**Workshop on: 'Problems and Possibilities in Multi-Sited Ethnography'**
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(VERY EARLY DRAFT)


*Problems and possibilities of researching kinship in a transnational context/perspective. An ethnographic experience between Italy and Kerala, South India.*

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## 1. Introduction

The first question I have posed to myself while preparing this paper relates to the meanings - in my personal research experience - of building a multi-sited fieldwork in kinship studies: which practical and methodological choices, doubts, and problems it has entailed. Between 1996 and 2005 I have done fieldwork in Rome (1996-1998; 2002-2003: 10 months) and in Kochi (2000-2001; 2001-2002; 2004-2005: 15 months), on the relation between migration, transnationalism, family change and modernity among middle class Syrian Christians and Hindus. My interest on the way in which kinship and family intertwine with experiences of social mobility was progressively located within a wider framework – the *feminisation of migration* - that was emerging as relevant in Malayli contemporary migration to Italy. With this expression recent studies on gender and migration (Anthias and Lazaridis 2000; Parrenas 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschil2003) have differently indicated the increasing presence of women within the global labour force both as unskilled and professional flexible workers, mainly in the domestic, care and health service. The pioneer and active role played by Malayali women working in Italy in the development of a transnational migration flows – through remittances, journeys, sponsorships – posed crucial questions about the relation between their transnational lives and changes in gendered household's relations with references to both contexts. Fieldwork experiences in both contexts were thus motivated by my interests in 'following' migrants in different interrelated locations, in order to understand the way in which kinship and family life is reinterpreted and transformed in its meanings, practices and values through migration and transnationalism.

Since the end of the 1960's *kinship* has been subject of criticism, 'demolition' and revisionism in anthropology, both in terms of its legitimacy as a broader analytical concept as well as in relations to the methodology adopted to understand and represent its features and expressions. Recently, the development of a transnational perspective on migration seems to have partly stimulated a renewed interest towards the domain of 'kinship', mainly in relation to the formation of transnational families and households and in the role played by marriages in sustaining and shaping experiences of transnationalism (Grillo and Gardner 2002; Charsley 2005; Gamburd 2000; George 2005). Studying kinship in a transnational contexts raises crucial questions about the possibility of capturing and representing – at least partially - its complexity of meanings and practices in multi-local lives. If, as noted by Carsten, 'it is impossible to understand what a *house* is divorced from the people and the relations within it' (Carsten 2004: 56), what happen to kinship studies when these relations are produced and constructed *in* and *with reference to* different places by both migrants and non-migrants? And what when the researcher becomes part of this *house*, as an agent/voice among multi-vocal agents in 'producing' kinship representations? In this sense, the study of kinship through a multi-sited ethnography implies the recognition of and the dialogical confrontation between different agents in conceiving, experiencing and representing kinship meanings, relations and values. This confrontation it is crucially important in order to understand the way in which we and other people look at kinship both as a domain of study as well as a life experience, and at fieldwork as an interactive process of knowledge-building. In this sense, multi-sited has meant for me the attempt to maintain a wider and 'self-including' perspective both in moving with people through transnational and national spaces as well as in doing a more 'contextualised' research in a single site.

In this paper I will mainly focus on the processes of constructing fieldwork experiences between Italy and Kara. The discussion of the more crucial questions regarding the 'self-including' multi-vocality in constructing fieldwork sites and in producing kinship representation is only superficially touched here and is left to further development of this paper. In this context I will suggest that a multi-sited perspective may contribute to our understanding of how migrants dynamically experience, produce and transform kinship and family relations *in* and *with* reference to different interrelated places. In my experience, the potentialities of this perspective rely upon an understanding of the meanings of transnational experiences through the analysis of located contexts and, on the other hand, upon the intent to 'open' the understanding of these contexts to a transnational perspective. I will stress that the understanding of people's transnational family life and identity is not 'separable' from the understanding of ongoing historical processes of family change and kinship renovation in located contexts such as Italy and Kerala; on the other, the study

of processes of family and kinship transformation in contemporary Kerala and Italy should be carried out maintaining a wider perspective that takes into account the meanings and the effects of people's migration and transnational connections. In this sense, it seems to me important to avoid a dichotomization between 'multi-sited' fieldwork and 'traditional (localised?)' fieldwork and to look at the way in which 'multi-sited' can both be carried out at different levels and be used to reinterpret the meanings of field-sites and social phenomena in a more relational and dialogic way.

## 2. Building a multi-sited fieldwork: problems and stimuli.

The meanings of the social and symbolic connections between places - not only Italy and Kerala, but also within a wider map of places in the longer established history of malayli migration - have never been immediate, given and univocal. First of all for me, in terms of personal experiences of travelling, of building up a life and of researching in two different contexts, often both close and distant to my own life and provenience. Rome - especially the "migrant" areas of Esquilino and Boccea - where I often found myself to be an extraneous and an intruder - and in semi/urban Kerala, where sometimes prevailed a sense of familiarity with the culture and the lived experiences of migration, partly for my own family history of migration and diaspora from South Italy. Yet, while for the people I was meeting during my fieldwork a sense of connection between different experiences of migration and an "ideological geography of places" in malayali "diaspora", seemed partly to inform the meanings of their experiences, I sometimes found myself *imposing a separation* and a *discrete distinction* between my ethnography in Kerala and Italy. For instance, as I will try to show later in the paper, it took me sometimes to realise that, while I was trying to understand the role of kinship networks in sustaining transnational migration and how kinship values and practice may have changed in this process, I was often unconsciously looking at kinship and family among malayalis in Rome as "something" radically different, if not antagonistic, to a supposed more "traditional" and conservative malayali family setting in Kerala. Thus, while becoming aware of the active and pioneer role played by malayali women in developing a transnational network between Italy and Kerala, I was also often assuming that their family and social life in Rome represented a visible rupture from more oppressing hierarchies in their native country. In a simplistic way, I was looking at women's mobility as a potentially subversive process of an established patriarchal order: their life in Italy were implicitly conceived as an alternative model of life, which was at my eyes hardly reconcilable with my experience of family life and kinship values during my subsequent

fieldwork in Kerala, where women are hardly present in the public sphere, institutions and social life[1]. I will pick up this point later.

Clifford has pointed out that multi-sited fieldwork is in itself an oxymoron (Clifford 1997:57). Moving between different sites of research in order to understand the dynamic and changeable framework that links them together and gives meanings to these multiple connections (Marcus 1995) contrasts with the ideal of the in-depth research in a single site, entailed by the "classical" notion of anthropological fieldwork. Moreover, the trope of physical and cultural separation that the idea of fieldwork have traditionally entailed for the ethnographer seems clearly at odds with the fact that the life of the people we are meeting during our fieldwork are often *partly* build upon travel, connections and displacement. In Kerala not only migration is inscribed in personal, household and community biographies of a relatively large portion of Malayali society, who has experienced migration in different periods and heterogeneous destinations. People's social and geographical mobility has also progressively produced a *culture of migration*– through consumption, remittances, imported goods, investments, renewed life styles, narratives and public representations of migration – that deeply informs, in many different ways, the everyday life of the people who have never physically left their place, and their position within local socio-economic hierarchies.

During my fieldwork in Rome with the Malayali Syrian Christian community, I have mainly focused on how kinship and family change intertwines with migration and how gender relations and ideologies are negotiated and reinterpreted within this process. My interest was captured by the outstanding pioneer role played by malayali women in "opening the way" to Italy and in shaping life and job opportunities for other malayali men and women, through remittances, investments, sponsoring new migrants, journeys. Women-centred kinship ties were emerging as crucially important in order to obtain regular work permit and, no less importantly, to be accepted within Italian families. Migrant women's position in the Roma labour market and in the in-living domestic space of the Italian employer, as well as their capacity to sponsor further women from Kerala, seemed to be progressively rooted in a net of relations ambivalently built on reciprocal trust, social representations and expectations of family life between Italian families and malayali women (Gallo 1998; forthcoming). In this context it was relevant to look at the way in which Italian families were representing and shaping their employer's family life and values, and at how the former's family

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[1] Kerala is often represented in the contemporary literature of South Asia as a contradictory model of high social development (literacy, health provision, birth rate) and low GDP (...). Particularly, high level of women's literacy has not being accompanied by their presence in public institutions and public life. In terms of gender relations kerala is thus often depicted as a conservative society (...).

life, values, ideologies and practices where in turn also changed and influenced by the intimate presence of in living migrant women, often accompanied by their husbands and children.

On the other hand, the feeling that while researching in Rome I was encountering with a wider reality of people's life, that their experience of migration in Italy was deeply informed by a wider map of places and of imagined possibilities of mobility and alternative existences, was a key factor in deciding to proceed my research in Kerala. More specifically, follow the women I met in Rome back in their country, trying to understand the meanings of their experiences as migrant earning subjects in a place such as Kerala where *migrant identity and culture* has been mainly shaped by men's mobility (Gulati 1993; Kurien 2002; Osella &Osella) - became progressively part of my ethnographic interests.

Yet, during the first 6 months of research there the construction of my fieldwork has crucially rotated around two doubts:

1. *If concentrating myself on the Syrian Christians and on the families of the people I have met in Rome, thus legitimating continuity between my previous research experience.*

This possibility seemed to me, on the one hand, coherent with the perspective of understanding in depth how women's migration led to a re-interpretation of their role within the households in Kerala and the wider malayali society, and of how the recent formation of kin women-centred transnational networks between Italy and Kerala could be conjugated with a dominant configuration of male migration from this State. But exactly this problematic – reading and understanding new experiences of migration through the adoption of a wider perspective on people's heterogeneous forms and representations of mobility - has progressively led me to open my fieldwork to a inevitably more complex and dynamic reality. If I had to understand the meaning of Syrian Christian women migration in contemporary Kerala I should have located it within a more complex reality of migration and ongoing social transformation in this State, in a dialogical relations with how other members of malayali society have experienced and represented social and geographical mobility. This seemed to me an inevitable way of proceeding with my fieldwork after having 'followed' the people I had met in Rome.

People's everyday life in Kerala is deeply informed by their proximity and competition with Hindu, Muslims, other Christians, who may have made migration a successful way to achieve a certain socio-economic goals in their native society through migration in different places. As already noticed by Filippo and Caroline Osella, mobility achieved through migration takes places in continual comparison and competitions with other sections of Malayali society, in the cross-cutting

dimension of class, caste and gender (Osella&Osella 2000). In the context of my research, different experiences and projects of migration were often made meaningful in malayali popular imagination through the association of places with people's personal qualities and pedigree. Thus, Brahmins discourses asserted their recent presence only within the skilled migration flow in the USA, making natural an ideological association between the intellectual capacity of a superior caste with the possibility of migrating in prestigious places like America. Differently, migration in the Gulf is often associated with the lowest section of the malayali society or the *nouveau riches*. This ideological and hierarchical geography of places - that makes places meaningful through their association with personal, family or community naturalised attitudes and qualities - deeply informs today processes of social mobility and identity renovation in Kerala. It ideologically 're-appropriate' and give meanings at a local level to wider processes of people's displacement and transnational lives, reinforcing or putting into questions caste, class and gender hierarchies. In the area of my research, high status Christians and Hindu - who have experienced migration during the colonial period and are often today integral part of the more privileged group of skilled migrants in USA or Europe - were looking at families who were sending their daughters and wives in Italy to work as domestic servants or nurses (in the best cases) in a quite discriminatory way (see also: Kurien 2003; George 2005). The configuration of places such as Italy as degrading and 'feminised' destination where unskilled jobs are available for the lower section of the malayali society – as well as the centrality of women-centred kin network in sustaining transnational migration - was more often than not a discursive strategy of the established upper middle-class to de-legitimate competing processes of social mobility.

Moving with Syrian Christian people met in Rome within this complex net of power relations – and the fact that their social relations were naturally spreading out the distinctiveness of their community or class belonging – made me progressively decide to widen the social spectrum of my interests. My fieldwork started to be oriented towards different sections of Christian society as well as towards the Hindu Nayars and Nambuthiri Brahmins. In the area of my research, these two communities seemed to share with Syrian Christians a common belonging to the newly established or aspiring 'modern' urban middle class. But while Nayars shared with Syrian Christians a longer history of migration, the interest on the Brahmins was also partly motivated by the fact that this community have until recently made the ideological refusal of migration and transnational life an essential part of their identity. Their life-styles and identity was indeed constructed in opposition to places such as the Gulf or Italy, through the ideological negation of any connections with them in terms of family connections, remittances, imported consumer items or cultural influence.

2. *If focusing my research only on migration and transnationalism.*

In this phase of my research in Kerala, the relation between migration and the formation of transnational families was absorbed within a wider interest on ongoing historical processes of transformation of family and kinship relations and values with reference to colonial and post-colonial Kerala. One of the main problem in locating women's mobility within wider projects of household transformations in Kerala was to understand if and how their transnational lives were really putting into questions household ideology and hierarchies, and how the latter have been change in Malayali relatively recent history. While I was in Kerala, the possibility to collect and compare different life histories across different generations of migrants, to share with them their projects or past experiences of migration seemed to me fundamental to understand the relation between people's movements across different places and local processes of family change. The possibility to confront my experiences with the ones of Malayali historians and anthropologists have also been crucial to put into question the way in which I have been looking until then at Malayali kinship and migration, and to understand how women's mobility in different periods has been partly and ambivalently inscribed within a project of affirmation of a renewed 'modern' patriarchy (Devika, forthcoming). The possibility to conjugate my fieldwork experiences in Italy with the ones in Kerala warned me about the risk of identifying women's active role in migration and transnationalism as a process necessarily antagonistic to the establishment of patriarchal hierarchies and ideologies (Gallo 2004; forthcoming for a more detailed discussion of that) and against the risk to depict my kinship representations and my ethnographic experiences in Italy and Kerala against each other. Thus 'following' migrants back to Kerala was not only motived by my interest to understand the way in which kinship and family life is reinterpreted and transformed through migration and transnationalism, but it was for me cruacially important to explicitate and put into question the way in which I was conceiving and representing kinship while doing fieldwork in Rome, and to trace continuities, discontinuities and contraddictions between my kinship representations and fieldwork experiences in both contexts.

**Some final considerations**

Finally, let me come back to the initial question of this discussion to give it what seems to me, at present, a possible – though rough and incomplete answer. Moving the focus of my research at different and interrelated levels - between geographical and social contexts - has been an integral part of my fieldwork and of my ethnographic perspective:

- Between Italy and Kerala, with the aim of understanding - at least partially - how people conjugate their migrant experiences with reference to these places and, more importantly, the way in which women's migration intertwines with localised processes of social mobility.

- In Italy, in order to understand how italian families and malayali families are reciprocally changed by women transnational migration and how the domestic space of work becomes a site of multi-vocal representations of kinship and family meanings, values and practices.

- Within Kerala and in other parts of India – especially Madras and Bangalore - while travelling with other Malayalis who were visiting their relatives and friends living there. This gave me the possibility to become more aware about continuities and discontinuities between heterogeneous forms of migration and transnationalism in people's biographies. Internal migration has been crucially important for Malayalis and transnational movements cannot be understood without taking into account that they are often build upon a longer-established network of kin connections within Kerala and India.

- Between different communities in Kerala, to understand how heterogeneous experiences of migration and transnationalism in different periods inform today people's projects of social mobility and identity renovation.

- Between migration and transnationalism and with wider ongoing historical processes of family and kinship transformations in Kerala.

- Last, but not least, bewteen my different positions in related fieldwork and the different and often contradicting representations of kinship while following pople in related contexts.

A multi-sited approach has meant (partly) the attempt to locate Malayali Syrian Christian migration to Italy within a wider context which would take into account heterogeneous experiences of emigration from Kerala and ongoing processes of social and family transformations both in Italy and Kerala. In this sense, multi-sited had much to do with 'following' people through transnationally interrelated places as well as understanding their mobility in a more contextualised net of social relations and with reference to localised processes of social transformations. While travelling between places, people are also moving within 'localised' hierarchies in the cross cutting dimension of class, caste and gender. Gains achieved through migration have often to find recognition and be legitimated in located social contexts, that are in turn put into question and transformed by people's migration and experiences of different places. Contextualised experiences of social mobility are crucially important in shaping the meanings of people's transnational movements, and the understanding of localised processes of social mobility are deeply informed in contemporary Kerala by migration and people's transnational activities.

In the specific context analysed here, the use of a multi-sited approach was certainly crucial to the understanding of how family and kinship are transformed through women's migration and transnationalism within the wider framework of *the feminisation of migration*. In this sense, as pointed out by Marcus, the contribution of multi-sited ethnography is 'to bring different sites into the same frame of study and to posit their relationship on the basis of first-hand research' (Marcus 1995: 100).

Nevertheless, in my experiences, localised research in a single geographical site remains fundamental alongside the possibility of following people's transnational lives. In this sense - as many critics of multi-sited ethnography have already noted - the problem is how to integrate within the ethnography the meanings of people's movements with the understanding of the wider net of complex relations they experience and construct in each context. Conjugating prolonged fieldwork in Italy and Kerala have always posed many doubts about the possibility to find a continuity and a coherence between them: for instance, while comparing the experiences of Malayali migrant women with the ones of other communities, I often felt that I was detaching too much from the initial interests of my fieldwork in Italy. While doing research in Kerala, my experience of the 'Italian situation' was also progressively becoming superficial, fragmented and not 'up-dated'. Fieldwork in Kerala helped me to see Italy and the research I have done there with a different perspective and to put into question the way in which I have been looking at kinship and family change during my previous fieldwork: but many doubts, questions and stimuli that were in turn emerging in relations to Italy had to remain unexplained.

Nevertheless it seems to me that what is at stake is exactly the possibility of re-interpreting 'localised fieldwork' and the relevance of the local context through a multi-sited perspective, that takes into account the meanings and the effects of people's transnational life in different related places. In this sense it seems to me important to look at multi-sited ethnography as a research perspective that can be adopted at different interrelated levels of analysis: that integrate within the same approach the analysis of people's transnational connections with the understanding of the contexts in which they are located and capitalise their experiences of migration. Multi-sited potentialities in my personal experience rely upon an understanding the meanings of transnational experiences through the analysis of located contexts and, on the other hand, upon the intent to 'open' the understanding of these contexts to a transnational perspective. Women's transnational migration cannot be understood without referring to ongoing processes of family change and kinship renovation taking place in Kerala and without relating their experiences to wider and heterogeneous forms of migration and social mobility. On the other hand, changes in household relations and kinship identity is deeply informed in contemporary Kerala by people's migration and

transnational lives. More generally, the meanings of people's transnational life are hardly understandable if divorced from the meanings of their movements in 'located' social contexts, and the understanding of located social contexts is increasingly dependent upon the possibility to look at them taking into account people's transnational experiences.

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