

Migrants and their money are not all the same: Migration, remittances and family morality in rural South India

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Abstract

The article analyses the relation between social remittances and migrant families through the perspective of migrant elites' politics of identity in sending contexts. It argues for the importance of looking historically at how competing engagements with migration have led people to morally evaluate the suitability of remittances for kinship well-being. Migrant elites' conceptions of remittances are underpinned by a double meaning associated with 'foreign money', which is in turn highly influenced by local perceptions of different migrant destinations. On the one hand, money (as other goods) symbolizes loyalty towards the family and the community. On the other, money becomes the visible manifestation of distance between kin, and is locally judged insofar as it is not able to replace the lack of family care and affection. In the process, remittances emerge not only as a medium of family care, but also a social phenomenon through which the morality and possibility of kinship solidarity is questioned, if not invalidated.

Keywords: migration, remittances, kinship, morality, Kerala.

Introduction

In moving beyond a purely economic interpretation of remittances, scholars have underlined how the latter also produce changing norms, practices and identities. The inflows of material resources back into sending contexts is crucially accompanied by renewed values, life-styles and consumption patterns which in turn inform social relations among migrants and non-migrants, and across gender and class (Levitt 2001). In this respect, the understanding of the social impact of remittances requires us to go beyond a focus on the individual-household nexus, to analyse how they are made meaningful *through* their involvement in the 'larger social structure of communities' (Kurien 1994: 758; Leinbach and Watkins 1998; Trager 1984; Levitt and Lamba 2011). Particular attention has been paid to remittances as *medium* and *transformer* of family care (Parrenas 2006, Schmalzbauer 2004, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, Mahler 2001). Remittances, like household rituals, express a renewed way of conceptualising transnational household relations (cf. Gardner and Grillo 2002). They serve to 'stratify receiving households according to their wealth' (Campbell 2010: 152) and become integral part of family projects of enhancing social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Yeoh, Huang and Lam 2005). Remittances embody obligations and loyalty between migrants and left-behind relatives,

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they provide mobile subjects with a sense of continuity with sending contexts and heal migrants' precariousness in receiving societies (Chavez 1994; Bacallao and Smokowsky 2007). Yet, remittances also hold an ambivalent status. They are integral part of a 'mutually beneficial contractual arrangement' between migrants and homes (Cai 2003: 473-4). As such, they channel tensions between individual projects and familial/collective expectations (Lucas and Stark 1985; Mills 1997). Generational and gendered hierarchies inform normative expectations towards the meanings and uses of remittances as financial and in-kind inflows (King, Dalipaj and Mai 2006; Wong 2006).¹ Remittances may also fail to deliver their promises, as they increase households' dependency on consumerism as local opportunities fail to materialise (Cohen 2011; Binford 2003; Reichert 1981).

This article takes a complementary perspective on the relation between family care and remittances, and focuses on elites' politics of identity that results from increasing mass emigration. I explore how remittances come to be morally evaluated in relation to kinship solidarity in a context where emigration has both fuelled and resulted from competition across caste, class and religious divides. I show how social mobility has produced an elitist culture centred upon the ideological disdain of the materiality of remittances to favour family presence and disinterested kin love. The article argues how middle-upper classes' evaluation of remittances and of 'family ethic' needs to be located within the growing status-distinction between *unskilled* and *skilled* migration and within the moral appraisal of different migrant destinations. In current reading, the social significance of remittances emerges as *indifferent* to the provenience of money in terms of the social construction of the places where remittances are generated. Similarly, the way the meanings of remittances are moulded by changing social hierarchies in sending destinations - and become subject to *practices of distinction*, in Bourdieu's sense - has received minor attention. By drawing on the literature on the social significance of money,² this contribution highlights how remittances from different places are differently valued and what this says about the way the inflow of goods has transformed local conceptualisations of the family.

Krishnapuram: Migration, communities and remittances

The understanding of social remittances in contemporary Kerala requires the adoption of an historical perspective on how different communities have used and evaluated the inflow of goods back to their native places. The analysis involved three communities³ that differently embody an elite status in con-

¹ Wong shows how, while through remittances Ghanaian women gain power in their matrilineage, their location in the web of kin as mothers, daughters and sisters creates pressure on the possibility to fulfil multi-layered expectations (2006).

² See later sections for the discussion of this literature.

³ In Krishnapuram, the Hindu majority constitute the 62% of the population, and is roughly divided by caste between Hindu elite of Brahmins and Nayars, ex-untouchable yet upwardly-

temporary Malayali⁴ society: the Hindu Brahmins and Nayars, and the Syrian Christians.⁵ Although these communities play a pivotal role in the stigmatization of mass emigration and of remittances – the latter conceived as the symbol of the materiality of contemporary family life – their present status is considerably dependent from international mobility. Trained to become teachers, doctors and nurses by the British colonial rule and the Anglican Missionary Society, Nayars and Syrian Christians (men and women) worked since the 1920s in North India and in other British colonies.

Remittances represented an important mean through which migrants could both maintain connections with the homeland as well as enhance the status of relatives living in Kerala by investing in education, professional jobs, business activities and well-off life-styles (Kurien 2002). Until the 1970s remittances reinforced existent elitist status, thus allowing continuity between traditional landlord privileges and modern achievements. Between the 1940s and the end of the 1970s, Krishnapuram witnessed to the renewal of Nayar and Syrian Christian status through the investment of remittances in private goods – such as the restoring of prestigious mansions or the setting of family-run business and commercial activities – as well as in public ones, like the building of religious places, schools, hospitals or community centres. Paraphrasing Joshi's expression, remittances enhanced the role of elites as *cultural entrepreneurs* (Joshi 2001): these two communities have historically been at the forefront of public village life by connecting achievements in the household sphere with the display of hegemony within political, financial and cultural matters. This tendency, I suggest, has also moulded a folk understanding – and moral evaluation – of remittances as something that should go beyond the limited sphere of the household in order to be legitimate.⁶

mobile Iravas and Ashari, and a set of lower castes (mainly Pulaya and Paraya) that, despite their social improvements, have minor access to professional jobs and skilled migration. Latin Catholics count with the Syrian Christian for the 22% of population. Syrian-Christians claim a high-caste status on the premises that this community originated by the conversion of Hindu Brahmin families by St. Thomas in the VIth century AD. Latin Catholics (converted by the Portuguese) are considered lower-status communities. Nevertheless, they have in the last few decades been able to scale-up in local hierarchies and to challenge the Syrian-Christian privileges. Muslims represent nearly 14% of the population. They are generally targeted as backward by other communities, although migration has since long enhanced social mobility.

⁴ The term Malayali indicates citizens of Kerala State.

⁵ It is important to note that the following discussion of the elitist culture of remittances remains partial insofar as it does not take into account the position of Muslim elites, who are particularly concentrated in Centre-North Kerala. In the context of my research, Muslims constituted a growing lower-middle class, but could not be identified as elites. For an analysis of Muslim business elites in Kerala see: Osella and Osella 2009.

⁶ Osellas have also importantly shown how migrant Muslim businessmen invest back to Kerala in private educational and health activities as a way to gain hegemony yet also to show moral and religious piety (Osella and Osella 2009).

In Krishnapuram, the importance historically ascribed to the use of remittances for the *common good* should be understood in relation to a popular concern about the dissolution of family morality and solidarity that emigration potentially entails. If, on the one hand, migrants are often condemned for their selfishness and unpredictable behaviour with respect to household obligations, on the other their public commitment to the village well-being allows them to build new respectability and to prove their trustworthiness as responsible householders. In enhancing public/private services, remittances are conceived to set a better environment for one's own family and future generations. At the same time, the potentially 'disruptive effects' of migration have also led communities to adopt more conservative stances on gender and generational hierarchies. Despite the historical role of women in generating remittances, public commitment is generally understood as a male domain and, among early migrant communities, modern privileges have been accompanied by the assertion of renewed patriarchal relations (cf. Devika 2007). Women's presence in migrant labour force has been reversed since the 1970s as a way to increase community status, and new bourgeoisie families have embraced a model of educated housewife (Kurien 2002; Osella and Osella 2000).

The public concern with family integrity - alongside the tension between household morality and public commitment - increased alongside the transformation of emigration from an elite exercise to a mass phenomenon. Since the late 1970s 'Gulf migration' implied the participation of previously marginalised strata - particularly low caste Hindus and Muslims - in unskilled and semi-skilled outflows (Zachariah, Mathew and Rajan 2003). Since this period, remittances from newly mobile strata have deeply transformed Krishnapuram landscape and social life. The once characteristic distance between elites' mansions and lower strata humble houses have been replaced by a growing number of newly-built brick houses, which often exceed in luxury the ones of established elites. Osellas note how dressing codes and consumption have deeply challenged the once exclusive status of Nayars and Syrian Christians: today, an increasing number of low-caste youth can afford modern items such as branded clothes, bodily ornaments, and families have access to costly technological goods (2000a). In Krishnapuram, a relatively more secure life-style leads once marginalised strata to challenge traditional boundaries, by entering into love affairs or marriage relations with higher caste/class people (Gallo 2004), or by sending their children in once exclusive private schools. Shiva, a low-caste man who runs today a private brick factory in the village and whose son is married to a Nayar woman, eloquently asserted his self-confidence in confronting dominant elites:

See, in the past my people could not enter their houses, I had to step away from the main road if a Brahmin or a Nayar were passing by, we used to be beaten ... but now, thanks to all our sacrifices I made up my life. I have worked hard, like a slave, in Saudi Arabia for fifteen years, I have accepted all kinds of job, saving and saving, but now my family can be proud of it, and my son can guarantee his wife such a good life ... even better than a Nayar groom!

On the one hand, as this passage shows, remittances enhance the assertiveness of emerging strata vis a vis competition with higher groups. Shiva feels no embarrassment in stating how his commitment to humble jobs in the Gulf has eventually allowed him to bridge a gap in material possibilities with respect to higher-ranking families. The man is also actively involved in community activities and in the renovation of a small Hindu temple, thus reproducing an established pattern of public commitment within the village. On the other, both the public display of wealth by lower status population and, importantly, the questioning of caste boundaries through inter-caste or inter-religious marriages, exasperate elites' sense of social disruption as entailed by mass emigration and remittances. Elites' criticism also addresses another important social change as induced by remittances, which touches upon the increasingly mixed educational environment of Malayali high schools. New migrant's children are often sent to boarding schools, where they usually remain throughout the permanence of their parents abroad. Although this practice is well rooted also among elite's families, the latter relate to the phenomenon in a way that constructs lower-status youth as lacking of the adequate kinship surveillance. In this discourse, money and goods sent from abroad are not able to exercise the guardianship necessary to preserve the sexual morality and family solidarity among young generations.

It is in this context that the moral evaluation of remittances in relation to differential histories of mobility and labour engagement comes to be expressed more forcefully by the elites. Particularly, the legitimacy of modern status as achieved through remittances comes to be assessed by elites according to the historical depth of migration histories and to the capacity to produce wealth only through skilled jobs abroad. New wealth is stigmatised by established elites as expression of vulgar and rough behaviour (cf. Osella and Osella 2000a). Since the late 1990s, this attitude among elites is reinforced by the latter inflow into niche opportunities within the international IT industry, which have in turn reinforced the cleavage between old and new elites. Nayar and Syrian Christian families who have connections with UK, Europe or US capitalise on generational education to send their youth as engineers in prestigious destinations. Skilled migration has also witnessed the participation of Nambudiri Brahmins, who have historically looked with disdain at colonial and mass forms of emigration. Albeit still important for educational choices, the Gulf has increasingly become in the village a second-choice labour destination, ideologically associated by the elite with Muslims, Latin Catholics and Hindu lower castes. On the other hand, destinations like Italy have attracted migrant women and men from poor Syrian Christians families, and offered an opportunity of mobility to those families who had been previously excluded from international mobility (Gallo 2006), but are shunned by the elites as contexts where only servile domestic jobs are available.

Wealth is never enough: Competition and family morality

As the above section implies, remittances have a double and interrelated impact on social mobility, as far as elite formation is concerned. First, as in the case of Syrian Christians, Hindu Nayars and Brahmins, internal and international mobility reinforces the nexus between caste, class and status by creating a modern middle-class who is able to combine genealogical pedigree with modern achievements. Second, the inflow of financial and symbolic resources has moulded the formation of elites within each community, thus unsettling the longstanding association between traditional high caste/class status and modern privileges.

In today's Krishnapuram, a significant number of Irava, Latin Catholic and Muslim families can afford a life-style which has for long been exclusive of the local elite. These families invest in higher education in the hope to transform unskilled migration into the more prestigious migrant trajectories, although for many this project finds little practical actualization. At the same time, investment on technological items, gold and household's goods accompany the display of social change. As noted by the Osellas, this also exacerbates each community internal divide, with elites attempting at distancing from those community fellows who have been less successful (2000a). In terms of social impact of remittances, the inflow of financial and in-kind goods has not only enhanced competitions within and across different strata, but have produced a culture of migration (cf. Levitt 2001) centered upon the evaluation or stigmatization of different migration routes. Among elites, some expressions of geographical mobility are conceived as more prestigious and representative of 'Malayaliness' than others. Malayali engineers in the US or UK are indeed taken as representative of the *natural* elite inclination towards education and professional jobs. Conversely, Italy is associated with a so-constructed amorality of the aspiring *nouveau riches*, while the Gulf becomes in local discourses naturally associated with Muslims' and lower castes' inferior profile migration. As a result, de-legitimizing certain routes of mobility - and the remittances thereby produced - is an integral part of the established elites to shun social competition from below, often through the obliteration of past histories of lower forms of migration.

An important context where this emerges is the normative association between skilled (and semi-skilled) migration and gendered family morality. It should be preliminary noted how throughout the 20th century, migration has been accompanied by a progressive legal and social decline of the joint family system and by the affirmation of 'small family' model, partly as a result of intensive family planning enacted since the 1960s. While remittances are directed beyond the nuclear family - thus reinforcing a sense of vertical and lateral kin connections - migration also exasperates families' sense of disconnections between generations. Given the high rate of unemployment for young generations, youth migration represents a major source of family well-being, although the mobility of young women and men is predictably object of gendered moral evaluation.

Elites often identifies in mass migration and in the ‘sending out of youths’ - and particularly of unmarried girls – to earn money as leading to the dissolution of family solidarity. Ideologically, this risk is conceived particularly serious in the case of unskilled migration, not only because degrading job environments may compromise collective purity and the sexual conduct of migrant women.⁷ The ‘selling of youth’ is also conceived as morally unethical insofar the *sacrifice of distance* between children and relatives ‘left behind’ is not compensated by youths’ attainment of working professional status in receiving destinations. While many Syrian Christian families admitted the presence of young migrant female ancestors in their genealogies, the possibility of legitimating present status through past women’s mobility was adequately kept unfolded in family histories. Differently, present privileges were made legitimate by referring to the fact that a son working in the US would suffice in providing affluence to the entire household without compromising family honour.

For the Christian elite it is important to stray from the Hindu representation of Christians as *money oriented* people, and from the public image of being prompt to compromise family respectability – by sending women’s away from home – in the name of material advantages. Community fellows who have daughters working in Italy are shunned by Syrian Christian elite who reassert a model of modern patriarchy where women’s sexuality and reproductive choices are well safeguarded by the professional career of kinsmen or by women’s acceptance of high-status jobs. Overall, while having experience of different places is increasingly conceived as determinant for youths’ trajectories towards maturity and family responsibility (Osella and Osella 1998; Gallo 2005), youths’ mass involvement in international mobility has become an integral part of what Cohen defines the ‘narrative of the fall’ (1998: 103), whereas the privileged middle-class depicts modern changes as leading to the dissolution of family morality.

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Money and the materiality of intergenerational relations

The above discussion leads me to interrogate to what extent the ‘narrative of the fall’ as implied by Malayali (elitist) culture of mass migration brings people to conceive remittances as material and symbolic inflows ‘from abroad’. Viviana Zelizer notes how the neoclassical assumption on the ‘uncompromising objectivity of money’ (1989: 345) becomes less sustainable once we delve into the many ways extra-economic factors influence monetary economy and the

⁷ Unmarried migrant women often face stigmatization in their sending village as rumors spread about their uncontrolled sexual behavior in the countries where they migrate. Migrant domestic labor in Italy, in requiring cohabitation with male employers, is conceived in Kerala as leading to promiscuous situations. Gossips about migrant women not being virgin or having lovers abroad sometimes accompany the return of young women to Krishnapuram in occasion of their engagement or arranged marriage.

way money is socially conceptualised.⁸ In current migration studies there are evidences to support my argument about the relevance of the moral evaluation of money in order to understand the social significance of remittances for family relations. King, Castaldo and Vullnetari (2011) note for instance how earnings of migrant women are considered in Albania as ‘coffee money’. This expression ideologically denies the possibility of women’s having an official role in household economy and re-inscribes the gendered meanings of remittances within persistent patriarchal ideologies. Osellas (2000b) note how migrant identities may be essentialised by local associations between gendered life-cycle stages and the use of ‘Gulf money’.⁹ In Krishnapuram, elite’s conceptions of remittances are underpinned by a double meaning associated with ‘foreign money’, which is in turn highly influenced by local perceptions of different migrant destination. On the one hand, money symbolizes individual devotion and loyalty towards the family and the community. This becomes evident not only in the overall appraisal of higher educational opportunities and better life styles, but also in the positive evaluation of those migrants who invest in village activities and institutions. On the other, money expenditures become the visible manifestation of labour sacrifices and distance between kin. As such, money is locally judged insofar as it is not able to replace the lack of care and affection provided to elders, children and other family members. In this context – and differently from the case analysed by King and others (2011) – women’s money is not so much devalued *per se*, and made invisible within the patriarchal family. Rather, it is *selectively accepted* insofar as it is associated with professional jobs, with the ‘decency’ associated with places like Europe or the US, and with the financial and legal capacity to *maintain*

⁸ Zelizer’s analysis of the American public debate on the meanings of women’s earnings has eloquently highlighted in what circumstances money ‘acquire a moral value to become dirty money and defined as demeaning’ (370). Of course this point is not new to the anthropological literature on the social meanings of money, the edited volume by Bloch and Parry (1989) being among the most important ones in this field. The authors particularly question the uncritical acceptance in existent literature about the assumed intrinsic power of money in revolutionize modern societies, that is often premised on the underestimation of the significance of monetary exchanges in pre-capitalist societies. Against the risk of academic *fetishization* of money, the authors develop a critical framework to analyses the historical meanings of money in different societies and how money may come to mean different things within the same culture. Although there is no space to engage in depth with the general work on money in anthropology, my argument draws both from Zelizer as well as from Bloch’s and Parry’s arguments.

⁹ In this respect, the authors note how in rural Kerala, the social character of the *pavan* – the migrant man who dissipates earnings due to his submission to community expectations – is contrasted with the *kallan*, an ‘anti-social individual who refuse to honour social obligations’ (118). The way money is used is not only object to collective expectations and evaluation, but also defines the gendered subjectivity of the migrant person. The ‘mature man’ is the one who shows the ability to find a balance between the two extremes *pavan-kallan* and to fulfil social expectations while maintaining a degree of autonomy in the management of money earned abroad.

regular connections.¹⁰ It is in relation to a *gendered notion of family care* - as primarily provided by women (yet also by youth in general) - that the *frequency* of remittances at the cost of physical and emotional *absence* comes to be locally stigmatized.

Migration leads often to radical change in the spatial configuration of parents-children relation. As noted, among unskilled migrant families who experience occupational and legal insecurity in the receiving context there is the tendency to leave their children back to Kerala until the latter achieve adolescence. At the same time, even after return to Kerala, parents may reverse this tendency by using their savings to send their children 'back' to Gulf-established Malayali schools, where education is conceived to be less provincial. Families are well aware that the sending of remittances is not able to heal youth occupational insecurity in Kerala, and by re-investing abroad they attempt at reducing the risks that well-educated children may find their life frustrating in Kerala. Although both trends are not extraneous to the elites, the latter look at generational distance as a symptom of decreasing family values and solidarity. This becomes evident when care services provided for Western families have detrimental effects to care relations back home, fact that exacerbates the perceived immorality of certain migration choices. A secure job in 'the West' is also conceived as allowing the family with a better security for future generations, and with the resulting capacity to keep the family unite. High class families are often able to visit their children in the US and to spend time with them if not settling down. The ideological association promoted by the consolidated elite brings together genealogical pedigree with the persistent capacity to keep the family together and with the predominance in intergenerational relations of affection over material concern. As one rich Brahmin told me one day:

'See...those new migrants may avoid seeing their children for years but they are happy with the money, video-camera, gold, TV and so on they either send home or receive from abroad. They fill up their kids with whatsoever things but then these kids will have no education and will not care after their parents! This is how Kerala became...thanks to these people'.

Here the emigration of the masses is associated with an uncontrolled decay of Kerala society, the latter made visible by what is represented as the increasing monetization of generational relations. In this demeaning portrait, money sent for children will not compensate the latter's incapacity to live in society (*vivaram illyatha-alla*) due to lack of parental care. Although consumption of goods earned through migration is far from being absent among the elites, the latter locate the sacrifices of labour and distance in a past which is seldom recalled. In contrast, the present is depicted as leading to major harmony in

¹⁰ In this respect, illegal flows are eloquently associated by elites with lower-profile migration. Similarly, the risk and pain taken by people who migrate illegally is taken as the symptom of irresponsibility towards relatives left behind, who may fail to see their beloved for years.

family relations, which do not need to be built through material connections across places. Elites share the idea that migration should not lead to the dissolution of family integrity through heavy consumption. Against the masses, Brahmins and to some extent Nayars are often keen to depict themselves as *pavan*,¹¹ innocent, to state how despite their cosmopolitan experiences and material privileges, the latter have not translated into greediness or in the showing-off of material wealth. This attitude unravels a conceptualisation of youth as disentangled from any material responsibility towards the elder and of the 'elite household' as liberated from any considerable dependency from remittances. As it was told me frequently by a well-off Nayar woman:

'When my son comes home from the UK I always tell him not to bring money or expensive things...he has his life there, a good job and a nice house...why should he waste his money for us? We are having a good life here...there is nothing he can bring from abroad that we need!! We just want his love and to see him and we have enough money to visit him in London...we do not need Gulf money in our family!'

As Kurien notes, 'the meaning attributed to money and the use to which it is put depends on the context within which it is obtained' (1994: 158). As the passage above shows, elites tend to trace a difference between *Gulf money*, *Italian money* and *UK money*, a distinction which becomes entrenched with a broader distinction between family morality and immorality. *Gulf money* becomes the symbol of a so-conceived hyper-materialisation of intergenerational dependency which has corrupted or replaced family solidarity. Additionally, *Gulf money* is represented as necessary to supply for the incapacity of the household left-behind to provide for family subsistence. *Italian money* is disdained insofar as it results from a gendered stigmatization of women who 'abandon' their families to look after other people's children or to clean Italian houses. In contrast, *UK money* is not only the symbol of youths' (ideally) more secure job positions. It also importantly represents the outcome of generational achievements, fact that makes the family 'back home' presently free from any material need in relation to foreign money.

Concluding remarks

In this contribution I have analysed the relation between social remittances and migrant families through the perspective of elites' politics of identity in sending contexts. I have done so by arguing the importance of looking historically at how competing engagements with migration have led people to evaluate the morality of money (and other goods). The analysis of the relation

¹¹ In the context of my research, the use of the concept *pavan* to define migrant identity through money holds some differences from the one highlighted by the Osellas (2000b). It does not connote the naive young man who is unwillingly exploited by community expectations on his spending of resources accumulated through migration. Rather, among the elites the term positively (sometimes ironically) connotes a person who refrains from indulging in heavy consumption and maintains a disinterested and non-material approach to kin and social relations.

between cultural construction of places and wealth reveals to be important to understand the meanings of social remittances, particularly in relation to the family. Competition voices not so much, or not uniquely, a confrontation between non-migrants and migrants, but changing and hierarchical opportunities of mobility. In central Kerala, the overlapping of different migration histories and destinations throughout the XXth century has produced a local understanding of migrant remittances centred upon the association between money and the socio-geographical circumstances where money have been generated.

Gupta and Ferguson note how processes of de-territorialisation induced by globalisation and transnationalism might lead to the 'erosion of the cultural specificity of places' (Gupta and Ferguson 1999: 17). However, among Malayalis, social and geographical mobility has produced a pluralisation of migrant scenario where the cultural specificity of places, rather than being eroded, has been reasserted in a naturalised form to reinforce social hierarchies and the cleavage between skilled and unskilled migration. In the same line, the meanings of remittances in relation to kin relations are 'moulded by migrants positioning and experiences both in sending and receiving contexts' (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011: 14-15) and, I suggest, different moralities are ascribed accordingly.

In this context, 'the family' emerges not only as an important agent in the production and consumption of remittances, but also as a contested arena where the *moral* or *corrupting* nature of remittances is made meaningful through social competition and mobility. The way 'the family' is imagined and idealised is an integral part of wider processes of distinction within and across different caste and religious communities who have historically engaged with migration. In this context, elites relate to the emergence of mass migration by asserting the need of a family morality disentangled from material dependence from foreign money. The understanding of the social significance of remittances in terms of family culture cannot be disentangled from the analysis of how money is socially constructed and evaluated in relation to a wider geography of places. As it has been noted, remittances possess a 'dual characteristic, as national and foreign, as the return on a national product and as a gift from other nations' (Hernandez and Coutin 2006: 188; see also: Tsing 2000). This important fact holds significance beyond the economic relevance of remittances. The double nature of remittances as *alien* and *domesticated* inflows of material and cultural values transforms the ways family life is configured among different and competing social strata. Ideas of what a family is and should be – the tension between the desired morality of kin relations and the unpredictable kinship change that mobility entails – inform how migrants represent their own generational experiences and the values ascribed to remittances.

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This paper is based on research conducted in the city of Kochi and in the village of Krishnapuram, Central Kerala (2000-2005) and it is part of a broader doctoral project on kinship, migration and modernity among Malayali middle-upper classes. Krishnapuram belongs to the Block Panchayat of Ankamali, a territorial area comprising a total of eight villages and a population of 33,424 (Census 2011). This area is particularly interesting to study the relation between migration, remittances and social mobility in two main respects. First, it hosts a heterogeneous population of Christians, Hindus and Muslims – internally divided by caste and class – who have engaged with migration in different periods of XXth century. This makes this location apt to understand how migration has changed across time. Second, this area attracts a large number of migrants' investments, due to its fast economic expansion and its location between the city port and the newly built international airport. Krishnapuram also well exemplifies the 'Kerala Model of Development', where high rate of social development (literacy, health services, low infant mortality) is counterbalanced by low GDP and high unemployment. Fieldwork combined classical participant observation with a total of 90 structured and semi-structured interviews with migrant families belonging to different communities. Interviews involved both senders and recipient of remittances, that is both migrants during their visit back home as well as families 'left behind' and non-migrants. Additional interviews with Malayali migrants living in Rome and in London were conducted between 2000 and 2002 and between 2006 and 2009.

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