrant festivals and holidays are celebrated at home as well as in temples, synagogues, or churches: Christmas, Eid, Passover, Diwali, the Chinese New Year, the Vietnamese Tet, and a myriad of other holidays must all be reconstructed. In an overview of such family celebrations, Pleck (2000) shows how past and present cultural traditions are renegotiated and reinvented in the context of migration. Sometimes the public aspects of holidays may cause conflict. In France, for example, Moroccan immigrants' desire to slaughter their own sacrifice in person, often in public places, has created conflict with the authorities (Brisbarre and Diop

1997). In Trinidad, the descendants of Indian Muslim indentured laborers celebrate Muharram in an elaborate ritual, which begins with building *imambaras*, large, complex ritual structures that purify the community and are later carried through the streets in procession, with carnivalesque drumming and music, before being cast into the sea. Korom (2003) investigates the origins of the ritual in India in the light of current attacks on it by Islamic reformers, who object to what they see as its illegitimate creolized form.

One of the paradoxes of immigrant cultural celebrations highlighted by Korom's study is that in some respects immigrant cultures are both the same and different wherever they settle. To give a familiar example, every year during the Passover meal, Jewish families recount the story of the Exodus from Egypt and express their collective yearning for the homeland in their supplicatory prayer, "Next year, in Jerusalem." The simultaneity of the Passover celebration by Jews throughout the world engenders a consciousness, both individual and collective, of the Jewish diaspora as copresent, while it inscribes the space between past and present ontologically and materially—the shared sacrificial meal, the ritual enactment of the ten plagues, the open door to Elijah and to all strangers, the empty chair filled by their ethereal presence, the glass of wine. This simultaneity of ritual practice in thousands of widely dispersed homes seems itself to imply the sameness of the immigrant experience in the diaspora, even beyond a single shared script.

Yet Passover meals also differ widely between places of settlement and even families, and so too, apparently similar immigrant cultural practices vary

from place to place. They are never beyond place. As Stuart Hall points out (1991), they are hybrid formations, created by the encounter with very different receiving contexts. How then can they share a single imagination of home, when even the locations of immigrant sacred centers differ? Writing about Hassidic Jews in the diaspora, Henry Goldschmidt reports that, “Each rebbe’s court, wherever he may be, has always stood at the social and geographic center of his community, as a pilgrimage site for his Hassidim and a source of inspiration” (2000, 98). “Thus according to most Lubavitcher [Hassidic Jews], Crown Heights [in New York] is not merely the center of the Lubavitch community but the spiritual center of the Jewish people – ‘the center of the world’” (98). These “centers-of-the-world” travel in the imagination of Hassidic followers with the peregrinations of their holy men, whose charisma the centers radiate. Such centers are multiple, just as the religious sectarian tendencies and movements within immigrant diasporas are multiple and often highly contested and politicized.

Multiplicity is reflected in the diverse ways in which the cultural landscapes of immigrants are reproduced differentially even in a single receiving context, while resembling one another across different places. Religious and cultural movements respect no administrative, territorial, or political boundaries. This is what makes diasporas *chaordic* social formations: chaotic orders that reproduce and extend themselves without any centralized command structures, emerging as unique and yet predictable cultural-organizational forms in many different places. Chaorders are inscribed both materially and imaginatively in space, time, and objectifying practices (Werbner 2002). Chaorder theory implies that,

irrespective of receiving contexts, the generative cultural, religious, and organizational DNA of diasporas, so to speak, both ignores and transcends context. Migrant communities import and inscribe their homes spatially through ritual and religious processions and festivals, celebrated in the streets of their new places of settlement.

Note

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