Reflections on the use of multi-sites for research on Punjabi Sikh women's transnational lives.

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Gulf airlines are amongst a host of possible carriers for travel to Tanzania. Passengers on board the flight from Heathrow bound for Abu Dhabi were Arab, Pakistani, Indian men, elderly young women and children. From Abu Dhabi flights depart for other Arab states, east towards the Indian sub-continent and South to Africa. Following a three-hour stop over at Abu Dhabi my aircraft made hour-long stopovers at Bahrain, Muscat, Kampala and Zanzibar. I witnessed a variety of passengers embarking and disembarking the aircraft at key airports. For example South Indian women joined us at Abu Dhabi (having arrived from India) and they disembarked at Muscat. Later on in the journey Arab women travelled the short distance form Zanzibar to Dar es Salaam. The only other passengers who endured the journey from Heathrow to Dar es Salaam were a Sikh lady with two teenage boys and me.

Throughout our travel the flight monitoring system indicated the nations that we had crossed and our next destination. Grounded at the stop-overs in Bahrain and Muscat signs on buildings marked the spaces as international ports. For the three hour stop-over at Abu Dhabi international airport all passengers disembarked. The cool air, from the transit/ duty free lounge, tickled our senses; the air conditioning was a relief from the gust of hot air that welcomed us as we walked down the jetty to the lounge. The lounge with its dome ceiling, covered in exquisite geometric tiles radiated intense colours. The blues and greens of the tiles were a contrast to the dry arid landscape visible through the darkened glass. This oasis with its abundance of desirable commodities is regularly advertised on 'Asian' satellite channels worldwide and on our in-flight entertainment. One shop at the duty-free had South Asian men and women staff selling gold jewellery, coins and ornaments. These were all placed in low

glass covered counters, which included weighing scales, current exchange rates and calculators. At an adjoining shop South Asian men were keen to engage customers to look at, and operate, the 'high tech' electronic items alongside glamorous Filipino women assisting in the purchase of cosmetics, alcohol and tobacco.

At the Abu Dhabi stop-over I was to purchase gold coins to be given at a forthcoming marriage by a family member of my adopted household in Tanzania. Both excited and apprehensive I looked for the shop described to me during the recent phone call from Tanzania. Just as I had been told, there is only one shop that sold gold in the lounge. In the past I had witnessed the purchase of 22 carat gold by others it was a new venture for men and I was nervous. As I tried to understand how one approached such purchases, I picked up on the conversations taking place in Hindi. Shared language was a significant aid in the purchase of gold; since discussions about the weight, value, design and the origin of the metal was a feature in the purchasing process. Having common terms of reference increased understanding of value, provided a sense of security and lent authority to the transactions.

Whilst I did not intend to observe the interaction at the airport for the purposes of the PhD, the experience brings into fore many of the issues raised during my subsequent research. Primarily the question of how and why spaces become places that can be identifiable, are made meaningful and related to with emotion became clear through my purchase at Abu Dhabi. In my research, journeys were made by informants for spiritual, economic or familial reasons across places over the life course and this became the object of study. In particular I looked into the lives of Punjabi Sikh women who were visiting, dwelling and moving within and across Indian Punjab,

Tanzania and Britain, as positioned actors within familial and state discourses. From the onset, travel by women across places and the life course became central to the research.

The description of my journey to Tanzania is a departure from traditional anthropological representation and procedure. However, the account introduces the possibilities and problems arising from undertaking research into transnationalism through multi-sites. The critiques raised by authors like Marcus (1997); Gupta and Ferguson (1997); and Fog-Olwig and Hastrup (1997) have pointed to the ideological underpinnings and empirical exclusions embedded in the notions surrounding traditional fieldwork premised on long term residence in a single- site and 'going native'. Instead, these authors have stressed significance of the way research is framed in terms of how the research is designed and the object of investigation which take into account contemporary realities. Taking on the call for multi-sited research proposed by Marcus my research consisted in the main of 'following the people' and the biography (Marcus 1997).

My informants and I held common migration histories and in some cases were related to one another. Additionally, like me many were involved in travel between places and reflected on processes of change and continuity that affected them. These factors questioned the spatial distance and the ideological premised underlying traditional ethnographic practices. Although not focused on in this paper, the discussion about the construction of identities such as 'us' and 'them', 'insider and 'outsider' as well as linguistic competencies in the context of fieldwork competencies are important aspect for understanding multi-sited research.

In this paper I draw attention to adopting a multi sited research design was due to empirical realities. In using this approach new inter-relationship and arenas for investigation came to the fore whilst new light was shed on existing anthropological themes. For example, gold coins bought in Abu-Dhabi and given as ritual gifts during the wedding of a 'third generation' Punjabi Sikh male migrant underscored the limits of traditional anthropological fieldwork comprising of single sites with an overt emphasis on participant observation for capturing the context of transnational lives. At the same time the example of buying gold, which in turn relates to status owing to its inherent and culturally specific value meant that I could explore status and the relationship this has to place and gender. Therefore new linkages between social identities and status in relation to place were apparent and a multi-sited approach opened up the possibility for comparison. The request for gold coins by my informant also highlighted the interrelationship between cultural norms surrounding gender and the division of labour, whereby women's activities are differently instrumental for the generation and continuity of transnational ties (Mand 2004).

One of the key criticisms made of adopting multi-sited research design is that it potentially lacks the possibility to gain contextual depth made feasible through traditional fieldwork. Whilst there is undoubtedly a close fit between studying migration and the use of multi-sites, such a strategy also runs the risk of producing snap shots and fails to account for the significance of place within which transnational lives are lived. The remainder of the paper explores this issue. The paper concludes by suggesting that some of the challenges could be met by combining traditional anthropological thematic concerns and methods along side more innovative practices.

Empirical realities and contextual depth.

Adopting a transnational perspective revealed that migrants held and maintained relationships with people and places through practices that went beyond the model of Britain as the receiving context and the sub-continent as the sending context. Historically, South Asians migrated to East African countries as free migrants and indentured labourers and, despite a move towards the west following Independence some South Asians remained in Africa and there are new migratory movements between the subcontinent and East African countries (Mand 2004). The only widely available study that addressed the migration of Sikhs to East Africa and then on to Britain is Bhachu's (1984) study of East African Sikhs whom she named 'twice migrants', conducted in Britain. In this text Bhachu argues that the economic and social success of twice migrant East African Sikhs was directly related to their stay in Africa and that they assumed a permanent stay in Britain. Although there was an adherence to the significance of the intermediary site (in this case Kenya) the text did not explore ongoing relations, historical or contemporary between Sikhs in Kenya and the Punjab or links with Punjab through practices such as travel, marriages and/or pilgrimages. What became glaring in this was the lack of ethnographic data on how distinctive identities were fashioned amongst the Sikhs in the African context and at what points did ties with the different geographic locations alter and what if anything remained the same. Owing to Bhachu's research being conducted purely in the British context these questions remained unanswered.

Furthermore, in exploring the experience of migrants who have moved across different continents and taking on board their continuing links, which fluctuate in

terms of density and flexibility, the adoption of a multi-sited research strategy provides contextual data relevant to the object under investigation.

The research contexts and methods

The research was carried out in Tanzania, Punjab and in East and West London amongst 10 extended families who are of the *Jat* Sikh caste group. These families were chosen for the research because they had significant social relations that they actively maintained in other national contexts. In following connections across multiple national contexts I became aware of social relations being influenced by the socio-cultural norms and legal policies of nation-states. I based myself within households in rural and urban contexts and interacted with various actors in institutions like schools, temples, legal authorities and so on.

In particular my focus was on women's experiences. Punjabi Sikh women have been travelling, with varying intensities, in Tanzania, Punjab or the UK, over the course of their lives initially as brides, mothers and /or widows. Elderly women often accounted for their movement 'to escape the cold of England', 'Punjab's hot summers' and or to be close to transnationally dispersed kin owing to their old age or widowhood. Women in their forties and fifties as well as younger women were also involved in travel for the purposes of their own or children's education, which initially used to be from Tanzania to the sub-continent but at the present time is to Britain.

A diversity of methods were utilised in the course of the research and these altered according to places and the people with whom I worked. For example during the

weddings in Punjab and Tanzania I participated in the rituals whilst at times standing back to observe the ways in which practices altered from place to place. At a different points and places, I watched rituals on video recordings and engaged with women on the basis of what we were viewing whilst they reflected on common practices during their marriages. Like me, my informants were in a process of reflection concerning their dispersal and were keen to note practices using specific methods (telling stories, video recordings, and photographs). For example as I recorded observations on notepaper, my informants were recording events like weddings in real time on videocassettes (Sengupta 1999).

The use of different methods like participant observation, the use of videos, photographs as well as open ended interviews was all the more necessary owing to the mobility of my informants, which at times led to large gaps in my knowledge. For this reason I found narratives to be a useful method for bridging distances across places and time. Narratives were fruitful because they spoke about women and men's experience of movement and the ways in which they perceived places and practices. Furthermore narratives travel; they are told across generations and places and provide a rich source of data about shifting contexts and mobile people. My position in the Tanzanian context brought home to me the different ways in which women talk about places as dependant on locality and, therefore, what a reference to place signified in women's narratives. During analysis I found that women's narratives about places were also a reflection on their feelings about social relations. I initially understood this to be related to issues of confidentiality and my location within these networks. However, the relationship between places and people within these narratives were

made frequently and with hindsight, I see that talking about a place is a strategy to discuss social relations that were otherwise difficult for the narrator (Khan 1996).

Different geographical sites and the significance of social identities.
Time spent and interactions held differed according to the locality and were heavily influenced by norms pertaining to gender, class and race within them. Meanwhile, familial hierarchies meant that not all family members are involved in travelling; most were surrounded by images and were interested in the processes of migration. This was notable in the case of Punjab when I went to visit a Tanzanian based woman's natal kin. Here I was the recipient of questions about what happens in the, 'foreign [land]', 'what are the people like' 'their morals and activities'. Over the course of the research, it became necessary to stay in one place so as to understand the dynamics of transnational families.

Residing in one locality drew attention to what is known and knowable as being engendered and enabled. For example, differences between women's experiences and knowledge of state processes were apparent owing to the rigid division between public (male) and private (female) spheres in Tanzania as compared to Britain (Mand 2002).

In the Tanzanian city I lived with a family preparing for their son's wedding involving the attendance of key members of the household from other trans- localities. During this time, as we walked or were driven to and from places accompanied or unaccompanied by men, I understood Sikh women's movements in Tanzania to be

related to the historical racialisation of the place that meant the demarcation of areas as suitable and 'safe' or 'unsafe' for women. (c.f. Nagar 1995).

Following the wedding at the home of my host in the city, I relocated to a Tanzanian town. The move was part of a strategy to develop relations and meet with an older generation of migrants. The composition of Sikhs in the Tanzanian city and town is different owing to the history of Sikh movement within Tanzania (Mand 2004). In the town I also worked in local schools established by Asians and subsequently nationalised following Tanzanian Independence and at the 'international school'.

Whilst living with a family in the Tanzania town, I heard about a marriage involving a male migrant, when the prospective groom's aunt was called from Britain and given the 'good news'. I decided to return to England and follow this wedding alongside the family as they travelled and subsequently performed the wedding in Punjab. The way in which news of the wedding travelled and later the travel of members of the household, from various localities, to Punjab illustrates precisely the ways in which social relations are maintained and created transnationally. On return from the Punjab, during my fieldwork in Britain I was able to work with the newly arrived bride in east London. Whilst in Punjab, I spent some time at the natal village of one of the women who had been part of my research in Tanzania. Living in the village for the period of two months gave me background knowledge about lifestyles and I could target my enquiries around what it means to be connected to families abroad. Through such queries I came across some of the negative ways in which migration intersects with social relations as I spent time in voluntarily attended family courts that investigate the cases women who are 'abandoned' shortly after their marriages to migrant men.

By adopting a multi-sited approach to fieldwork I began to explore the interface between marriage, legality and migration. In the process questions were raised about the dominance of viewing South Asian marriages as building bonds between households and the focus on the 'positive' aspects of social relations. Such a focus, I later argued in the thesis has meant that other experiences of marriage such as divorce, separation and widowhood remain marginal to much of the anthropology of South Asian kinship.

My gender identity and kinship networks played a significant role in my relative immobility in Tanzania and, in Punjab there was not the infrastructure to move from village to village and being an unmarried female raised specific issues. My experience in Britain was less restrictive owing to my own understanding of the locality. In Britain I was relatively 'independent' as I could access material and social resources away from my informants. However, the pace of research was slower in Britain than the other two contexts. This was because women have more demands in terms of paid work, domestic responsibilities than those experienced by their counterparts in the sub-continent and Tanzania.

In Britain I based myself with a household (Rai) with whom I attended weddings occurring amongst their contacts from East Africa, Punjab and in Britain. Many people would visit the house since Mrs. Rai an elderly widow was living in England for some period having travelled to and from Punjab and Tanzania in the course of nine months. In the summer the Rai household who have house in Tanzania and ancestral property in Punjab moved from East London to a rural Berkshire. Through

my time with the Rai household I began to understand the changing nature of household organisation and the ways in households are influenced by place in terms of policies.

Conclusion.

In this paper I have described and reflected on the strategy of conducting multi-sited research across different geographical sites and across the life course. Owing to the predominance of studying settled ways of life, taking up the study of peoples who had connections and then following them jars against the naturalistic assumption embedded in anthropological fieldwork. There is an implicit recognition in using this strategy that the field of investigation is constructed albeit based on empirical realities.

In the course of this paper I have tried to signal new arenas for investigation that arise from adopting such a methodology. However, despite new arenas like airports being incorporated into the research gaze there are limits to what can be observed and by whom. For example, although duty free lounges can be in the research frame immigration interview rooms are less approachable. Furthermore, owing to the restrictions posed on travel by nation-states, this type of methodology inherently implies the need to hold a particular immigration status and therefore excludes other researchers on the basis of their identities be they national and/ or gender.

A key criticism of following connections and not studying groups of people in a more 'holistic' fashion relates to the quality of data. As we have seen, in the context of transnationalism contextual depth is lacking when the focus is on single sites.

Paradoxically, transnational Punjabi women's ways of life across multiple national contexts highlights their experiences to be set in the context of social and political norms of places. This underscores the need to adopt varying methods for the collection of data alongside participant observation in a locality.

Therefore, I have highlighted the need to incorporate the analysis of narratives, photographs and wedding videos in conjunction with traditional fieldwork practices of living alongside informants and partaking in their daily lives. In doing so, multi-sited research brings new life to traditional themes such as kinship and marriages which have preoccupied anthropologists working in South Asia. Whilst looking at older established themes does not mark a radical shift in terms of research gaze using a multi sited approach allows a focus on emerging processes and a mapping of change and continuities.

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