

UNLIKELY COSMOPOLITANS:
MIGRATION AND MORALITY AMONGST SRI LANKAN CATHOLICS

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Sri Lankan Catholic families that successfully migrated to Italy encountered multiple challenges upon their return. Although most of these families set off pursuing very specific material objectives through transnational migration, the difficulties generated by return migration forced them to devise new and creative arguments to justify their continued stay away from home.

This ethnography traces the migratory trajectories of Catholic families from the area of Negombo and suggests that – due to particular religious, historic and geographic circumstances– the community was able to develop a cosmopolitan attitude towards the foreign that allowed many of its members to imagine themselves as “better fit” for migration than other Sri Lankans. But this cosmopolitanism was not boundless, it was circumscribed by specific ethical values that were constitutive of the identity of this community. For all the cosmopolitan curiosity that inspired people to leave, there was a clear limit to what values and practices could be negotiated without incurring serious moral transgressions. My dissertation traces the way in which these

transnational families took decisions, constantly navigating between the extremes of a flexible, rootless cosmopolitanism and a rigid definition of identity demarcated by local attachments.

Through fieldwork conducted between January and December of 2010 in the predominantly Catholic region of Negombo, I examine the work that transnational migrants did to become moral beings in a time of globalization, individualism and intense consumerism. My work was based in two small fishing villages that surround the central area of Negombo – located thirty miles to the north of Colombo along the coast of the Indian Ocean.

This dissertation therefore engages with non-elitist and rooted theories of cosmopolitanism as well as with contemporary philosophical and anthropological developments in the study of morality. These approaches understand morality beyond its deontological dimension and interpret it as a kind of practice, a work on the self geared towards becoming a particular kind of person.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Bernardo E. Brown was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1974. After graduating from the Universidad de Buenos Aires with a degree in Political Science, he worked for local NGOs and taught social sciences at high school level in Buenos Aires. In 2003 he was awarded a fellowship by the New School University to join its Graduate Program in International Affairs. At the time, he started conducting research with undocumented immigrants living in New York City. Upon completion of his MA degree, he worked for the Consulate General of Argentina in New York until 2007, when he moved to Ithaca to join Cornell University's Department of Anthropology. After Cornell, he will take a Postdoctoral position at the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden, The Netherlands.

For Chatero

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INTRODUCTION

Most people I talked to in Negombo wanted to leave. In fact, many of my closest informants left while I was conducting fieldwork. Some were trying to leave the country for the first time, some were going to Italy to join their families already there, others had been visiting their relatives at home and were now returning to their jobs abroad.

Migration in Negombo was a constant source of conversation for everyone. Particularly the younger generations – who felt stuck in Sri Lanka with little prospects of employment – were constantly talking about who left, where to, who returned, what they brought, where could they go next, who could provide a connection, who had an acquaintance that knew of a way to leave.

My own presence as a foreigner routinely riding my motorcycle on the streets of Negombo was motive for speculation. As people heard I was studying migration to Italy, my research interests were suspected of being a cover up for my real purpose: recruiting workers to go to Italy. When I eventually talked to some of these people and confirmed that I was an anthropologist doing fieldwork and that I hadn't even been to Italy, most of them were disappointed and their eagerness to talk to me rapidly disappeared. Others persevered, and as soon as they heard I was coming from the United States, their Italian dreams mutated for American ones, still the pinnacle of

immigrant ambitions. I tried to evade their questions by saying that I was not an American, but that suggested to some an even better connection. After all, I was an immigrant myself, and who could have better knowledge of how to get there. Other times the questions I was asked were more concerned with my personal life and marital status. If I was helpless with labor connections, perhaps at least I could be a potential marriage candidate, “Are you married?” (*BandalaDa?*)¹

Whatever the argument was, my presence was seen as a way out. Young people in Sri Lanka, or at least in this part of the country, believed that migration had somehow become a necessary part of their lives, a rite of passage. Leaving the island was partly an adventure and a need to fulfill a curiosity about the outside world that was in many ways inspired by those who had already left and now returned periodically with money, gifts and good stories from Italy. As opposed to migrating to the Persian Gulf countries or other Asian destinations, Italy was not only seen as desirable in financial terms but it was generally perceived as a destination where the anxieties of migration were substantially minimized (Lindquist 2009).² The coveted Italian residency permit that allowed migrant workers to find legal employment was known as the “Italian Sojourn” (*Permesso de Soggiorno*). So it was not uncommon to see the excitement of a prospective migrant who had finally obtained his “sojourn” to work in Italy. Oxymoron aside, the anecdote neatly captures the way in which migration to Italy, hard work, excess cash and an ostensibly chic lifestyle blended into

the ideal project of exiting Sri Lanka.

Yet these were not the only reasons that inspired people to leave. There were other, material factors that caused very real anxieties and urgencies amongst local families that over the last three decades found it increasingly difficult to sustain their standards of living. While teenagers dreamt of an Italian adventure, parents who struggled to make a living as fishermen worried about the constant uncertainties that the separatist civil war and the national economy had imposed on the lives of their families. When migration to Italy started to become popular amongst Negombo fishermen in the late 1980s, it worked as an instant balm against the fears that lurked over their daily existence. Many of these fishermen became migrant workers over the next decade; traveling to Italy by any legal or illegal means possible and reinventing themselves once there, learning to speak Italian, becoming domestic workers, cooks, nannies and security guards.

While most male migrants started in southern Italy doing menial jobs, over time their occupations and destinations diversified as they were sometimes joined by their families and they moved towards the north of the country. Migrant workers generally left with a series of specific material goals that they wanted to attain abroad. However, once in Italy, the reasons that attracted them about that country seemed to multiply encouraging them to stay or to pursue further “sojourns”, sometimes in more appealing occupations and sometimes in cities with better paying jobs. On one hand,

people found in Italy things that they didn't expect to find, or that they didn't expect to enjoy. On the other, when they came back, Sri Lanka seemed to no longer be the place they thought they wanted to be in for the rest of their lives. The combination of these two experiences that migration to Italy produced led many migrants to feel ambivalently about their place of work and their place of origin.

Statement of the Problem

The main argument of my dissertation suggests that transnational migrant workers from the town of Negombo developed a cosmopolitan attitude by living and working in Italy. Their experiences abroad transformed the way in which they made sense of life after migration, altering their perceptions of both Sri Lanka and Italy. This attitude differentiated these migrants from other Sri Lankan communities which followed more conventional transnational trajectories where work abroad was merely “home plus better pay”, as Ulf Hannerz defines it (1996). But the cosmopolitan outlook that permeated their lives and their opinions also needs to be contextualized beyond the specific conditions of contemporary transnational labor and situated at the juncture of specific historic and geographic circumstances. These circumstances are twofold.

Firstly, the coastal location of Negombo along the western coast of Sri Lanka placed the local populations in the midst of transoceanic networks of fishing and

trade that are traced back to the 11th century. These networks made of Negombo a commercial destination for Muslim traders and South Indian fishermen who – at different points in time – migrated and settled in the region. More recently, since the 16th century, colonial enterprises and Christian missionary outposts established Negombo as a stronghold of the Catholic community in Ceylon and in independent Sri Lanka. Furthermore, conversion to Christianity also represented a direct link to modernization and western values that over the years placed those who converted closer to the colonizers vis-à-vis other communities that remained in the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim faiths.

Secondly, the Negombo migrant community also needs to be qualified by their work destination in Italy. As opposed to the strenuous conditions under which other Sri Lankans experience life abroad – and the scarcely advantageous financial opportunities that migration enables for them (Gamburd 2000) – workers who traveled to Italy found an economically attractive and culturally accommodating destination. Italy did not only allow transnational migrant workers to achieve substantial material improvements in a short time, it also offered them the possibility of experiencing new lives that they oftentimes found to be attractive and suitable.

In this way, the cosmopolitan attitude that I attribute to transnational migrant workers from Negombo emerges from the combination of its particular history of transoceanic connections with the appeal that life in Italy had for most of them. This

appeal, in turn, is arguably inspired in the shared religious tradition and practice that they had with their Catholic employers and that placed them at a comparative advantage with respect to other migrant communities in Italy.

Yet this congenial attitude that enabled migrant workers to successfully navigate many cultural aspects of their transnational lives also acted as a double-edged sword that transformed cosmopolitanism into an unbridgeable distance between the migrant and the local community. The new attachments that they developed while in Italy grew in direct detriment to some of the attachments that made them “proper” Negombo Catholics. While migrant workers did not become uprooted from the values and practices of their community of origin, I suggest that these fundamental attachments were relocated within their cultural imaginaries to accommodate the new interests and ideas that they became familiar with while in Italy. To those who did not migrate, life in Italy had transformed their neighbors and relatives into ambitious and snobbish caricatures of themselves.

Migrant workers however, rejected this and believed that the practices and tastes they had adopted in Italy did not have an effect on their Sri Lankan identity. Ultimate proof of this was allegedly offered when they returned home for their children’s education. This was perceived as the preeminent evidence of their efforts to uphold the values of Negombo Catholics and of their commitment to raising children in accord with the normative codes of the community. But these efforts on

behalf of migrant workers also signaled to the limit that they drew between aspects of their lives that could be negotiated and those that remained beyond deliberation.

One of the central objectives of this dissertation is to critically examine the ethical dimensions of the way in which transnational families made decisions and produced arguments and justifications for them. In this sense, I bring into question globalization and transnational approaches which argue that migrant workers become familiar with different cultural contexts, developing a kind of global knowledge that allows them to accommodate and shift between different moral imaginaries. My ethnography suggests that for all the cosmopolitan curiosity that Negombo migrants developed for certain aspects of Italian culture, this was limited to the normative codes that they encountered living and working abroad. Their fundamental ethical values remained defined by their Sri Lankan Catholic tradition and time away from home did not alter these values. However, the relation between ethical notions of how life ought to be lived and the normative codes by which they lived in Italy and Sri Lanka, constantly shifted and was challenged by those who did not migrate. This situation generated a range of instances of confrontation and misunderstanding where the realm of values and the realm of norms clashed, re-defining the border between cosmopolitanism and rootlessness.

The Cultural Advantages of Migration

Most people who had spent several years working abroad could clearly list what were the advantages of life in Italy and the reasons why returning to Sri Lanka was not a desirable alternative. Living in Italy was not only better for economic reasons, many migrants had strong moral arguments to favor their lives there. As I will describe in subsequent chapters, people soon embraced many aspects of Italian norms and thought of them as unquestionably better than those of Sri Lanka. What people referred to as “better systems” (*Honda kramayak*), the rule of law (*neethi reethi*), the absence of corruption (*dushaanayen thora*), the freedom to change jobs (*wadda nihassa*), the honesty in labor relations (*awaankawa sewaya karanawa*) or the general predictability of life in Italy were all considered “Italian goods.”

But while these were some of the reasons that encouraged migrant workers to continue migrating and to think that settling back home was a bad decision, non-migrants were of a different opinion. To those who stayed, “money had gone to their heads” (*salii oluwaTa gabala*) and those who left were seemingly obsessed with Italian lifestyles and material goods and they had lost their sense of what was important in life. This was one of the most evident tensions that could be observed amongst the Negombo migrant community. A sense of misunderstanding that was frustrating and discouraging to people who returned from Italy to find relatives and neighbors often scrutinizing them with suspicious eyes, judging against the supposedly licentious and

overly materialistic lives they were enjoying in Italy.

It was therefore a combination of economic and moral reasons what encouraged many migrants to want to travel again. After spending several weeks or months in Negombo, they returned to Italy to their old jobs or to find new employment in a different occupation or in a different location. Given that this was the general situation for thousands of Sri Lankan families along the west coast of the island, I became especially interested in why people didn't just "give up" on Sri Lanka and instead insisted on returning and dealing with such a large number of issues that they disliked. When I asked my informants if they wouldn't rather stay and settle in Italy – avoiding all the troubles that return entailed – almost all of them consistently rejected this possibility without hesitating. After people had praised Italy for a good number of reasons, most of them concluded that they would rather live in Sri Lanka because Italian culture was bad for Sri Lankans. In their words, “ Italian culture was not good” (*Italia Sanskruti bondaii nee*).

For all the penchant for things Italian that most migrant workers showed in their consumer preferences and in their newfound appreciation for discipline and hard work, it seemed that when the ultimate decision of where to live was confronted, few of them opted to settle in Italy for good. In a way, neither Italy nor Sri Lanka was good enough on their own – people needed both at the same time. Their reasoning was such: Italy could be a wonderful place for Sri Lankans as long as they never

believed themselves to be Italian. Some Italian practices were clearly better than Sri Lankan ones, so it was an easy decision to embrace the new practices that Italy offered. However, one needed to adopt these as a Sri Lankan Catholic with Sri Lankan Catholic values. Problems would unavoidably emerge if a migrant worker thought that they could live by Italian values. This possibility represented a serious transgression that everyone seemed to be well aware of. Where to draw the line between what was acceptable to change and what was not, was not such a clear question. However, no one doubted that there needed to be a balance between the values of the hometown and the norms that they adopted in their employment destination.

Teaching Children How to Live

Settling permanently in Italy was almost unanimously seen as a bad thing. How could one educate good Sri Lankan children with such a culture of individualism and freedom? Once children were educated to speak fluently in Sinhalese and they had spent several years of school in Sri Lanka, living with the extended family, learning to love the food, embracing Catholic values, understanding fundamental notions of propriety and gender norms, it was desirable to go to Italy and enjoy everything that country had to offer. But if children grew up in Italy they would think themselves Italian, spoiling the advantage of humility and decency that they had as immigrants in Europe.

This was generally the discourse with which migrant workers explained their decisions concerning when to travel and when to return. Of course, the specific content of the decisions of individual migrants differed a lot: how many years to spend abroad, how often to return, how to invest, when to send the children to Sri Lanka, what school they should attend, etc. But the important thing was that they thought that there was a time to be at home and a time to be abroad, and that there were things that they could change with migration and others they could not.

For this reason, many migrant workers returned to Negombo when their children reached school age. Migrant parents argued that “it was the right thing to do” (*ekathamai hari de*), and made great efforts to organize their lives in ways that allowed them to bring their children to be schooled in Negombo. To do this, sometimes one of the parents stayed in Italy and sent monthly remittances to the family, other times both parents needed to stay abroad and left their children with some relatives during the school year and had them travel to Italy during summer recesses.

But locals often did not see all of these efforts approvingly, as the return migrants had expected. Children born in Italy going to school in Negombo were perceived as a source of corruption for the local youth. They were viewed as uninterested in school, just waiting until they reached the age when they could go back to live in Italy. They also tended to have more freedom than local children – as parents

were busy working in Italy – with seemingly plenty opportunities of getting into trouble. And on top of this, they usually had expendable cash and fancy material goods that other children could not afford, with the consequence of making locals envious of their lifestyles. On the other hand, these children who had started school in Italy were generally not very keen on moving to Sri Lanka either. Although at a very young age, most of them had lived in vibrant Italian cities and small town Sri Lanka was hardly appealing to them.

This description of the way in which migrant workers saw their lives in Italy and Sri Lanka may be seen as depicting a very static representation of the home against a dynamic representation of life overseas. But this was exactly how migrant workers perceived Negombo vis-à-vis Italy. Italy was the place to explore life, to enjoy a certain degree of freedom, to playfully re-invent themselves. In sum, Italy was the place where mistakes would not be severely judged and where they could do things they wouldn't have imagined themselves doing a few years earlier. Negombo was the safe haven where to return to, where relatives and neighbors awaited, where parents were offered their due respect and children obeyed what they were told, where people were humble and had modest ambitions in life.

Although Negombo had little of real stability – not only in the economic sense, but also in the volatile nature of Sri Lankan politics and the recurrent peaks of violence that it suffered – migrant workers liked to imagine it as a place where certain

standards of morality could be relied on. These expectations they had proved to be another constant source of frustration, as migrants kept returning to a place that had changed a lot in their absence.

But what was even more striking to them, was to see that the reason that had inspired some of these changes in the local landscape of Negombo was their own experience as migrant workers. Their success in Italy had given their town the nickname of *Punchi Italia*, Little Italy, or Little Rome alternatively. Their sleepy fishing villages had been transformed into people smuggling hotspots and their youths – rather than looking forward to a life in the fishing industry or if they excelled in school, maybe teaching or government employment – seemed to think that going to Italy and “being rich” (*pohosath wenna*) was worth any risk and any transgression. Migrant workers were certainly proud of the economic improvements that they had achieved for the well-being of their families, but they were much more ambivalent when it came to dealing with the way in which they were represented amongst non-migrants. The economic changes that they had made possible through migration had brought along social and cultural changes that they were not sure how to interpret.

A Historical Cosmopolitanism

The rise of migration to Italy over the last thirty years provided Negombo with many of the characteristic challenges that transnationalism and globalization have

produced throughout the world. However, if we are to identify the particularities of this specific migratory flow it is necessary to consider questions that exceed both migration and the recent history of it.

In this ethnography, I explore religious, colonial and trade connections that the Negombo community sustained both with the world beyond Sri Lanka as well as within the country. I do not suggest that this web of connections inspired people to migrate, but I do argue that the particular way in which many in Negombo engaged with migration have to do with the history of this predominantly Catholic community (Osella & Osella 2008).

Some prominent Indian Ocean historians and anthropologists have considered the western coast of Sri Lanka as an extension of the Malabar Coast of South India, situating a place like Negombo within the religious, cultural and commercial influence of very old transoceanic networks that traversed the Ocean from East Africa to China (Ho 2006; Pearson 2003; Chaudhuri 1985). With the arrival of Vasco da Gama to the coasts of Calicut in 1498, the western regions of Sri Lanka were also soon enveloped in a new era of colonial, commercial and missionary operations that came to characterize the coastal regions of South Asia and Southeast Asia since the 16th century and connected them to the emerging western colonial powers.

However, it is also important not to overestimate the influence of these powerful networks on contemporary cosmopolitanism. As Edward Simpson and Kai

Kresse have noted, there is no evidence that there is a historical continuity between the Indian Ocean trade networks described by historians such as KN Chaudhuri and contemporary transnational circulation (Simpson and Kresse 2008, 10). What is important in this sense is not to search for unity and historical continuity, but to imagine the region as eminently diverse and where “history has created societies in which differences are recognized and individuals are [...] equipped with the skill to navigate through such differences” (Simpson and Kresse 2008, 15).

A historical overview of the transoceanic connections observed in this region will be explored in detail in Chapter 3, but the reason why I mention it in this introduction is to suggest that for a very long time this region has witnessed the presence of foreigners amongst them. People speaking different languages, practicing different religions, eating and dressing differently, have regularly visited and settled this region for centuries. This diversity of traditions and practices present in the region is one of the reasons why I suggest that a kind of *historical form of cosmopolitanism* characterizes Negombo.

This is the first way in which I use the concept of cosmopolitanism. It is what can be called cosmopolitanism out of necessity, as it is closely linked to specific historic and geographic factors. In order to survive, coastal populations like that of Negombo needed to make diversity and flexibility a fundamental part of their identity (Pratt 1992).³ Efforts to bridge miscommunication and to learn about other cultures

in places with long colonial histories had little to do with curiosity with the foreign; nevertheless, curiosity and an accommodating attitude may be counted as some of the consequences of their particular colonial history.

Writing about the south Indian city of Kochi, Ashis Nandy has argued that cosmopolitanism is better defined by a series of contradictions and inconsistencies than by a homogenous sense of tolerance and multicultural identity. Nandy suggests that Kochi's cosmopolitanism is based on ethnic stereotypes, dislikes and hostilities that, rather than infusing violence and resentment, allow for an unexpectedly peaceful cohabitation. Nandy writes, "Cochin seems to have thrived on the checks and counterchecks provided by its low-key communal loves and hates" (2002, 160).

In this sense, Nandy rejects the three basic arguments usually forwarded to explain the cosmopolitanism of Kochi: abundant trade, a common language and high literacy. Nandy's approach to cosmopolitanism is useful for my present purposes because it effectively rejects the idea that clarity, common understandings and lack of conflict are what characterize it. The cosmopolitanism that Nandy describes in Kochi – and that I partially borrow to think of Negombo – is one that somehow allows the city to survive and to re-invent itself, in spite of signs that hint of disappearance and failure.

Cosmopolitan Attitudes

The second way in which I make use of the concept of cosmopolitanism is of course related to the previous, more utilitarian form, but deals with its more ontological dimension. If geography and history set the stage for a particular kind of engagement with the world, it was the individuals living in these junctures who had to develop particular attitudes towards the home and the foreign. In this sense, cosmopolitanism is more than a utilitarian decision to accommodate to the requisites of life in the midst of powerful cultural and economic forces. Regardless of whether people initially took practical decisions that enabled them to live through new political and social circumstances, these circumstances had a profoundly transformative effect on people's lives (Scott 2004). A key aspect of this transformation in the context of migration takes place at a very personal level, as migrant workers discovered abroad that their lives were sometimes not so firmly attached to those things and places they thought they would be attached to.

When people traveled and met other peoples in different parts of the world – or when they learnt how to deal with the presence of the foreign at home – they usually changed some of their habits and the way in which they did certain things. This aspect of cultural change through contact is not a cosmopolitan characteristic (or maybe a 'lazy cosmopolitanism', as Simpson and Kresse define it), but what I suggest as uniquely cosmopolitan is that regardless of what observable changes may have

been introduced to their lives, people became aware of the existence of alternative ways of living and interpreting life.

What this means for my ethnography is that transnational migration sometimes generated very profound changes in the way people understood life, although on the surface there may have been little change to account for. Cosmopolitanism in this sense needed few of the eccentric and worldly characteristics that are associated with life on the move. Many times, the most cosmopolitan migrants desired above anything else to return to the hometown and live as close as possible to the values and practices with which they had grown up. However, this did not mean that their lives had not changed, but that actual changes needed to be found in the more subtle ways in which people had come to conceive life in an eminently cosmopolitan way that transcended the narrow expectations of the hometown.

This often posed further problems for the individual migrant, as this cosmopolitan gaze on life was something that was not necessarily considered a positive change. There was always something lost when people wanted to return home to construct the life they had dreamt of, but realized that the years abroad changed them in ways that they could not quite articulate. The stories from the field that I will relate in further chapters contain different aspects of this situation and constitute what I consider to be one of the fundamental problems that cosmopolitanism created in Negombo: the cosmopolitan detachment and flexibility fundamental to the success

of migrant workers abroad, was also responsible for sealing people off from re-integrating when they wanted to return and live their lives at home.

Over the last two decades many intellectual efforts have been inspired by the search for a “new cosmopolitanism” which could reconcile a person’s attachments to the home with their responsibilities to the world (Robbins 2012). Kwame Anthony Appiah’s (2006) notion of *rooted cosmopolitanism* is perhaps the most widely popular approach to a kind of cosmopolitanism that is proud of its roots. I believe that Appiah is correct in pointing out that cosmopolitans do not shed all of their cultural connections to the home in order to embrace a kind of belonging that transcends borders. However, if we conceive of cosmopolitanism in this non-conflictive way, the entire concept ceases to be helpful when instances of conflict actually arise. What this means is that for Appiah, if there is a collision between local and cosmopolitan attachments, the problem is no longer one related to cosmopolitanism and its causes need to be found somewhere else. The kind of cosmopolitanism that I propose here is one that does not reject local attachments, but one that will sometimes have to adjudicate between different values and practices.

Transnational migration in Negombo showed that over time there was a kind of movement towards detachment that unavoidably produced some of the consequences which many accuse cosmopolitanism of incubating. For most migrant workers, time away from home did not make them stop missing their loved ones and

lose their sense of belonging, but it did generate new attachments to the places where they spent many years of their working lives.⁴ If migration did not produce detachment, there was a kind of *attenuation* by which people came to realize that they had developed diverse ties of affection that did not override older ones, but did assign them a new location in their lives. Cosmopolitanism in Negombo had to do with this heightened sense of awareness of cultural diversity and of the different ways of thinking life that people encountered through transnational migration. Local attachments were not replaced by a blanket detachment or by the development of exclusively cosmopolitan bonds; but they were in a way relocated in the imagination of belonging that migrant workers developed over the years.

But Where to Draw the Limit to the Cosmopolitan?

I think of cosmopolitanism in the two different and seemingly contradictory ways outlined above. On one hand, cosmopolitanism refers to travel, flexibility and diversity. In this way, the history of Negombo provided plenty of evidence of adaptability to the new and different. On the other, cosmopolitanism refers to a kind of distance and attenuation, a lack of engagement that becomes fundamental for this adaptability to take place.

But this capacity for accommodation always had some limit, as cosmopolitanism in Negombo required a particular balance between people's

attachments to the home and the world. If we think of the cosmopolitan as navigating between the extremes of rooted and rootlessness, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the movement towards severing some of its attachments needed to stop somewhere, lest one became completely uprooted. Transnational migration in the Negombo community reflected the conflicts that this process of “becoming cosmopolitan” generated – where non-migrants accused migrants of forgetting their roots and responsibilities towards the community, while migrants thought that Italy allowed them to participate in some genuinely good practices that would improve lives in Sri Lanka for everyone.

Non-migrants generally had little sympathy for these arguments and mocked migrants for their new Italian pretensions, or wanted to migrate themselves to enjoy the financial benefits of labor migration to Italy. Yet in spite of all the reasons that migrant workers had to settle abroad permanently, they insisted on returning to Sri Lanka to pursue their dream of living a comfortable life at home with their families. Their inability to find ways to sustain this project encouraged them to migrate again in the hopes that a few more years in Italy would allow them to realize their dream.

One of the main questions that my ethnography tries to answer is thus, where did the Negombo Catholic community draw the limit between cosmopolitanism and rootlessness? I anticipate that people did not offer a unified response to this and that arguments were endlessly contested, but I suggest that there was an agreement over

the need to offer children a notion of Sri Lankan Catholic culture through education in Negombo. Educating children in Sri Lanka had two different and related explanations. On one hand, it instilled in the youth the fundamental values of the home community which in turn would be essential to make the most of their own migratory experience in the future. On the other, migrants would not regard themselves as good Sri Lankan Catholics if they did not become good parents. To be good parents, it was not only necessary to provide for the family but most importantly to communicate the values of the community.

But this was already a very cosmopolitan attitude on the part of transnational parents who did not see a threat in many aspects of cultural change. As I have already mentioned and as it will hopefully become clear in the following chapters, the only agreement that migrants and non-migrants seemed to have in this respect was that the problem was one of culture and education (*sanskrutya saba adhyapanaya*). Non-migrants thought that people that went to Italy were not simply bringing new and better practices, they had foregone their Sri Lankan values and adopted new ones in Italy. In this sense, bringing children to Sri Lanka for their education could hardly count as enough proof that they were good Sri Lankan Catholics.

In my dissertation I focus on these difficulties and obstacles that migrant workers found when trying to mediate between their Sri Lankan ethical values and the norms that they had adopted through migration. The problem was not only to strike

the right balance, but to convince non-migrants that finding this equilibrium was an actual possibility. What I believe is really interesting about this situation is that this did not only reflect the ways in which migrant workers changed over the years as opposed to how stable and “provincial” those at home had remained – it also reflects the exact opposite. In spite of their years abroad and of the cosmopolitan outlooks that they had embraced, migrant workers believed that returning would allow them to live the life they had dreamt of. Meanwhile, non-migrants in Negombo saw their lives change constantly, in part due to the political and economic volatility of the country, in part due to the way in which transnational migration had transformed the imagination and dreams of everyone at home.

Ethnographic Context

Negombo is situated in the Gampaha District of the Western Province of Sri Lanka. Although one of the smallest districts in the country, its population surpasses the two million mark, making it – together with Colombo – the most populous in the country. The main reason for this is that beyond its southern border demarcated by the Kelani river is located the city of Colombo. In this way, the growth of the capital towards the north has spilled onto former towns transforming them into urban neighborhoods.⁵

In terms of religious affiliation, only 6.1% of the national population identifies

as Roman Catholic. However, spatial distribution is highly unequal with particular concentrations in certain districts of the country and also in specific areas within them, constituting places like Negombo into veritable religious enclaves (Stirrat 1992). The Roman Catholic population of Gampaha District is slightly under 20%, but it is distinctly concentrated along the coastal areas given the historical connection that exists in Sri Lanka between the fishing industry and the Catholic Church. In this way, in a city like Negombo – known as the capital of Catholic Sri Lanka – more than 65% (92,827) of the population identifies as Catholic amongst a population of 141,676.⁶

Negombo has a unique local history as a commercial port and military outpost that makes it stand out from the more humble towns that have recently become busy urban areas due to the growth of Colombo. In spite of this, it has become increasingly difficult to define its character unambiguously, as its new role of commuter town for people who work in the capital has added new population categories to Negombo. The borders of the city are impossible to identify, as it has become part of the semi-urban sprawling area that characterizes southwestern Sri Lanka (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988). Additionally, the proximity to the international airport and the industrial Free Trade Zone in Katunayake further contribute to the difficulties encountered when looking for ways to describe Negombo in a coherent way (Hewamanne 2008; Lynch 2007). Many of the people who live in Negombo have sources of income that are

completely disconnected from the local economy, making it very difficult to produce useful estimates of the local economic situation that do not take into account other parts of the country and – fundamental to my research – overseas remittance networks. Negombo follows the pattern observed in other cases across the globe where transnational migration has led the economically active population away from the country. The combination of this notorious absence of entire fractions of the local population and the steady flow of remittances that arrives at the households of their families can sometimes produce rather uncanny situations that are a reflection of an economy in which levels of production flounder while levels of consumption appear to be in perpetual expansion.

Transnational Migration and Remittances

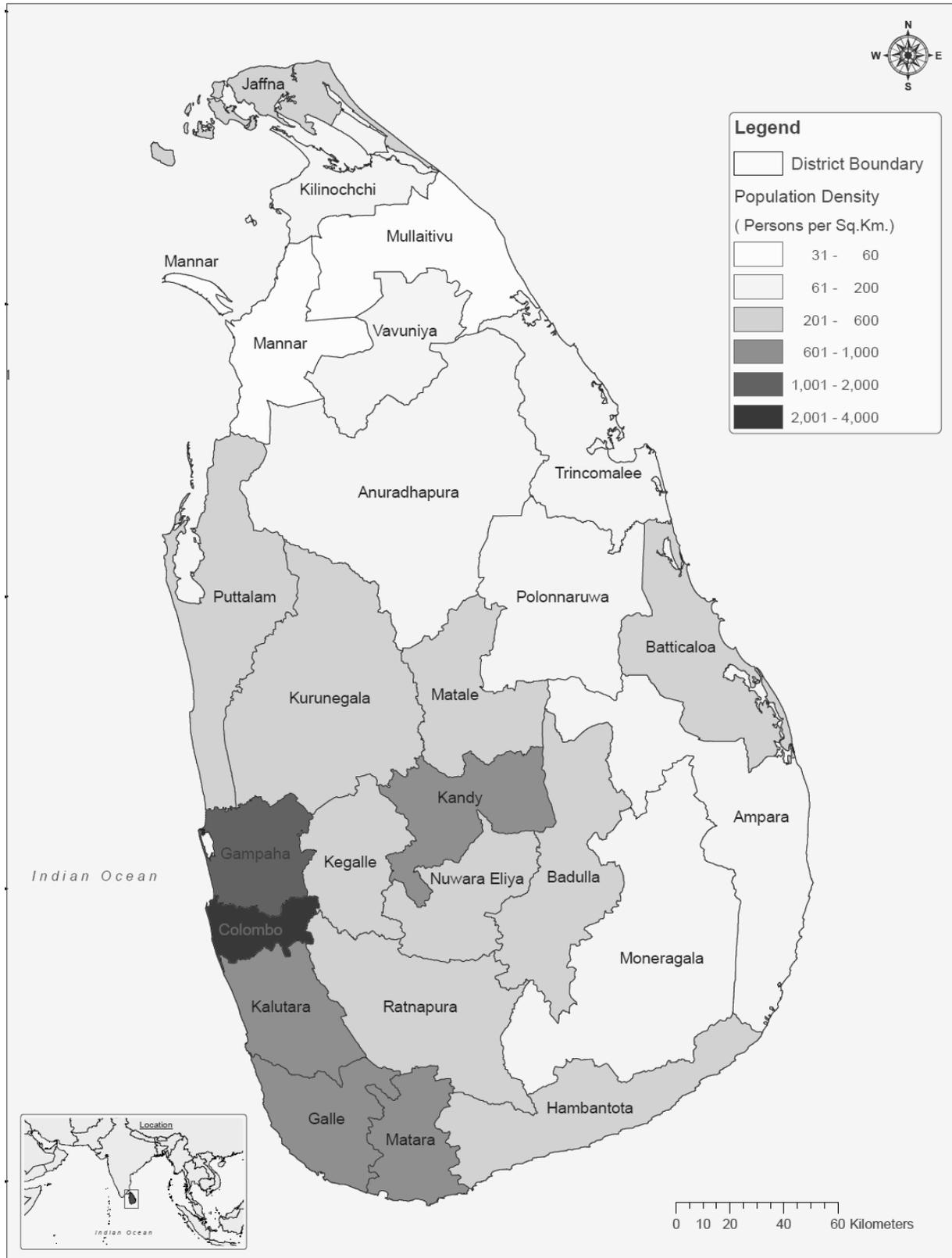
The first waves of Sri Lankan transnational migration were fueled by push factors that originated in the political and economic reforms implemented across Sri Lanka by the United National Party (UNP) government after the election of J.R. Jayawardene in 1977. In an effort to balance the national accounts, the new government initiated a series of pro-market liberalization policies that were aimed at drastically reducing the country's financial deficit (Winslow and Woost 2004; Spencer 1990; De Silva 1981).

But the neo-liberal reforms inaugurated by the UNP administration were not

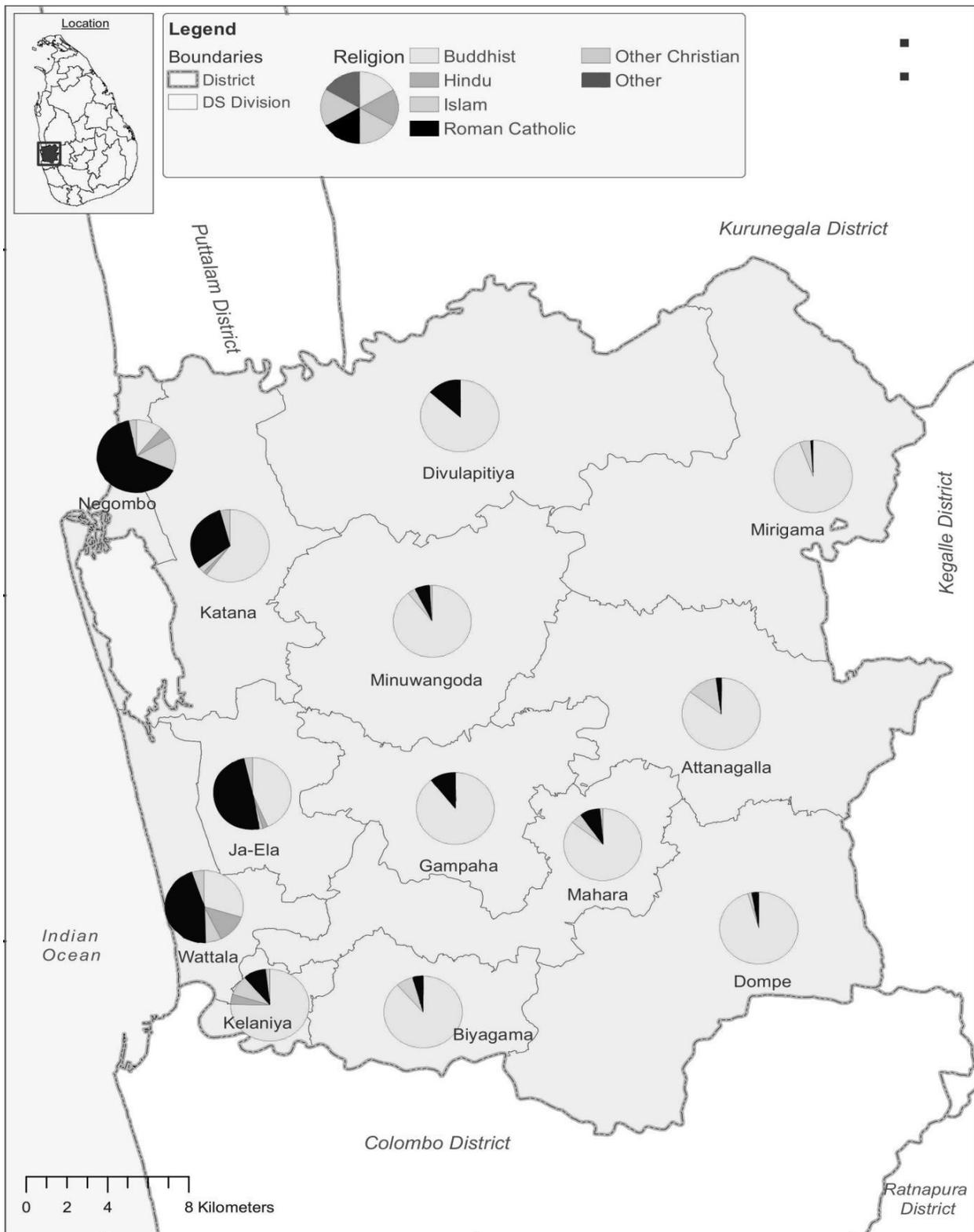
accompanied by a reduction in the state budget, as the government was unable to downsize the clientelist and spendthrift policies of the previous Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government under the leadership of Sirimavo Bandaranaike. After 1977 the state budget further expanded with the injection of capital received from the opening of the economy. By 1980, the government was still spending 43% of the country's budget, and after a rapid and short-lived growth of the economy due to the inflow of foreign investment and loans, the economy plummeted under inflation, unemployment and debt (Richardson 2005).

Concurrently, a major change that coincided with the opening of the Sri Lankan economy was the exponential growth in demand for unskilled labor in the Middle East produced by the surge in oil prices in the mid-1970s (Mohammad & Sidaway 2012). In a context of rising unemployment, deteriorating terms of economic exchange and brewing political tensions, the government of Sri Lanka saw the opportunity to seize foreign exchange needed to support its new open market policies by attracting remittances from transnational workers migrating to the Oil economies (Gamburd 2004).

With this objective, the UNP administration developed an infrastructure to regulate and support the transnational demand for low-wage laborers. Given that more than 90% of migrant workers were traveling to the Middle East, the priority of the government was to cater to this population; however, migratory flows to Italy and



Population Distribution by District, 2012



Population by Religion and DS Division, Gampaha District 2012

other minor recipients of labor from Sri Lanka also benefited from the development of this infrastructure. To support its active policies promoting transnational migration, the government of Sri Lanka opened new embassies and consular services in UAE in 1979, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in 1981, and most importantly inaugurated the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) in 1985 (Gamburd 2000).

The economic impact that transnational migration had on local populations was of course not limited to Negombo. Over the last three decades, remittance money has become a fundamental source of income on which the national economy is highly dependent. Transnational migration to Italy is a minor case in a country in which at any given time there are more than one million women laboring as domestic workers in countries in the Middle East. It is estimated that these women provide for five million people in Sri Lanka, roughly one quarter of the country's population (Jureidini & Moukarbel 2004; Smith 2010).

Three reasons combine to make of this migratory flow to the Middle East the subject of much scholarly and policy work. First, the sheer numbers of people and money that this flow generates. According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, in 2009 remittances have become the main source of foreign income in the country surpassing the garment industry.⁷ More than 4 billion dollars are sent home by the estimated two million Sri Lankans who live outside the country. Second, the markedly feminized character of this flow that alters traditional patterns of reproductive labor,

mainly in rural households where the majority of these migrant women come from (Dias and Jayaweera 2002; Abu-Habib 1998). Third, the recurrent cases of abuse suffered by Sri Lankan women at the hands of their employers in the Middle East that reaches the news routinely. The case of Rizana Nafeek, condemned to death and beheaded by the government of Saudi Arabia in late 2012 for the death of an infant at her care, being the most recent case in which the media across the globe took note of the dismal conditions under which migrant women work.

The combination of these three reasons unavoidably denies visibility to the case of Sri Lankan migrant workers traveling to Italy. The only time at which this migratory flow reached the mainstream news was in the early 2000s, when the Italian migratory frenzy was at its height. This is the subject of the next section.

Traveling to Italy

Most personal stories of travel to Italy narrated by migrant workers stressed a link between the town of Wennappuwa and the Catholic Church.⁸ In its most popular version, Sri Lankan priests who were traveling to Italy for their education in the mid-1970s established an employment connection between people from their parishes in and around Wennappuwa (located 15 miles to the North of Negombo) with prospective Italian employers who needed caretakers for their elderly. The initial success of these migration pioneers enabled them to develop a process of chain

migration (Lutz 2008; Parreñas 2001) by which their relatives soon followed suit, rapidly multiplying the numbers of Sri Lankans working in Italy.

Since the early 1980s, the Sri Lankan government had encouraged the introduction of motorized fishing trawlers to the local industry.⁹ In particular, Festus Perera, the Minister of Fisheries at the time, promoted these developments amongst his constituents who mainly came from the coastal belt of fishing towns. These new motorized vessels were able to venture far out of the coast and could eventually be used to transport other products across the ocean. Not long after their introduction in the local fishing industry, some boat owners found more profitable businesses than fishing. They soon started developing the connections necessary to establish transportation networks, allowing them to take dozens of people at a time across the Indian Ocean, Red Sea and Mediterranean to reach the coasts of Italy.

At the height of the smuggling business in 2000, boats were arriving weekly to Italy from Negombo and other coastal towns. While the first boats doing this trip are said to have left in 1994 charging less than US\$2,000 per person, the prices charged by smugglers grew exponentially over the next few years, eventually surpassing the US\$4,000 mark. Some of the smugglers were supposed to have relatively safe and carefully planned schedules for the twenty day voyage, but the popularity of the smuggling industry encouraged many to improvise their voyages which led to overcrowded boats, scams and even the death of passengers.¹⁰

Table 75 : Private Remittances and Foreign Earnings (Rs. Million) during the Year 1990 - 2010*

Year	Private Remittance	Tea	Rubber	Coconut	Garment	Total Export	Private remittances as a % of total export
1990	16,054	19,823	3,080	2,783	24,827	76,624	21.0
1991	18,311	17,867	2,641	2,619	31,652	82,225	22.3
1992	24,037	14,893	2,960	3,691	49,176	107,855	22.3
1993	30,592	19,911	3,086	2,796	62,349	138,175	22.1
1994	34,992	20,964	3,582	3,761	68,945	158,554	22.1
1995	40,482	24,638	5,713	5,271	84,806	195,092	20.8
1996	46,003	34,068	5,753	6,091	93,814	226,801	20.3
1997	54,445	42,533	4,640	6,940	121,083	274,193	19.9
1998	64,517	50,280	2,808	6,110	142,333	310,938	20.7
1999	74,356	43,728	2,305	9,119	155,214	325,171	22.9
2000	87,697	53,133	2,179	9,174	206,360	420,114	20.9
2001	103,180	61,602	2,129	7,348	208,624	430,372	24.0
2002	123,183	63,105	2,552	8,009	214,895	449,850	27.4
2003	136,475	65,936	3,717	8,926	231,652	495,426	27.5
2004	158,291	74,897	5,155	11,453	268,573	583,967	27.1
2005	195,256	81,482	4,724	11,400	276,144	638,276	30.6
2006	224,663	91,667	9,674	12,898	303,263	716,579	31.4
2007	276,728	113,565	12,089	15,636	347,670	845,683	32.7
2008	316,118	137,600	13,538	18,532	355,995	878,499	36.0
2009	382,801	136,171	11,327	19,091	358,374	813,911	47.0
2010*	465,372	155,376	19,256	19,593	374,041	937,737	49.6

*Provisional

Source : Central Bank Annual Reports 1995-2010

The rather homogeneous cargo of young Catholic fishermen from the west coast also started to change and extend to other communities and other parts of the country, eventually reaching international prominence. The ease with which nationals of countries like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan entered Sri Lanka led many Europe-bound migrants to arrive first at Katunayake airport near Negombo, only to be later smuggled via ocean routes to Italy.

This situation drastically changed in 2002 as a consequence of two important decisions. First, the Italian Parliament sanctioned a new immigration law known as the Bossi-Fini law.¹¹ This law amended previous immigration legislation and offered a path to regularization to those already living in Italy. It also devised a structure for the processing of new immigrants with offices throughout the country and stricter border controls. The second important change was a consequence of the ASEM - Ministerial Conference on Cooperation for the Management of Migratory Flows between Europe and Asia. Following this conference, the Italian government established bilateral agreements with sending countries to help curb illegal migratory flows. One of the advantages offered to the countries that signed was that Italy allowed them special quotas for immigrants and readmission priorities in exchange for their cooperation. Another component of these agreements was to externalize the policing of the Italian border.¹² In other words, Italian authorities began cooperating logistically and financially with local law-enforcement agencies to stop migration at

the point of departure.¹³

As a consequence of these measures illegal migration to Italy was drastically controlled. A police officer in Negombo told me how back in 2002 they had received the order to crack down on illegal emigration. He remembered that at that time smugglers were making large amounts of money and even offered to take him to Italy for free if he allowed them to do their business. Looking back at his decision he told me, “Maybe I should have taken the offer and gone there with my family. My wife’s family is already there anyway.” The sea route to Italy that originated in 1994 and grew exponentially every year had peaked in 2002 when police estimates suggested that 2,000 Sri Lankans had been smuggled to Italy. Only a year later, this route to Italy was almost completely extinguished.

The Receiving Side

Italy has a long history of outmigration which lasted for over a hundred years until the late 1970s, when it achieved positive net migration figures for the first time (Bonifazi et al. 2009). Historically a country struggling with poverty, Italy lagged behind other European countries in attracting immigration flows. It was only in the last two decades – when the presence of foreigners became an issue of popular concern and debate – that immigration policy gained importance in the campaign platforms of politicians running for office. Until that time, it had been relatively easy

for immigrants to overstay their visas and find employment locally.

Since the time when Italy started to become a receiving country, five sweeping amnesties aimed at regularizing thousands of immigrants who were working in the country have been implemented. The last of these in 2002 (Bossi Fini Law), received more than 700,000 applications for residency and coincided with the last massive people smuggling operations from Sri Lanka.

The relatively unproblematic view that Italians held of immigration facilitated the rapid growth in popularity of Italy as a migration destination, attracting thousands of Sri Lankans throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Italy was not only attractive to Catholic Sri Lankans but also became a coveted destination for immigrants from other Asian and North African countries. Official statistics provided by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) place the number of foreign residents legally living in the national territory at 4.2 million in 2011 – 7% of the total population. Estimates by the Catholic organization CARITAS/Migrantes suggest that almost another million live and work in the country illegally. In the span of three decades, Italy went from being a country of outmigration to one of the most coveted destinations for immigrants.¹⁴

In addition to the ever growing number of migrant workers arriving in Italy, the number of foreign residents born in Italy has also grown exponentially. It should be noted that children born in Italy from parents who are not Italian citizens

constitute a special category referred to as the “Second Generation”, who are not Italian citizens by birth (Clough Marinaro and Walston 2010). More than half a million children are included in this category of non-Italians who are born in Italy; which when added to the number of children who arrive in Italy as a result of family reunification policies, place the number of children under the age of 18 at nearly one million (22% of the foreign resident population).

Country of Citizenship	Age Group											Total
	Under 17	18-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64	65	
Sri Lanka	18,423	4,881	8,509	12,260	11,997	10,991	8,841	6,229	3,690	1,832	984	88,637

(ISTAT, Ministero dell'Interno)

According to recent population statistics published by ISTAT in 2011, there were 88,637 Sri Lankan legally residing in Italy; 18,427 of them under the age of 18, constituting the largest age group of Sri Lankans in Italy.¹⁵ The continuous growth of the migratory flow from Sri Lanka to Italy stabilized in the early 2000s, but the migrant community keeps slowly expanding as evidenced by the number of youths currently living in that country. A small anecdote that is revealing of the importance of Asian migrations in Italy is that amongst the most common surnames for newborn babies in 2010 were the Chinese *Hu* and *Chen*, in many districts surpassing the historical domination of *Rossi* and *Lombardi* as the most popular. Interestingly enough, close behind these, were newborns bearing the family names of *Fernando* and

Warunakulasurya, quintessential Sri Lankan Catholic names with strong caste connections to the fishing industry.

Negombo Neighbors

Before moving on to the chapter outline that constitutes the closing section of this introduction, I offer an overview of the two main locations where my work was based. The villages of Doowa and PitipanaVeedyā are adjacently located to the south of downtown Negombo, across the bridge that connects the fishing harbor to the city. These two villages have a population of 1,500 and 1,300 respectively. A paved road that extends for 2.6 kilometers winds through houses, churches and the seaside connecting the two villages, while narrow lanes branch out to reach other houses. Although Negombo provides a diverse religious spectrum – including two major Hindu kovils, two mosques and several Buddhist temples, in addition to some important Catholic churches and schools with imposing buildings – Doowa and PitipanaVeedyā are almost exclusively enclaves of Catholic fishermen.

As the success of transnational workers traveling to Italy became an increasingly usual story amongst the local population, the quiet streets of these two fishing villages were transformed by the economic prosperity of its migrants. But the way in which money was used in this formerly austere community had a particular Italian charm that showed a kind of pride that migrant workers had for the origins of

their money.

Remittances were not only financial, they had a social and cultural component that determined what was advisable to spend money on, and what aesthetic ideas would influence the way in which the money was spent (Levitt 2001). Housing improvements were highly desirable, but it was also desirable to make an aesthetic statement while improving the home of the family.



The "Italian-style" in PitipanaVeedyā



A walk down the streets of these villages in 2010 would take the visitor past auto-rickshaws with Italian flags painted on their backs, advertisements for Italian lessons and Western Union deals for money transfers. Construction and remodeling projects in every other house were also common, making businesses in downtown Negombo that sold and delivered construction materials and home appliances thrive with cash they received from people visiting from Italy. The new houses being built had manicured lawns and were sometimes preceded by big black gates with stately golden lions masking their steel bars. The buildings themselves followed particular architectural design trends popularly referred to as the “Italian style.” These were remarkably different from the traditionally modest one story constructions with red cement floors and shingled roofs with no inner ceiling that characterized this area.

The changes in fashion also made quite evident who had been to Italy or had family members working there. Young boys and girls walking down the local streets with big sunglasses and with t-shirts with Italian flags would be common, or with soccer jerseys from teams like Milan and Napoli.¹⁶

Many times I was greeted to my interviews with coffee made with imported espresso machines (rather than the more usual Sri Lankan tea), and some people even dined with wine glasses on their tables. Large flat screen TVs, Italian kitchen appliances and Italian furniture were standard in most homes of migrant workers. Many migrants in Italy periodically sent home large parcels with Italian products.

These included pasta, Italian tomato sauces, fruit juices and candy for the children. One of the main things that most people sent home were toiletries and cleaning products for the kitchen.

My interviews were conducted mainly in Sinhalese with the aid of a research assistant. But in certain occasions when he was not present and my Sinhala skills proved insufficient, conversations would drift into Italian and English. While migrant parents had become relatively fluent in Italian, many times it was on their school aged children we relied on to bridge language gaps. These children were attending the new international schools that taught in the English medium and that had sprouted in areas where transnational migration was popular. Other parents who could not afford the fees charged by these schools relied on the historically prestigious education provided by local Catholic schools and colleges like St. Mary's, Maris Stella College or Loyola College.

In general these villages provided irrefutable evidence of the material advancements that transnational migration had brought to the region. But they were also proof of the social and cultural conflicts that Italian-style prosperity had brought along. The chapters that follow are an effort to ethnographically interpret these transformations beyond the conceptual framework provided by theories of globalization. I do not contest the insight that these theories provide when studying a case of transnational migration like the one that concerns this ethnography. However,

by focusing on the material aspects of migration, these approaches generally fail to address the complex process of ethical deliberation that migrant workers engage with in order to take decisions about their lives and the lives of their families. Rather than



Italia Getua

being the exclusive consequence of utilitarian assessments aimed at improving the material well-being of those at home, there is an intricate combination of desires, dreams and duties that inform the multiple ways in which prospective migrants think about their decisions.

By approaching transnationalism using anthropological and philosophical developments in the study of cosmopolitanism and ethics, my objective is to find ways to interpret decisions taken by migrant workers and their families that are



Fashion in Dooma

beyond the scope of globalization research. My hope is that from the next five chapters will emerge the image of a people who strove to do the right thing for their families. Yet this struggle was muddled by uncertainty as to where to pursue their best interest or what shape it should take. The financial stability that had guided the efforts of most migrant workers ended posing unexpected and undesirable challenges for people who tried to solve one problem only to be confronted with a myriad new ones

that seemingly originated in their own success. But perhaps the emergence of the problems themselves was not as puzzling as the difficulty people found when trying to articulate them in intelligible ways.

To conclude this introduction I draw a rather unlikely connection to the work of anthropologist James Ferguson in the *Zambian Copperbelt* (Ferguson 1999). In his ethnographic work, Ferguson was deeply troubled by his inability to interpret life in a rapidly deteriorating context. But his struggle to make sense of that place only reflected the confusing circumstances in which everyone lived, unable to articulate problems that had come to characterize their lives. Ferguson's work is important to any ethnographer intending to work with rapidly changing and globalizing societies in that it reflects a deep sense of uncertainty, not only for the fieldworker but for the very people whose lives he is trying to describe. Ferguson asks,

What happens to anthropological understanding in a situation where “the natives” as well as the ethnographer lack a good understanding of what is going on around them? What if “the local people,” like the anthropologist, feel out of place, alienated, and unconnected with much of what they see? (1999, 19)

This uneasiness that Ferguson described in his ethnography can apply to my own experience of conducting fieldwork in Negombo, where people were recurrently leaving and returning, looking for ways to avoid losing what they had and constantly trying to make sense of how to live life in Sri Lanka 2010. In this sense, my effort to

offer arguments that may reconcile people's attachments to the home while they enjoyed their new lives overseas will hopefully reflect the individual struggles made by people to renew their ties to their Sri Lankan Catholic community while they tried to enjoy the new lives they had made for themselves abroad.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter 1, I explore contemporary approaches to cosmopolitanism and discuss different varieties of rooted, discrepant and working class cosmopolitanisms in the work of Appiah, Robbins, Hannerz, Nussbaum and Nandy amongst others. I suggest that cosmopolitanism amongst Sri Lankan Catholic migrant workers is characterized by a kind of disengagement and isolation from certain national and local attachments. Rather than seeing cosmopolitanism as an extension of a person's connections to the world, it can be useful to think of it as "a lonely business", as characterized by Martha Nussbaum.

Chapter 2 is an ethnographic account of the life of a migrant worker who found little incentive to settle back in Negombo after accomplishing the material objectives he pursued in Italy. Ten years of work in Milan had made him appreciate many aspects of life in Italy and to opt for certain Italian practices over those typical of Sri Lanka. As he explained, the lifestyle he had developed in Italy eventually disconnected him from the problems and struggles of daily life in his home country.

Meanwhile, his wife and children who were enjoying their newfound prosperity in Negombo, questioned his decision to recurrently extend his work stints in Italy for an extra year. His life exemplified the tensions that many transnational migrants faced as they dreamed of returning to a hometown that in many ways no longer appealed to them.

Chapter 3 is a historical overview of the Catholic community of Negombo. It traces the origins of the community to its diverse South Indian origins, and suggests that five centuries of contact with traders, missionaries and colonial officers inspired a cosmopolitan attitude towards the foreign amongst the local population. In this chapter I argue that for this community, cosmopolitanism is not only consequence of contact produced by contemporary transnational connections but also the result of long-standing and overlapping transoceanic trajectories where Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial enterprises intersect with Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim linguistic and cultural traditions found in the Negombo area.

In Chapter 4, I engage with recent developments in the Anthropology of Ethics, analyzing how transnational migrants produce moral arguments to justify decisions they take in reference to return migration and especially towards their children's education. Drawing on the philosophical work of Foucault and Williams on the ethical life as daily practice and on the question of "how life ought to be lived", I discuss the recent work of anthropologists like Faubion, Laidlaw, Keane, Pandian,

Robbins and Lambek who bring the subject of ethics to the realm of ethnography.

Chapter 5 uses the concept of indifference to describe the way in which many migrant workers reacted to their communities of origin upon return. Economic success in Italy did not open paths to social mobility for these migrants who were mocked for “acting like Italians.” This situation was profoundly frustrating for migrant workers who wanted to invest locally but realized that business opportunities were reserved for those who had traditionally monopolized the economic circles in the country. At the local level, tensions ensued as non-migrants in their own hometowns suspected transnational workers had not made their money by legal means and accused them of refusing to help relatives at home. The combination of these two situations encouraged many return migrants to sever some of the connections they had with the home country and opted to live in relative isolation.

Notes to Introduction

¹ In this dissertation I will try to follow as close as possible the “Orthography of Spoken Sinhala” developed by Michele Gamburd in her book, *The Kitchen Spoon’s Handle* (2000, 245-247). “Sinhala speakers distinguish between long and short soundings of seven vowels. I represent long vowels by doubling the short vowel symbols: ‘i’ is a short vowel similar to that in American English ‘bit’; ‘ii’ is similar to the vowel in the English ‘deed’; ‘e’ is halfway between the English ‘bet’ and ‘bait,’ but without the glide found in ‘bait’; ‘ee’ is similar to the vowel in ‘raid,’ again without the glide; ‘ae’ and ‘aeae’ are similar to the vowel in ‘cat’ [...] “a” is like the vowel in ‘hot,’ while ‘aa’ sounds like the first vowel in ‘father’; ‘u’ is like the vowel in ‘shoot’ but shorter and without the glide, while ‘uu’ sounds like the vowel in ‘food,’ but again without the glide; ‘o’ is similar to the vowel sound in ‘coat,’ but shorter and without the glide; ‘oo’ sounds like the vowel in ‘load,’ without the glide. Many of the consonants in Sinhala correspond to those used in American English. However, Sinhala-speakers distinguish between two ‘T-like’ and two ‘D-like’ sounds. I use ‘T’ to represent a sound pronounced just slightly further back in the mouth than the first consonant in the English ‘taxi.’ [...] The full nasals ‘m,’ ‘n’ and ‘ng’ correspond to the first consonants in the English “mood” and “noon” and the ‘ng’ in ‘sing.’ [...] Finally, Sinhala speakers note a difference between single and double consonants; ‘kk’ is pronounced as in the English ‘bookkeeper.’” Like Gamburd, I have transliterated personal and place names according to traditional conventions, which do not always correspond to the orthography set out here. All Sinhala words-except for names of people and places are italicized.

² Johan Lindquist’s *The Anxieties of Mobilities* (2009) is an ethnographic account of the Indonesian island of Batam. Anxiety, the central theme of his work, is one of the main consequences suffered by migrant workers who are caught up in a constant struggle to perform a dream of modernity and progress that is never fully accomplished. I use the concept of anxiety in my ethnography of Negombo following Lindquist, who sees transnational migration as a double-edged sword: enabling new opportunities to impoverished populations but simultaneously creating societal pressures and generating an inflationary growth of dreams of mobility and cultural refashioning amongst young migrants.

³ This is also very much determined by the conditions of a contact zone, as Pratt writes, contact zones were shared spaces where “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination- like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today”(Pratt 1992, 4).

⁴ Ulf Hannerz wrote that for most migrant workers, migration is just home plus better pay. I think that this is true only of a minority of migrant workers (Hannerz 1996). Migration makes people move away from some of their local attachments. How much they will become removed with migration depends on a combination of their individual disposition and their cultural histories, but in general it will be rare to find migrants who live “as if” nothing from the home had been lost. Benedict Anderson’s idea of long-distance nationalism is also useful here, as it conveys a notion of heightened nationalist sentiments that are inspired as a reaction to the sense of loss that migration produces (Schiller and Fouron 2001; Anderson 1992).

⁵ In terms of population density, Gampaha is also second after Colombo according to the 2011 National Census (1714 inhabitants per square kilometer and 3,438 respectively). However, as opposed to Colombo, Gampaha has large stretches of rural and semi-urbanized land, concentrating its largest population across the Kelani river and to the north along the Indian Ocean coast.

⁶ Some smaller districts have proportionately larger population of Catholics, like Mannar (52.7%) and Puttalam (31.2%). Both of these districts are also coastal and are located to the north of Colombo with large presence of fishermen. Many of the families I interviewed in Negombo had relatives in these areas

and seasonally migrated for work during the monsoon seasons that affected differently the Southwest and the Northeast of the island.

⁷ Figures published by the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment SLBFE (Table 75) based on official data of Sri Lanka's Central Bank Annual Reports 2005-2009.

⁸ In my dissertation I make use of the more usual narratives told by migrants themselves to suggest arguments that explain the particular growth that migration to Italy experienced in this region of Sri Lanka. This kind of research – that to my knowledge has not been undertaken – would make an important contribution to the study of this transnational migratory flow and would help illuminate some of the connections that I tentatively present here.

⁹ For the conditions of fishing communities in Sri Lanka see the 2009 work of K. Sivasubramaniam, *Fisberies in Sri Lanka: Anthropological and Biological Aspects*.

¹⁰ There were rumors of scam smugglers who would recruit migrant workers and sail away from the Sri Lankan coast for a few days. One story says that in the middle of the night they reached a beach and told their passengers to jump out as they had reached the Italian shore, but they were only in Hambantota.

¹¹ For the particulars of the 2002 Italian immigration reform see, Totah, Michele. 2003. "Comment – Fortress Italy: Racial Politics and the New Immigration Amendment in Italy." *Fordham international Law journal*. 26 (5): 1438.

¹² The Italian and Egyptian governments had reached a cooperation agreement by which Italian immigration patrols were based on the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea to control the influx of undocumented immigrants and stop them before they got close to the Italian coast. In 2003 and 2004 boats from Negombo were still attempting this route but were systematically detained before reaching the Suez Canal.

¹³ An example of this kind of cooperation is that the Sri Lankan Navy received the donation of an Italian patrol boat in early 2006. See "Practical Responses to Irregular Migration: The Italian Case" (2011). IDOS/EMN Italy.

¹⁴ Italy's number of foreign born residents has increased in recent years. According to official EU statistics, Italy has the largest immigrant population in Europe after the UK and Spain.

¹⁵ Official figures show similar numbers for other South Asians, Pakistanis (90,222), Bangladeshis (103,285) and a larger number of Indians (142,565).

¹⁶ The weight of social remittances seems to be directly connected to the imaginaries of local communities and the way they represent the West. "Remittances impact is also stronger if, by adopting these new ideas and behaviors, individuals signal to others that they are better off, more "modern," or more "American." Since more Mirafloresños covet all things from the United States, they are more open to new styles and practices that migrants introduce" (Levitt 2001, 65).

CHAPTER 1

Cosmopolitanism

Our roots can be anywhere and we can survive, because if you think about it, we take our roots with us [...] The essential thing is to have the feeling that they exist, that they are somewhere. They will take care of themselves, and they will take care of you, too, though you may never know how it has happened. To think only of going back for them is to confess that the plant is dying.

Gertrude Stein¹⁷

In 1934 Gertrude Stein returned to the United States for the first time in twenty-five years for a book tour. During an interview originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Stein suggested that roots are not only non-negotiable, but also that exposing them to the different and new does not put them at risk either. Roots for Stein are therefore beyond both negotiation and threat, as they remain in a place that cannot be reached by everyday cultural interactions. In a later essay published by Stein in 1936, about her life-long decision to live in Paris and her experience of America from afar, she wrote “It is not what France gave you but what it did not take from you that was important [...] And so I am an American and I have lived half my life in Paris, not the half that made me but the half in which I made what I made.”¹⁸

Stein’s ideas about the place of home and roots in a person’s life may provide a good way to start thinking of the relation between migration and cosmopolitanism. When migrants “stop worrying” about the well-being of ethnic and kinship ties to the

hometown, they are more likely to perceive the *different* in a way that poses less instances of threat and confrontation to their most visceral bonds. Life in Italy for many migrant workers is the part of life that they have made for themselves. The other part, the one that is firmly grounded in their personal histories growing up in Sri Lanka, remains virtually unaltered regardless of the years spent abroad and of the adoption of whatever practices they might have encountered in Italy.

Cosmopolitanism should be partly characterized by the separation between aspects of culture that are negotiable and those that are not. As this ethnography tries to show in multiple ways, Negombo Catholics who returned from Italy were willing to adopt certain cultural practices that they encountered through migration. Food preferences, dress choices, work ethics and generally more routine schedules were seen as better in Italy and their adoption in Sri Lanka as an improvement to their lifestyles. However, there was also a clear sense of what would represent a transgression of their most central values; not educating children as Catholics in Negombo being the most reproachable decision a parent could take. Like Gertrude Stein, whose love of Paris was no obstacle to her very American identity, Negombo Catholics could live and enjoy Italy without losing their Sri Lankan roots.

Why Cosmopolitanism?

James Clifford writes, “we take roots to precede routes” (1997, 3) – only after

identifying the cultural roots of a community we start to look at the ways in which it travels and analyze the reasons for its good or bad adaptability to difference. But Clifford suggests that it is possible to think of roots that derive from routes. Travel and displacement may not be just the extension of cultural meanings but fundamentally constitutive of them. The Sri Lankan Catholic community is an expression of these translocal origins in the midst of commercial, missionary and colonial routes. It is at the historical juncture of these transoceanic flows that the roots of today's Negombo migrants can be found.

It is possible to approach the experience of labor migration amongst Sri Lankan Catholics as another manifestation of transnationalism in the context of globalization. But to do this is to deny the cultural specificity that makes this community stand out amongst other contemporary narratives of migration in South Asia. Situating the migratory circulation of Sri Lankan Catholics traveling to Italy within a historical framework can help understand the unique attitude with which this community approaches the foreign. James Clifford's notion of "contact approach" is helpful for the aims of my ethnography because it does not presuppose socio-cultural wholes that establish relations once already formed. A contact approach considers cultural systems to be relationally constituted and entering "new relations through historical processes of displacement" (Clifford 1997, 7).

If we start to see the major cultural characteristics of Sri Lankan migrant

fishermen as being historically generated at the crossroads of different traditions, it also becomes possible to see that their religious, caste and national identity originates from these interactions. Many Sri Lankans that over the last few decades have experienced life in other parts of the world have come to adopt practices that they find appealing, but I suggest that when people from Negombo do this they are doing nothing new. Cosmopolitanism in this part of Sri Lanka is not the consequence of new contacts and opportunities that are made possible by globalization, it is rather the expression of a particular kind of awareness enabled by its specific history.

I think that before approaching a place like Negombo as a “culture of travelers” it is important to conceive of it as a “destination for travelers.” Rather than thinking of the movements that this community has engaged with – one of which is migration to Italy – it is useful to think of the movement that Negombo has witnessed throughout its history. The origins of cosmopolitanism sometimes need to be sought not so much in the different places that people may see in their lives, but in the diversity that is present at home. For this reason, I suggest that it is not transnationalism, migration or Italy what makes the community of Negombo cosmopolitan, it is its history of mixture and adaptation inside Sri Lanka what makes it unique. As Ashis Nandy’s work on the city of Kochi in the South Indian state of Kerala suggests, cosmopolitanism is constructed by projecting the outside into the self and making it a constitutive part of its identity, with the tensions and

contradictions included (Nandy 2002).

It is not my intention here to approach the Catholic identity of Sri Lankan fishermen as a persistent symbol of colonialism or as evidence of their ‘inadequate’ accommodation to the standards of belonging imposed by the Sinhalese nation-state. Whatever they may have been, the reasons why the Sri Lankan coastal populations embraced the Catholic faith are buried under five centuries of history.¹⁹ But in the contemporary context, their religious affiliation has partly enabled the flow between Italy and Sri Lanka of much more than priests and nuns. Religion provided an unlikely channel for transnationalism that had little to do with the deregulation of labor markets in Sri Lanka or the technological developments that allowed for the fast and affordable movements of thousands of people across borders.

Cosmopolitanism as Estrangement

Transnationalism and cosmopolitanism in the context of globalization have been defined as living in two worlds (Appadurai 1996), as having multiple attachments that flow in different directions (Csordas 2007) and inhabiting in-between spaces (Bhabha 1994). Some authors have proposed to see cosmopolitanism not as detachment but as “a reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachments, or attachment at a distance” (Robbins 1998, 3). These notions convey images of increased diversity, fluidity and intensity in the relations that an individual establishes with the world. In

this section I suggest that it can be helpful to reverse these terms when defining contemporary cosmopolitanism. Living in two worlds can also be living in none.²⁰ Multiple connections are also lighter connections, more superficial and fluctuating attachments that are detrimental to the stability associated with the home and the family. Instead of the expansion and diversification of personal bonds, cosmopolitanism can be thought of as a narrowing, an attenuation, a simplified version of life devoid of some of its most complex attachments. Rhacel Parreñas described Filipino migrant women in Italy as *perpetually foreign*. I borrow her phrase here because it offers a very compelling image of transnational migration. Many of the stories I narrate from my fieldwork in Sri Lanka in 2010 are stories of cosmopolitanism, but this cosmopolitanism is always one that is very much characterized by a kind of loneliness and estrangement.

Initially, I wanted to think of cosmopolitanism as the expansion of an individual's connections to the world, a person who embraces the curiosity for the new, someone who is comfortable with what is different and unknown. Yet stories of migration are often stories of solitude and indifference. The homesickness of migrant workers abroad, the loneliness of families who miss their loved ones working in a different country, the isolation of the returnee who had to sever some of the relations to the home community and finds it difficult to reconnect upon return.

Martha Nussbaum observed that cosmopolitanism is often a lonely business

(Nussbaum & Cohen 2002). In that polemical essay first published in 1996, Nussbaum cited Diogenes, Thoreau and Emerson to support her argument that cosmopolitanism can be a kind of exile from the local truths, habits and boundaries that leave individuals “bereft of any warmth or security.” The alternative that cosmopolitanism offers does not have this kind of refuge and may seem “less colorful than other sources of belonging” (2002, 15).

Nussbaum’s most valuable contribution is to remind the reader that cosmopolitanism can sometimes have an uglier side than what many of its proponents would like to admit. The most usual representations of the cosmopolitan – in both popular and academic literature – convey images that speak of border crossings, explorations and the forging of bonds with unlikely bedfellows. Nussbaum concurs with other proponents of cosmopolitanism in using the term as a praiseworthy attribute, a model for tolerance and compassion that everyone should aspire to. But she also is asking the reader to keep in mind that many will not see cosmopolitanism in the same light. The versatility and forbearance that characterize it may also sometimes be interpreted as timidity and lack of loyalty. This is the ugly side of cosmopolitanism that Nussbaum warns us will come to the fore, especially in the context of thriving nationalist sentiments. For all the virtues that cosmopolitanism may have, it is unable to inspire the strong passions that the nation, the hometown or the community can mobilize.

Nussbaum exemplifies the lack of interest that cosmopolitanism can give rise to by reference to Rabindranath Tagore's character Nikhil in *The Home and the World*. Nikhil is an unengaged and somehow distant man, who allegedly fails to embrace the truly important objectives of the nation. His wife Bimala and his nationalist friend Sandip blame him for his lack of commitment to the cause and for not embracing what they perceived as every Indian's duty to the pursuit of independence. In spite of Nikhil's support for the cause, he recurrently reminds both wife and friend that his allegiance to truth and justice transcends the borders of the nation and that the unquestionable legitimacy of the Swadeshi movement can never warrant acting in an unjust manner to others. Nussbaum's uses this example because it helps her present a cosmopolitanism that appears to be bland and aloof in comparison to the more passionate vernacular attachments of the nationalists. The rather charming cosmopolitan narrated as adventurous world traveler intrigued by everything foreign is confronted with a cosmopolitan that is more introspective, someone whose interest in the different is guided by a search for human commonalities across cultures rather than by exotic experiences. This is a more distant cosmopolitanism that hardly fits the model of eccentricity that many imagine.

Cosmopolitanism is a lonely business. Just as with Nikhil, locals will sometimes accuse the cosmopolitan of selfishness and lack of commitment to the fundamental values of the home. These are certainly not commendable attributes, but I suggest

that to defend cosmopolitanism it is necessary to accept that they are also legitimate ways to describe the cosmopolitan. By this I mean that there is an “ugly face” to cosmopolitanism that should not be denied. When people in Negombo distrust migrant workers and mock their aloofness, they are also recognizing their cosmopolitanism. Or when returnee migrants have an indifferent attitude towards some of the exigencies and limitations that Negombo imposes on their lives, they are also showing that the approval of the hometown and nation are not their most important objectives.²¹

A Brief Digression on Rooted and Rootless

Why defend a rooted cosmopolitanism? Authors like Kwame Anthony Appiah have dedicated a substantial portion of their work to imagining different kinds of rooted cosmopolitanisms. The main objective of their work has been to refute accusations that cosmopolitanism can only be imagined as a highly intellectualized project and that for it to become a true global ideal everyone should give up their cultural roots. For Appiah, everyone can be a rooted cosmopolitan, “attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different, places that are home to other, different people.” (1998, 91)

Appiah’s essay is partly intended to find a way to reconcile Nussbaum’s more

philosophical approach to cosmopolitanism with her critics, who at best only see ideological value in her work. Nussbaum's arguments in favor of attachments to humanity as a whole have often been criticized by arguments that suggest that it is not reasonable to expect individuals to care for others in faraway places as much as they care for those at home. To care for those who are faraway, Appiah argues, it is not necessary to renounce local attachments and replace them for a love of humanity as a whole.

Rather than exploring different varieties of rooted cosmopolitanisms, my ethnography concentrates on the moves people need to make towards becoming uprooted from certain cultural attachments. This does not mean that roots are not important, or that they constitute an impediment to cosmopolitanism. But following Gertrude Stein's words, there is no need to worry about them too much. Nationalism, ethnicity and religion have proved to be good enough custodians of people's primordial attachments. In spite of the fears that globalization and hybridity have inspired, most people have showed a consistent loyalty to the values and practices of the home and an unwillingness to engage with the foreign. Curiosity for the different and interest in other cultures have been the exception in the era of globalization. A pressing question in the contemporary context of globalization is what does it take for people to move beyond the home and have an interest in the different rather than how to protect one's cultural roots.

As Bruce Robbins writes reviewing Appiah's work,

When Appiah quotes Edmund Burke on the need to love “the little platoon we belong to in society” (RC, 241), he repeats Burke—“It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind”—without asking what the force is that is supposed to propel us from the first link to the last. Looking around, one might say that there has been insufficient movement toward love of mankind, and on the contrary a dangerous surplus of love to our own country at the expense of others [...] Neither Burke nor Appiah has anything to say about how the sentimental journey outward might have gotten arrested, or about how to adjudicate, when and if adjudication is called for, between love of humanity and love of country.

Appiah and others who defend rooted cosmopolitanisms declare that the weight of familiar attachments for a person is undeniable. From their point of view, cosmopolitanism cannot imply rejecting loyalty and responsibility towards family and loved ones. In more anthropological terms, Edward Shils has suggested that “Man is much more concerned with what is near at hand, with what is present and concrete than with what is remote and abstract” (1957, 130). The point Appiah and Shils – in very different contexts and with different projects in mind – try to communicate is simple: abstract humanity cannot inspire in an individual the same feelings that our closest relations do.

I imagine the opposition between rooted and rootless as a question of degree. The more time people spend away from the home, the more likely they are to become estranged from those familiar attachments and develop new affinities abroad. Enseng

Ho has also suggested that absence from the home can inspire “new vices away from knowing eyes” (2006, 4). But this is not a unidirectional process that unavoidably leads to detachment – people take decisions that are intended to work as antidote against this. Migrant workers recurrently renew ties to the home before distance and time impose burdens that become too big for them to handle. With periodic trips back to Negombo, participating in the community and sending children to live with relatives at home, migrant workers attempt to neutralize the negative effects of distance.

The process of becoming cosmopolitan reflects the movement along this path from rooted to rootless and the search for a special balance between them. As my ethnography tries to show, Negombo migrant workers were constantly debating which Italian practices could be adopted in their lives without transgressing fundamental Sri Lankan Catholic values. This search for balance between the attachments to Sri Lanka that they retained and the new attachments to Italy that they made for themselves constituted a daily practice of moral deliberation. But this process of deliberation also led to disagreements and initiated many instances of friction with the family, the community and the self. Most of these instances emerged when the distinction between ethical values and moral norms was difficult to determine. It was common to see migrant workers adopting Italian normative codes that they thought were no obstacles to fulfilling their ethical responsibilities, while non-migrants thought that what they were actually doing was “forgetting who they are.”

I suggest that the process of becoming a cosmopolitan is thus a process of becoming uprooted. This does not mean that migrants have an alternative between rooted and rootless, but that it is a question of degree. I describe the Catholic migrants to Italy as cosmopolitan because their identity is located further towards the rootless side than most other migrant communities. The reasons for this are multiple. And each of these reasons contributes to pushing the identity of this community towards the cosmopolitan side. This does not imply that Sri Lankan Catholics are “naturally” cosmopolitan, but that their history, geography, religion and caste predispose them positively towards the foreign.

Sri Lankan Catholic migrant workers from Negombo who lived in Italy did not need to develop a global consciousness or an elevated sense of bonding with humanity. This “less ambitious” version of cosmopolitanism only required that people established bonds and connections with specific others who they interacted with. In this sense, Negombo cosmopolitanism has a propitious history, as people who traditionally interacted with foreigners cultivated a kind of cosmopolitanism out of necessity. This kind of cosmopolitanism is not universal or prescriptive, it is a kind of “actually existing” cosmopolitanism that has very specific historical and geographic origin.

Becoming Rootless

Cosmopolitanism should not be equated to being everywhere, but to “nowhere in particular” (Pollock 2002, 24). I suggest that cosmopolitanism needs detachment, but a detachment of a rather limited kind. This process of detachment however does not need to be fatal for one’s cultural identity (Robbins 1998, 2). A person cannot simply renounce all of their attachments because they leave their hometown and can neither transport every cultural feature intact to a new location with them. Defining cosmopolitanism requires finding where to draw the line between what is kept and what is given up. Cosmopolitanism will be defined by the relationship that exists between these essential parts of identity and those things that can be left at home and replaced by others encountered through migration. Cosmopolitanism does not require that a person blends in to pass unnoticed in the new context – culture should not be shed to feel at home in faraway places. But cosmopolitanism demands that people take decisions that unavoidably require them to renounce certain things.

The heavier the luggage, the more difficult it is to travel. The more stuff people carry, the more obstacles they have to move around freely. Smart travelers are generally those who pack lightly and detach themselves from unnecessary burdens. Yet to think practically and be prepared without being over-prepared is a difficult balance that requires taking careful decisions. To pack in an efficient manner, travelers may have to give up style and fashion, and other times may need to leave behind some

things that they cherish from the home but that are not essential while they are away.

A similar selective “packing” is performed by transnational migrants in reference to culture. Certain elements of their identity accompany migrants in their travels and are relatively safe from cultural negotiations, helping define the identities of migrants regardless of where they are. Cosmopolitan travelers are aware that no matter how much time they spend away from home, roots will remain safe from the threats of hybridity and acculturation, and that exposure to the foreign will offer new alternatives that will not interfere with the central values of the community.

But Later There Seems to be No Way Back

Once people learnt that the fundamentals of their culture were not threatened by migration, they could no longer return and act *as if* they couldn't live without every single cultural trait of their place of origin. Food is a good example. As I repeatedly heard throughout my interviews, Sri Lankans loved rice and curry and genuinely missed it while they were in Italy. However, this did not mean that they rejected all Italian food as unsuitable for their taste. Within the alternatives available, they “exercised” their preferences and found new things that accommodated to their Sri Lankan tastes. But the idea that Sri Lankans *needed* their Sri Lankan food slowly disappeared, as many migrant workers realized that amongst their preferences in Italy were many things that were not Sri Lankan. I believe that to a great extent this is what

gives evidence of an individual's personal experience of what can be described as the process of "becoming a cosmopolitan."

This personal experience of cosmopolitanism was determined by the evaluations people made of local and foreign cultural practices after migration.²² Detachment from the local did not imply rejection. In this sense, my view of cosmopolitanism stands close to Nussbaum's and suggests that equating "detachment from the local" with "rejection of the local" confuses the reality of most migrant workers who become detached from certain preferences they had at home, but do not reject them as unsuitable or backward.²³ Realizing that previously fundamental national, cultural or religious attachments did not stop members of the Negombo migrant community from leading an ethically correct and fulfilling life overseas, did not lead them to reject all of those attachments as empty or meaningless. However, this realization on the part of migrant workers was sometimes misunderstood by non-migrants who took it a sign of inadmissible moral transgressions.

Travel and work overseas sometimes acted as a kind of revelatory experience, where migrant workers uncannily discovered that those things to which they thought they would be more attached to did not fulfill their promise. Probably the most important single reason why people engaged in migration was the well-being of the family. But once people left and experienced life away from home, other reasons encouraged them to stay abroad. Most of these new reasons gained importance in

direct detriment of the centrality of the family. While most migrants maintained stable relations to the hometown, after a few years of work overseas their involvement and responsibilities towards the home tended to wane (Collyer & Pathirage 2009). This does not question the active participation of migrant workers in the affairs of the community of origin as one of the most relevant characteristics of transnationalism (Levitt 2001); but this active involvement should be understood as happening *in spite of* the distance and time that separates migrant workers from the home.

While the financial well-being and stability of the family remained at the top of the list of arguments used to justify migration, the new lives that many migrant workers experienced overseas significantly deteriorated the unity of the family and the quality of the members' interactions. Migrant workers generally did not relinquish family responsibilities, and when they did they were severely criticized for it. Nevertheless, I argue that migrants became increasingly detached from their families. As is reflected in Chapter 2, where the tension between Chaminda and Indika over his continued work abroad generated serious disagreements, long-term migrations generated many contradictory situations where the stated objectives of migrants were seemingly at odds with the life decisions that they took in Italy.

How can we explain the persistence of transnational work when the urgent needs of the family have been solved? As evidenced by several of the interviews I

analyze in other sections, Sri Lankan Catholics justified their on-going transnational sojourns using the same arguments they used before leaving for the first time, although their most urgent needs had been left way in the past. The reasons for their persistent migration have to be found not only in their newfound interests overseas, but in their declining attachment to the hometown. This transnational kind of cosmopolitanism also shows that migrants become less loyal to the hometown.

Monica Smith argues that Sri Lankan female migrants in Lebanon experienced freedom for the first time and soon came to value this independence (2010). As a consequence, many of them had little intention of returning to Sri Lanka. They loved and cared for their families, but up to a certain extent they had become detached from them. Children of transnational migrants did not become strangers to them, but even if only because of time and distance people became relatively detached from loved ones. This does not suggest that people who grow detached from family and home culture are cosmopolitans, but that a certain kind of detachment is a condition for cosmopolitanism – without it, migrant workers would not be able to find enjoyment in their newfound freedom.²⁴

In chapter 4, I show how migrant workers rely on a particular set of ethical values that fundamentally shapes their identity. These values draw a limit to cosmopolitanism and are intimately related to the attachments that shape who an individual is and with whom he belongs. They are rooted in the non-rational

foundations of personality (Geertz 1973, 277). For all the flexibility that the cosmopolitan “light traveler” has, these are the essential cultural characteristics that will travel with them across the world. The strength of these bonds varies “from person to person, society to society and from time to time,” but some of these attachments flow more from a sense of natural affinity than from social interaction (Geertz 1973, 259-260). Migration is thus as much an act fraught with spiritual preconditions and consequences as one determined by the economic exigencies of postcolonial economics or global capitalism.

In the rest of this chapter I discuss the possible reasons for the particular attitude that Sri Lankan Catholics from Negombo had towards living in Italy. Why was their migratory experience apparently so different from other transnational narratives that told stories of hardship and alienation? (Parreñas 2001; Cheah 2007; Constable 2007; Ong 2006). Why were people willing to exhibit the Italian origins of their economic success? And why did so many people did not perceive Italian culture as a threat to their identity except for when it came to children’s education?



Niklas Fernando was the Village Servant (*Gramma Sevaka*) for one of the towns that borders with Negombo.²⁵ His father had been a teacher at the local Catholic school and his brother was following in their father’s footsteps. He lived in a small

house with his wife and their one year old son. A second room was being added to the house for the child, although construction was moving slowly, as they only could afford to dedicate a small portion of his salary every month to the expansion project. Niklas was 32 years old and had taken the government's Village Officer (*Grama Niladhari*) examination in 2004. After training in different parts of Sri Lanka he was assigned to work in his town of origin, where he had gladly returned to in 2008. His house was located only a few streets down from the house where his parents lived and where he had grown up. He commuted to the office on his old Honda motorcycle every morning and went back home for lunch before returning to work for a few more hours in the afternoon. He was the only government employee here. The office consisted of two small rooms and was rather stereotypical. One room had his desk – calendars, photograph of his family, photograph of the president on the wall, a small flag, some forms printed out, some volumes on the shelves to the side, ceiling fan. The other room only had a long table and some plastic chairs used for meetings.

In his district there were 515 households – 213 of them had family members working in Italy. According to Niklas, whose job kept him abreast of the latest news in town, most people agreed that over the last few years the quality of jobs available in Italy had declined. Young migrants who had traveled after 2002 were not permanently employed and found it increasingly difficult to settle and find steady jobs. Niklas Fernando estimated that more than 50% of Sri Lankans in Italy did not have stable

employment in 2010, and even to get these jobs many newly arrived immigrants sometimes had to wait for more than three months with debts accumulating and social networks straining.²⁶ Despite this situation, the dream of leaving Sri Lanka for Italy and pursuing the comfortable lifestyles that earlier generations of migrants had achieved was strong as ever amongst the local youth. The persistent desire to move to Italy was partly inspired by the tokens of economic success provided by those who recurrently visited the hometown from Italy. Most of these migrant workers and their families came home, spent, invested, gifted, showed off, and eventually returned to Italy.

As Niklas explained, “People can’t choose, they live in both places. They reach the age of 20 and can only think of leaving to work in Italy.” Most of these migrants considered that they did not have the educational qualifications needed to work in business or government positions in Sri Lanka. They could aim for other technical jobs (carpenters, blacksmiths, mechanics), but they didn’t like the idea of working in these activities and had never learnt the trade either. For these people, after years of profitable work in Italy it was very difficult to imagine their return to Sri Lanka to apply for jobs that did not appeal to them. Niklas explained that some of these migrant workers had learnt and developed skills in Italy, but these were not very useful when they returned to Negombo. He said,

They come back with their children and build houses and sometimes help others, but sooner or later most of them go back to work in Italy. This is a small town and people are always gossiping about who came back and what they are doing. A lot of migrant workers don't like this, they just want to go back and not have to deal with all that. When they're there they take their own decisions and do as they please.

As a result of this, there was a rather eerie feeling in this semi-abandoned village, which abounded in recently built mansions that were inhabited by no one. Niklas explained that most of these large homes were not rented out or given to family members to use while the owners were away in Italy, they remained locked and empty. Most of the migrant workers, especially the younger ones, seemed bored by the prospect of staying in Sri Lanka. There was little for them to do other than spend money, and even the possibilities for spending were very limited for people whose consumer interests had diversified after migration. However, most migrants said that they had little interest in Italy, "our country" (*Ape Rata*), was the usual answer I received when I asked them where they would prefer to live. But their daily decisions seemed to constantly conflict with their stated answer. To explain this apparent contradiction, Niklas argued that migrant workers said Italy was good for work and Sri Lanka was good to live. The two concepts were presented as incompatible and migrants acted as if they were putting their life on hold while in Italy, reserving the moments of enjoyment and fun for their periodic return trips. Yet most people who asserted that they wanted to return seemed to do very little to make their lives in

Negombo viable.

Migrants who had the education to find qualified employment in Sri Lanka increasingly thought that staying was a promise of a future of mediocrity. Niklas's position as a career civil servant, for example, would have been highly desirable for a high school graduate in the past, but today most young people in the region regarded his work as little more than pencil pushing. His only real chance at success was inexorably tied to becoming a minion to some MP. In the eyes of local youths, Niklas's options were hardly enviable: either signing up for a life-long slow career in bureaucracy or embarking on the demanding business of steadfast and unapologetic political loyalty.

On one hand, this situation reflected the collapse in prestige suffered by bureaucracy and civil service in Sri Lanka and the opening of alternative paths to economic prosperity brought by transnational migration. On the other hand, it also manifested that very neo-liberal characteristic of the late 20th century where narratives of success are exclusively imagined in the key of conspicuous consumption and unabashed self-gratification.

Professional and administration careers that for many years had defined the life-paths of young boys who excelled at school in Sri Lanka had lost their appeal since the 1980s. The clear steps towards social mobility that characterized the pre and post-Independence years in Sri Lanka had become muddled with the implementation

of neo-liberal reforms and thus, paths to prosperity turned increasingly difficult to predict. Civil service and teaching careers still offered a certain level of prestige and stability, but few teenagers regarded these qualities as desirable and instead dreamt of amassing large sums of money abroad over short periods of time.

The local parish priest, Fr. John Tissera, was trying to explain to me how it had become increasingly difficult to attend the needs of the local community. A cheerful priest with a taste for sarcasm, his work was split between attending the duties of this parish and an orphanage near Katunayake, where many estranged children of single migrant workers were living. He explained how until a few years ago the brightest students in the local school wanted to become teachers, some even managed to attend the university in Colombo or Kelaniya. These disciplined students that the town used to look up to had now been relegated to a rather obscure place that few wanted to occupy. Discouragement was not only caused by the new symbols of opulence provided by return migrants, the teachers themselves were now questioning their own accomplishments and considering quitting to go to Italy in the hopes of not losing their chance to be part of what they saw as the only desirable way to live in present day Negombo.

Many related the experience of Italy as liberating from the pressures of family and community, and with money to spend liberally, the life of young migrant workers became a kind of individual exploration and adventure. What was censured and

frowned upon in Sri Lanka, became acceptable and enabling when abroad. Fr. Tissera jokingly added “In Italy all Sri Lankans find decent ways of doing indecent things...”

Migrant workers who traveled to Italy were seemingly free from the careful deliberations that people like Niklas had to engage with on a daily basis to secure their jobs. Migration offered little stability, but it liberated people from the burdens of long-term commitments. Disagreements with employers in Italy could propel migrant workers into new jobs within days; similar disagreements with bosses could jeopardize a civil servant’s entire career prospects in Sri Lanka. Perhaps one of the most important changes that transnational migration brought to Negombo was the possibility of making mistakes that did not have lasting consequences. Lack of long-term careers and commitments allowed people to challenge employers’ decisions and even quit jobs without suffering grave consequences. This possibility of disputing authority extended to almost every other aspect of life, as people’s actions in Italy were always mediated by the buffer of distance. This buffer zone sometimes raised suspicion over migrants’ actions in Italy, but other times it seemed to allow young people to explore life at a safe distance from the gaze of the hometown.

Migrant workers in Italy had less complicated labor relations, they worked hard and their efforts were generally rewarded with good salaries. No one wanted social mobility in Italy or looked to pursue careers locally – they only wanted well paid unskilled jobs and reserved all their dreams of social promotion for their eventual

return to Sri Lanka.²⁷ Over several years of migration to Italy, Sri Lankans had developed a reputation as hard and reliable workers in the domestic sector and in other service industries. The younger generations of migrants were now enjoying the efforts of previous Sri Lankan migrants who went to Italy and forged this good name amongst Italian employers who allegedly preferred to hire Sri Lankan and Filipino migrants over other communities residing in Italy (Parreñas 2001; Henayaka-Lohbihler and Lambusta 2004).

The stereotypes held by Italian employers were readily embraced and reproduced by Sri Lankan migrants who did not hesitate to characterize other communities as lazy, dirty or untrustworthy; justifying in this way the comparative advantage they had in Italy. But this new generation of migrants was also suffering from the popularity of Italy as a destination and the pressure generated by some of these new migrant communities who were willing to work for much lower salaries than them. Many Sri Lankans therefore still managed to cash on the supposed ethnic advantage they had and obtained better jobs than other migrants, but those who did not find these opportunities were left with no alternative but to compete for jobs in a much harsher migrant worker market.



Sri Lankan migrant workers imagined their “old age” settled back in Negombo.

Italy was too cold, and the money they made while abroad was supposed to be enough for them to retire at a rather early age and return to Sri Lanka to “enjoy life.” According to Niklas and several of my other informants, young people had come to believe that migration was a necessary part of their life cycle and many thought of it as a routine of youth. For most young men, staying in Sri Lanka represented almost a guarantee of economic failure. But apart from this, staying also represented a refusal to engage in the exciting project that all young people in the region seemingly wanted to pursue. Life at home was perceived as monotonous and young people came to desire this adventure of migration. “It became a fashion to do Italian things,” and many argued that “they like change in their lives” (*Ape jeewithe wenasakata api kamathi, lankawe jeewithe ekakari*), said Niklas.

As migration studies scholar Douglas Massey has noted, the social networks on which migrant workers rely for their transnational endeavors help them reduce costs and risks, establishing complex patterns of circulation between the home and the employment destination. Over the years, these networks gradually expand and encompass all sectors of a community, transforming migration into a mass phenomenon (Massey 1987). In some of the Negombo neighborhoods where I conducted fieldwork, more than half of the households were receiving periodic remittances from Italy, and the allure of an “Italy-infused” lifestyle had rapidly engulfed everyone’s imagination.

When I asked Niklas why he thought migration to Italy was so popular in this town, he argued that there were two reasons. On one hand, this transnational migratory flow had started when a Catholic priest had helped a few women travel to Italy in the late 1970s. Soon after they arrived they found profitable and stable jobs – Italians had been leaving the country until recently, so there was little pressure on immigrants who wanted to come and work in the country (Callia et al. 2011; Totah 2003). These women later brought their husbands along; and soon after that, siblings and other relatives followed, rapidly building strong chains of migration between Sri Lanka's west coast and Italian cities.

But Niklas also explained that there was another important reason. People in this region had historically sustained good and friendly relations with foreigners and felt comfortable around them. In his opinion, migration to Italy may have been a recent phenomenon with unique characteristics, but people's curiosity for the foreign was nothing new. He said,

Since the Portuguese and the Dutch, people here have been interested in the foreign. They like it, they think that the presence of different people and cultures here is normal. This is part of who we are in this part of Sri Lanka, we all have Portuguese names and we're all Catholic.

Before transnational migration to Italy became popular, cultural circulation between Europe and this part of Sri Lanka had followed a unidirectional pattern –

coastal populations being exposed to diverse transoceanic influences, yet rarely moving themselves beyond the limits of the island. People in Negombo had for centuries interacted with colonizers, missionaries and traders, but always in their terms, accepting or rejecting what was being offered. The new context of transnationalism had multiplied the possibilities for circulation.

In this sense, contemporary globalization made possible religious and cultural flows in multiple directions. For world religions like Buddhism, Christianity and Islam there is hardly anything new about globalization. But what is new is the multiple ways in which religious values and practices travel transforming center and periphery.²⁸ Sri Lankans were not only receiving what foreigners brought here, they could now travel themselves and choose overseas what to bring according to their own tastes and preferences. Yet these transformations in people's consumer decisions did not change in a uniform fashion across the different communities who started to migrate since the 1980s. Sri Lankan migrant workers from different parts of the country and with different ethnic and religious backgrounds allocated remittances differently, basing their decisions on complex arguments built on consideration of social status, mobility, inheritance and investment possibilities, as well as on a kind of historic and traditional habitus.

In her work with South Indian migrants from the state of Kerala, sociologist Prema Kurien noted that – contrary to what scholars like Massey et. al suggested –

although migration becomes an institutionalized routine amongst a community, it does not become a practice with uniform results (Kurien 2002, 7). Her ethnography shows how Mappila Muslim, Syrian Christian and Ezhava Hindu migrants to the Middle East from neighboring villages have different responsibilities towards the family and community and thus allocate the profits from migration differently. Kurien explains that most studies of labor migration focus on the economic aspects of remittances and the impact they have on decision-making at the individual household level, overlooking the socio-cultural context of these different groups of migrants.

Other approaches that transcend the individual level of analysis, stressing the importance of social networks in the development of chain migrations, tend to ignore that friendship and kin networks mobilized for migration are pre-existing and are an integral part of group membership (Kurien 2002, 8). Social network approaches therefore fail to acknowledge that kinship duties and responsibilities oftentimes interfere with the specifically economic and utilitarian dimensions of these networks. Kurien suggests that ethnicity fundamentally determines the quality of the experience of migration and the way in which communities at home will be transformed (Rozario 1992).

In a similar way, in this chapter I suggest that the historical experiences and traditions of a community will have an impact on the cultural adaptability that they have while abroad. The combination of several conditions that include geographical

location, historical occupation, exposure to foreign influences and religious identity, over the years gave the migrant workers from the Catholic community of Negombo a particular cosmopolitan attitude that enabled them to accommodate to the new circumstances of life introduced by transnational migration in a rather congenial way.

However, before discussing cosmopolitanism in Negombo, it is necessary to make clear that Negombo Catholics are *not* cosmopolitan. My argument suggests that Negombo Catholics have a particular history that allows those who migrate to Italy to interpret their travels and cultural encounters by constructing a narrative that represents them as rather cosmopolitan. For people who stay home, transnational migration is not a manifestation of any particular aspect of their religion or their tradition of contacts with the foreign. Those who never left may suffer from the same kind of provincialism seen in any other small Sri Lankan town and might show little interest in the different or the foreign. But those who migrated to Italy appeared to be aware that they enjoyed their time abroad more than what other migrant workers across the country did. The style of the houses built or the fashion they brought had a clear Italian stamp that distinguished them in a very particular way from other migrant workers. They were well aware of this difference and knew that it gave rise to mockery amongst non-migrants.

When asked to suggest why this was the case, many migrant workers took a moment to think of where this difference might have originated. It was in these

instances when people started to construct a historical narrative that used justifications such as “this is what we always did” (*Meka thamai api hammada Kare*).

While people never described themselves as cosmopolitan, they explained their unique approach to migration and their apparent affinity for Italian culture by stressing historical events that set them apart from the usual narratives embraced by other Sri Lankans. Simpson and Kresse (2008) refer to the disparate uses of the past that informants make, which is similar to the ways in which some migrant workers produced arguments about their own pasts.²⁹ If Sri Lankan Catholics were to explain their different approach to the foreign in historical terms, they selectively constructed a narrative that placed special emphasis on communal pasts that guided them to a position that was always closer to the Europeans.

Osella & Osella explain that amongst Muslims in Kerala a history of commerce and religion was used to draw connections to a present of migration to the Gulf, thus producing discourses that highlighted the cosmopolitanism of the city and its inhabitants (2008, 324). Likewise, transnational migrants from Negombo argued that their experience and interpretation of migration was very different from that of other Sri Lankan communities. It was not only that Italy offered better employment and living conditions than the Middle East, Negombo Catholics had a particular cosmopolitan history that allowed them to have a different disposition towards the migratory experience and to interpret it in the context of a tradition of flexible work

patterns characteristic of the fishing industry.

For most of these families, transnational migration was not merely a life alternative or a circumstantial opportunity. The combination of travel and residence in Italy with their specific history of transoceanic cultural contacts had shaped their lives in a particular way and led them to have a unique attitude towards both of their places of residence. Circulation between Italy and Sri Lanka was not a solitary “European adventure” where young Sri Lankans worked, saved and played in Italy for a few years before returning home. For most transnational migrants, life in Italy was not life in “a foreign land.”

Rohan, one of the migrant workers who Niklas introduced me to said,

I have approximately twenty friends from Sri Lanka in Italy. We all come and go all the time. Sometimes I come back thinking that someone is in Sri Lanka because I haven't seen him in some time, and when I get here I find out he has gone back. I have been there since I was 24 [...] Life in Italy is not bad. My wife is over there right now and I'm here taking care of the children [...] Italy is not a good place for them, but Sri Lanka is not a good place for us! If you don't have a government job, being here is difficult. One of my friends wanted to return ten years ago. He bought a boat and went back to fishing. Now he is indebted once again.

However, that Sri Lankan Catholic migrants appeared to have a positive attitude towards their encounters with the different should not give the idea that they lacked a sense of identity strongly characterized by their attachment to the values of their

community. Transnational migration did not displace the importance of language, religion and ethnicity in Negombo. As Clifford Geertz suggested, these categories provided attachments taught by parents to children which determined commitments that flowed from a sense of natural affinity (1973, 259-260). Geertz described these attachments as stemming from social “givens” like immediate contiguity, kin connections, religion, language and custom.

These attachments do not need to be static, they are renewed, modified and remade in each generation. They are historically and culturally constructed and encoded in powerful emotive symbols (Hoben and Hefner 1991, 18). But these attachments are not spatially fixed either – migration allowed people to travel with a clear sense of values and home that remained seemingly intact in spite of time and distance. This does not mean that contact with the foreign did not alter perceptions and ideas brought from Negombo; it suggests that there was a kind of fundamental kernel of identity that was beyond negotiation.

Migrant workers did not become uprooted from Sri Lankan culture and values when they traveled to Italy, yet these came to constitute only *one part* of who they were. It was not necessary for them to become completely detached from the home country and to reject Sri Lankan culture to successfully live in Italy. Their identity was not defined exclusively by their Sri Lankan affiliations to language, ethnicity or religion – transnational migration had generated new attachments that reduced the centrality

of their Sri Lankan roots and added new dimensions to the way they represented their lives.

Imagining Life After Italy

Roshita and Mohan were visiting Negombo for four months before returning to Italy. When they had first traveled in 2001 their two children stayed with relatives in Doowa until they could find a way to settle. Although they were not smuggled into Italy, they overstayed their visas in the hopes that they would be able to benefit from one of the immigration amnesty initiatives that the Italian state offered every few years. As Mohan said, “Immigrants are always expecting new regularization policies, and they think that if they wait long enough they will always be allowed to stay legally in the country.”

Less than a year after they had arrived, the Italian parliament approved the Bossi-Fini law, which soon enabled them to obtain their sojourn and bring their children to Milan. Mohan enjoyed a lot being at home and dreaded the freezing temperatures and long hours of work that awaited him in Milan. As opposed to this, Roshita thought that village life was boring and sometimes quite oppressive, especially for a woman. As she told me, in Italy young Sri Lankans felt that they could “be themselves”, dress how they wanted, spend time with whoever they wanted. An entirely new world became available as the possibility of imagining alternative

lifestyles replaced the more monotonous and demure life they knew from Sri Lanka.

Roshita said,

I like being in Italy a lot. Of course I miss my family and enjoy my time here, but in Sri Lanka there is not much to do, one must stay at home [...] When we're in Italy I have my job and my money, I enjoy my freedom (*Ehe nidahasaTaman kamathi*) [...] There's plenty of things to do in Italy and places to visit. I've been to Padua, Pompeii and the Vatican. In Milan we have restaurants, cafes, fashion to see and maybe sometimes buy. Back here all we do is stay at home, cook and watch TV. Men enjoy this because when they're in Italy they have to work and share housework with the wives, but we have a better time there.

In Sri Lanka, women like Roshita not only had to unquestioningly obey their parents or husbands, but the dynamics of small town gossip constantly cast an inquisitive eye on the whereabouts of neighbors and relatives. As her experience showed, most of these young people embraced the opportunity of self-fashioning their lives in new and creative ways. They were not gullible youth who were easily tricked and misled into a fantasy of Italian luxury; they were able to appropriate for themselves the construction of an important part of their own life histories in ways that had been unimaginable in the past. The narrative of migrant labor as an experience of solitude, foreignness and vulnerability was creatively transformed by these young migrants into a story of adventure and cosmopolitan coming of age.

But the life and experiences of Roshita were interpreted very differently from a Sri Lankan perspective. For young people wanting to leave, the perception of the two dramatically different lifestyles that Italy and Negombo offered was contaminated by

an artificial image of luxury and leisure that was offered by those who worked in Italy and returned home to visit annually. Without migrating themselves, people could hardly get an accurate notion of what work in Italy was like.

Conclusion

Cosmopolitanism in Negombo can be described as having these two contradictory and conflicting faces. It offered the possibility of establishing new connections with rather unexpected sides of Italian culture, but it also distanced migrant workers from some of their attachments to the home and the family. Migrant workers generally negotiated with success the balance between their old attachments to Negombo with the new aspects of their lives that they developed in Italy, but those who remained in Sri Lanka perceived the changes that migrant workers had undergone in a very different light.

There was a new side of life that migrants “made for themselves” and that they were proud to show off when they returned home. Independence for female migrants and honest labor relations for men were two of the main benefits that Italy offered and that most people liked to stress. The financial opportunities that Italy provided and the consumer goods that migrant families could now afford were also very appealing to most people who were happy to exhibit them with pride.

Most non-migrants were enticed by the dream of a better financial future and

young boys were especially willing to risk anything for a chance at this. For them, the “Italian lifestyle” was exclusively about money and luxury. As Ulf Hannerz noted, for most transnational workers migration only meant home plus a higher income and involvement with other cultures was more of a necessary cost than a fringe benefit (Hannerz 1990). This seemed to be the case with non-migrants, or with young people who were looking for ways to migrate. But for many of those who had already experienced life in Italy, arguments were increasingly informed by cultural practices that they preferred in Italy.

Most migrants talked about the non-material aspects of life in Italy and Sri Lanka with more enthusiasm than when they talked about money and consumer goods. Both what they appreciated and rejected about Italy and Sri Lanka were presented in terms of practices and values. In general, migrants cherished the Sri Lankan Catholic values by which they had been educated and wanted their families to embrace them wholeheartedly. But when discussing specific cultural practices, they were ambivalent as to whether life was better in Italy or Sri Lanka.

Notes to Chapter 1

¹⁷ This excerpt is contained in an essay by John Hyde Preston from *Gertrude Stein Remembered*, a collection of conversation and essays edited by Linda Simon (1994, 157).

¹⁸ These two quotes are from “An American in France” contained in *What are Masterpieces?* (Stein 1970).

¹⁹ In *Becoming Sinners*, Joel Robbins suggests that utilitarian explanations of conversion are inadequate, or at least insufficient (See also Fenella Cannell). Regardless of the original motives that inspired conversion, many communities throughout Asia wholeheartedly embraced Christianity so their faith and religious practice cannot be merely dismissed because of this historical argument. In Sri Lanka a similar argument can apply in that many in the country consider that Catholics and other Christian denominations are simply offering an opportunist cover.

²⁰ In his critique of Nussbaum, Benjamin Barber writes that this notion of living nowhere is problematic. “We live in this particular neighborhood of the world, that block, this valley, that seashore, this family.” (Barber 1996, 34) With this, Barber rejected Nussbaum’s argument as an unattainable and undesirable ideal. But what Barber fails to acknowledge is that local attachments can sometimes be too narrow and that taking a step back to see beyond our more passionate attachments is the effort that Nussbaum suggests everyone can do.

²¹ Some of Nussbaum’s critics have argued that the problem with cosmopolitanism is that it is too intellectually demanding. Love of humanity, transcending borders, embracing difference, are simply too abstract concepts that leave common individuals with nowhere to fasten on (Barber 1996, 34). From this perspective, the cosmopolitan ideal requires that people engage in a process of abstraction and disembodiment that the majority will not be able to achieve.

²² Bruce Robbins says that it is also a process of re-attachment and of developing multiple attachments. I focus here exclusively on the detachment part because I find that some of the most unexpected reactions to travel and residence abroad is a sense of discovery of what is fundamental about one’s education and past, and what is not so important. This discovery is not necessarily a welcome change. Those who stayed at home may see it as a refusal to acknowledge primordial attachments, but those who left also suffer, as they sometimes become anxious about facing their lack of interest in what they thought would encourage them to return.

²³ This may remind the reader of Tagore’s Nikhil, once again, who embraced the Swadeshi movement but always kept in mind his larger responsibility and loyalty towards humanity. From Sandip’s perspective, these different circles of belonging only posed contradictions. Being loyal to the nation above everything was the duty of every Indian that supported the national struggle. Someone who feels detached from her primordial bonds is someone who rejects them. To Nikhil, this position was unacceptable; love for the nation should never be an obstacle to see the ultimate superiority of love for humanity. Nussbaum shows how the debate between cosmopolitanism and nationalism poses similar conflicts, as nationalism demands a complete commitment and cannot make room for superior attachments.

²⁴ Smith analyzes a report by UNDP on the state of labor migration to Lebanon. Interestingly she compares the first drafts of the report – where female domestic workers in Lebanon are presented as having agency in their decisions and enjoying sexual freedom in ways that would have been unthinkable in Sri Lanka – to the final report that was published. In the final version, virtually all references to sexual activity that were not framed as forms of abuse had disappeared from the report. Smith writes “Finally,

the report is replete with photographs of Sri Lankan migrant women who are supposedly representatives of exploited women but in actuality, the images are of women enjoying themselves at a Sinhala concert in Beirut in 2008 (which I attended as well). The women were with their boyfriends and friends; they spoke loudly, drank, smoked and wore jeans and tank tops. If these women had been in Sri Lanka, this type of attire and behavior would elicit comments of [...] loose and immoral” (Smith 2010, 147).

²⁵ Village Leader appointed by the Central Government.

²⁶ Jagath Pathirage and Michael Collyer have approached the problems faced by newly arrived migrant workers in Italy using the conceptual framework proposed by Bourdieu's notion of social capital. In their work, they point out that while social networks are very important for the insertion of new immigrants in the Italian labor market, these networks easily get strained leading to conflicts between new immigrants who expect help from relatives and friends already in Italy and those older migrants who do not want to be considered as an endless source of emergency assistance for other Sri Lankans.

²⁷ As I describe in other sections, some people would like better quality jobs in Italy, but most of these are not available to foreigners. Part of the reason for this is their poor mastering of the Italian language. I knew a woman who worked at a police station, a man who was a lab technician and knew of others who were there working as clerks in Italian stores. But for the most part Sri Lankans focused on finding work as janitorial staff, factory workers, cooks or security guards. As one my informants (Chaminda) told me, all government jobs with benefits were reserved for Italians in the first place.

²⁸ As Thomas Csordas points out, the presence of three million practicing Buddhists in France is not so much given by unsatisfied French people in search of a new spirituality but by the constant influx of migrants from Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the increase in Catholic priests in France performing exorcisms is not only motivated by the presence of African and Caribbean immigrants who practice spirit cults, but also by the rise of Catholic charismatic indigenous movements in France that popularized prayer for deliverance from evil spirits (Csordas 2007, 264).

²⁹ Simpson and Kresse write, “One often encounters experts on the past, as well as those who have little or selective interest in what went before [...] this uneven distribution of knowledge is not only seen among individuals in the same place because it is also true that different societies have different degrees of interest in the past as well as different methods of recording, recounting and erasing what has gone before” (Simpson & Kresse 2008, 4).

CHAPTER 2

The Family of Chaminda and Indika

In my first two months in Sri Lanka in 2010 – while I was starting my fieldwork along the narrow strip of land that separates the Negombo Lagoon from the Indian Ocean – I began to contact local religious leaders and other prominent social figures that could help me reach migrant workers and their families. I had been here before a few times over the previous three years and had a sense of the geography of Negombo and its vicinity. I knew, for example, that Negombo was by now almost a suburb of Colombo with many people commuting daily to the city for work. This not only included locals who were employed in the capital, but many people from Colombo and expatriates who followed a kind of vernacular version of suburban sprawl by fleeing the urban nuisances of the city. Its proximity to the airport was a marginal advantage, for it provided the only four-lane road in the country until 2010, which gave Negombo a direct access to the capital. Although marred with traffic and virtually a commercial street that extended for twenty miles, within an hour it connected the airport to downtown Colombo. The Free Trade Zone near the airport in Katunayake also made of Negombo a convenient location for managers and investors who worked for large companies. These constituted a kind of local business

elite that over the years settled in the area and helped establish Negombo as an important commercial district.

In addition to this, the short distance that existed between the airport and the beach was another reason for Negombo's popularity. Budget European tourists found here a relatively cheap version of the idyllic tropical beach without wondering out towards other parts of the island that offered expensive resorts and more 'brochure-like' experiences of the Sri Lankan beaches. Within fifteen minutes of the airport, dozens of Russians and Germans would be walking barefoot on the sand, enjoying packaged tours that included room and board, a swimming-pool, a beach, a bar, and not much else. While most of these tourists never ventured beyond the 'hotel row' and its restaurants and souvenir shops, it was not uncommon to see auto-rickshaw drivers going for some extra dollars and euro by re-inventing themselves as impromptu local guides, taking non-conformist travelers for a view of the harbor, the train station and local town market. In turn, fishermen also re-fashioned their livelihood to take people in their small outboard engine boats for a trip down the Dutch canal, the marshlands and the backwaters, where otherwise they would spend their days trying to capture prawn and crab.

This rather eclectic array of visitors and residents converged in the town mostly for shopping purposes. But besides crossing paths while grocery shopping and the occasional emergency bathing suit purchase or pharmacy visit, the different crowds

that could be seen in Negombo inhabited separate and disconnected spaces surrounding the town center. To the north and past the old Sea Street Kovil (Hindu Temple), the 'hotel row' started and stretched for approximately two miles of perfectly asphalted road, neatly tiled sidewalks, speed bumps and good street lighting. The opposite end of this lane was signaled by the Porutota Grand Mosque where tourism drastically stopped leaving its place to an endless succession of fishing villages along the A3 road heading north.

To the south of Negombo and after crossing the bridge that connected the inlet where the larger fishing boats were harbored, you arrived at a completely different scene. The work of paving the main road had not been completed when I was doing my fieldwork in 2010, and although by the end of the year it was almost finished, this was the only tangible evidence of improvement to the infrastructure in the areas of Doowa, Munnakaraya and Pitipana, where most of my informants lived. There were no sidewalks and public lighting was very scarce. Although the road was new, it was of poor quality without shoulders or signaling. Certain stretches of it would flood during the monsoon season and only SUVs and buses could navigate them, sending waves of floodwater into the small shops that lined the road. If one followed this road that traversed the narrow strip of land that separated the lagoon from the sea for a little over an hour along the Hamilton Canal and across several small villages, you eventually reached the northern neighborhoods of Colombo after

crossing the city boundary delineated by the Kelani river.

After crossing a second bridge to the south of Negombo, one entered the Fish Market (*Lellama*). The *Lellama* is a fish auction facility where fishermen from Negombo and its vicinity and buyers from Colombo meet for business. On one side of the road there was a building with the administrative offices and right across, an open space with cement floors and a large blue tin roof where several tons of fish arrived six days a week before sunrise. By noon, the *lellama* was nearly deserted, partly because all transactions for the day had been completed and the fish was gone, and partly because fishermen were out in the lagoon or at sea for a new day of work. Yet another part of the reason for the flight of people was that the stench of putrefied fish guts and blood lying in the sun made staying in this place difficult to tolerate.

Throughout the afternoon and evening stray dogs and cats – along with swarms of flies, seagulls and rodents – would take care of the muck, rather ineffectively. The surrounding grounds would swallow the rest into the night in a muddy and toxic moldering mix that flowed back to the lagoon. Around midnight, the noisy old machines of the neighboring ice factories would announce the arrival of a new night of business. An hour or two past midnight the charm would be back, as lorries and motorcycles with styrofoam boxes tied over their back tires started arriving with fresh crates of fish and ice and hundreds of people came in to trade.

Walking past the *lellama* and away from the trading grounds you reached the

village of Doowa, soon leaving behind the bustle of business to enter a quiet residential area. Proof that most of the inhabitants of this area were fishermen was not only given by its proximity to the *lellama*, but by small hints of their activity found in fishing nets, small boats, ropes, oars or overboard engines tucked away in corners and backyard storerooms. Yet signs that there was more than fishing taking place here were increasingly abundant as you walked deeper into the heart of the village and saw construction work in virtually every other house.

Life in Doowa

Doowa was far from being a poor village and had clearly been so for many years. Transnational migration had considerably changed the local landscape in the last two decades, but this should not give the idea that before people started traveling to Italy this was an impoverished fishermen's village that struggled at the subsistence level. Fr. Anthony, the parish priest of *Our Lady of the Seas*, explained that although most fishermen's lives were defined by austerity and work in a dangerous and extenuating activity, the fishing industry had consistently provided enough to sustain their families throughout the years.³⁰ Negombo fisher families had communicated fishing techniques from generation to generation for centuries and had successfully resisted times of hardship relying on tight-knit religious and caste networks of solidarity. Fisher families in this region owned fishing apparel, boats, nets and engines

that required a relatively high level of investment and maintenance. The frequent accidents and the damages suffered by equipment in this industry also made fishermen rely on their local relations for loans of fishing tools and boats so that they could continue working while repairs were being made or new equipment being bought (Sivasubramaniam 2009; Stirrat 1988).

Over the last two decades the influx of money from transnational work had helped improve the life of many of these fisher families. In some cases, migrant workers were able to help relatives by affording fishing equipment of better quality, but for the most part evidence of money generated abroad was seen at the level of consumption, and particularly in housing – the most important destination of money brought from Italy. New constructions expanded houses and greatly improved the comforts that local families enjoyed by adding second floors, freshly painted rooms, extra bathrooms for the children, kitchens with modern appliances and verandahs with imported chairs where families spent the hottest hours of the afternoon. Yet almost all the new construction was built on pre-existing homes that although small and humble, already had attached bathrooms, concrete or tiled floors, electricity for most of the day and red shingled roofs.

Doowa had no commercial activity and no public spaces. There were no restaurants – barely one small sleepy grocery store – no sidewalks and no parks. The only institutions that provided a space for social engagement were the school and the

Church that shared an atrium and an adjacent grassy open space that served as soccer field and cricket grounds alternatively. In other parts of Negombo, the beach in the evenings functioned as the preferred outing for families that went for a stroll, children flying kites and young couples in search of some distance and privacy from their families. Doowa did not provide this kind of space since it was literally surrounded by water and had no sandy beach. To the west was the Indian Ocean and to the east the lagoon. The north side had the port and *lellama*, and to the south Doowa blended in with the next village, PitipanaVeedy.



The Church in Doowa and the port of Negombo in the background

The houses on the seaside were only separated from the surf by a narrow road and a rock barrier where the waves broke. This is where *Our Lady of the Seas* was situated. Through some people I had met that were involved in environmental and union negotiations between the government and local fishermen, I reached Fr. Anthony who gave me some initial contacts to start my fieldwork. Months later, I realized that this Catholic priest and the first few families that he introduced me to would become some of my most generous and interesting informants. In particular, Indika and Chaminda, a couple in their early forties, who with great kindness shared many afternoons with me and their extended family.

For Fr. Anthony, Indika must have been the most immediate person he related my research project to, given that she worked with him as a Sunday school teacher. “Sunday school” (*Dabam Pasala*) is probably not the most accurate term to describe what she did, as her work also took most of her mornings with children and some afternoons with parents and co-workers. Her official job was to prepare eight and nine year olds for their First Communion, but the massive preparations required by religious holidays and festivals in this community involved many hours of work that extended over several weeks preceding the celebrations. Doowa is famous in Sri Lanka for its “Passion Plays” (*Kabwari, Paskuu pennanawa, Kurusiye lakunu pennanawa*) at Easter time that have been performed for more than a century and have been the subject of newspaper and academic articles virtually every year.³¹ These Passion Plays are the

pride of the community and the ceaseless work of local youths, who look forward to being on stage for nearly a lifetime.

The annual local festival (*Doowa Mangala*) that takes place in August is the time of the main local festivity and pilgrimage, when the statue of the Virgin of *Our Lady of the Seas* is removed from its usual place inside the Church and after walking the streets of the town, boards one of the fishing trawlers and together with hundreds of small and medium-sized fishing vessels goes out to sea. Upon return to the port, the local Bishop will be present to offer a blessing to the fishermen of Negombo and all its neighboring fishing communities. Thousands of people congregate and celebrate with sweet buns and fruit juices that boat owners buy and share in hopes of an auspicious and safe year of work. If we add these two most important events in the Doowa community to the normal celebrations and festivals observed by Catholics, the time spent on organizing, decorating, rehearsing and publicizing festivities easily consumes at least six months of the year for people like Indika.

Chaminda

During my first visit to her house with Fr. Anthony, I met Indika's two children and her mother in law who lived with them. Chaminda was working in Milan at the time, but was preparing to come back to Doowa for an extended stay the following month. This made them an ideal family for me to know, since I would have the chance

to interview them while the father was away working in Italy and when he returned to



The School Band following the water pilgrimage during the Doowa Mangala

spend time at home. The house was located some 200 meters from the Church and the sea and was built on a small plot of land, typical of this village.

Given that Doowa could not expand due to the fact that it was surrounded by water on three fronts and by another village on the remaining side, plots of land were very small with widths of less than thirty feet and variable lengths that barely left space for small backyards where to hang clean laundry. This was considerably different from other towns to the north of Negombo that had large migrant populations – Wennappuwa for example – where return migrants bought several

perches of land (269 sq. ft. a perch) and built new houses with driveways, majestic gates and manicured gardens.

Indika and Chaminda's house was enclosed by a brick wall painted green, with a sliding black iron gate that when opened could fit a car in the front yard. In my first few visits, this yard was full of sand bags for construction, boxes with floor tiles and new bathroom appliances. The four members of the family present at the time lived on the first floor, but the structure of the second floor was already visible. Over the following months I saw construction evolve until each of the two children and the



Our Lady of the Seas

parents had their own rooms upstairs and Chaminda's mother could use the

downstairs part of the house exclusively. As I was having my first visit with Indika's family and struggling with my Sinhalese language skills, I was lucky to have the help of her children who aged ten and twelve, were enrolled in an international school in Negombo and spoke good English so were able to correct my mistakes. In my first visit, while drinking coffee and asking some questions, the telephone rang so Indika excused herself – it was Chaminda calling from Milan. A few minutes later she called me over to talk to her husband on the phone. I was slightly taken aback since my language skills were precarious enough in person and I didn't want to face the added difficulties that a telephone conversation would entail. Soon enough, Chaminda in Milan realized that I was not a Sri Lankan anthropologist doing research and to my relief he started speaking English, which although rusty, had odd americanisms that are very unusual in Sri Lanka. He was curious to know where I was coming from, and to avoid the unnecessary complications of explaining my own odd trajectories from Argentina to Sri Lanka via Upstate and New York City, I simply said, "I live in New York."

To this he responded by asking more details – where exactly, what neighborhood. It was one those peculiar moments of fieldwork when the multiple and unexpected trajectories of transnationalism manifested right in front of me and made me a part of them. I found myself in a small fishing village in Sri Lanka, talking on the phone to someone in Italy, about his five years working as a cook with Latin

American immigrants at a Greek diner on 9th Avenue near Port Authority.

In 1987 and at the age of twenty, Chaminda had decided to try his luck abroad and joined the crew of a cargo ship in which he worked for six months. At the time, the levels of violence in Sri Lanka caused by the civil war were escalating daily and making life for every community increasingly difficult and tense. The next two years would witness some of the most somber and gruesome episodes in Sri Lankan history with the arrival of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) to the north and the repression of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurgency in the south.

The compounded difficulties that were transforming Sri Lanka as a consequence of market and structural reforms on one hand, and the escalating ethnic and political violence on the other, took their toll on fishing communities like the one of Negombo, making traditional livelihoods difficult to sustain. An activity like fishing – historically characterized by seasonal migrations that followed the monsoon cycles – was severely affected when travel to the alternative destinations in the North of the country was banned by the government. Curfews and bans were also imposed unannounced on fishing in the Negombo area, so even in the season when people could fish near their hometown, they had to increasingly be limited by the contingencies of the war.

As the last decade of the 20th century was inaugurated, the predominantly Catholic communities of this region became increasingly impoverished and pressured

to find an escape from what seemed an inexorable collapse. People from neighboring towns had started to find in migration and seafaring alternate ways to make a living, but it was not until the mid-1990s that the desire to leave as a survival strategy slowly crept into everyone's imagination.

Chaminda could be counted amongst some of the first to venture into new ways of making a living. Transnational migration as the main exit from Sri Lanka was still not at its peak in 1987 when he initially left. The line of work to pursue at the time was seafaring, when freight companies were hiring men for their crews in places like Sri Lanka and the Philippines.³² He was signed up by a recruiter for one of these companies and soon boarded a ship that took him to different ports over the next six months, until one day his ship reached the port of New York City. He followed his plan of sneaking out of the ship to call a Sri Lankan friend who lived there already. After a couple of days of staying in Staten Island, he found a job in the kitchen of a Greek diner on 9th Avenue – he would keep it for the next five years. He also found a place to live on 47th street, so his commute to work just required a few minutes' walk. But this didn't mean that his life was limited to that neighborhood, he had the chance to travel out of the city and see a lot of the United States. Chaminda, who lived in New York City in his early twenties, had fond memories and odd anecdotes of Port Authority and Hell's Kitchen in the early 1990s, and still remembered some of the Spanish he had learnt working in a Manhattan kitchen.

When he returned to Sri Lanka in May of 2010 and I finally got the chance to meet him, we spent a lot of time exchanging anecdotes of life in the city. Retelling these stories of New York, Chaminda would always feel nostalgic and swear there was no place like it, and although Italy had been more generous work-wise, nothing compared to the fun he had in New York.

By the time he returned to Doowa in 1994, migration to Italy was a big trend amongst fishermen. News of the ease with which people worked and saved money working in the domestic sector spread fast. Chaminda had saved some money while in New York and thought that his stint as a migrant worker was over. He now planned to stay in Doowa, get married and return to the world of fishing. But by the late 1990s the situation in the country had not improved and the difficulties that had forced him to leave had become part of the daily life of Negombo rather than a fleeting time of crisis. For more than five years he struggled to build a livelihood in Negombo, but frustration and failure had eroded the excitement with which he had originally returned home. It also eroded his savings, and now that he was married and with two young children, the future he foresaw was rather bleak. So it was that at the age of 32 in 2001 that he sought for a loan of \$5000 to finance his first trip to Italy.

In the late 1990s many fishermen had also found a new occupation in the business of people smuggling to Italy. Young boys from towns like Negombo would be tempted by family members in Italy who encouraged relatives to join them, and by

boat owners who were illegally taking hundreds of people nearly every week. This was a much cheaper way to get to Italy, but a riskier one as well. Chaminda was not that young and adventurous anymore and had the responsibility of his family, so he rejected such a journey and opted for a more expensive and formal route.

Seasonal and Transnational Migration

While the region where I conducted fieldwork was one of the only parts of the country that was not submerged in the terror and violence that took over the rest of the island during the initial stages of the civil war, difficulties for fishermen that migrated seasonally following the monsoon cycles were immense. People from the fishing communities that lived in the region of Negombo had historically migrated to the island of Mannar or to the northeastern village of Kokkilai for work during the season when the monsoon made it impossible to work in the waters that surround Negombo. Colonial records that can be traced back to 1806 give evidence of this seasonal migration which R.L.Stirrat has referenced in his seminal ethnography on Sri Lankan fishermen, *On the Beach*, for which he conducted fieldwork in a fishing village located thirty miles to the north of Negombo (Stirrat 1988).

Doowa fishermen traditionally settled for several months every year in the village of Kokkilai, in Mullaittivu district, while their families remained at home in Doowa. Kokkilai is located very far from Negombo, more than 200 miles away in the

Northern Province. But due to the uncertainties and risks that the widespread violence created in the last years of the 1980s, many decided not to travel anymore, with the harsh economic consequences that this entailed. The 1984 Kokkilai Massacre – when the LTTE killed 11 fishermen from Negombo (probably all from Doowa) and is documented as one of the first instances of the incipient conflict – had already set a grim precedent that dissuaded many from seasonal migration. Yet those who still ventured to travel across the island to Mullaitivu District were eventually forced to stay in Doowa when the Sri Lankan Army took Kokkilai to be used exclusively as a military base and when army checkpoints and searches made the trip more complicated than ever before.³³ A similar fate suffered the fishermen who had historically traveled to the island of Mannar, located 130 miles to the north of Negombo, as it also became one of the main sites of the ethnic struggle.

Herman Kumara, President of the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO) explained that Kokkilai was also the origin of many stories of fishermen having two wives and two families, one in each of their working locations. This had become more of a folk tale than a historical fact, but also presented an interesting way to think of the relation that these fisher families had to travel and to living in multiple locations simultaneously. I shared this thought with Fr. Anthony to see if there was a way of connecting this history of seasonal migration with the more contemporary history of transnational migration to Italy. He said that families from Doowa had seen

their fathers traveling to Mannar and Kokkilai for several months every year for many generations, while children went to school in Doowa and wives sustained the normal routine of their households. While on these fishing excursions fishermen lived in precarious palm frond huts (*cadjan wadiyas*) built on the beach and saved the money made fishing to take back to their homes in Negombo.

Finding similarities between the experience of domestic work in Italy and fishing in Mullaitivu District required an ambitious and rather elastic understanding of seasonal and transnational migration on my part, but nevertheless it offered an interesting way of imagining how these fishermen interpreted migration. Although I was not willing to defend this hypothesis very seriously, I used it repeatedly because it became a useful trope to invite people to share their thoughts on transnational migration. Fr. Anthony said,

It is true that there are some similarities, it looks the same, but money disrupts everything. One thing is to travel seasonally because of the requirements of your work, but it's a totally different matter when your ambition spins out of control after going to Italy. The welfare of your family justifies Kokkilai, but a craving for things is what fuels migration to Italy. There is a parallel, true, but the motivations are very different. The fishermen are not prepared to live in Europe, perhaps it is education, but when they come back, they're totally lost (*Ee gollo sampurnayen athaaramang wela*).

Fr. Anthony believed that for most migrant workers "Italy was too much."

Better working conditions and the possibility of advancing in life inspired educated

people to migrate. Corruption in Sri Lanka frustrated these same people. But in Fr. Anthony's opinion these arguments did not apply to fishermen – they were only concerned with money. Italy produced a kind of overdose of capitalism that blinded these fishermen who became obsessed with consumer goods. People like Chaminda and Indika were the exception rather than the rule in their austere planning and levelheaded ambitions. For those migrants who became emblematic of this region, it was a fast paced and openly displayed consumerism what seemed to justify transnational migration.

Life in Italy

It was not long after Chaminda arrived in Milan that he found a job at an Indian restaurant ran by Bangladeshi immigrants. While in New York, he had learnt to cook and was now taking advantage of this and of his knowledge of English. Most other younger migrant workers with no skills, no experience and no English, were much more limited when it came to the Italian job market and were willing to take anything. Chaminda was older and a responsible father with no eccentric ambitions and with specific material objectives. His list included three main goals: expanding the house, providing a good education for the children and financing some start-up business that he could manage upon return. Both him and his wife Indika were proud of this plan and repeatedly stressed his work discipline and ethics as opposed to what

had become the more usual migratory frenzy in Sri Lanka. They exemplified this by



Chaminda, happy with construction almost done

describing how in New York he had obtained a job within a few days of arriving and had kept it until he decided to return to Sri Lanka. He had a similar experience in Milan, which showed a combination of perseverance and also of good luck with employers – this was his ninth year working at the Bangladeshi restaurant. Only a few months after starting he had mastered all the Bangladeshi and Indian dishes they cooked and had also gained the trust of his employers as a serious and reliable worker.

Indika said,

In Italy he works at an Indian restaurant. This is his first job there and he still has it. He is that kind of guy, he wants to progress in a field. He doesn't want to change jobs, he is very serious. He doesn't want to start a big business when he returns, just a small restaurant for daily lunches, not a bar for tourists. He is a smart man, very careful. We have a plan to open a restaurant where I can also work. I can cook and together we can make a living in Sri Lanka.

His routine before returning to Sri Lanka in May 2010 was to work from Tuesdays to Sundays between 10 AM and 3 PM for the lunch shift, and from 6 PM until midnight for dinner. He only lived fifteen minutes away by tram from the restaurant, so almost every day he went home for a quick afternoon nap. Mondays were saved for laundry, running errands, resting from his exhausting work week and going to Church. Mass was prayed in Sinhalese every Sunday in Milan given the large number of Sri Lankan Catholics living there. Chaminda regretted he had to work every Sunday and missed mass as well as meeting other people in the community. But besides this, he liked his job and his employers and had mostly good things to say about life in Italy. Over the years he also managed to secure a very efficient and profitable work schedule that allowed him to reach most of the financial objectives he had set for his family. In 2010 he made €1200 a month working six days a week, two shifts for the Bangladeshis. He shared a room with other Sri Lankans for which he only paid €150, and spent roughly €300 a month on his other expenses. He also sent parcels to Sri Lanka with gifts and other products for his immediate family and for other relatives that took almost €200 every month. After paying for all this, he still

saved more than €500 that were destined to the children's education and to remodeling the house. In the context of transnational migration, the advantages of working in Italy were evident when compared to the experience of Sri Lankan women traveling to the Middle East, where besides the worse working conditions that they endured, the average monthly salary of a domestic worker was well under 300 U.S. dollars (Smith 2010; Gamburd 2008).

Daily work was hard, but the restaurant was quite small and only served about 80 customers on an average night. After all these years working for the Bangladeshis, they knew he was a trustworthy person and left him in charge of the restaurant for several days at a time when they were away. Chaminda went into all the precise details of cooking times, calculating amounts of rice to be prepared for each meal, vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes, predicting how many people to expect and an endless list of details that showed his management abilities and his understanding of the restaurant business.

His years of experience in New York and in Milan had inspired in him and Indika the dream of starting a small take-out restaurant in downtown Negombo. The alternative project was to start a fish delivery business with Indika's brother who worked at the *lellama*. But at least for now these plans were just dreams for the future. Chaminda was now in Negombo until September and planned to return to Italy for nine more months, the last nine months. A month before I met him, Indika had told

me that they had planned he would not return to Italy this time and would try to start their business in 2011. Later on and after several other interviews I realized how common it was to hear amongst migrant workers “just one more last time” (*Thawa eka parai yanne, aye yanne naha*). The plans to return and stay rarely materialized, causing big arguments and frictions between spouses. It became an endlessly deferred project for most migrant workers in Italy given the difficulties they faced when trying to come back to Sri Lanka for work. Now that construction would be finally over, the money he could save would add up to €6000 for one more year living in Milan. Needless to say, making this kind of money in Negombo would be nearly impossible for Chaminda and Indika, and after so many years in Italy, the temptation of doing it for one more year, doing one extra effort, was difficult to resist.

The financial benefits of staying in Italy increased even more for someone who could stay alone and regularly remit money home. Living by himself in Milan he managed to save a substantial portion of his salary, but if the whole family went to Italy – as Indika had wanted – they would struggle to make ends meet. Chaminda had built a clear separation between his world of work on one hand, and his affections and time for leisure on the other. He had found an efficient schedule to organize life; however, his wife did not agree that it was possible to compartmentalize life in such a way.

Although this transnational life scheme had clear benefits for Chaminda, he was

well aware that he had probably reached the top of his career ambitions in Italy. The fact that there was little room for further progress in Italy posed a real limit to his Italian ambitions and contributed to his desire to return. For all the opportunities for economic prosperity that Italy had offered Chaminda, it did not seem to offer the possibility of social mobility. As he said, government and office jobs in Italy that paid better were mostly reserved for Italians. “Even if I wanted to collect garbage, they wouldn’t allow me to compete for a service job with benefits working for the state,” he once told me.

Indika

Chaminda and Indika shared a life-project that required very different efforts from each of them, from different standpoints and from several thousand miles away from each other for most of the year. While Chaminda had a more straightforward interpretation of the migratory process and the benefits it provided, Indika was much more hesitant than him when it came to evaluating the consequences that this lifestyle had on their family. Chaminda’s decisions in reference to Italy seemed to always be particularly concerned with the material wellbeing of the family in Doowa. As head of the household, he took responsibility for the financial stability of the family in ways that Indika respected, but that in her eyes were sometimes neglecting the emotional balance of the family. The satisfaction that Chaminda derived from guiding

his family away from economic hardships and the uncertainties that struggling with Sri Lanka would have represented, made of him a happy and optimistic man.

The way that people like Chaminda described their lives growing up in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s was rarely nostalgic. In those years he would spend most of the time in Mannar fishing with his family and only return to Negombo three or four times a year for festivities and holidays. In light of the transformation that the country underwent and the deteriorating conditions of life that most of their families experienced, many had come to see transnational migration as an unquestionable blessing. Of the future prospects that someone like Chaminda had when he was a teenager, the decisions he took had brought him to one of the best positions he could have imagined himself to be in 25 years earlier. He was well aware of this and was not willing to approach his migratory experience with a critical eye. Chaminda was not enamored by Italy, there certainly were many things about it that he enjoyed, but at no time he thought that it could provide a better life than Sri Lanka. As I will describe later, he engaged in a practice of *cultural critique* by which he could clearly point out what were the disadvantages of living in Sri Lanka while never questioning the belief that Italy was not a good place to live for a Sri Lankan family. He always approached the project of migration from a very practical perspective and privileged the economic prosperity of the family over other considerations. For all the problems he would find with life in Italy, he was thankful for the opportunities it had offered him. At the back

of his opinions and stories, one could feel the daunting prospect of what his life would have looked like if he had never left.

Indika interpreted transnational migration differently and was not afraid to be much more critical of it. Never having traveled to Italy she did not have harsh opinions of that country, but was hesitant to embrace the phenomenon of migration as the unquestionable magic bullet that others saw in it. When I first asked her if Italy had changed the life of her family, she said without hesitating,

Yes, completely. My life has changed a lot. Before Chaminda went to Italy I had freedom. I had to be a wife and a mother, do housework, cooking, taking care of the children. That was it. Now it is all *my* responsibility.

Throughout all the conversations I had with her, Indika always downplayed the importance that financial stability and material improvements had on her family's life and showed that the emotional impact of migration was consistently heavier than what most people were willing to admit. It was difficult for Indika to understand how it could be good for the family to live at such a long distance from husband and father. When Chaminda left to Italy in 2001, she thought that after he found a stable job and regularized his legal situation they would all join him in Italy as many other families from Negombo did. Like Chaminda, Indika did not fantasize about Italy, but she nevertheless believed that going to Italy would be a good idea for her and the kids, at the very least to unify the family there. Yet after he returned for the first time,

he had developed the common idea amongst migrant workers that Italy was not a good place for Sri Lankan children to grow up.



Indika and other teachers during the festival

On the practical side he saw the problem of language, where children would have difficulties learning Sinhalese and would be schooled in Italian. In Sri Lanka, parents like Chaminda and Indika could manage to afford an education at an international school where classes are taken in the English medium and the issue of learning Sinhalese would be automatically solved. In this sense, educating a child in Italy was almost a guarantee of sealing off the doors to Sri Lanka because not

knowing good Sinhalese or English would condemn them to forever be diasporic children with little chances of finding employment or marriage prospects in the country.

On the moral side, Chaminda felt the weight of the individualist values by which Italian children were educated. He considered there was a gulf between Italian values and what he thought were the appropriate values to educate a Sri Lankan child. Migrant workers that shared a similar opinion however, always made clear that they did not want to pass moral judgment on Italian values or on the way Italian children were educated. They simply thought that to educate a Sri Lankan child it was necessary to abide by the values of their own community. Educating children in Italy had the double problem of estrangement from Sri Lanka through language, and the difficulties that the individualist values they embraced in Europe would necessarily impose a cultural distance that they would never be able to bridge. Parents like Chaminda wanted their children to have better opportunities in life, but wanted to offer these within a Sri Lankan context, as if the effort to improve the situation of the family lost meaning if to have better alternatives available for the future entailed dismissing their cultural subjectivity and heritage.

To a large extent, Indika agreed with Chaminda's ideas, however she had what could be described as an alternative notion of temporality in reference to the life cycles of her children. This particular sense of the personal history of her children

was inspired by a specific event in her life – that I will describe soon – which made her interpretation of migration very different from her husband’s. She valued the material improvements that Chaminda’s work in Italy had provided for the family, yet she was never keen on showing me around her house or exhibiting any of the consumer goods and gadgets that his years in Italy had made possible. She was much more interested in letting people know how her children were doing in the Church choir and would ask them to sing in the living-room for their guests, or would simply enjoy sharing time with her sister and colleagues from her parochial work.

As I was in the house one afternoon, a truck stopped outside and two men unloaded a refrigerator-sized box being sent by Chaminda from Milan. I was immediately interested to know what products he was sending home from Italy – she smilingly told me off the top of her head what she guessed was inside: pasta, pomodoro sauce, concentrated fruit juices, cleaning products, candy. At no time she showed any sign of excitement about it and didn’t even care to open the box that was directly hauled into the kitchen.

In her view, none of these material products or financial improvements justified living away from her husband or her children not having the daily guidance of their father. In the past, Indika had wanted to migrate to Italy with the whole family – not because she wanted to experience life in Europe or because she thought that it could provide a better education for the children – the importance of having

the family together was clearly above any other priority. Chaminda and Indika had never agreed on this. While he thought that in the long run educating the children in Sri Lanka and providing for a stable future were the keys to raising a good family, she was of the opinion that children needed the constant presence of both their parents in their formative years. Regardless of Chaminda's hard work in Italy and her efforts to be an exceptional mother, she could never fulfill both roles of mother and father at the same time. She could have joined Chaminda in Italy a few years ago, when the children were still young and could stay with some relative in Negombo for a couple of years. Now the children were almost teenagers and needed a parent to help them with homework and to steer them off trouble. As she explained, at the end of the day it was better to have one parent at home than none.

Indika repeatedly backed her opinions with evidence she found in the town and through her work at the local school. Dozens of local children grew up under the tutelage of grandparents, aunts and uncles and traveled annually to Italy or received the visit from their parents working in Italy. Most of these children did well at school and led normal lives; however, stories of teenagers getting in trouble were unequivocally framed in the context of transnational families. Mischievous youth who dropped out of school and used the money sent by parents to buy motorcycles became a kind of stereotypical narrative of what were the potential negative consequences of transnationalism that haunted parents. While most people in the

community had embraced the opportunities made available by transnational migration as generally good, everyone had the unsettling images of the kind of curse that unrestrained materialist ambitions could bring to the family.

During my time conducting fieldwork in Negombo I often witnessed the fears that parents had of children straying away from the good path materialize – although none of these children who “got into trouble” were the children of immigrants. On the contrary, it seemed that those who never left and who apparently “got stuck” in Sri Lanka were the youth who were at higher risk of corruption.

The Evils of Migration

One of the most recurrent and moralizing tales told was that of children who, left without the daily care of parents, slowly fell off the wagon to struggle with addiction and vice. These fears were particularly serious amongst low-income families and were not restricted to the context of transnationalism. However, the “Euro craze” – as a concerned citizen described it in an article published by the *Daily News* – was multiplying and deepening the potential sources of temptation.

The tension that existed between the new material ambitions that migrant workers embraced and the moral values that they cherished posed challenges that were especially manifested when it came to educating children. Below I quote at length excerpts from an editorial published in 2011 written by Ajith Perera, a resident

of Wennappuwa, that accurately reflect the anxieties that transnational migration provoked amongst people who helplessly watched their community transform in ways they did not approve of. Although this specific article makes reference to the situation in the town of Wennappuwa located twenty miles north of Negombo, the characteristics of its population in the context of migration to Italy reproduce many of the same phenomena and fears prevalent amongst non-migrants.

Worse comes to worse when we consider education and discipline of the children, especially those whose parents are abroad. [...] The future of the children of Wennappuwa and the other villages in the coastal belt where parents are abroad is at risk in this regard. [...] Most children who are not under the watchful eyes of their parents are susceptible to social evils. [...] Some parents encourage their children to travel to Italy during their school holidays to be with them. This will undoubtedly be a practice and their children will begin to like the lifestyle in Italy.

Such children attend school not for education but mainly for pleasure. For them school is a day care centre. They are on top of the list of scamps who tempt their fellow students for malpractices and in turn tarnish the good image of the schools. Ultimately such children become a threat to all [...] What about the children in other schools and especially in international schools where children pay for their education? Such children attend schools for fun. They just waste their time and disturb the whole set up until their O/L examination is over. Then they happily migrate and return with social evils from Italy [...]

Where have that serenity and spirituality gone? Have they been devoured by the Euro Monster? If there is no discipline among the new generation or among the people, the main fault is their upbringing. If the upbringing of a person is fully supported by the parents themselves with the influence of the church, there is no possibility of deterioration of him or her. [...] With all the

educational and professional qualifications teachers cannot earn a good salary that helps them to build a good house and own a vehicle. I told him that it is true but one should have intelligence not only to earn but also to manage and manipulate what he earns. To defend myself I boldly said 'Money is not everything.' Further I told him if teachers want, they too can migrate and earn.

Thus the main reason for the spiritual and disciplinary decadence of the present generation is the parents' migration leaving behind their children at home and as a result the children deviate from the church. [...] If we do not act against the widespread evils enthusiastically the Catholic villages in the costal belt including Wennappuwa will be shattered into pieces ethically (Ajith Perera, Daily News, January 24th 2011).

Many teenagers were disinclined to study in school and were ambivalent about the prospects that a good education could provide. The project of traveling to Italy was the only one that seemed to excite them, and hard work and sacrifice seemed to be reserved exclusively for the time when migrant labor came.

Fr. Francis, the parish priest of St. Joseph's Church in Wennappuwa, told me about the origins of the town's nickname, *Punchi Italia* (Little Italy). He said that the town's nickname was new, "if you had come a few years earlier, you would have heard Wennappuwa being called the Teacher's Village (*Guru Gama*)."

The question that puzzled people like Fr. Francis was why, instead of opening up new opportunities for people to stay, work and progress in Sri Lanka, the influx of money from migrant labor ended up having the contrary effect, somehow transforming *Guru Gama* into *Punchi Italia*. While in the past people struggled to offer

a good education to their children that could open doors of professional and technical employment; today that struggle was traded for one of obtaining visas to Italy. And although the tradition of educational excellence that the Catholic community took pride in was still alive, most people no longer thought that education was a dream worth pursuing.

According to Fr Francis, “some people get blinded, if you work hard there you can also work hard here. They could start a business or something with the money they bring from Italy, they just don’t know how to.” But as he also explained,

Some people get used to life in Italy and don’t want to come back. When they’re over there people are free. Here, everyone has ‘very good eyes’ (*Hamotama hoda eis thiyenawa*). Everybody sees what you’re doing. If a boy kisses a girl in Italy, there’s no problem, if you do it here, everyone knows it right away. Ladies are free there. Some women tell me, “Father, only now we’re free.”

As Fr. Anthony had also told me in Negombo, the Church was partly responsible for this situation. Over the years the costs of migration had increased consistently and the comparative advantages that Sri Lankans found in Italy when it came to obtaining employment there had decreased. From paying less than \$3,000 in the mid-1990s, prospective migrants had gone to pay the exorbitant sum of \$15,000 to obtain a chance at migration. Nonetheless, the local youths continued to perceive Italy as their ticket out of Sri Lanka. The Catholic Church had some initiatives aimed at informing prospective migrants of the current situation in Italy and to tone down the

rosy picture that young people had of migration. Rev. Dr. Valence Mendis – Bishop in charge of the Catholic National Migrants Commission had implemented a number of awareness programs in parishes for prospective migrants to help students understand the risks of migration and to limit the expectations that the youth had.

But as Fr. Francis explained, it was really difficult to communicate this notion to enthusiastic young boys eager for adventure,

Even the order of things is reversed for these young boys. They see their neighbors who buy perches of land and put large gates in them. *Italia Getua* (gate) they call them. So you will see that people first build a wall and place a big gate. There is no house, just the *getua*. They just imagine the kind of money they will make in the future so they think it will deserve a big wall and a gate, although there is nothing there now. How can we explain to young boys that Italy is *not* going to provide so many opportunities if they are constantly seeing these things?

This is not exclusively a Sri Lankan phenomenon. It has increasingly become the case amongst migrant populations who travel in search of low-paying and low-qualification employment abroad. Receiving countries that offer no opportunity for social mobility to immigrants, compensate the social stagnation and racial stigmatization that characterizes these occupations by offering relatively good levels of income (Levitt and Nieves-Lamba 2011). Research conducted with Mexican migrant workers, for example, showed how larger amounts of remittances sent home

from the U.S. did not translate into more years of schooling. The opportunities to earn and save encouraged younger prospective migrants to drop out of school and travel to work in the U.S. earlier. Non-migrants were also discouraged from attending college, since better education and qualifications did not translate into better employment in the context of migration (Levitt and Nieves-Lamba 2011, 5).

Research conducted with Pakistani male migrants has also showed how young people felt decreasingly interested in getting involved in local institutions; when they pursued educational qualifications, they only did so in fields that improved their possibilities of obtaining better employment abroad (Charsley 2005). In the case of Sri Lankans going to Italy, young boys took Italian lessons and learnt how to better perform household and domestic chores in ways that suited Italians instead of pursuing a traditional school and university education.

Coping With Migration Alone

The lives of many migrant families from Negombo was characterized by radical oppositions. Italy, being the place to work hard and save money; Sri Lanka, the place where to spend lavishly and rest. As Indika explained, this situation was confusing for young children who had their parents working in Italy. If they are unable to witness the kind of efforts that parents do while in Italy, it is easy to lose sense of the hardship and loneliness that they face while working abroad. The only firsthand

experience that non-migrants had of transnational work was that of return, when people were seen idling at home nearly seven days a week, making trips around the country and spending money copiously.

Indika insightfully questioned and debunked the idyllic image of migration that even her husband told. It was not only necessary to take the precautions that prudent parents like Chaminda took; the daily experience of migration was one of unavoidable struggle for every member of the family. As she explained, Chaminda would sometimes call on the phone crying from Italy. Not only birthdays and holidays reminded him of the distance that these years in Italy had forced between him and his family, but the weight of moments of hardship and loneliness were compounded by the lack of support that family, community and religion could offer.

The helplessness they felt was reflected in the heartbreaking story of the loss of her youngest child when she was only nine months old. Indika told this story to me in one of our first meetings when I still barely knew the family. As I was trying to record what she craved about Italy and what benefits had transnational migration brought to her life, she shrugged and firmly said, “There is nothing good about Italy or about migration, it has only brought problems to our family.”

I was taken aback by her words, especially since the main objective of my project at the time was to examine the reasons why so many Sri Lankans were almost obsessed with Italian products and with migrating there. Here I found myself with the

wife of a migrant worker who showed clear signs of material advancements, yet had little care for them and without hesitating said that life would have been better without any of the new comforts. For Indika, there was a direct connection between Chaminda leaving to work in Italy and the death of their youngest girl.

It was 2006 and the girl had fallen ill with high fevers. Chaminda had been working in Italy for five years, and although he came back to Negombo almost every year, he had only met his daughter as a newborn baby. Indika was worried about the health of the baby and took her to the hospital where the doctors examined her briefly and discharged her without much care. As the girl's condition deteriorated Indika worriedly called Chaminda in Italy who insisted she took the baby back to the hospital and demanded that they performed further studies to try to figure out what was wrong. Indika once again went to the hospital with the baby and once again, was rapidly dismissed by doctors who thought she was exaggerating and told her that the fever would soon subside. The baby and Indika returned home but her health did not improve. The next day she was desperately calling Chaminda on the phone who could not do much to help from Italy; in the afternoon, she went back to the hospital with one of her sisters. The baby was finally accepted to the hospital after almost a week of high fevers. That night she died.

As Indika told me her story in tears, she explained that none of this would have happened if her husband had been in the country. She was not blaming her husband,

but being poor and a woman in a Sri Lankan hospital were the reasons why nurses and doctors dismissed her and attended to others who came for medical care. In her opinion, Chaminda would have stayed in the hospital and insisted until the baby was properly examined. But because of Italy and transnational work and the need to progress in life, they had lost their youngest child. Chaminda never talked to me about it, but Indika told me what a heavy burden this was for Chaminda who, to this day, called crying on the telephone apologizing for his absence at that time of need. Indika's desire to migrate to Italy became stronger than ever after this happened as her arguments to keep the family together had been confirmed in the worst possible way. Yet Indika, who partly blamed Italy for their misfortune, was now wishing to be in the place that she thought was responsible for her loss.

Where Have Our Family Values Gone?

Many people in the community suspected that migrant workers liked life in Italy more than at home. The way locals interpreted the actions of migrant workers, it looked as if they really enjoyed the freedoms that life in Italy provided, leading to their genuine adoption of Italian values as their own. Indika had recently bumped into a childhood friend who had been living in Italy for a few years. After chatting for a few minutes on the street, the man flirtatiously invited her to have some coffee. She felt quite uncomfortable as he knew she was married and even knew Chaminda. He

insistently asked if she felt “lonely” and repeatedly commented on how difficult it must be to “have no company” (*Harima palui, asbraye karanna kenek nee*).

Indika was shocked and reprovably asked him if he was the same boy she had grown up with going to school and church – how could his values have changed so much. To this he responded by saying, “*Nangi* (little sister), this is the same Bible they use in Italy, they go to the same Churches there, so I follow them, I like it better there.”

Indika told him that she was not alone, “I have Jesus and my children with me.” She almost cried as she told me this story and couldn’t imagine what happened in Italy that made a man change so much. She had always liked him when they were children, he had been a good friend. But now everything seemed to have changed, he seemed lost. When she asked him if it wasn’t time that he settled and got married he told her that he didn’t want to get married as he thought there were plenty of women available in Italy and having fun was more important right now than anything else.

Indika’s friend reproduced a Sri Lankan version of the *Gulfan* migrant stereotype amongst Keralites traveling to the Middle East (Osella & Osella 2000). The *Gulfan* is the male model that young Malayalis aspire to become: successful and wealthy. “A transitional and individualistic figure, defined largely through relationships to cash and consumption, he is typically a deracinated and not fully mature male needing to be brought back into village life.” (Osella & Osella 2000, 118).

The presence of such characters in Sri Lanka had a high impact on young boys who dreamt of migration. Much more influential than the image of sober success provided by Indika and Chaminda who could provide for the extended family while also managing to establish a secure and solid financial position for themselves. As Osella & Osella describe for Kerala, the distance between these two stereotypical role models is mediated by two other characters: the *pavan* and the *kallan*. One is the returnee who can't help but squander all his money and say yes to everyone who asks for help; the other, the returnee who rejects his responsibilities towards the community and embraces the individualist values by which they lived abroad.

Ethnographic examples that I offer in other chapters show several of these useful categories devised by Osella & Osella. Many immigrants from Negombo appear to be caught up in the transition between *pavan* and *kallan*. A *pavan* who generously spends on family and community but is unable to accumulate social prestige, ends up becoming an indifferent *kallan* who severs his connections to the community and only concerns himself with consuming until it is time to return to Italy.

Italian Morality is not Always Bad

Although virtually no migrant worker would openly choose life in Italy over Sri Lanka and would always claim that they only had financial motives, many relatives and

friends were confused by their reluctance to return. Up to a certain extent, this refusal to return was recognized and justified by them. Most migrant workers enjoyed the discipline and respectful relations they had encountered in Italy – and these were not exclusively restricted to the workplace. Probably Chaminda's only reference to the death of his daughter was to compare the healthcare systems in Italy and Sri Lanka. It was not the quality of healthcare that made the difference, it was the respect with which migrant workers who did not speak the language properly were cared for by doctors and nurses.

While no Sri Lankan I interviewed ever admitted to prefer Italy over Sri Lanka, they would not hesitate to tell me what were the advantages of life in Italy over Negombo. Most people that wanted to return would justify their decision by saying that Italians had no good values (*Sanskrutii bondai nee*), yet when they talked about the advantages of Italy they almost exclusively listed values like equality, order and respect (*Eka samanai, piliwelai, kramanukulai, garu karanawa*). Chaminda was no exception to this. He thought that Italy was not a good place for his children, as they would spend most of the time at school or alone while Indika and him worked. He justified this by explaining that in Sri Lanka he could afford an international school in downtown Negombo where his children could learn good English and have the constant care of Indika, while in Italy they would attend a government school and only learn Italian.

Mixed Emotions

The prosperity that transnational migration had brought to Indika's family could never substitute the feeling of helplessness and solitude that she felt while her husband was away. Another story where Indika's feelings of vulnerability came to the fore occurred at the time of the tsunami in December 2004. She had noticed how birds and pets were acting strange, making people agitated and anxious. When she heard news of the tsunami on the radio she promptly took her two young children and moved out of Doowa to downtown Negombo minutes before the tsunami hit Sri Lanka. This part of the island was one the least affected by it, yet water went into the house reaching almost three feet high and wrecking most of their furniture and home appliances. Moments of anxiety like this took their toll on Indika who was responsible exclusively for the well-being and safety of the family. Her instincts and decisions had helped her when the tsunami hit, but were unfortunately not enough when her young daughter was gravely ill.

The extreme characteristics of these instances at least had the advantage of simplicity. Neither Indika nor Chaminda would hesitate in describing them as sad and unfortunate consequences of migration. But the problem that they now faced was how to react to them, how to live life after their lives had changed forever. In the wake of misfortune, was it time to return to Sri Lanka or to move the entire family to Italy? Or take the risk that the next time an emergency occurred they would be once again

separated from each other? This decision had brought a constant disagreement to the family, where Indika thought that migration had already allowed them to improve the house and afford a good education for the children and there was no reason to carry on this transnational lifestyle any further.

Meanwhile Chaminda thought that he would soon return to settle in Sri Lanka, but there was at least one more year of work at the restaurant in Milan. For many transnational workers, migration and return became an endless Scheherazade tale where there was always one more project to pursue, one more material objective that would solidify the prosperity of the family. It was common to see the progression of the migrant worker's ambitions that started with the desperate need to feed the family, continued with the buying of land, building of a house, building of a second floor, a motorcycle, a car, a good school for the children, more land, a business, a fishing boat... Soon enough, even those discerning migrants like Chaminda who only embarked on transnational work as mature fathers and did not fall for eccentric ambitions found that it was hard to take decisions that put financial considerations behind affective ones when there was no urgency.

The material reasons that had justified migration in the past, were no longer there to explain the new trips that migrant workers embarked on. However, it was not difficult for most migrant workers to devise new plans that could provide reasons to extend their stays abroad. It was common to find successful migrant workers like

Chaminda who by saving €500 a month were seduced to continue working in Italy. Yet there were reasons that exceeded the financial concerns that kept migrant workers traveling to Italy. Although Chaminda missed life at home with his family, the uncertainties that return would pose discouraged him from attempting to settle definitely.

While the projects that had inspired people to migrate were fulfilled, the lives of migrant families did not become simpler but instead turned more complex, as many now had lifestyles that would be very difficult to afford with local money exclusively. Transnational migration created unrealistic expectations of lifestyles that are impossible to sustain without the influx of foreign money (Levitt and Nieves-Lamba 2011, 1). In this sense, the simple ambitions of stability that made many fishermen abandon their traditional activity, left their place to more elaborate projects that required careful scheduling and plans that spanned several years. Not only this, but migration also ceased to be an individual endeavor to become an intricate family affair. Chaminda had assumed the financial well-being of the family as his exclusive responsibility, but many couples alternated work stints in Italy so that they could maximize the money they could send home. It was common to see parents come to Sri Lanka for several months and send relatives as replacements to Italy for the time they were taking care of family and business matters in Sri Lanka. As Indika explained, “people go to Italy because they want to live a better life with their families,

but then they all end up living away from their families because they never want to return.”

The contradictions that migration brought to the lives of transnational families became permanent characteristic of places like Doowa, where everybody struggled to reconcile the reasons that inspired them to leave with the reasons that kept them away after a decade. And for people like Indika the contradictions were even deeper, as she felt she had to be thankful to the place that had brought the biggest misfortune to her family. This situation made her uneasy because she could see that while her plans for the family had remained quite stable over the years, her husband appeared to have changed his substantially. And although he declared that he wanted to return and settle for good with his family, the possibility of working in Sri Lanka was clearly not appealing to him.

Migration and Isolation

One of the recurring themes in the narratives of people like Indika and Chaminda was the ubiquitous sensation of being alone, away from loved ones and deprived of safety nets and familiar ties. On her own, Indika had to cope with the day to day responsibilities of her family. Even in moments of extreme need she lacked the support of her husband. Thousands of miles away, Chaminda also alone was a helpless witness of the struggles of his wife and felt guilty for his extended absence.

Meanwhile, his daily routine was also characterized by lack of relatives and friends. To a large extent, migrant workers in Italy and families in Negombo managed to cope with the ordinary activities of their lives. But the precariousness of life became evident in moments of need, when they could use the help and advice of a partner. As another migrant worker once told me, “... living in Italy is no good. You’re always alone. If you get sick there’s no one to take care of you. If you have a problem there’s no one to talk to..”

However, return and reunification appeared not to be the solution either. Even when back in Sri Lanka people were affected by these problems. In a later chapter I discuss the *indifferent* attitude that many returnees showed towards the demands and expectations of the community. Similar to the cases explored by Osella & Osella in Kerala, a common reaction to the demands of the community was to “shut them off” and ignore them to pursue one’s self-interest. Pathirage & Collyer also discussed how Sri Lankan migrants from Wennappuwa in Italy felt overwhelmed by the responsibility of receiving and caring for the newcomers and how this eventually led many to “turn off their mobile phones” (Pathirage & Collyer 2009).

Migrant workers often explained that to succeed in Italy it was necessary to adopt certain individualist values that allowed them to understand the logics of employment in that country. Chaminda once told me that he took too long to understand the “work system” (*wadda kraayak*) and wished he had traveled there

earlier as he wasted too much time until he started saving for his future. As with the South Indian *pavan* described by Osella & Osella, Chaminda's first trips home had depleted – between family, friends and gifts – all the money he had made in Italy and went back empty handed. Other young migrants even had to borrow money once again from their families just to pay for the airfares before returning to Italy.

The transition from *pavan* to becoming a mature and responsible migrant in Sri Lanka implied turning down responsibilities. This did not mean that all successful migrants inevitably transformed into the *kallan* stereotype. Chaminda's experience is evidence that it is possible to take smart decisions with remittances *and* to support several people at home with the work of only one person in Italy. Yet this was the result of a process of learning and adaptation that required him to organize his life according to a set of priorities that fit with European values that limited responsibilities to the realm of the nuclear family. This careful planning and limiting of responsibilities towards the extended family also required organizing his yearly routine in ways that enabled him to maximize his earning power and stretched his time working at the restaurant as much as his body would allow. But one of the more important changes that this lifestyle demanded was that every member of the family increasingly relied on their own and became “self-sufficient” individuals. Indika was the member of the family that felt this the most, as she believed that life could improve without having to give up that much. As transnational connections improved

and opened possibilities, their cost seemed to be an increase in isolation and solitude.

Notes to Chapter 2

³⁰ The life size statue of Christ is said to have arrived in Doowa in 1839 and is believed to have miraculous powers. The passion plays staged in Doowa have a history of 400 years and are claimed to be the oldest in Asia. It is also noteworthy that Catholicism survived through a century and a half of proscription during Dutch rule (1658-1798), and thrived once again with the arrival of the British, even though it was only towards the end of the XIX Century that missionary work from Europe started with regularity.

³¹ Some people claim that the origins of the Passion Plays staged in Doowa can be traced for 400 years. Historically there were no actors and the roles were played by puppets, but this would change in the 1930s. Fr. Marcelline Jayakody OMI was an important Sri Lankan priest and musician who wrote much of the music used in the plays today while he was Parish priest of Doowa. He introduced actors on stage instead of puppets. Some of the largest productions had more than 250 actors on stage. Fr. Jayakody was also one of the first Catholic priests to embrace nationalist values and to promote the indigenization of the Church. In his early years as a priest he was questioned for introducing the use of lotus flowers in Catholic weddings. His music was influenced by this ideology and he composed several Catholic hymns in Sinhala using South Asian Carnatic musical traditions. He was affectionately known as “Pansale Piyatuma.” (Catholic priest of the Buddhist temple). (Daily News, June 3rd, 2003)

³² The Flag of Convenience (FOC) system was introduced in the early 20th Century but it was in the mid - 1970s after the drop in international commerce that followed the Oil Crisis when it boomed. Thus system allowed for open registries by which shipowners could change the flag of vessels and could hire crew members from any country. While Panama and Liberia became the largest FOC nations, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and especially the Philippines became the main providers of manpower in seafaring activities (McKay 2007).

³³ The area of Kokkilai and Mullaitivu district had been engulfed in the ethnic violence since the early stages of the conflict. The Kokkilai massacre, where eleven Sinhalese persons were killed on 1 December 1984, took place the day after the Dollar Farm and Kent Farm massacres, also in Mullaitivu, where the LTTE attacked and killed 62 people.

CHAPTER 3

Between Nation and Religion

Father Basketball

A walk past any Sri Lankan school is almost always a walk by cricket grounds with children and teenagers tirelessly playing at all times of day. But in schools on the east coast of the island this national passion for cricket amongst Sri Lankan boys is rivaled by a comparable enthusiasm for basketball, particularly in Batticaloa, the “Basketball Capital of Sri Lanka.” The history of basketball in the country started in 1917 with Walter Cammak, the American Director of Physical Education for the YMCA in Colombo who promoted the practice of the sport in the capital. It slowly spread across the country when students at Ananda College started playing it in 1927, and in time gave rise to the establishment of the Ceylon Basketball Association in 1950 and the Sri Lanka Schools Basketball Association in 1958. This group was fundamental in the development of tournaments and school leagues that thrived in the 1960s and 1970s, surpassing in popularity the practice of any other sport in cities like Jaffna, Trincomalee and Batticaloa. But the youth’s enthusiasm for basketball along the eastern seaboard of Sri Lanka would have never flourished without the passion that American Jesuit priests stationed in the area had for the game.

Since 1893, when the Papal Seminary was created in Kandy, the Society of

Jesus (Jesuits) had a strong presence in the island and administered two entire dioceses. The French Jesuits from the Champagne Province were assigned to the Diocese of Trincomalee-Batticaloa, while the Belgian Province controlled the Diocese of Galle (Perera 1941; Gomez 2009). Over the next fifty years there was a constant flow of European Jesuits to Sri Lanka that staffed schools, convents and parishes on one hand, and trained the first generation of local clergy at the Kandy Seminary on the other (Ballhatchet 1998). Towards the 1930s, the disproportionately large presence of European priests and nuns in Sri Lanka started to diminish as the numbers of local clergy grew. But the inflow of European priests also started to wane as two world wars in Europe had forced the Society of Jesus to turn its attention to the hardships at home. It is estimated that more than 1,110 French and Belgian Jesuits lost their lives during World Wars I & II in Europe. As a consequence of this, many priests and nuns who were stationed abroad were requested to return to their home countries, leaving depleted schools and parishes in different parts of the world.

In the Diocese of Trincomalee-Batticaloa, the dearth of French priests produced by the wars was solved when a few American Jesuits from the New Orleans Province were appointed to attend the needs of the community. The first American clergyman arrived in 1933, but the numbers grew every year since then. With the death of the Msgr. Robischez in 1946 (French Bishop who headed the Diocese of Trincomalee) the entire Diocese along with its schools was handed over to the

American Jesuits.³⁴ In the following years more priests arrived from New Orleans and became teachers, principals and rectors in schools like St. Michael's of Batticaloa (Gomez 2009). It was these American priests who encouraged the practice of the sport they knew and loved from home and communicated their passion to Sri Lankan schoolboys.

Some people credit Fr. Eugene John Herbert S.J. with being the person who singlehandedly introduced basketball to St. Michael's College, where he acted as coach for many years and led the teams to obtain several national championships for the school and the city. "Fr. Basketball," was allegedly famous for his love of the sport and was warmly remembered for his ardent coaching, "endlessly yelling instructions from the edge of the courts." At the age of 67 in 1990 – when Fr. Herbert was returning by motorcycle from Eravur, he disappeared along with a Tamil boy from Batticaloa.

Violence in the region escalated after several targeted killings conducted by the LTTE – along with the ensuing reprisals against civilians by the army – had raised communal tensions (McGilvray 2008, Thiranagama 2011). Fr. Herbert, who was a known human rights activist and a member of the Batticaloa Peace Committee that was established to investigate abuses by the LTTE and the government, is believed to have been a victim of military action.



The story of Fr. Herbert and the American priests working in the east coast was related to me by Fr. Rohan Ranjith, a retired priest I regularly met with in Wattala. In our interviews Fr. Ranjith spent long hours explaining and commenting on the changes that the presence of foreign priests and nuns had brought to Sri Lanka over the years, particularly in education. But along with his descriptions of the different political transformations that had affected the status and fortune of the Catholic Church in the country, Fr. Ranjith always conveyed the idea that these changes were accompanied by cultural manifestations, some of these, rather unusual. The different European and American influences to which the local populations were exposed to due to colonial and missionary encounters had consequences that materialized in small, apparently incidental cultural transformations in culinary tastes, fashion or sports. The anecdote of the introduction of basketball to Sri Lanka was mentioned by Fr. Ranjith as a way to exemplify some of these cultural changes brought by foreigners to the country, somehow as a “side effect” of their pastoral work.

But this anecdote is also helpful to think of cosmopolitanism in the way I outlined earlier in this monograph. By imagining cosmopolitanism as emerging at the intersection of a movement towards diversity and a movement towards detachment, it is possible to describe the anecdote of Fr. Basketball as an expression of the incipient cosmopolitan attitudes that characterize certain regions of Sri Lanka. Similarly, the historical portrayal of Negombo and of the local Catholic communities that I offer in

this chapter situates the people who inhabited the region as recurrently having to carefully balance their attachments to the home and to the world. Negombo has a history of diversity that inspired the quality of flexibility and accommodation observable amongst transnational migrant workers; but it also exhibits a history of detachment that not always worked in favor of its interest in national politics. This past should not be read as the helpless marginalization of Catholics in Sri Lanka, but as a history that arguably made Negombo a place with rather peculiar notions of belonging and attachment in the context of nationalist politics.

In this chapter I explore the consequences that cultural contact had on Sri Lankan communities that embraced the Catholic faith. To do this I contextualize the past of the Negombo community in the midst of a long history of contact through fishing and trade, which only in the last five centuries gave way to colonialism and conversion. By doing this, I also critically approach the notion that the Negombo Catholic community has a caste and ethnic lineage that can be easily traced to specific and singular origins, unsettling nationalist narratives that seek to create linearity where there is none. Negombo's history of contact and cosmopolitanism is also a history of mixture and shifting alliances. Rather than searching for an unambiguous and univocal historical narrative, understanding Negombo's present requires that we interpret its history as produced at the crossroads of multiple cultural, religious and commercial trajectories.

Cosmopolitanism in Negombo was not only characterized by diversity, it also had a dismissive attitude towards the local and provincial that sometimes circumscribed the Catholic community to the margins of the national culture. This marginality and detachment from mainstream identities sometimes played to the Catholics advantage – as with educational privilege – but sometimes became an impediment to their full participation in national politics, particularly with the rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. The cunning of cosmopolitanism amongst this community was a never fully accomplished process of modernization, a kind of impossible effort to assert their membership in the nation while struggling against a restrictive definition of belonging posed by the Sri Lankan state (Kapferer 1988).

In this chapter I also refer to the changes that this community and its distinct Catholic identity experienced in the context of the rising Sinhala nationalism, particularly focusing on the years that followed national independence in 1948. Towards this objective, I trace the changing fortunes of the Catholic Church in the country, paying special attention to the transformations wrought in education by the myriad parish schools and prestigious colleges built throughout the country by the two main congregations that worked in Sri Lanka. These were the Society of Jesus that started working in Sri Lanka in 1893 as an extension of the work they carried out in the Bengal mission (Gomez 2009), and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), a French Congregation that started its work in the country half a century before the

Jesuits, in 1843. While the Jesuits concentrated in Galle and the eastern seaboard, the OMI mission focused its work on the western coast to the north of Colombo (Perniola 1992).

Shifting Alliances

Since the first mass conversions that took place during the height of Portuguese colonialism, the Catholic community of Sri Lanka forged for itself a reputation for having stronger attachments to Rome than to the nation. This perception has been based on the allegedly strategic use of religious identity made by these communities in search of reliable partners during colonial times (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991). This argument that suggests a degree of pragmatism on the part of the local community, is not very helpful to understand attitudes that showed cohesion and loyalty to the Church at times when Catholicism did not enjoy the favor of the authorities. The strongest evidence that can be provided to support the claims of Catholic staunch loyalty to the clergy can be found at times of persecution, particularly during the years of proscription imposed by Dutch authorities. In these instances, notions of pragmatism and accommodation are insufficient to understand the role of Catholics in Sri Lanka's modern history. As authors like Roberts (1982) and Raghavan (1961) have argued, it was with the prohibition of Catholic ritual practices and the deportation of Catholic priests that a sense of community first

emerged amongst Catholic converts in the island.

The proscription of Catholicism under Dutch rule in the mid-17th century served as a way to evince the existence of a distinct religious community, undeniably visible in its fierce resistance to Dutch colonial impositions. The arrival of Joseph Vaz from Goa in 1687 – which became the central episode in the history of Catholicism in Sri Lanka (Farias 2008) – served as the catalyst that shaped the Catholic presence in the island as a legitimately local form of religious expression. Persecuted, Vaz was smuggled to the house of the Negombo Mudaliyar Don Affonso Pereyra where he secretly preached and attended the needs of the local Catholics who, in a communal effort, prevented the Dutch from seizing him. Vaz moved to Kandy in 1696 under the protection of King Vimaldharma Surya II (Mascarenhas 1977) where he remained until his death in 1711.

In the 20th century context of nationalism, a new episode of confrontation that again revealed the staunch support for the Church offered by the Sri Lankan Catholic communities was provided by the two decade battle over the nationalization of school education. This political process that terminated the denominational school system in 1960 fundamentally shaped the role of Christian minorities in contemporary Sri Lankan politics. The post-1960 historical trajectory of the Catholic communities of Sri Lanka is one characterized by subordination and compliance in the face of the ever growing power of Sinhala nationalist forces. In this recent period, most Sinhala

speaking Catholics embraced a nationalist discourse aimed at guaranteeing their inclusion in the narrow spectrum of belonging demanded by nationalist politics. The few instances in which Catholics appear to have retained a measure of the privileges they enjoyed in the past can only be appreciated comparatively, especially against the brutal fate suffered by Tamil minorities in the country.

As historian John Rogers has argued, Sinhalese Catholics who saw themselves as Catholic first and Sinhalese second in the colonial years, started to embrace their Sinhalese identity and some “adopted strident anti-Tamil positions perhaps to compensate for their marginal position amongst the Sinhalese as a whole” (Rogers 1987, 598). Similarly, Roberts et al. suggest that given their “border status” between the foreign and the Sinhalese, Sinhala Catholics were particularly active in chauvinist anti-Tamil outbursts of violence in 1977, 1981 and 1983.

While until two decades earlier Catholics had been the target of nationalist violence, now they had become central to it. “Arguably, however, the newly-developed chauvinism of segments of the Sinhala Catholic population compensates for their questionable religious affiliation as well as their questionable location along the coast [...] Sinhala Catholics hope to establish themselves firmly within the *rata* and *jatiya* (country and nation)” (Roberts, Raheem, and Colin-Thomé 1989).³⁵ Electoral results in the last two decades show a similar trend towards alignment, as traditional strongholds of the UNP like Negombo have shifted their preferences towards the

SLFP – the party that had historically done the most to remove the privileges enjoyed by the Catholics.



By exploring the historic and religious roots of the Catholic community of Negombo, my objective is to contextualize arguments produced by transnational migrants that pointed to an alleged affinity they had for certain cultural practices associated with western values and modernity. When Catholic migrant workers from Negombo were asked about their apparent fondness and suitability for work abroad, they often elicited arguments that pointed to a history of transnational connections.

Yet it would be an extremely ambitious project to draw links between the contemporary political and economic forces that drive transnational migration and the experiences of previous generations of people in Negombo who interacted with European colonizers and missionaries. Without embarking on such a project, it is possible to observe in present day Negombo traces of a historical heritage that enabled people to imagine a kind of affinity between their local traditions and European cultures.

These traces were sometimes manifested in very simple and mundane ways throughout the landscape of Negombo. First, the most immediate example can be found in their own names that linked them to a past where Portuguese and British

influences are undeniable. Most people combined Christian first names with surnames of Portuguese origin like Perera, Fernando or de Silva. Second, the ubiquitous presence of Catholic iconography in Pitipana and Doowa – together with some imposing church buildings found in Negombo – also constituted the basis for other connections of familiarity that migrant workers traveling to Italy could make. Especially when these migrants arrived in Italy and experienced the local landscape of church buildings and the Catholic rituals performed by some of their employers (even when assigning them very different meanings), it was natural for them to observe cultural affinities. The third, and perhaps the most important historical legacy that led to the establishment of some of these connections, had to do with the prestigious history of Catholic education in this part of Sri Lanka. Although the quality of education provided by these schools had consistently deteriorated since the 1960s, they appeared to have retained a measure of their prestige and continued to represent a distinctive feature of the Catholic community across the country. For many years, Catholic education in Sri Lanka had not only been a symbol of westernization and privilege; it had also helped cultivate a distinct communal identity amongst Catholics that – although ethnically and linguistically diverse – shared a measure of the benefits associated with conversion.³⁶ This, however, should not give the idea that English-medium education was widespread amongst Sri Lankan Catholics. In places like Negombo, only a small minority had benefited from these prestigious colleges while

most children of fishermen attended public and small parish schools. In spite of this, different Catholic communities came to perceive themselves as distinct from Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. To a large extent, this was the consequence of how they were represented by non-Christians in Sri Lanka rather than by their shared culture and values. Although a small minority can be said to have taken strategic advantage of conversion, all converts were seen as enjoying these privileges. Catholicism was seen as providing western influences in two ways: as a religion that conduced people to embrace European values, and as a network of educational institutions that brought non-religious western culture to Sri Lanka. The limit between these two aspects of Catholicism were often overlapping, hence, even those who had little contact with prestigious educational institutions came to represent themselves as culturally different from other communities in Sri Lanka. These simple examples should serve as an introduction to the kind of situated historical context that I sketch throughout this chapter.

Transnationalism from a Historical Perspective

To discuss the political and cultural forces that shaped the Negombo community throughout the 20th century, it is useful to take an approach that traces older transnational connections that are present in this region. By contextualizing the local history in such a way, I highlight that at one time this was one of the most

cosmopolitan areas in the island, with trade and passenger routes to India passing through the coastal areas of western Sri Lanka, especially in ports along the Indian Ocean coast (Stirrat 1988, 127).

Evidence of the presence and settlement of fishermen and traders in this region can be found several centuries prior to the arrival of Portuguese colonization (Dewaraja 1990; Kirabamune 1985). The archeological record gives testimony to the existence of different waves of fishermen of Dravidian origin who arrived in the region since the 7th century C.E. (Meyer 2003). Some of these are presumed to have been seasonal migrants with diverse caste backgrounds (Paravar, Karayar, Mukkuvar) who, for different reasons, found it convenient to settle temporarily or permanently in the island of Lanka. After the 14th century, traders from the Arabian peninsula who had already forged business connections with south Indian Tamils, also started to settle in Sri Lankan ports and develop trade relations with local communities (Indrapala 1971; Dewaraja 1994; Sivasubramaniam 2009, 149). These two broad commercial and cultural flows (South Indian fishermen and Arab merchants) between the coasts of Sri Lanka and south India are different from the three main waves of conquest led by Chera, Chola and Pandya kings, to which many have referred to in search of the origins of south Indian migrations.

For coastal regions of Sri Lanka, it is important not to circumscribe transoceanic connections to movements of invasion and conquest exclusively. It is

more useful to interpret their exposure to the foreign as layered and fluid throughout several centuries. Furthermore, to speak of immigration from south India in the pre-colonial context implies that we transplant contemporary conceptions of national and maritime boundaries to regions which in the past appear to have been highly integrated (Pearson 2003; McPherson 1993; Chaudhuri 1985). In this sense, it is helpful to think of this region in terms of a society of littoral networks that included fluid and constant exchanges and movements across the Palk Strait and Gulf of Mannar, as well as between the Malabar Coast of India and the western coast of Sri Lanka. These connections also expanded in certain occasions to other areas like the Coromandel Coast of India and southeastern Sri Lanka, as shown by the presence of Tamil speaking Mukkuvar fishers in the region of Batticaloa (McGilvray 2008).

Historian Éric Meyer has noted that littoral interdependence in the region should not be limited to the two periods of migration that have traditionally been identified by the scholarship on connections between Sri Lanka and south India. The first of these has focused on the migration period between 10th and 13th century during Chola domination of the ancient kingdoms in the Dry Zone. The second is a much more recent period in the 19th and 20th century under British colonialism, when Tamil workers were brought to work in plantations and public projects such as building roads and railways. Concentrating on these two periods exclusively can make the reader forget that in some regions of Sri Lanka, migratory and commercial flows

were virtually uninterrupted before and after these two main periods (Meyer 2003).

Meyer writes,

Specific communities could carry out their occupation on both sides of the Straits. Fishermen – Mukkuvar from Kerala, Paravar from the Tirunelveli coast, Karaiyar (Tamil) alias Karāva (Sinhala), were regular commuters and acted at the same time as petty traders, exchanging dried fish for cotton cloth and rice produced in the Kauveri irrigated areas, which were in short supply in the island (2003, 59).

The combination of migrations and invasions with internal movements and displacement on one hand; business activities, political changes and inter-marriages and other alliances on the other, has “contributed to a significant restructuring of the original castes and religious beliefs of the immigrants from India” (Sivasubramaniam 2009, 185). As a consequence of this, it is not possible to identify any pure character amongst the different fishing communities of Sri Lanka or trace their origins to specific ethnic, caste or regional groups in India.

Karāva Apologists

In the context of rising nationalism and the search for ethnic roots, the Karāva caste has been often presented as a rather homogenous group with a unified lineage that connects present day coastal populations to their fisher and warrior ancestors.³⁷ These historical narratives need to be interpreted as the product of particular political projects for which the search for origins has been a guiding principle (Stirrat 1988;

Raghavan 1961; Roberts 1982; Rogers 1994, 2004). Much of these historical reconstructions have been aimed at contesting the fishing origins in south India of the Karāva, to argue instead for Aryan origins and Kshatriya status.

In addition to the diverse migratory flows caused by fishing and trade, many arrived to Sri Lanka from south India as mercenaries who later settled in the island. This evidence has been used by Karāva apologists to advocate for the Kshatriya origins of the inhabitants of this region. These have sometimes claimed to be descendants of the Kurus, an Indo-Aryan Kshatriya tribe from northern India that gave origin to the Kauravas of the Mahabharata (Raghavan 1961).

The mythico-historic origin of the Karāva in Sri Lanka has been traced to the 11th century CE. A common practice at the time was for Sinhalese kings to hire Chola and Pandya warriors to fight against other Indian invaders or internal enemies (Strathern 2007, 32). The history recorded in the Mukkara Hatana (Mukkara War) relates that between 1412-67 the founding King of Kotte, Sri Parakrama Bahu VI, recruited soldiers from three different South Indian kingdoms to fight against the Mukkuvars from Southern Tamil Nadu that were in Puttalam trying to invade Sri Lanka. After the Indian tribes came, fought and defeated the Mukkuvars, the king – pleased with their military feat – granted them lands in the areas adjacent to Chillaw and down south to Negombo (Raghavan 1961, 18). As reward he also gave them silver, passports to trade freely and cross maritime borders, and granted Negombo as

their hereditary land (Sivasubramaniam 2009). “Negombo was granted to them as their hereditary (*paraveni*) land, as long as their generations shall last. And thus they were settled in Negombo” (Raghavan 1961, 19).

Both the mercenary and fishing narratives provide a sense of the contested origins of the coastal communities of the region. However, it should be noted that neither of these occupational histories provide an exhaustive picture of the caste or regional background of these communities. While the history outlined above clearly ties the ancestry of the local populations to south India, there is little evidence to sustain the claims of Kshatriya origins that Karāva apologists have strived to find. Five centuries also separate this narrative from present day Negombo, during which time further waves of migrations arrived to the region and large portions of the local populations moved to other parts of the island and began to perform a wide variety of other occupations. For these reasons, finding a single narrative that can encompass the caste and religious history of the local population in order to draw direct connections to the present day inhabitants of Negombo can only be achieved by embarking on a comprehensive process of historical and cultural reification. At present, there is not sufficient historical evidence available to reconstruct occupational histories in a way that can clarify the origins of local populations. Furthermore, much of the work concerned with a caste focus grounded on mythico-historic and primordialist arguments needs to be understood in the context of a project deeply

influenced by late colonial reifications of caste and ethnicity. As Rogers has argued for Sri Lanka in the broader South Asian context, “primordialist interpretations are so strongly embedded in Sri Lankan political and popular views, that most writers, no matter how modernist their inclination, address primordialist arguments to an extent often not thought necessary by scholars working on the mainland” (1994, 11).

Stirrat has suggested that since the 1950s the controversy over the origins of the Karāva has mounted with the rise to prominence of ethnic nationalism. This controversy needs to be understood in the context of the centrality that the Goyigama caste has taken in national politics. Karāva leaders have tried to reject the association of their caste origins with the fishing activity claiming equal status to the Goyigama (Stirrat 1988, 24). However, these struggles over the authenticity of historical narratives did not emerge only with modern nationalism; for example, Blackburn has noted that tensions over caste, origins and hierarchy can be found at play in the mid-19th century when the already dominating Goyigama made sure to draw a clear division between Kshatriya warriors from Northeastern India and fishermen/soldiers for hire from south India (2010, 87).

Controversy and ethnic nationalism aside, the historical records point to centuries of migrations from the south of the continent and to the occasional settlement of warriors and fishermen in the area. The racial and ethnic origins of today’s communities in the Negombo area need to be found in the combination of

these different influences over the centuries rather than point in one direction exclusively.

Caste and Language in Negombo

In *People in Between*, Roberts et al. noted that even before the arrival of the Portuguese, the diversity of the populations that inhabited the western littoral had enabled the presence of several languages simultaneously, although Tamil was strongly prevalent (Bonta 2003). Portuguese became the language of colonization and evangelization, and even during Dutch times Portuguese Creole remained the colloquial language that prevailed. The diverse population of migrants, fishermen and merchants that populated the ports before the arrival of the Portuguese was intensified and increased during the colonial years of Portuguese and Dutch domination with European settlers, mestizos, Tupass (people of Portuguese descent), Burghers, Konkani priests and many others that came to populate Sri Lanka (Roberts, Raheem, and Colin-Thomé 1989).

The majority of fishermen in the region where anthropologist R.L. Stirrat conducted fieldwork in the early 1970s identified as Sinhalese Karāva. This area that extends from Negombo to the Gulf of Mannar is dotted by a large number of fishing villages from where most of today's transnational migrants to Italy originate. In his ethnography, Stirrat pointed out that most of the people in this area spoke Tamil as

their main language and were practicing Roman Catholics, which made them “very odd Sinhalese” (1988, 24). It is important to remember that this situation that Stirrat observed was taking place more than a decade before the start of the separatist conflict against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. This process of “Sinhalization” has only intensified and deepened throughout the region, and the search for ethnic identities that do not antagonize with the Sinhala Buddhist majority have become an increasingly important objective (Perniola 1983, Rogers 1994).

Evidence of the legacy of European connections observable amongst the local population is given by the combination of Christian names with Portuguese surnames that I mentioned earlier. However, it should be noted that local names to this day officially also state *vasagama* affiliations, which link their ancestry to the three *Surya* groups that are said to have originally settled from south India in the area of Negombo (Warunakulasurya, Kurukulasurya and Mihindikulasurya).³⁸ Examples of how typical names in Negombo are composed with these three parts are *James Mihindakulasurya Perera* or *Kurukulasuriya Mary Lily Fernando*. Some names further complicate this by including preceding *Ge* names like Patabendige and Hewage, and others have recently also become “Sinhalized” to mask Tamil origins. An example of this is that some people with traditionally Tamil Catholic family names such as ‘Fernandopulle’ have dropped the ‘pulle’ to become ‘Fernando’, a more acceptable Sinhala Catholic name.

From the perspective of language, fluctuating boundaries and hybridization have also been characteristic of the coastal regions to the north of Negombo. Historically, Tamil was widely spoken amongst coastal populations, but while a few decades ago Negombo still had a sizable presence of Tamil speakers, today it is necessary to travel along the coast to the north almost to Kalpitya (100 miles to the north) to see Tamil speakers and Tamil-medium schools. Fr. Ranjith (originally from Avisawella) remembered how while he was studying in the 1970s to become a priest, seminarians from Chillaw were all Tamil speakers and were used to different foods than the Sinhalese seminarians.

From a linguistic perspective, Steven Bonta's research has identified a particular Tamil dialect (Negombo Fishermen Tamil) amongst local fishermen that is markedly influenced by contact with Sinhalese speakers (2003). Bonta suggested that in 2001 coastal population between Negombo and Chillaw were bilingual, with a particular variety of Tamil spoken in households and in fishing boats that was strongly aligned with Sinhalese grammar.

However, this situation also needs to be considered beyond questions of "contact-induced change" (Bonta 2003) and placed in the context of the tensions produced by the politics of language nationalism. Fr. Anthony who spent much of his time working with Tamil refugees in Vavunya, explained to me that if he mentioned to Tamils in the north in 2010 that he came from Negombo, many people

would react by saying “*Oh yes! Negombo, a Tamil town!*” That northern people have this idea of Negombo was interesting to Fr. Anthony, as the overwhelming majority of people in Negombo identified as Sinhalese Catholics. Fr. Ranjith, who also had experience working in the North, thought that such comments often hid deep political meanings and needed to be interpreted as expressions of Tamil nationalism. As he explained, “If you ask Tamil nationalists they will tell you that everyone is Tamil and everyone spoke Tamil a few decades ago, but that is simply not true.”³⁹

British Colonialism and Education

The moral-educational project that became an essential part of the British colonial enterprise in South Asia was implemented in Sri Lanka mainly by missionaries who worked in the island since the second decade of the 19th century (Seth 2007, Wickramasinghe 2006, 41). Although English education was constitutive of the British colonial project and instrumental in the movement towards modernity that they sought for Sri Lanka, the practical implementation of these policies was not always directly managed by the government. This deserves a brief explanation. The Colebrooke-Cameron Commission that presented its report on the modernization of Sri Lanka in 1831-32, made several recommendations that were to transform local education and public administration (Wickramasinghe 2006; De Silva 1981, Peebles 2006). Amongst these, the Commission suggested that the Ceylon Civil Service

should be open to Sri Lankans. Until then, all administration was in the hands of British officials, but after the implementation of the new regulations, the lower echelons of the island's administration would be open to young Sri Lankans. The Commission also recommended the standardization of state education and that the medium should cease to be exclusively English, thus encouraging the adoption of vernacular languages.

Over the next two decades the combined decision of recruiting Sri Lankans to the Ceylon Civil Service and to end lay education in the English medium imparted by the state (except for Royal College) had the consequence of benefiting schools run by religious organizations. While employment opportunities for English speakers became available in administration, the state was dedicating most of its educational efforts to expand the reach of schooling in vernacular languages across the country. The vacuum in English-medium education was often covered by Church-ran schools that, seizing the opportunity, sprouted all over the country, especially in the coastal regions to teach in the English-medium and also to become fundamental agents in the moral education of the Sri Lankan population.

The first French members of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) had arrived recently, in 1843, and by 1870 were ready to take full advantage of the new colonial policy along the western coast of the island, where they had concentrated their missionary efforts. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, two decades later, the

Jesuits – who had concentrated their missionary work in the Bengal Province – were assigned the new seminary in Kandy and the newly created Dioceses of Galle and Trincomalee-Batticaloa (Gomez 2009, Zupanov 2005).

Until 1869, virtually all Christian schools in Sri Lanka had been managed by Anglican missionaries. But the Catholic Church protested against their lack of access to educational grants until the British ceded and started to offer funds for the development of Catholic schools. While in 1860 there were only 41 Catholic-ran schools in the island (Stirrat 1992, 18), by the late 1870s Catholic schools had outnumbered Anglican ones. A large network of small parish schools was inaugurated, and a smaller number of very good secondary schools were established.⁴⁰ These were no rivals to the traditional elite Anglican schools like St. Thomas's and Royal College in Colombo and Trinity College in Kandy, however they provided a very good education in English to many who were not the children of the ruling classes.

This situation would later give Catholics a relative advantage over other communities in the country. English-speaking children from small villages soon started to obtain white-collar jobs in the cities and developed a network of contacts by which priests and colonial officers channeled young graduates directly to good government and business jobs (Hayes 2010, Stirrat 1992, Rogers 1987). This contributed to building the identity of Catholics as a well-educated and modern

community, but it also contributed to the growing resentment of other communities who increasingly found it difficult to navigate the educational sector. As K.M de Silva shows, this privileged status was particularly evident in the schooling system where Catholic graduates had a virtual monopoly over teaching jobs (De Silva 1981; Don Peter 1987; Hayes 2010).

Stirrat argues that the height of Catholic dominance was reached around World War I, when the combination of quality education in Catholic schools with excellent opportunities for social promotion in the colonial administration nearly guaranteed a high level of success for Catholic youth. A sustained decline started to affect the community after this moment of splendor, especially since the 1931 Donoughmore Commission reforms that implemented universal suffrage, making ethnic identity a fundamental social and political cleavage (Stirrat 1992; Rogers 1987; Wickramasinghe 2006). The Donoughmore Commission reforms proposed an experimental administration system in executive committees organized by a democratically elected State Council that replaced communal representation (de Silva 1981, Peebles 2006). The extension of voting rights without keeping the provisions that guaranteed the legislative representation of minority communities had the effect of further concentrating power in the hands of Sinhala Buddhists.

Since the 1920s, efforts to promote education in Tamil and Sinhala had been gaining momentum under the banner of the *swabasha* movement that protested

against the privileges of the English-educated (de Silva & Wriggins 1988, 152-153). One of the consequences of the implementation of reforms proposed by Sinhalese nationalist sectors who had been gaining power since the second decade of the 20th century, was that Catholics became “denationalised” (Stirrat 1992, 22) as they were seen to be loyal to a foreign Pope more than to any national authority, and were also perceived to be introducing foreign customs and ideas into the country.

By the 1920s, Catholics had developed the best educational system in the country with wide employment networks that rejected the inclusion of non-Catholics, even for those educated in Catholic schools. Sinhalese nationalists perceived this tight-knit structure as an unfair system that closed virtually all doors for social mobility. Not only this, Catholic schools were denounced by some Buddhists as the preeminent strategy used by priests to proselytize. After World War II and as independence drew closer, the Church had to face the problems that its own success had created (Stirrat 1992). By that time, many Sri Lankans increasingly saw the Catholic Church as a foreign influence – and although there were already many native priests and nuns – their values and education were allegedly European, lending support to non-Catholics assertion that their allegiance was strongly in line with Rome.⁴¹

The Demise of the Denominational System of Education

The Education Ordinance of 1939 marked the beginning of a struggle between

the Catholic community and the reformists led by Minister of Education C.W.W. Kannangara. With this Ordinance, the government effectively seized control of education policy from the Board of Education controlled by Christians. It created a network of central schools run by the state to teach in the English-medium and also promoted the adoption of Sinhala as the official language of instruction, although this proposal would not be implemented at the time (Peebles 2006, 94). While the initial passage of this ordinance was thwarted by D.S. Senanayake and other members of the State Council, the influence of the reformists towards ending the denominational system of education grew consistently over the next few years (De Silva 1981, 577-583).

In the first eight years after independence – during which the UNP remained in office – the distribution of power in Sri Lanka remained fairly stable. The status quo was seen with good eyes by Catholics, who for decades had sustained good relations with the British and with local elites. Although the UNP government had to make concessions to Sinhala Buddhist nationalist sectors that were rapidly gaining power across the island, it was in their best interest to solidify their bonds with the Catholics who were becoming one of their few reliable sources of support.

After 1956 with the arrival to power of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike – who conducted a winning campaign strongly grounded on populist promises that cashed in on the brewing demands of Sinhalese nationalists – the privileges of the Church

became seriously threatened. Foreign missionaries were expelled or had to pay visa fees, Catholic nurses and nuns were removed from state hospitals, and Catholic officers were purged from the military after the failed 1962 coup plot (De Silva 1981; Wickramasinghe 2006). The frustrated coup lead by Colonel Frederick de Saram (Bandaranaike's cousin), was a symptom of the broadening distance that existed between Ceylonese, anglicized elites and emerging nationalist groups that contested the power of these elites in every realm of the national culture and administration. Armed forces officers who were overwhelmingly Christian, from Tamil, Burgher and Sinhalese communities, had seen their monopoly over hierarchical positions threatened since 1960, as governmental efforts to balance the religious composition of the military became increasingly successful.

With the implementation of nationalist reforms under Bandaranaike, even Sundays were removed as holidays and replaced by *poya* (full moon) days. The impracticality of this made the government retrace its steps, but due to these attacks, many Christian traditions that were part of the colonial government were rapidly eliminated. However, Bandaranaike did not cede against the pressures of his more radicalized nationalist supporters who demanded the impounding of school education from the hands of the Christians. It was only when Mrs. Bandaranaike became Prime Minister in 1959 that the question of denominational schools was directly confronted (De Silva 1981, 645).

The most important blow against the Catholic community was the nationalization of schools that was finally implemented in December 1960. While the educational reforms designed and promoted by C.W.W. Kannangara during his tenure as Minister of Education between 1931-47, were instrumental in improving access to free education and reducing illiteracy rates across the country, their impact in regions where the Catholic Church had a strong presence was much more controversial. More than 600 parish schools were taken over by the state, along with their lands and buildings, without compensation. Those schools that remained in the hands of the Church were denied state funding and were not allowed to charge fees to parents, virtually leaving no chance for financing (Don Peter 1987). Stirrat writes,

The troubles of the sixties were represented as a modern parallel to the Dutch persecutions of the Church. Just as the Church had emerged triumphant from that experience, so now it would emerge from the Buddhist persecutions. Partly in response to the Vatican II and partly in response to the local situation, this policy was soon abandoned and the hierarchy began to look for forms of accommodation with the majority community. (Stirrat 1992, 45)

After offering consistent and unified resistance against the advances and attacks of Sinhala nationalists, the Catholic leadership – encouraged by the ideological transformations of the Vatican II council – decided to accept their subordinate position vis-à-vis the predominance of Buddhism in the country. This change on the part of the Church leadership was received with dismay by the Catholics who

interpreted it as short of a betrayal of the community. When the markedly nationalist character that government policies had taken over the last half decade – denouncing privilege and foreign influences across the board – appeared to confront no opposition, the Church leadership rather than defending the interests of the community seemed to be accepting the new national reality without opposition. “The Roman Catholics, like the Tamils, smouldered with resentment.” (de Silva 1981, 647)

Fr. Ranjith explained how the decisions that the Church authorities took at this juncture increased internal divisions amongst Catholics. As he elaborated, with the nationalization of school education the Church had the chance to keep some institutions which would be financed by the Church itself, as state financing was no longer available. The Church handed over the smaller parish schools that taught in the vernaculars, but insisted in keeping control of its more prestigious urban colleges. The Jesuits retained some of their flagship institutions like St. Aloysius College in Galle (later handed over to the government) and St. Michael’s in Batticaloa; the OMI kept control of Maris Stella in Negombo and the Irish Sisters of the Good Shepherd retained St. Bridget’s Convent in Colombo.

To Fr. Ranjith there was a clear division within the Church as its leadership took the strategic decision of relinquishing its responsibilities towards the lower classes of its laity and aligned with the more successful, highly educated sectors that could help finance the Church’s activities. At the same time, some priests interpreted

the need to reform as an opportunity to get closer to the people in need. Fr. Ranjith said,

Vatican II coincided in part with the nationalization of schools. So within a few years, mass was prayed in Sinhala, schools were in Sinhala and most priests were Sri Lankan, in a way severing a lot of connections Catholics had with Europe [...] In general, Catholics took this transition quite well. Within the Church, some people were of more progressive attitudes, even in the national seminary, and started to support reforms that were more aligned with SLFP policies. So one could see that in the 1960s the clear support of the Catholics for the UNP started to change and be more split [...] Sinhalese nationalism had in a way entered the National Seminary.

But although according to Fr. Ranjith the transition was smoother than what is generally believed, he nevertheless stressed the hardships that the newly privatized Catholic schools had to undergo. Some of the schools that were initially privatized could not overcome the financial bottleneck and eventually moved to the state sector. In these cases, priests encouraged students and parents to avoid confrontations with the new lay principals and teachers and for the most part, Catholic priests were allowed to retain a certain degree of protagonism in these schools. The struggle for survival amongst the schools that remained in the denominational system continued until 1980, when the government of J.R. Jayawardene started to pay the salaries of teachers once again (Don Peter, 1987). Fr. Ranjith's words tell a story that substantially differs from the more usual historical narratives that closely associate the Catholic

community with the more conservative circles of Ceylonese colonial power. Although the rather smooth transition that activist priests with left-leaning ideologies observed should not be interpreted as contesting the validity of those who stress the magnitude of Catholic disgruntlement, it should convey the notion that the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka is an institution with varied and conflicting political ideologies. For members of the clergy who had been influenced by movements such as Liberation Theology, disengaging the Church from circles of power and moving towards a Church closer to the people was seen as a positive change.

The homogenizing forces of nationalism – on the rise since the early decades of the 20th century – that consistently helped to improve the relative positions held by Sinhalese Buddhists, removed most of the privileges that the Catholics had enjoyed during colonial times. Protestants had, until then, been spared of the attacks that Sinhalese nationalists had embarked on because they represented a less visible minority than the Catholics. Mainly concentrated amongst elites in Colombo and other major urban centers, Protestants were not seen as competing for employment opportunities so much as middle class Catholics.

While the Catholic Church initially presented staunch resistance against the recurrent attacks perpetrated by nationalist forces, institutional transformations that affected the Church at a global level brought as a consequence a more conciliatory attitude on the part of Catholic authorities in Sri Lanka. Even though this was

perceived as a betrayal by large numbers of Catholics, it can be argued that it also helped avoid bloodshed. In light of the fate suffered in recent years by those movements –political, social or religious – that challenged the power of the central state, it is not unjustified to assume that Catholics could have followed a similar trajectory if they had pursued the path of confrontation.

The advent of the new policies pursued by the Vatican after World War II – which promoted interfaith dialogue and a less engaged role of the Church in secular politics – removed the institutional backing that the most conservative factions of the Sri Lankan Catholic Church had previously enjoyed. However, this ideological turn also produced a number of political confrontations within the Church that were manifested in the context of local politics in different parts of the world. In present day Sri Lanka, a split can be observed between Church authorities who use the argument of non-involvement in secular politics to offer support to the civil government, and a left-leaning faction of the clergy who denounce human rights abuses and are active advocates of the Tamil cause.⁴²

Conversion and Modernity

Conversion to Catholicism in Sri Lanka has been explained using geographical and pragmatic arguments. These rather insufficient explanations suggest that since coastal populations were relative newcomers they were not really entangled in the

Sinhalese social structure (Raghavan 1961). Less involvement in local feudalism gave them more freedom of movement. Given that most of these communities had arrived from Kerala and Tamil Nadu, they were “less firmly rooted in the system of services and obligations that prevailed among the Sinhalese and Tamil people of the interior.” (Wickramasinghe 2006, 21).

Instead of making use of these conventional arguments, I claim that conversion to Catholicism in Sri Lanka is better understood if situated in the larger context of the ideological transformations inspired by modernity. Sri Lankan coastal populations may have partly embraced Catholicism due to the relative flexibility and peripheral location that is attribute to them (Pearson 2003; Subramanian 2009); but as Peter van de Veer suggests, conversion also provided a more suitable framework with which to understand and navigate specific changes introduced by colonialism (especially British colonialism) such as markets, urbanization and development initiatives (van der Veer 1996).⁴³

Joel Robbins explains that there are two traditional explanations for conversion: one is utilitarian (conversion brings material gains), the second involves meaning (embracing the new religion renders meaningful situations that are new to their society). Certain sections of local populations may be closer to the colonizers not only because they practice the same religion but because the new religion makes certain novel situations make sense (Robbins 2004). In his ethnography of the Urapmin in

Papua-New Guinea, Robbins has argued that the introduction of Christianity did not replace older forms of belief and traditional religious practice. Christianity became a central part of their identity, yet not one that terminated other practices.

To Robbins, the utilitarian approach is useful to understand the first stages of conversion but is unable to explain why people embrace the new faith and are willing to expose themselves to grave dangers because of it – as with Sri Lankan Catholics during Dutch colonialism. The intellectualist approach that Joel Robbins proposes suggests that at some point people embrace the new as their own, enacting *real* cultural change. From a utilitarian perspective, people embrace the new religion on the surface while for the most part the old beliefs remain intact. Robbins rejects this by suggesting that it is necessary to approach conversion in a way that combines both theories, one for the initial stages, the other to account for real change. If real change never occurs, we need to explain why it is that the intellectualist, second phase, fails. The coastal converts of Sri Lanka may have acted strategically when they were first confronted with the Portuguese and with the Catholic Church. Yet to understand the transformations in their cultural and religious attachments, it is also necessary to see these transformations as *real changes* rather than as merely utilitarian decisions taken to improve their relative position (Robbins 2004, 15).

The situation of the Catholic community of Sri Lanka seems to complicate Robbins's argument even further. As I will describe below, the vernacularization of

Catholic rites and traditions in the 1960s was also a movement in the opposite direction. It was by adopting some Sinhala Buddhist values and practices that the Catholics began to find their new place in the context of a postcolonial Sri Lanka under the aegis of a strong nationalist ideology. If Robbins saw that the introduction of Christianity to colonial societies was a way to interpret the functioning of the modern state and the logics of market economies, the indigenization of Catholic ceremonies and traditions can be seen as a way to interpret the conditions imposed by a Sri Lankan nationalist state.

However, these changes should not be exclusively understood as a consequence of postcolonial Sri Lankan politics. Ideological changes in the Catholic Church in the post-WWII years had inspired a movement towards dialogue and understanding with other religious communities and had encouraged the clergy to step back from its engagement in secular politics. Amongst some of the main changes introduced to Catholic ritual practice was the adaptation of religious rites to regional traditions. This was meant to detach the practice of Catholicism from its European origins and bring religion closer to the history and traditions of Catholic converts in different parts of the world. While this new institutional orientation promoted from the Vatican could have been favorably seen in the nationalist context of Sri Lanka, most of the Catholic community was unwilling to reject their European affiliations. After a history of stressing European ties and identities with the objective of maintaining privileges, the

idea of adopting vernacular languages and practices to improve relations with other communities was profoundly counterintuitive to most Sri Lankan Catholics.

Fr. Ranjith exemplified these changes in Sri Lanka by making reference to the indigenization of certain ceremonial practices. An important instance was the adoption of Sinhalese Buddhist traditions to Catholic wedding ceremonies. Coconut flowers placed in brass urns which were previously only used as auspicious symbols in Hindu and Buddhist weddings replaced other floral arrangements used for Church decorations. Although the most conservative sections of the Catholic community rejected these more syncretic transformations, Fr. Ranjith's opinion was that in general people welcomed the indigenization of rites. Especially the use of vernacular languages was seen as a positive change over the traditional use of Latin until the reforms of Vatican II in 1962. This transition to vernacular languages was smoother than it may seem, as most foreign priests in Sri Lanka were already very well versed in the vernaculars. Another example of the incorporation of non-European practices to vernacular Catholic rites was the use of the *Poruma* in wedding ceremonies. Whereas in the past bride and groom would kneel in front of the altar in Church, after the reforms were implemented, the wooden platform used in local wedding ceremonies was adopted in Catholic rites as well.

Contact Zones

Fr. Ranjith had a wonderful anecdote from his childhood in Avisawella that drew a clear connection between the work of Catholic priests and the introduction of certain practices that he associated with modernity. In the 1950s there was no electricity in this rural area which is located 55 kilometers to the east of Colombo. They used German Petromax kerosene lamps to illuminate households, but there was virtually no opportunity to hold larger gatherings after nightfall. A French priest who was based here brought with him a generator from France for the Church. Fr. Ranjith said,

Our town had no electricity, but after one of his trips back home, this French priest brought along a generator for the Church. So to us this was not only that the Church had light, it meant that it was the place where all the teenagers like me went to spend time in the evenings. We would use the dining hall of the parish as a place where we could spend endless hours studying and reading or just chatting with friends. Maybe children were not interested in religion, but everyone wanted to be where “the light” was. To children like us, the Church was synonym for progress and modernity.

Fr. Ranjith described in this way a particular aspect of the spread of Catholicism in Sri Lanka – but his story also offered a way to interpret the unique way in which some young people came to imagine modernization in rural Sri Lanka. Scientific knowledge had also been a central part of the missionary education in the years when Fr. Ranjith attended school (which coincided with the last years of

Catholic education with public financing). Several European priests in Sri Lanka had brought laboratory equipment from their home countries to open small labs in local schools. Jesuits in Sri Lanka became scientists and botanists who published in specialized journals and encouraged local students to follow in their steps.

Between the Colonial and the Missionary Projects

It is important to point out that the literature on colonialism has tended to juxtapose the colonial project with the missionary project (Harding 2008; Zupanov 2005). Although some general orientations towards modernization and western values can be seen to coincide and provide basis for such an argument, the historical and anthropological record show more instances of friction and conflict than what is generally suggested. In this sense, a distinction should be made between the work of British protestant missionaries who worked in close proximity with colonial administrators and Catholics, who generally had objectives and motivations unrelated to those of British colonialism. That Catholic missionaries and colonial administrators saw the benefit of collaborative projects should not translate into the notion that their goals were shared. As Christopher Harding has remarked for colonial Punjab in the early 20th century, the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Belgian Catholic Capuchins pursued very different objectives and used visibly different methods in their approach to evangelization (Harding 2008, 61).⁴⁴

In Sri Lanka, Stirrat shows how early in the 20th century Catholic *muppu* (village leaders) and priests were the de facto intermediaries between the Catholic communities and the government. He writes that although “British rulers were predominantly Protestant, Catholic missionaries and civil administrators generally got on well” (Stirrat 1992, 17). The British correctly believed that the Church would promote a kind of loyalty to their regime. Missionaries and priests gained importance as they became mediators between the GA (Government Agent) and the villages. When the GA wanted to introduce changes, he went to the priests; and when people needed something in their villages, the priest would be the one forwarding requests to the GA. In this way, priests and missionaries increasingly became the unavoidable link between GA and the local populations. In many cases, as Stirrat explains, the *muppu* and the village headman were the same person, showing the overlapping functions that these figures had in a community.

But towards the time of independence, the links between Church and state started to become more strained. Part of the power and authority of priests resided in their foreignness. This was not only a question of racial superiority under colonial rule, their European origins also distanced them from the worldly problems of the native community, thus facilitating their apparently unbiased opinions when it came to conflicts at the local level (Stirrat 1992). The case with indigenous priests was different. Even though they initially behaved and dressed like their European

counterparts, they never enjoyed the prestige of European priests. Part of the reason for this was that they were seen by the laity as involved in local and worldly affairs to which foreign priests were apparently immune. But the growing numbers of indigenous priests also coincided with ideological changes strongly influenced by what after the 1960s would be identified as *Liberation Theology*. While the major proponents of this left-leaning strain within the Catholic Church were in Latin America, their work inspired the activism of priests in other parts of the world. In Sri Lanka, these young priests were not only connected with the populace because of their national origin, they took as their responsibility to further the demands of poor and marginalized populations (Stirrat 1992). Many of these priests abandoned the white cassock for daily activities and reserved their identifiable clothing to use during the celebration of mass and other formal activities. Catholic priests blended in with the local population in three ways. They were no longer visibly different because of their race, they no longer used identifiable clothing for most of the day, and most importantly, they refused to circumscribe their activities to the spiritual realm and actively sought to further the cause of disenfranchised classes.

Conclusion

After the 1960s, Catholics continued to obtain employment in civil administration and private companies, however, they no longer competed for

positions in the higher echelons of those organizations. It was at this time when Catholics started to migrate overseas in search of better professional opportunities. Career ambitions needed to be drastically restricted for those who wanted to stay in the country. Particularly between 1960 and 1980, economic and political circumstances took a decidedly negative turn for Catholics across the country. K.M. de Silva has argued that after 1970, the tension between Catholics and the SLFP government started to diminish, as Catholics accepted their subordinate position in the new national scenario and resolved that it was better to adopt a more conciliatory position towards the state (1981, 674). After the UNP returned to power in 1977, conditions for Catholics improved marginally; but the dire economic situation of the country at the time, paired with the neo-liberal economic reforms that were introduced during those years, virtually neutralized any palpable improvement that the Catholic minority could have gained.

When asked what he thought was the overall impact that the nationalization of schools and the exclusive adoption of vernacular languages for all instruction had for Catholics, Fr. Ranjith said, “more than the medium the reforms created culture.” In his view, the language shift and the forced alignment with national politics that Catholics had to conform to had not been a bad change for Sri Lankan Catholics who had to give up arguments of European affiliations that justified their alleged exceptionality vis-à-vis mainstream identities in the country. With the constant attacks

staged by the more radical sectors of Sinhalese nationalism and the omnipresent suspicion that Catholic schools were fundamentally an instrument of Christian proselytizing, the elimination of these source of friction eventually afforded the Catholic community an opportunity for stability and inclusion. The price paid for this opportunity was very high, especially for middle-class Catholics who lost what they had come to regard as their earned and secure place within Sri Lankan society. For other Catholics who had only marginally benefited from the colonial perks – Sinhala-speaking fishermen, for example – the new scenario did not represent such a dramatic change in status, as they were renouncing privileges that they had not enjoyed in the first place.

Notes to Chapter 3

³⁴ The Diocese of Galle was later also transferred from Belgian hands to the Napoli Province which meant the arrival of several influential Italian priests to the Southwest of the country. See Stirrat.

³⁵ Roberts et al. further claim that these intruders had created a whole race of “mixed bloods”, racially and culturally that included foreigners, Burghers, Tamils, Moors and Christians and were referred to as the “eaters of stones and drinkers of blood” (as in the Maha Hatana), *páráñgi*, *suddo*, *karapotu* (cockroach), *sudu karapotu* and *tuppáhi* amongst other epithets (Roberts 1989, 19). In this sense, Roberts et al. question the assumption that Sinhala nationalism is exclusively a consequence of the introduction of a modern national project in the 19th Century and suggest that distrust towards foreigners was deeply embedded in Sinhalese identity centuries before the formation of a Sinhala nationalist movement.

³⁶ As authors like Harding (2008), Robbins (2004), Cannell (2006) and Ballhatchet (1998) have noted, it is not possible to speak of conversion as a strategic move that always provided social and economic mobility to the converts. However, leaving aside the question of how beneficial conversion could be, there is always a certain degree of affinity and an increased fluidity of contacts with the colonizers and missionaries amongst converts. It is in this sense that both Tamil and Sinhala Catholics – even when they saw little in common between them – were perceived by non-Christians as sharing more than a religious identity.

³⁷ Given that many of these warriors were recruited from fishing communities in the first place, making a distinction between fishermen and soldiers may also lead to inaccurate conclusions. Meyer contests traditional arguments which proposed that fishermen were violent and “used to killing” and suggests that the main reason for confusion between the different reasons elicited to explain the arrival of these people is that since both occupations required high degrees of mobility it was not uncommon that fishing and warring were interchangeable.

³⁸ Changes of names may also be found in the history of these coastal population dealing with colonizers. As Wickramasinghe shows, during the Portuguese years, some local preeminent figures were given the “Don” as a title to add to their names. Like “Don Affonso”, the Mudaliar of Negombo in the late XVII Century when Joseph Vaz hid in his house. But towards the end of Portuguese colonialism the granting of this title became less of an honorary title and was given to anyone working for the Portuguese administration. This in addition to the usual Portuguese names adopted by the Karava like Fernando, de Silva, Perera or Fonseka.

³⁹ I personally witnessed this process in 2010 with local Tamil Catholic families in Negombo, where I met with grandparents who barely spoke Sinhala, parents who were fluent in both languages, and the younger generations who did not speak any Tamil. Another example of the waning legacy of the Tamil identity amongst Negombo fishermen was given to me by Fr. Anthony when I inquired about ethnic tensions amongst fishermen. He said “These are not 'real' Tamils, they do not have Tamil names and now rarely speak Tamil anymore. When they show the IDs the police automatically assume that they are Christian and they are not subjected to any suspicion as people with obviously Tamil names are.”

⁴⁰ “The expansion of the education system from the later decades of the nineteenth century onwards caused an increase in the quantity of schools from 494 in 1871 to 2,735 schools in 1911. The number of children attending school rose from 38,355 in 1871 to 359,657 students in 1911. Improved access to education had a favorable impact on the literacy level of the population. The male adult literacy rate increased from 23 percent in 1871 to 43 percent in 1911. The female adult literacy rate rose from only 2 percent in 1871 to nearly 12 percent in 1911” (Aturupane 2009, 2).

⁴¹ Stirrat says that to balance this image and promote the idea of the indegenization of the Church, even some architectural changes were introduced, and some parishes were built following a neo-Kandyan style, but these changes were difficult to impose on a community that increasingly embraced their 'european' identity.

⁴² The best example of this situation is provided by the bishop of Mannar, Rayappu Joseph, who has adopted vocal anti-government stances even after the end of the conflict against the LTTE. His work has strained relation within the Catholic Church of Sri Lanka, especially with the Archbishop of Colombo, Malcolm Ranjith, who has taken a more conciliatory stance towards the Rajapakse administration.

⁴³ In this sense, Stirrat also describes the transformative effects that the introduction of new market regulations in the fishing industry had in the west coast of the island. To promote the development of the fishing industry the British removed the tax imposed on fish. Although the Catholic Church assumed the taxation role of the state by imposing a *renda* of 10% to finance an emergency fund for fishermen and to build churches and schools, fishing consistently grew in the 19th Century generating substantial profits for local entrepreneurs (Stirrat 1988). Many Tamil fishermen were attracted by the thriving Sri Lankan fishing industry and seasonally traveled to the areas surrounding Kalpitya for work.

⁴⁴ Many instances in the history of colonial South Asia provide evidence of these conflictual relations. Harding's historical work in Punjab and the ethnographic work of Ajantha Subramanian (2009) with Mukkuvar fishermen in Tamil Nadu and David Mosse (2012) are good examples of the lack of agreement between Catholics and both colonial and national authorities.

CHAPTER 4

The Ethical Life: Doing Cultural Critique in Sri Lanka

Very simply, the people I encountered have attempted, routinely – but also anything but routinely – to do what they think right or good, sometimes as a matter of course, sometimes as a struggle to know what the right path was, and sometimes ineffectively, infelicitously, inconsistently, incontinently, or not at all, but then with respect to what they or others think or have established as right or good. (Lambek 2010, 40)

Negombo migrant workers in Italy periodically returned to their hometown. Most of them had a combination of family and business reasons to return and depending on the urgency and the complexity of these motives, their stay could span from a couple of weeks to several months. The length of their stay was also determined by how well they were doing in Italy, longer stays indicating unequivocal success that afforded them extended and leisurely periods at home. The combination of reasons used by migrant workers to return included the health of aging parents and in extreme cases the death of a family member; but could also be much more trivial, like the desire to take a long vacation at home or make a trip to some part of the island they never visited before. On the business side, many returned for real estate and construction reasons: selling and buying land, renovating the house and starting business ventures with relatives. But the most recurring motive for migrants and their families to return, virtually mentioned by every worker I've ever talked to,

was the education of their children.

I always found this puzzling because, for the most part, Sri Lankan Catholic families enjoyed life in Italy once they had set right their legal status. Transnational migrants generally argued that Italy provided a welcoming and pleasant lifestyle for a migrant family. Nevertheless, once their children reached the age of eight or nine, most parents decided that it was time to return, or at least for the children to return.⁴⁵ While most migrants struggled to reach Italy, find stable employment, regularize their legal status and bring their families to Italy; only a couple of years later they would take the decision of separating the family once again to engage in a complex process of return migration. The main purpose of this trip in the opposite direction was to send the children to school in Sri Lanka. Parents imagined Negombo as a place where their children would be socially contained and safe from the unrestrained individualism that unsettled them about Italy. Sometimes children traveled with their mothers while the fathers remained in Italy working, other times both parents stayed in Italy while the children moved in with some relative.

More specifically, what became an increasingly important concern to my research was a seemingly contradictory statement made by most parents with young children. Virtually everyone thought that Italy was not a good place for children to grow up because Italians “don’t have good values” (*Italia Sanskrutii Honda nee*) but, at the same time, they thought it was a good place to travel for work because Italians

“have good values.” While I recurrently heard these discrepant arguments being used by many migrant families, I became interested in how people understood their own values and those of others; and I started to ask myself how to understand this apparent contradiction in the different contexts where it was expressed.⁴⁶ Regardless of whether they were arguing in favor or against life in Sri Lanka, *values* were always invoked to explain decisions when other arguments had been exhausted.

Furthermore, the cosmopolitan attitudes that many migrant workers developed while in Italy seemed to be reversed when what was at stake was the education of their children. For all the cosmopolitan preferences that transnational migrants came to embrace, certain values remained firmly grounded in their Sri Lankan Catholic tradition. All the capacity developed by migrants to produce incisive opinions and adjudicate between different practices that they came across in Sri Lanka and Italy, appeared to be suspended when they perceived that what was at stake was more than their preference for how people behaved in the two places that they knew in detail.

In this chapter I examine competing arguments that were advanced by return migrants in Negombo to evaluate the experience of transnational migration beyond its socio-economic dimensions, placing special emphasis on actions that had the capacity to uphold or jeopardize the moral integrity of the local Catholic community. While habitual arguments used by migrant workers to justify migration revolved around financial concerns, life-course decisions were ultimately crafted with little

regard for these. While the evolving cultural and economic conditions experienced by families that engaged in long-term migratory cycles suggested taking certain practical decisions at particular times, heads of household often did not act in accord with what their purported material objectives required. Instead, they took decisions that conflicted with their stated intentions in financial matters and even put at risk the cohesion and welfare of their families.

Why would it be better to have members of the family dispersed across different continents and children growing up with grandparents when they could be close to their parents? Why were people's responses so often built around "culture" and "values" both to make arguments for and against migration? And if parents were worried about their children's education, wouldn't it be better to live with them so as to guide them and instill in them the values they cherished?

This chapter is inspired by moments when people acted in ways that appeared to contradict their self-interest and the stated objectives they were pursuing. I engage with the ethical dimension of life amongst the Negombo Catholic community, especially as related to the importance parents attached to the education of their children.

The main objective is to think of a form of *cultural critique* in which migrant workers and families engaged. I suggest that the different responses and reactions that people in this community produced can be interpreted as a practice of cultural

critique by which a kind of moral boundary was traced. By engaging in this process, people were constantly evaluating different practices that were common in Italy against the backdrop of Sri Lankan Catholic values to determine which of these practices were acceptable and which posed a danger to their ethical integrity.

Talk about values could be confusing, as many different practices in Italy and Sri Lanka were evaluated by migrants and non-migrants using the language of values and culture. What migrants usually appreciated about Italy were specific norms that regulated labor relations and social interactions. When talking about these, migrants approvingly said that Italy was a good place because “Italians have good values.” Migrants evaluated these practices making use of a utilitarian kind of rationality because they did not appear to pose a challenge to *their* values, those which migrant workers were unwilling to negotiate or to approach from this utilitarian perspective.

Strong regulations and clear rules were considered desirable, as migrant workers generally agreed that knowing how to proceed and what to expect from labor and social relations was an improvement over Sri Lanka’s informality. Yet this argument was undone when it came to other kind of practices that they found in Italy. When the issue at hand referred to questions of sexuality, gender norms and individualist ideas of freedom, they thought that Italy was the place that lacked regulations and clear rules. From their perspective, Sri Lanka was the country that offered simple and desirable guidelines on how to behave. Italians lax and lenient approach to gender

norms of propriety and decency was problematic to Sri Lankan migrants, and although they did not find it difficult to live with them, they thought that these rules offered a poor model for raising their children. As most migrant parents explained, it was very different to live side by side with practices that they did not approve of, than to grow up with them. They found it extremely difficult to imagine how children could embrace good Sri Lankan Catholic values if they were not raised in Sri Lanka. However, the situation was further complicated when migrant workers realized that the safe haven they imagined awaiting in Negombo had been transformed and allegedly contaminated by the very values that they wanted their children to stay clear from.

Ethics in a Context of Transnationalism

While the literature on globalization and transnationalism has stressed the new syncretic cultural forms that emerge as a consequence of flexible and multi-directional flows and exchanges, it tends to overlook the ethical dimensions that draw a limit to what can be hybrid and what can be negotiated (Csordas 2007; Levitt & Schiller 2004; Levitt & Nieves-Lamba 2011). These approaches tend to overstate hybridity and underestimate the role of pre-existing ethical values that survive the engagement with new cultural systems. One of my questions in this chapter is how we can understand decisions that people take that cannot be interpreted as merely navigating across the

culturescapes of globalization (Appadurai 1996) or as utilitarian ways to maximize benefits in a new global context (Hannerz 1996).

Transnational migrants who become familiar with diverse cultural practices have often been described as people who expand their cultural repertoire. This broadening of their scope of action is seen as enabling them to choose between alternative practices and to develop a heterogeneous assemblage of norms by which they live their lives abroad.⁴⁷ Scholars working at the intersection of migration studies and global cultural flows have suggested that individuals have the possibility of moving across different cultural systems, choosing between them according to circumstances. This is a notion of agency in which individuals choose who they want to become mediating between agency and “globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai 1996, 31).

Rather than arguing for the individual agency to choose amongst diverse cultural practices and create hybrid forms where traditions merge, I suggest that the Sri Lankan Catholic migrants I worked with in Negombo had a set of ethical values that allowed them to select between different courses of action. These ethical values were different from the specific norms that individuals needed to follow in order to uphold them. For example, if sexual propriety was an important ethical value – as it was for Sri Lankans working in Italy – it was necessary to abide by a strict normative code that regulated pertinent actions. Closely following these norms was even more

important in Italy than in Sri Lanka, as there were less social instances to regulate behavior when not under the constant scrutiny of the community. When it came to upholding fundamental ethical values, there was no room for cultural change and hybridity.

What I will try to show in the next sections is that Negombo transnational migrants were not simply free to choose between Italian and Sri Lankan normative practices. It was not only a question of adapting to the new or old cultural setting according to circumstance, or of developing the flexibility and astuteness to mutate into their new selves when they were in Italy. Certain normative practices could be approached critically and traded for new ones with more ease than others. The difference between these needed to be found in the dialectical relationship that exists between *normative* and *ethical values*. Only when the norms in question were not intimately related to fundamental Sri Lankan Catholic ethical values it was possible to develop the hybrid and transnational practices that globalization proponents have suggested. Norms provided useful tools that could help a migrant worker attain the kind of life that they dreamt of for themselves and their children. However, the strict following of rules was never an objective in itself; it was only valuable as a strategy that enabled people to live in accord to the Sri Lankan Catholic values they held in high esteem.

The Moral System

Michel Foucault defined a *moral system* as the combination of the four components of an “ethical system” (ethical substance, ethical work, self-forming activity and telos) with a “moral code” (1990, 1997). This moral code is formed by the normative rules an individual must follow. In this way, the moral system includes both a deontological dimension (norms) and an ethical dimension (values). While the moral code is the realm of obligation, the ethical system is a space of relative freedom, where the individual engages with him-herself in a process of self-creation, of imagining what kind of person one wants to become.

The values that constitute the ethical system and that set the stage for the self-fashioning of the individual do not change according to context, they are firmly grounded in the history and beliefs of a community and are constitutive of its identity. Although they provide an individual with guidelines on how to act in different situations, these values are different from specific normative rules that are meant to offer a deontological blueprint for action. There is a qualitative difference: whereas the ethical system is concerned with living “a good life,” the moral code is limited to the realm of duty and obligation. It is by having a very particular understanding of what it means to live a good life for a Sri Lankan Catholic, that transnational migrants are able to adopt some and reject other practices that they encounter in Italy through migration. What is of particular interest to this chapter is

that many migrant workers considered that violating certain normative rules did not interfere with upholding those values that they saw as intimately connected to the pursuit of a good life.

Migrant workers did not choose their *ethical values* because these were firmly grounded in their own personal histories growing up in Sri Lanka. But the experience of a different culture in Italy allowed them to sometimes choose what they considered to be better *normative values*, especially in the workplace. If punctuality, for instance, was given more importance in Italy than Sri Lanka, migrant workers tended to clearly see what were the benefits of this practice in the workplace over the more lenient approach to tardiness that they would observe in Sri Lanka. However, praising Italian punctuality and adopting it in their lives, was different from praising the Italian approach to privacy. Sri Lankan Catholics thought that Italians approach to privacy was problematic, especially when it involved young children. Although they could see what were the advantages of being respectful of an individual's private life, they thought that holding privacy as central to a person's life was not for Sri Lankans, as it could detract from family unity, conviviality and solidarity.

All norms that migrant workers came across with in Italy were evaluated as more or less desirable; however, it appeared that they were not all subjected to the same process of critical evaluation. If an Italian *normative value* conflicted with a Sri Lankan *ethical value*, this rule was going to be dismissed as "only good for Italians." As

it will be reflected in the ethnographic cases that follow, Sri Lankans were always careful not to judge negatively Italian culture. In some instances, they would praise and adopt what Italians did, but in others, they would cite the cultural peculiarities of the Negombo Catholic community as a limit that could not be breached.

If we bring Foucault's definition of a moral system to the context of transnational migration, we see how it was possible for an individual to successfully navigate across different moral codes – like the ones they become familiar with in Sri Lanka and in Italy – without abandoning the fundamental ethical values that were central to their Catholic subjectivity. These values were bred within their ethical system from a young age and allowed them to discern when it was acceptable to follow one or another set of norms and when to be more lenient towards certain obligations.

Migrant parents who grew up in Sri Lanka sent their children back home for their education because they believe that this would instill in them the kind of ethical values that they cherished, leading them to become good Sri Lankan Catholics. But transnational migration to Italy brought transformations to the local culture of Negombo that substantially altered the possible futures that a young Sri Lankan could imagine, thus making the work of self-fashioning a much more arduous task than what parents initially envisioned. Children of migrant workers had a myriad of opportunities ahead of them that their parents would have never imagined in their

own youths. So the sheer number of possible paths that these children could pursue in their futures represented a dramatic increase in complexity in the life of a teenager compared to the more simple life prospects that their parents had to confront. In this way, the work of defining what a “good life” is and what qualities should be cultivated to live life accordingly, seemed to be an educational project with more obstacles than what parents would have liked to believe. But regardless of how well aware they were of the intricacies that this situation presented to their children, parents expected that by educating children in Sri Lanka their own ethical values would be upheld.

Migrant parents found it extremely difficult to imagine how children could embrace good Sri Lankan Catholic values if they were not raised in Sri Lanka. They considered that only in Negombo children would learn how to discern between practices which they could be lenient to and those that left no room for flexibility. Their decision to separate the family and send children home to stay with relatives was never an easy one, but parents always agreed that “it was the right thing to do” (Pandian 2009; Keane 2010). They were aware that in Negombo their children would not grow under the watchful eye of caring parents and that small town cultural dynamics would be difficult to handle for boys and girls who had spent the first years of their lives in Italian cities. Nevertheless, parents believed that it was better to tackle these risks than to raise children in Italy.

To interpret the way in which Sri Lankan migrants took decisions concerning

their children's education it is important to identify the distinction they made between the ethical values they wanted to instill in their children and cultural practices that they thought were not central to the ethical formation of the youth (Faubion 2001; Foucault & Rabinow 1997; Laidlaw 2010). Once the ethical values that parents considered of fundamental import were identified, it was possible to see which deontological norms children had to be followed in order to cultivate these values (Appiah 2008; Chapin 2010; Gamburd 2008; Hewamanne 2009; Howell 1997). As I mentioned in the previous section, parents' approach to cultural critique was not exclusively centered on the strict following of rules. Instead, of fundamental importance were the dispositions and practices that they must cultivate towards the living of a good, virtuous life (McIntyre 2007, Williams 1986).⁴⁸ In this sense, prescriptive rules played a pedagogic role (Faubion 2001) in the molding of future Sri Lankan Catholic generations but were *not* the reason why people decided to educate their Italian-born children in Negombo.

Ethics and Freedom

One of the main objectives of an Anthropology of Ethics is to think of agency beyond its capacity to contest structures and enact change (Pandian 2009). Individual agency also needs to account for the efforts made to uphold the values and traditions of a community. Parents who risked their lives to leave Sri Lanka, later went

out of their way and jeopardized much of the stability they achieved in Italy in order to educate their children in a manner that was acceptable for the Sri Lankan Catholic community.

The approach to the ethical life of Sri Lankan migrant workers in Italy that I propose here is one that is not centered on duties and obligations exclusively. Instead, I am concerned with the dispositions and practices that they must cultivate towards the living of a good, virtuous life. In this sense, the distinction made by Bernard Williams between ethics and morality is a first step towards understanding the concerns of Sri Lankan migrant parents. If ethics is interested in responding to the question of “how ought one to live?”, morality has the much more limited aim of deciding when to follow and when not to follow specific rules (Williams 1986). In this sense, the objective of an anthropology of ethics is to transcend the utilitarian logics that inform a normative morality to recuperate the genuinely altruistic motives that inspire the ethical life (Pandian and Ali 2010, 4).

To understand ethical reasoning it is necessary to move away from a Kantian conception of morality as the consequence of rational thought and from a Durkheimian approach that juxtaposes morality with culture (Laidlaw 2002). The central problem that these understandings of ethics share is that their definitions allow no place for the work of freedom, judgment or the individual’s imagination. Durkheim’s understanding of ethics was grounded on the identification of the moral

with the social. This meant that acting morally was equated with acting according to the norms approved by society (culture, ideology, etc.) In doing this, Durkheim replaced the Kantian notion of rationality with the concept of society as the source of morality – but like Kant, left no room for individuals to deliberate and decide between different paths of action. James Laidlaw writes, “Where Kant tries to show that the moral law is binding on us by showing that it is commanded by practical reason, and therefore that it holds for all rational beings as such, Durkheim’s explanation is that moral rules derive from society.” (Laidlaw 2002, 313).

The question that becomes central to Laidlaw’s project of developing an anthropology of ethics is how to incorporate freedom to the study of ethics. For this task, he approaches the study of freedom and ethics following the later work of Michel Foucault. If Durkheimian morality was concerned with how well actions accommodated to norms, Foucault’s notion of ethics had to do with a distancing from those actions, with a stepping back from the realm of activity to appraise the actions as objects that need to be reflected on (Pandian 2009; Faubion 2011; Robbins 2004; Laidlaw 2002). For Foucault, ethics involved a creative process of self-fashioning that took place internally to the individual and independently of moral responsibilities towards society. In this way, a fundamental aspect of an ethical life was to imagine what kind of person an individual wanted to become.

However, this did not mean that the ethical was “free” and unconstrained to

imagine limitless possibilities, it was circumscribed by models proposed by the individual's culture and society (Foucault 1990; 1997). But while freedom was never unrestricted, what was fundamental to Foucault's work was that culture and society did not constitute "an insuperable boundary, either to the ethical imagination or to ethical practice" (Faubion 2001, 89).

Understanding ethics as a practice entails on one hand not always rationally choosing what is in one's self-interest, as instrumentalist approaches would have it. On the other hand, it implies the idea that freedom is part of every decision-making processes – even when it is not perfect, even when alternatives are severely constrained by relations of power. Freedom is a human possibility, but one that is usually severely restricted.

This anthropological approach to ethics as practice can help interpret the actions and decisions of individuals when they appeared to conflict with some of their stated objectives. Migrant parents going out of their way to educate their children in a particular manner or to do right for the community cannot be merely understood as acts of obedience. Neither can they be interpreted as the simple refusal to engage critically with the cultural norms of their society.

Acting in ways that uphold the values of a community is sometimes the difficult thing to do. Agency in such cases is manifested by the work an individual does to comply with norms, not expressed in defiant and transgressive decisions. It

was in these instances when the weight of Sri Lankan Catholic ethical principles became apparent in the decisions taken by parents about their children's education. It was not enough to struggle with children to make them follow certain normative codes, what was of real importance was that these children came to embrace the values of the community.

Moral Education

Educating children in Negombo was a fundamental objective for Sri Lankan migrant parents in two distinct ways. Growing up in the hometown, learning the cultural norms and embracing the moral codes of the Sri Lankan Catholic community generated moral qualities, dispositions and aptitudes (Pandian and Ali 2010; Asad 2003). This signaled to the centrality of moral pedagogy in the formation of the youth. However, migrant parents also believed that deviating from the dutiful following of Sri Lankan moral codes was not an impediment to leading an ethically good existence. They considered that a certain moral leniency was acceptable with fully formed ethical beings. Strict moral codes were understood as heuristic devices that facilitated the cultivation of good qualities. Young Sri Lankans who left the country before reaching adulthood were generally perceived as not fully formed ethical beings.

But if we follow Foucault and understand ethics as an everyday practice, adults cannot be considered fully formed ethical beings either. This is the second way in which properly educating children as Sri Lankan Catholics was fundamental for migrant parents. Sending children to be schooled in Negombo was “the right thing to do.” Regardless of how impractical or counter-intuitive bringing children to Negombo was – most times in spite of their wishes – this decision allowed parents to meet their ethical responsibility towards the community. By bringing children to Sri Lanka, parents were fulfilling an important requisite towards leading a good ethical life. The difficulties that their children experienced growing up at home were a different kind of problem they had to deal with. Yet not confronting these difficulties and keeping the family together in Italy was perceived as a refusal to engage with the truly important ethical aspects of children’s education.

The decisions taken by parents were interesting because they constituted expressions of an agency that did not challenge established norms. Instead, actions were an effort towards observing cultural norms (Laidlaw 2010; Keane 2003). This is the reason why an anthropological approach to the study of ethics amongst a migrant community is important – it allows to interpret why people “go out of their way” to stay within the ethical boundaries of the community.

While the process of building a viable and stable livelihood in Italy took long years, once it was achieved, people started re-planning and re-organizing life for a

nearly imminent return. Sri Lankan families with children who were either born in Italy or had traveled there as toddlers routinely decided to send their children back to Sri Lanka for their schooling. As I mentioned earlier, it was precisely when families were obtaining a certain level of security and predictability that they decided to embark on a new series of changes that imposed instability, distance and uncertainty upon their lives.

Kumara and Sunnita

At the age of twenty in 1991, Kumara joined the crew of a cargo ship in which he worked for a year until he decided to quit and stay at a French port. Many Sri Lankans, especially those familiar with the sea because of their family ties to the fishing industry became seafarers as an alternative to working with relatives in fishing. He moved to Paris and worked illegally there for a year in a series of day jobs. After this, he decided to move to Italy given that there were many Sri Lankans already there and that he had heard that life for an undocumented immigrant was easier than in France. Over the next few years he managed to secure a stable job and was sponsored by his employers at a tile factory (where in 2009 more than 30 Sri Lankans worked) to obtain his residency permit. By 2000 it was time for him to return to his country and get married after almost nine years abroad.

In PitipanaVeediya, the small fishing village outside the city of Negombo where

Kumara is originally from, his family had already arranged for him to meet the daughter of another Catholic family from a neighboring village. A few months later, Kumara and Sunnita were married and soon after he returned to work to the city of Pesaro in Italy. Sunnita's trip was delayed for several months until her visa paperwork was sorted out, but she finally joined him in Italy where she found a job with a local family as a nanny. Two of her brothers lived in Italy already, one in the same city as them and one in Milan, where they occasionally traveled to visit his family. Although the moving of a married couple to Italy represented a certain level of independence from the family, kinship connection continued to attach responsibilities to the hometown (Percot 2005, Gallo 2006).

In 2003 Sunnita gave birth to their only son. She took time off work and went to Sri Lanka with the newborn and Kumara. He soon had to return to Pesaro, having a relatively good job in the industry of decorative tiles that is traditional to this Italian region. Upon Sunnita's return to Italy, they worked out issues concerning the care of the baby with her brother's wife and went back to work with the same family she had been working with before giving birth. From the perspective of transnational migration narratives, Kumara and Sunnita's story was one of unquestionable success: both parents had good and stable jobs, had family and friends from Sri Lanka who lived close by, saved money to build a house outside Negombo, went to mass every Sunday where they met other Sri Lankans and periodically traveled back to visit family

and monitor the construction of their new house.

Their financial situation was so comfortable in 2010 that even in the context of the global financial crisis that had affected the tile industry, Kumara was granted more than six months leave with 60% of his salary paid. Sunnita, now planning to stay in Sri Lanka, had photo albums of the family she worked for on the living-room's coffee table that showed her playing with two children on the beach in Italy. To that day, she would regularly receive phone calls from her employers and the children who she had taken care of for more than five years, now missing her company in Italy.

Neither Sunnita nor Kumara thought that Italy was an idyllic place to live and settle permanently. They complained about the cold weather and considered that life was rather monotonous and lonely – people worked a lot with very strict schedules and even though they often had family and friends nearby, it was rare that they had the opportunity to enjoy their company. But other than these relatively small complaints about weather and food and hard work, they were very satisfied with life in Italy. However, after more than ten years of hard earned stability and with a seven year-old son who had already started school in Italy, Sunnita and Kumara decided to finish some details left to their new house in Negombo so that she could move back to Sri Lanka with their son, while Kumara moved to a smaller place in Pesaro and continued to work there.

As parents, they were not oblivious to the dangers that Sri Lanka would pose to

children who had until then been raised close to their parents in Italy. Yet it appeared as if the problems raised by return – although grave and real – did not represent the ethical quandary that growing up in Italy constituted. In a certain sense, having to deal with the many uncertainties that return migration produced was a more acceptable challenge than the risk of educating children that would not share the ethical values of Sri Lankan Catholics.

Parents like Sunnita and Kumara who made use of very practical arguments to explain the reasons for their departure, would elicit strong moral justifications that overrode the practical dimensions of keeping the nuclear family together and that minimized the benefits of stability and prosperity.

Sunnita explained,

If we don't bring our son back to Sri Lanka, he will be Italian, he will never learn our language and our customs, he will only have Italian friends. He will not know his family – afterwards he can choose to do whatever he wants. But if we don't bring him here now he will just think he is another Italian [...] Also, if we stayed there I'd have to work. So the boy would be all day at school or alone or with other Italian children, living like them. In Negombo I can take care of him and he can grow up with his family [...] The problem in Italy is that children are given too much freedom (*molto libertà*), they are alone all the time and they think they can do whatever they want, no respect for what parents say. When they grow up they make friends with whoever they want (meaning boyfriends or girlfriends), and they sometimes even go and live with them before getting married.

Yet Sunnita did not exclusively rely on these arguments to justify their decision

– migrant parents always included a financial explanation amongst the reasons they gave. Although Kumara and Sunnita managed to make a substantial joint income while in Italy, having to pay the monthly rent and raising a child there left them in a situation where saving money was not very easy. When Kumara returned to Pesaro at the end of 2010, he would share a place with some other Sri Lankans and reduce his cash expenditure considerably, increasing the money he could save and remit to Sunnita in Negombo to more than €400 every month. With the new house already finished and paid off, the money sent home would allow Sunnita to live comfortably and send their son to an international school where he could get an education in English.⁴⁹

Besides the financial justifications and the reasons concerning language, Kumara and Sunnita said that it was necessary to bring their son back because Italy was not a good place for a child to grow up. They thought that it was possible, as other parents did, to return to Italy with their children for the last couple of years of high school, but it seemed to be fundamental for the child's education to be in Sri Lanka between the ages of 8 and 15.⁵⁰

Sunnita had a clear sense of what the consequence of staying in Italy would produce: a Sri Lankan child with Italian values. Adults like her could be seduced by the shimmering opportunities that Italy seemed to offer and sometimes lead to bad decisions. However, children growing up there would entirely lack the ethical certainty

of what is *the right thing to do*. Sunnita was deeply worried about the future of her son in Italy, but felt safe herself from the problems this kind of cultural mixing could trigger. Her words could be interpreted as coming from someone familiar with “living in two worlds,” where she inhabited two very different cultural universes with distinct moral codes, and where she had the knowledge and flexibility to shift with ease between them “à-la Appadurai.”

What differentiated the transnational world of an adult from that of a young person was this understanding of Italy and Sri Lanka as places with two distinct moral codes. As I discussed earlier, many Sri Lankan adults believed that migration to Italy was a wonderful opportunity, not only for material progress but also to experience and learn from a different culture. But in order to do this it was necessary to approach migration with the right attitude. It was important to know what was permissible and what was not, what enriched a person as a Sri Lankan Catholic and what posed obstacles to living a virtuous life.

Sunnita’s critique of Italy was specifically directed at certain aspects of its lifestyle and did not extend to the whole of Italian culture. As she later acknowledged, there were many desirable aspects of Italian culture, but it was *only* possible to truly enjoy these if one approached them with the right kind of values and with an appropriate temperament. Sri Lankans in Italy were aware that they were sought after migrant workers in the Italian labor market. The negative stereotypes that Italians had

of Moroccans and Bangladeshis for example, were opposed to the gentler stereotype of Sri Lankans and Filipinos who were considered more ‘docile’ and honest workers (Näre 2010). Sri Lankan migrant workers also cultivated this stereotype, or at the very least, they worked it towards their own advantage. People like Sunnita feared that one of the consequences of their children “becoming Italian” was that they would feel entitled to compete with locals for jobs and build careers locally, with the consequence of generating racial tensions and thus, jeopardizing the advantages they enjoyed as immigrants.⁵¹ The evidence she used to support this was the example given by Eastern Europeans and Moroccans who were “constantly causing trouble.”⁵² The *right attitude* in Italy was partly made of hard-work and humility, but partly made of never forgetting that one was a foreigner and that home and values were grounded somewhere else.

Cultivating an Identity from Afar

In one of my conversations with Fr. Anthony about the Doowa parish community, he appeared visibly frustrated by a situation that appeared to deteriorate every year. The way he explained it, migration had helped this fishing community to live in a more comfortable way, without the endless uncertainties of a “hand to mouth” existence. In the past, the Church had struggled to meet the urgent material needs of some of the members of the community. Leaving behind these recurrent

situations of crisis was a good step for everybody, but the problems that Fr. Anthony had to deal with in the current context were equally if not more challenging. He said,

These children should not be alone. They are too young and need the guidance of their parents, but no one wants to come back from Italy. They just send their children back because they want them to go to school here, but the parents all want to stay there. Some of these children are very angry at their parents. They live with grandparents, have money and are bored, that is a really bad combination, you know? [...] They feel abandoned so they get into trouble just to attract their parent's attention.

To parents that had grown up in poverty, it was easy to see the benefits of a life without the looming uncertainties of how to feed the family and pay the bills. The life of children who did not have to see the anxiety of parents struggling to make ends meet was an unquestionable improvement. However, it appeared to be much more difficult to see the new problems that the younger generations faced in the context of transnational migration in Sri Lanka. Migrant parents clearly identified what they considered to be the greatest dangers that youth in Italy had to confront, but some of them were reluctant to see that similar problems were present back in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, as Fr. Anthony explained, it was very difficult – both for him as a priest and for parents in this context of transnationalism – to draw lines of connection between their own childhoods in relative poverty with those of their children in relative opulence. Upon return, children generally managed to appreciate

and embrace certain Sri Lankan Catholic values and ultimately understood the family and language reasons that had motivated their parents to send them back. But integration to Negombo society posed other complications when it came to ideas of humility, hard-work and progress. While in the past the community was divided between the fishermen and those who managed to get a better education and become teachers and office workers, in present day Negombo a whole generation of Italy-bred children constituted a group for whom the alternatives that Sri Lanka offered were profoundly unsatisfying. Many parents found it frustrating that their children in Italy were seemingly disrespectful and unappreciative of their efforts, but later found out that return was not providing a satisfactory solution either. Fr. Anthony described this as a very sad situation and felt helpless as he witnessed a kind of anomie amongst the local youth. He said,

It is very confusing for most people, they ask themselves, “how can someone without education make more money?” It becomes perplexing [...] like an alternate way of making money, easy, fast, like you’re smarter than everyone else. Everything starts afresh. They break everything they had in the past, whatever they don’t like, and rebuild [...] They squander the money, no thought, no precaution. When they want to go back to Italy they even have to ask their mothers for money. Nothing is left, unto the last cent [...] Some people get blinded, if you work hard there you can work hard here. They could start a business or something; they just don’t know how to do it. These are the same parents that want their children to grow up here so that they learn good values. You can’t blame these children for their confusion (*Awul wela*).

Who Wants to Grow up there, Anyway?

Chanaka was a migrant father in his early forties who had been working in Italy and was now back in Sri Lanka for almost two years. Before leaving the country he was a policeman, but ten years before he had quit the force to travel illegally to Italy. Soon after he regularized his documents, his wife and two young sons came along. He told me how when his eldest son reached the age of twelve they decided that it was time to return to Sri Lanka. When they first arrived in Negombo both of their children were very unhappy with the decision taken by their parents. They thought that Sri Lanka was boring and monotonous and missed their friends in Milan.

Chanaka said,

I will go back to Italy to look for work soon, before my residency permit expires. But the kids need to stay here, who wants to grow up there, anyway? [...] Children are out of control in Italy, they think they can do whatever they want. At least I have two boys, but imagine if I had girls! You sometimes see girls smoking on the street in Italy, even some Sri Lankan girls are out alone with boys. For young boys to grow up there it is not that bad, you know, they can have all the fun they want and later come back and get married here. But girls cannot do that, if they do whatever they want while in Italy, *everybody* knows it back here.

Chanaka had little care for Italy. To him, it was all about work. He would have much rather stayed in Sri Lanka as a policeman, but as I later inquired, after twenty

years in the force an officer could expect to make Rs. 60,000 (approximately \$550 in 2010). As Chanaka dismissed my questions about what was so attractive about Italy, his wife sitting behind him gesticulated in disagreement. A few minutes later when Chanaka went to the kitchen she said,

Chanaka thinks that all you can do in Italy is work and make money. But I like it better there. Negombo is too small, when I'm here I'm supposed to stay at home. In Italy I go out to cafes, we go for walks and picnics in the park when it is nice outside. I also work and have my own money, no one tells me what do with it there. But when we're back men want to be in charge of everything again.

Cultural critique is not a uniform practice carried out by migrant workers in Italy. The way in which Sri Lankans reject or embrace Italian morality is fundamentally determined by their age and gender. But also the risks of being more or less lenient while in Italy are relative to who the migrant is – the tolerance that the community has at home and the repercussions of transgressing Sri Lankan normative codes have dramatically different consequences depending on who the transgressor is.

In this chapter I do not specifically engage with the gender dimensions of cultural critique, but suffice it to say that the way male and female migrants approached the opportunities made available in Italy are extremely different. Most men saw in Italy a place where their freedom was curtailed and where all they could

do was work hard without having other social or cultural ambitions. As opposed to this, women generally described their stays in Italy as the first time they had truly experienced freedom in their lives, this freedom was partly expressed in having financial independence from their husbands. But for many women Italian freedom also represented their first chance of imagining a different life, of contemplating alternative ways of living as actual possibilities they could pursue.

Male migrant workers were generally aware of the different perception women had of Italy, yet some interpreted that the consequence of this was evidence of a heightened need for modesty and self-restraint. As one of my male informants said,

Italians have a different mentality (*Ithali ayata thiyenne wenas manasikathmayak*). People [Sri Lankans] there have a kind of freedom they would never dream of in Sri Lanka. Boys get to enjoy it a lot. Girls there tend to be kept more under the control of the family. They still need to stay at home and be good girls or they'll never get to find a husband [...] They are not the ones who enjoy going out and wearing short skirts – but the boys do, they go out and fool around with girls and then get to come home and find a wife.

As opposed to what Chanaka's wife said, in this migrant worker's view it was not the girls who enjoyed Italian freedom, it was boys who did. Young Sri Lankan boys in Italy were seen as the ones getting all the benefits of the more lenient moral standards – they got the best part because they got to fool around but also could go back to a nice Sri Lankan wife. Girls in Italy could experience a new sense of

freedom, but this came at a cost. The flexibility with which the community treated men did not apply to women. To a large extent, the moral demands posed on female migrant workers became stricter with migration. Now that they were not under the constant watchful eye of the family in Negombo, offering proof that they were demure and could become good wives required an extra effort on their part.

Doing Cultural Critique

When Sunnita told me that the problem they had with the idea of staying had to do with Italian culture and values, I asked her if there was anything good about Italy other than better employment opportunities than in Sri Lanka. She said,

Working in Italy is really good, employers are very respectful, you always get paid on time and get time off. People are very caring, my employers were always asking me if I needed anything and gave me gifts, and Kumara's employers at the factory don't want him to leave. They know he is a good worker and they value our efforts [...] People are really nice, they like and respect Sri Lankans because they know we are good workers and family people (*Api honda senakayo, pawul karayo*) [...] Everyone is treated equally there, they don't think less of you because you are from Sri Lanka. If you go to the hospital, they don't give priority to Italians, if you're first in line they will see you first. That doesn't happen here, if you don't have money, no one cares about you. But in Italy, we once had to take the baby to the hospital and all the doctors and nurses were so nice to me and so concerned with the health of the baby.

What she was describing and what many others referred to as things they

missed about Italy like discipline, respect, “the systems” and fairness, were nothing but values. I asked Sunnita if these were not good values, after all. She answered,

Oh, Italy is a very good place with very nice people, but life is better here. There you can make money and save, but this is where we are from, I couldn't imagine staying there forever [...] Over there you are always alone and work all the time. The work system is very good, but sometimes it gets very boring, you always do the same things [...] We are different, so we cannot let our children think that they are like Italians, we need to give them a good education, and that is only possible here. Being there is good, but you always miss your family, your food, your home.

Values seemed to be the answer both to embrace and to reject Italian culture.

If this is the case, distinguishing between Sri Lankan and Italian values in a normative sense does nothing to explain why people chose different paths of action in different situations. If doing “the right thing” could not be circumscribed to following the norms that prevailed in society, then it is necessary to consider those values that inspired an individual's actions beyond the contextual character of norms. This does not mean that values should be understood as universal or unchanging, but that they should be thought of as grounded in a particular history and tradition that informs processes of decision making that are contextual in the normative sense, but profoundly inspired by the ethical value system of Sri Lankan Catholics.

Like Sunnita, Chanaka and his wife were able to articulate strong criticism and

censure of *some* values while at the same time they praised *other* values that Italians held in high esteem and lamented themselves for those currently dominating Sri Lanka. These seemingly contradictory statements did not point to a kind of double moral standard and certainly did not refer to a hybrid morality resulting from the cultural encounter between the Sri Lankan and the Italian. These migrant families engaged in an active practice of cultural critique that allowed them to think and imagine what kind of people they wanted to be, and most importantly what kind of people they wanted their children to become.

This understanding of cultural critique is very different from the idea that migrant workers are able to shift from one moral system to another according to geographical context, or that they are capable of mixing and matching values to re-define who they are. On the contrary, these migrant workers had a particular set of deeply rooted ethical values based on which they could judge and decide what moral codes to follow in different realms of their lives.

Rather than describing this as a form of cultural hybridity characteristic of globalization – where Sunnita freely imagined what kind of person she wanted to be and selectively chose amongst a wide range of alternative practices – it is better understood if we think of it as a practice of cultural critique. This kind of critique rejects the idea that migrant workers are limited by narrow Sri Lankan *normative values* that they unquestioningly follow, but instead argues that it is a particular set of *ethical*

values what enables them to produce judgments about the cultures that they know.

Based on a particular set of ethical values, Sri Lankan migrants were able to choose and follow morally apt courses of action in different situations. What this suggests, as Webb Keane writes, is “that values are historical in nature, that people are creatures of habit not just of reason, that habits are inseparable from their grounding in bodies and emotions and, of special significance in the face of cultural determinism, that habits can be purposefully shaped by the practices of self-cultivation developed within a tradition” (2011).

By migrating to Italy, Sri Lankan Catholics did not free themselves from their values – transnationalism did not allow them to choose which ethical values were more convenient to follow in the new geographical and cultural context. But they did have the freedom to choose between the moral codes that existed in Sri Lanka and Italy. Ethical values were beyond negotiation and ignoring this fact represented a grave transgression in the community. Normative values were more flexible. This meant that there was a certain degree of tolerance that allowed migrant workers to bend norms for a few years of their lives while the community turned a blind eye to it. But it also meant that norms were contextual, following them could be the right thing to do depending on location and situation. Not following Sri Lankan norms in Italy did not pose a threat to the ethical integrity of an individual. Furthermore, bringing certain Italian norms to Sri Lanka was considered desirable to many migrant

workers who dreamt of more serious work ethics and more predictable rules.

Judging Italy the Sri Lankan Way

As I tried to understand the reasons why Sri Lankan parents in Italy recurrently took the decision to bring their children back, the boundary between the practicality of certain decisions and the desire to live in a certain way kept returning as central to their arguments.

Randhika was only 26 years old and had been working in Napoli since the age of 19. He worked at a supermarket and lived with seven other Sri Lankans in a one-bedroom apartment. His father lived in New Jersey and his brother was working with him in Italy. He was visiting their mother for a few weeks before returning to Italy to work at the same supermarket where he had been working for the last two years. He was also using this trip to Sri Lanka to meet his girlfriend's parents who lived in Chillaw (25 miles north of Negombo). She had also been working in Italy and living with one of her siblings. They were planning to get married in 2011. He said they wanted to stay in Italy – there was no reason to come back yet – although he thought that when they had children he would eventually want to return. He explained his opinion in this way,

I have some Italian friends at work and sometimes hang out with them outside of work. They are really nice people and I enjoy their

company, but all my really good friends are from Sri Lanka [...] not people that I knew before going, I met them all over there. Italians are not warm amongst themselves, they're not like Sri Lankans. There is nothing wrong with their culture, it is good for them to live there, but we like doing things differently[...] What do I like about living in Italy? The law. People obey orders and rules, criminals get caught. Also, everyone likes Filipinos and Sri Lankans, so we never have any problems there. In other countries we have visa problems and people don't like foreigners, but Italy is good [...] The problem is that you are always alone there, *even* the Sri Lankans are busy all the time and worried about work and money (*Ithaliye inna Lankawe minissu hamathissema wadda, hamathissema rassawal ganai salli ganai hithanawa.*)

Judgment is an important aspect of cultural critique because it allows to mediate the tension between obligation and freedom inherent to any discussion of the ethical. As Michael Lambek pointed out, it is this kind of judgment that enables people “to discern when to follow one’s commitments and when to depart from them” (Lambek 2010, 28). What becomes relevant to my ethnographic work is that the decisions that migrants took cannot be exclusively interpreted as the instrumental articulation of their projects of development and dreams of progress. Certain ethical values overrode the rational aspects of the process of taking decisions and weighed heavily on the judgments people made.

Cultural critique is fundamentally based on the ability of people to produce judgments – and this ability is grounded on the freedom that enables deliberation. If we exclusively interpret the decision to return home that a Sri Lankan family takes as the following of cultural norms, we fail to acknowledge the existence of a whole

ethical dimension that informs people's decisions.

For a Sri Lankan Catholic in Italy, return to the hometown for the education of the children was a good in itself, in spite of the practical considerations that might suggest otherwise. Growing up in Negombo may have posed a number of problems in 2010 that parents probably never had to confront in their own childhoods.

Nevertheless, these were challenges that a young Sri Lankan Catholic should learn how to cope with. Staying in Italy was thus seen as avoiding one's responsibility as a parent, not taking proper "care of the self," as Foucault would have it.



At what point did the Italian moral codes begin to conflict with Sri Lankan ethical values and lead to the decision of return? As mentioned earlier, Foucault defined a moral system as composed by codes of behavior (normative dimension) and "forms of subjectification." While the codes of behavior reflected the deontological dimension of an individual's life, the forms of subjectification offered the space for the exercise of self-fashioning. The code and the forms of subjectification can grow rather independently from each other – change in one does not imply change in the other.

The reason why making the distinction between the concepts of moral system, codes of behavior and forms of subjectification is important is because it helps to see

that migrant workers could adapt to new moral codes upon arrival to their employment destination without sidestepping significant ethical values. The Italian normative code was welcomed as liberating individuals from the oppressive and limiting restrictions imposed by the Sri Lankan code (Robbins 2004).

Sri Lankans in Italy could embrace this new moral code because they were *already constituted* ethical beings. Once in Italy, they could exercise the kind of cultural critique I described earlier to choose Italian practices for certain aspects of their lives. They engaged in this process of cultural critique grounded in a specific moral system strongly determined by ethical values, history, religion and class. By sending their children to school in Negombo, to stay with their relatives, to participate in the local Church festivities, to learn Sinhalese, not only were parents communicating their culture to their children, they were sharing a way of constituting themselves as moral beings (Hirschkind 2006; 2001). If Sri Lankans decided to stay in Italy, the characteristics of their ethical system would be slowly transformed; and although this process would be fraught with conflicts for the immigrant population, the younger generations would eventually not only live by an Italian moral code but would develop an ethical system shaped by that normative code.

As many migrant workers noted, Italian freedom was good, but it is *only* good for Italians. This meant that Sri Lankan Catholics were not rejecting Italian culture as morally unworthy; however, they considered it inadequate to form their children as

ethical persons. The moral system was thus constituted in a dialectical relation between the moral code and the ethical system. When Sri Lankan adults became migrant workers and abandoned their traditional codes of behavior to engage with Italian moral codes, they did so without jeopardizing the ethical values by which they had been educated. But when children grew up without the strict Sri Lankan normative code to guide their actions, the ethical work of self-fashioning became immensely complicated. It is in this sense that we should interpret a migrant family's decision to send their children back to Sri Lanka, even when they would not have the daily guide and counsel of their parents. For all the freedom and opportunities that Italy provided, it lacked clear guidelines for Sri Lankan youth to be constituted as moral persons.

Adopting some Italian moral norms also allowed migrants to appreciate ways of taking decisions that were not bound by family obligations. Many migrants felt liberated from the burden of family and friends after they settled in Italy and argued that the weight of too many rules and obligations at home hampered their ability to prosper financially (Collyer & Pathirage 2010). In this sense, being an ethical person in Italy was much less stressful than in Sri Lanka and most people accommodated successfully to the new, lighter requirements of life.⁵³ Rationality and individualism were essential to interpret Italian norms and principles that were relatively simple to understand over the complexities of kinship duties.

To Sri Lankan parents, Italian freedom was only good as long as one had a clear idea of origins, values and priorities. The limit to this was traced around the time when children finished the first couple of years of schooling in Italy. At the time, parents believed that it was necessary to send children back to Sri Lanka for the next six to eight years. After living in Sri Lanka under the tutelage and company of the extended family, it was acceptable and desirable that they returned to Italy for work. It was only possible to profit from the advantages that Italy offered if one did not fall in the trap of embracing Italian values as their own. This was a fundamental part of Sri Lankan understanding of Italian life: the best way of seizing the opportunities that migration had to offer was by never forgetting that it was a temporary endeavor; that the major decisions in life that concerned family, marriage, religion and reproduction, remained firmly linked to the home country. The values of freedom, individualism and efficiency that Sri Lankans enjoyed and cherished while in Italy, were only desirable if understood against the backdrop of a firm Sri Lankan Catholic ethical system.

Conclusion

A fundamental part of leading an ethical life is to consider one's relationship to others –becoming an ethical person demands that we effectively fulfill the positions to which one is assigned in life. The Greek citizen that Foucault alluded to needed to be

a “good magistrate and a good friend.” These were activities that engaged him with an Other (Faubion 2001; 2011). Similarly, leading an ethical life for a Sri Lankan migrant worker necessarily involved being a good parent. This was not the task of ingraining strict codes of behavior in sons and daughters – it referred to the work of an “ethical pedagogy” that had the goal of raising good Sri Lankan Catholic men and women. The work of the parent was then comparable to that of the master whose mission is “the enhancement and refinement of the reflexive freedom of his students” (Faubion 2001, 97).

Even though many saw that the decision to educate children in Sri Lanka was inspired by a need to impose tighter controls on them, I argue that the real objective of return was substantially different. As Faubion writes, “like language, ethics must be taught.” It is beyond the disciplinary dimension that decisions to return must be interpreted. It is the objective of constituting free moral subjects capable of reflexivity and judgment that inspires parents. In this sense, it would be unimaginable for parents not to offer a model worth following to their children. This model was not given only by a law-abiding, obedient, hard working citizen in Italy, it includes taking the “non-rational” decision of returning, of teaching ones’ language, of instilling good religious values and practices, of respecting elders, of putting ones family first. These were the practices that could not be merely inspired by a particular moral code, they were the necessary manifestation of a specific idea of how life ought

to be lived.

Notes to Chapter 4

⁴⁵ Gallo notes a similar phenomenon amongst Malayali migrant families in Italy, “Children born in Italy or Kerala are usually sent back ‘home’ when they are four or five years old. Schooling in Italy is considered unsuitable as it will make the project of return more difficult” (Gallo 2006, 369).

⁴⁶ People would often say *Sanskrutii Hondai nee*, when I asked what were their reasons to return to Sri Lanka. The word Sanskrutya is usually translated as “culture” but in the more common usage of migrant workers it refers to values, customs, traditions.

⁴⁷ In this essay I do not engage with the way in which this “assemblage” of ethical values is constituted. Although I do not address the question of origins directly, I stay clear from culturalist arguments that essentialize a community’s culture (see Vertovec 1996). The way in which these values and norms become constitutive of the identity of the community needs to be found at the intersection of powerful religious, colonial and historical forces – and as such, are deeply contested.

⁴⁸ The distinction made by philosopher Bernard Williams between ethics and morality is a first step towards understanding the concerns of Sri Lankan migrant parents. If ethics is interested in responding to the question of “how ought one to live?”, morality has the much more limited aim of deciding when to follow and when not to follow specific rules (1986).

⁴⁹ One of the main practical problems people found with education in Italy, was that their children only learnt to speak Italian and did not become proficient in the two languages that parents valued the most, Sinhalese and English.

⁵⁰ Bambi Chapin – approaching her fieldwork from a psychoanalytic perspective – similarly argues that children’s education in Sri Lanka has two different and seemingly contrasting phases. The first few years of socialization are characterized by very permissive attitudes towards them, whereas when reaching school age parents believe it is the right time to be strict. This can be compared to the attitudes of migrant parents, who think that being born and spending a few years in Italy would not interfere with their children’s moral education (Chapin 2010).

⁵¹ Sri Lankans in Italy were aware that careers were not easily available to foreigners in Italy. One of my informants knew a Sri Lankan woman that worked in a Police precinct in Italy, but this was almost the only example of a migrant worker having a job in the public sector. As another of my informants explained, government jobs are only offered to Italians, even garbage collectors and street sweepers were almost exclusively Italian. Sri Lankans found good employment opportunities in Italy but only in the service sector and sometimes in manufacturing. However – even though they managed to improve their economic situation and obtain good salaries – this was rarely reflected in promotions to management jobs.

⁵² Since 2003 the largest inflow of immigrants into Italy came from Romania, amounting to 20.5% of foreign residents in Italy in 2008 (ISTAT Statistics).

⁵³ In *Becoming Sinners*, Joel Robbins explains how the embrace of Christianity amongst the Urapmin in Papua-New Guinea was experienced as liberating from the heavy burdens of community responsibilities they lived by in the past. However, a somewhat bitter feeling lingered amongst them, “people feel that in spite of the Christian backing they had for their actions, their willful disregard for the spirits had gone too far.” (Robbins 2004, 219). In a rather circuitous comparison, Sri Lankans in Italy willingly adapted to the exigencies of their new environment, but they did so with some reservations. Following a new moral code in Italy was clearly advantageous for their financial stability, and letting go off family responsibilities

helped this goal as well. But just like it happened with the Urapmin, Sri Lankan Catholics in Italy became aware that refusing to honor traditional obligations came at a high price. Many people explained how living in Italy had made them forget what were their values and their priorities, only to be eventually reminded of who they were and what was important in their lives after several years, or after some major event had occurred in their lives (parenthood, marriage, death, etc).

CHAPTER 5

Indifference: Imagining Ways of Being Different in Negombo

“But perhaps there is nothing so simple as a choice here. Habitation that is complex and multiple is already shot through with unavoidable distances and indifferences, with comparison and critique; yet it does not thereby cease to be a mode of belonging.”
(Bruce Robbins 1998, 3)

This final chapter explores the question of why many transnational migrant workers who returned home decided to re-migrate after a short time. After spending several years in Italy and achieving their dream of prosperity, many migrant families did not find in Sri Lanka a welcoming country where to invest or work. The dearth of opportunities for returnees to live life differently was profoundly frustrating and led them to act with indifference towards the place that they cherished. Instead of using their savings to invest locally, people spent their money in building large houses and buying expensive consumer goods; or just spent months idling until their money ran out and they had to return to Italy.

If people were not able to live a different life, the only alternative they found was to become *indifferent* to the opinions and banter of others who mocked them for “becoming Italian.” However, rather than seeing lack of creativity to find new spaces for action in Sri Lanka, their indifference can be interpreted as a symbol of their deep understanding of the social dynamics of the country and of the rigidity of cultural

norms that only offered seldom recognition to their efforts.

Indifference

Return migrants in Negombo were commonly scoffed at for their “Italian aspirations” when they built large houses in modest neighborhoods and adopted unexpected fashions and food preferences. In this chapter, I suggest that their attitude can be interpreted as an attempt to question the space that Sri Lankan society has historically reserved for them. But this chapter is also about consumption and the fundamental role it plays amongst Sri Lankan return migrants. Remittance money sent home from Italy was used for the reproductive and growth requirements of family and community, yet a large portion remained that was geared towards spending on luxury goods.

Georges Bataille, wrote that wealth which is not used for survival or development purposes constitutes a kind of “excess energy” that needs to be consumed somehow. One of the main ways of getting rid of this surplus that cannot be saved is by squandering it on luxuries, “*sending it up in smoke*”, as Bataille put it (1998, 22).

Money arriving to Sri Lanka from Italy was used towards the reproductive needs of the community and to enable new paths for its development. But when the limit of these two faces of capital was reached, the remainder was consumed

senselessly and obscenely. Bataille's work can offer a way of interpreting this aspect of sumptuary consumption amongst a community that found it difficult to use its newly acquired wealth to forge bonds of solidarity and reciprocity with other social groups. Their response to this lack of opportunities to engage with Sri Lankan society differently was to act with indifference and squander their wealth. Yet this expenditure, seemingly devoid of utility, may also represent an attempt to obtain some kind of return for their efforts, an attempt at forcing a sort of symbolic reciprocity that improved the spender's status in society.

The arguments I pursue here and the stories from the field that I relate in their support do not contest or challenge other more familiar analysis pertaining to the consequences of transnational migration and the adoption of market practices in new regions of the world. They are an attempt at offering a different approach and hopefully a nuanced way of interpreting *some* decisions that people took which are difficult to understand from more conventional perspectives. Although certain cultural relations are overshadowed by the force of globalization, they surreptitiously survive and continue to shape people's values and beliefs, inspiring decisions and preferences. However, these should not be always interpreted as a form of resistance. When globalization and other cultural practices encounter each other they sometimes produce unexpected situations and peculiar phenomena that cannot be understood as a consequence of capitalist dynamics or of the survival of previous social relations

exclusively.

To understand the spendthrift character of return migrants in Sri Lanka, for example, I suggest that it is useful to focus on the ambiguities that arise at the intersections where individualist values and capitalist ideals have not yet fully overtaken other cultural logics. Therefore, describing the returnee population of a place like Negombo as acting *indifferently* towards mainstream societal expectations is not attempting to offer a competing interpretation to authoritative theories of globalization. It is a way of thinking of phenomena that are inherently the outcome of global forces, yet at the same time a byproduct of them, a kind of secondary repercussion.⁵⁴

I argue that contrary to what people commonly believed in Sri Lanka, migrant workers were not unwise investors. They took sound investment decisions that consistently improved the quality of life of their families. But the increased capacity for saving that work in Italy generated was not matched by a comparable expansion of investment opportunities in Sri Lanka. The surplus that migration produced was not geared towards productive investments and was instead destined to luxury consumer goods. I suggest that what was sometimes seen as an eccentricity on the part of return migrants, can be better interpreted as a kind of frustration that arose from the migrant workers' awareness of their lack of opportunities for social mobility. Rather than analyzing the general consequences of transnational migration amongst

this migrant community, this chapter tries to articulate an argument to understand what motivated people to use their surplus money in this particular way (Bourdieu, 1984).

“Punchi” Italia

More than a consequence of transnational migration or the new symbols of status and success of what has come to be known as the *Italian style*, Negombo’s connections to Italy are built on a particular history of religion and education that has been strongly inspired and led by the Catholic Church for more than a century. Some of the best schools in the country are located in towns like Negombo which, as I described in Chapter 3, for generations have educated a strong middle-class of professionals and teachers that the community still takes pride in (Gomez 2009).

However, in the last three decades, the reasons why Negombo bears such a heavy influence of Italian culture have less to do with their faith and religious devotion than with the way the Italian has become metonymy for kitsch luxuries and seemingly limitless consumption. These are seen as the only tangible changes brought home by migrant workers in Italy. But although this is the generally grim perception of what transnationalism has to offer in towns like Negombo, a closer examination of the history of the transnational experience of Sri Lankans in Italy may suggest the manifestation of other, more complex problems that are deeply constitutive of the

national culture.

In this sense, the graceless transplant of the Italian to Sri Lanka may be seen as an expression of the frustration caused by the lack of opportunities that return generates for those who acquired a certain level of financial success while abroad. This frustration is caused by a national economic structure that is unable to offer alternatives to those who return with money, but most importantly to my present argument, to the dearth of spaces *to be different* that society offers. In a context where difference is severely cramped and censured, it is then *indifference* that flourishes as a backlash and is expressed in disruptive and flamboyant ways.

In his article on Shanghai's cosmopolitanism of 2000, literary theorist Akbar Abbas looked for ways to explain the apparent obsession that pre-war local elites had with exhibiting their wealth. He observed that this bourgeoisie's passion for the bizarre was not only evidence of the rise of a quirky europhile elite – as many at the time interpreted it – but the manifestation of a “colonial anxiety to be recognized,” that was expressed in a particular style of exhibitionism (Abbas 2000). Rather than seeing this as the consequence of a lack of creativity on their part, Abbas understood this anxiety as stemming from a world that rejected non-Europeans from legitimately participating in elite cultural circles. European metropolitan elites were never very gracious when it came to recognizing others' right to think the world differently, forcing truly cosmopolitan cities like Shanghai to act with indifference towards the

mockery and scorn that their ambitions were subjected to (Yeh 2007).

A comparable kind of conspicuous consumption is notorious in the context of the transnational world of Sri Lankans commuting to Italy. The long-term negative consequences that transnationalism has brought to these communities should not be underestimated, because although the extravagant can be dismissed as merely circumstantial, the negative is not limited to the questionable aesthetic changes that sweep the entire region.⁵⁵ But the baffling manifestations that leave anyone visiting these towns puzzled and wondering what good can come of transnational migration should not blind us to a different aspect of this phenomenon that is represented in the struggle of a community to carve a niche for itself in its own country.

Education vs. Migration

Fr. Anthony's work in Sri Lanka served as a metaphor for the country's dour postwar reality. His activities were divided between serving displaced Tamil-speaking Catholics around Killinochi and visiting refugee camps on one hand; and the daily routine of a small town parish outside Negombo on the other. His genuine interest was attending the situations of emergency that the end of the war in 2009 generated by the thousands. However, Church authorities tried to limit the activities of many priests in conflict areas by assigning them ordinary parish duties in the south of the country.

The people of PitipanaVeedyya, where Fr. Anthony was working at the time, had been some of the pioneers in the process of migration to Italy, dozens of them leaving before 1990. Most of these migrants had easily become Italian permanent residents, speaking fluent Italian and having progressed in their occupations. While initially they had worked as domestic workers, many of the people I interviewed had moved on to become head cooks at restaurants and lab technicians.⁵⁶ After they had acquired a stable position in Italy, their wives accompanied them and many of their children were born there. While many migrants from that older generation were now living back in their hometown in Sri Lanka, they were far from constituting the majority. Although they all shared the dream of return, many had opted to stay in Italy and reserved Sri Lanka exclusively for vacations or for a future retirement. For those who did return, their decision only became a reality after several failed attempts in which their plans to stay hadn't worked out and they ended going back to work in Italy for a few more years.

But while the lives of these families was constantly caught in the midst of the uncertainties and challenges of living in-between two faraway places, the image of economic success produced by migration to Italy fast became a trademark of their hometown. The evidence of the money generated by work in Italy was even more prominent in this small fishing village than in downtown Negombo with its bustling markets and streets. The *Italian style* for which this region is now famous, began to

flourish in small sleepy villages with people buying land and building two and three-story houses (Bacciocchi 2010). Most of the times, people built on top of their old family homes in rather small plots of land that could not contain the kind of construction that they were now able to afford. As a consequence of this, real estate prices rose consistently in the last twenty years, and a walk down these streets felt like walking down an old world citadel with houses cramped on both sides of narrow streets, virtually no gardens or backyards left.

This first wave of migrants rapidly became a role model for the local youth, inspiring many to follow a similar path of adventure and hard work that could advance the lives of their families. But economic success is a tricky business and the dream of a better life soon mutated into an ambitious and accelerated chase for money, the faster the better. What had started as a way out of the anxieties of poverty turned into a competitive race to exhibit luxury and power, most times multiplying exponentially the anxieties of the fishing industry which they had grown up. The migratory experience of those who followed the first waves of returnees that had gone to Italy in the 1980s and early 1990s was very different from that of their predecessors. While most young migrant workers had originally been inspired by the comfort and stability that the earlier generations had achieved, their own experience was already contaminated with toxic levels of ambition. What happened somewhere in the 1990s, that made migrants trade in their dreams of a better life for a dream of a

radically different life, is the subject of what follows.

Why Leave?

When I asked Fr. Anthony what was his experience as a priest dealing with so many people with newly acquired wealth he explained that, to a large extent, people's obsession with Italy and money should be understandable. Virtually all the fishermen involved in transnational migration had grown up in a world of austerity and hard work. Transnational migration represented the first opportunity that their communities and families had in several generations to do something different from their ancestral occupation. Too many things combined too fast to generate a situation that was overwhelming for many young people who found themselves with a lot of money that came to them relatively easy. It is not that domestic work is effortless, but that doing housework, an occupation that is seriously underpaid in Sri Lanka and reserved for women, became the source of tens of thousands of rupees every month for male migrants.⁵⁷ As Fr. Anthony explained, the notion that domestic work was an occupation *in demand*, and one that paid over a thousand euros a month was unthinkable. It was simply unimaginable for a teenage fisherman that he could make an exponentially larger sum of money by cleaning houses than by spending ten days at sea risking his life. But Fr. Anthony also took responsibility for the Church not being able to add some realism to what many believed to be a fairy tale turned real,

People now want to go to Italy and don't think about anything else, they see neighbors and friends who went and made money and they think it will be the same for them [...] Ten years ago people paid approximately 3000 dollars to go, today they get indebted for 15 lakhs (14,000 dollars approximately in 2010). They don't even consider going anywhere else, Italy is the only place they can imagine.

I later asked Fr. Anthony what he thought of the houses and the shopping sprees many migrants embarked on when in Sri Lanka. He smiled and told me how a couple of months earlier a migrant worker from his parish had asked him to come to his brand new house to give a blessing for the new family home. In shock and embarrassment, Fr. Anthony told me how he entered a mansion filled with luxury, "there was a fireplace... in Negombo! Can you believe that? Why do you need a fireplace in Negombo! I didn't know what to do. They asked me to bless their home, they are good people, you know, but this was too much!"⁵⁸

While people's attention to Italian details of style and the mimetic adoption of these into the migrant worker's imagination was an outcome of years abroad, there also seemed to be a point at which this mimicking of the Italian home surpassed certain limits that bordered the eccentric. Not in vain, people in Colombo used the *Punchi Italia* more as mockery than as nickname. The house with a fireplace in Negombo was probably the best example; however, other houses with elevators and underground garages were also good to exemplify the way in which migrant workers

had been pushing the limits of what motivated migration. An extravagant race for luxuries took hold of the lives of most migrant workers in the last twenty years, raising the stakes involved in migration to Italy to the point where stability and decorum were almost frowned upon and where exhibitionism became the mark of success par excellence. One migrant worker told me that “money goes to their heads” referring to younger migrants who returned and wanted to live like Italians lived,

Even people who made a little money feel like they have to come here and show off. Some people have money to buy cars in Sri Lanka, but others rent cars when they are here so that they can pretend they are as successful as the others [...] They come here and hire domestic workers so that they can act like their Italian employers [...] Me and my wife never bought a car, and some people here made fun of us because after going to Italy we just rode a motorcycle.

Even though the arguments used by workers to explain their reasons for migration remained virtually the same as those used by previous generations, the notions of success in the context of transnational migration had dramatically changed. Economic advancements no longer exclusively related to the improvement of the family's living standards become increasingly concerned with its improvement vis-à-vis the status achieved by the neighbors. In this way, an extravagant race to exhibit artificial and feigned symbols of opulence took hold of the lives of those who grew up seeing the success of migrants who left Sri Lanka earlier. Even those who had been in Italy only a short time felt compelled to assert their success abroad and

spend all they brought home.

To Georges Bataille, once resources have been dissipated the only thing that remains for the person who wastes is the acquisition of prestige. Waste itself becomes an object of acquisition (Bataille 1988, 73). But Bataille also pointed out a fundamental contradiction because waste that gains something is not waste; even when wasting people expect something in return. The life of Sri Lankan migrant families returning home expressed this struggle to make use of their wealth in efficient ways, even when investment opportunities were limited and all that they could do was squander their wealth.

The economic structure of the nation imposed severe limitations on the ambitions of migrant workers. Although they returned with money that could be invested in productive ventures, business initiatives continued to be monopolized by a small social group that had the resources and connections necessary to navigate Sri Lankan bureaucracy and business networks. This situation dissuaded returnees from becoming potential investors and joining the world of local business. For this reason, the money that returnees produced in Italy and brought to Sri Lanka could not be counted as *capital* – it had no productive purpose, it could only be used towards consumption. But when return migrants opted for showing off their wealth as a means to improve their rank in society, they were ridiculed for their pretentious ambitions. This is the contradiction Bataille referred to when “wasting money” is

done with the ultimate intention of obtaining some type of retribution.

Becoming Indifferent

Akbar Abbas described a particular situation in Shanghai where the colonial elites recurrently performed a dismissive “shouldering to the side” that mocked and disqualified the efforts of the local bourgeoisie to circumvent their negative aesthetic judgments. In reaction to this, many wealthy Chinese who were not allowed to participate in the colonial cultural and business circles opted to squander their money in rather flamboyant ways. Abbas suggested that these excessive displays of wealth on the part of the Chinese can be interpreted as a show of indifference towards the mockery that they were object of. When difference was not tolerated, it was indifference that rose as an alternative way for the Chinese wealthy classes to carve out a niche of their own in colonial Shanghai.

In Sri Lanka, the last card was always played by the Colombo elites, not only by the English speaking pseudo-aristocratic families that lingered on in their positions of relative power, but also by the (not so) new Sinhala nationalist elites that rule the country today. The “shouldering to the side” in Sri Lanka was expressed in a persistent tendency to infantilize and not take seriously the labor and the capacity of the migrant workers. Expressions like “Oh, those Catholics! Always pretentious and having crazy dreams... they still think they’re European!” and endless variations of it,

would be the smiling response that I got when explaining to people in Colombo what my research project involved. However, the Catholics position in today's Sri Lanka had very little to do with privilege, as one of my informants succinctly put it, "that may have been true for our grandparents, if we had any privilege left today, we wouldn't be jumping on boats like crazy to get out of here."

There was a constant attitude of dismissal towards Catholic migrant workers that, even after years of hard work abroad would still not be taken seriously. Their efforts to return and do something different in Sri Lanka were mocked and frowned upon and after years of trying to re-engage with their country, many opted for giving up. There were those who gave up by staying in Italy, but there were many others who gave up by showing no interest in politics, the economy or any social issue, becoming *indifferent* to what the future may bring to their own country.

Sri Lankan migrant workers were seen as unwise investors or as *nouveau-riches* that were mismanaging their money. But although anyone who witnessed their pace of spending and the kind of financial decisions they took would be inclined to observe this, I believe that their behavior said more about their understanding of Sri Lankan society and about the anxieties of migration than about their apparent eccentricity. Returnees were deeply skeptical of the prospects a business initiative would have in Sri Lanka and were generally convinced that the unwise thing to do was to have any faith in the country and opted not to embark in any venture that would

risk their hard earned Italian money. It was in this sense that the spendthrift character of returnees was more of a manifestation of the low expectations they held of their country than a symbol of eccentricity.

Migration from a Non-Migrant's Perspective

In Negombo town I visited the home of Mr. Perera several times, a man in his early sixties who had a degree in engineering and had recently retired from a factory where he worked for thirty years in the nearby Katunayake Free Trade Zone. Mr. Perera spoke fluent English and had developed a very comfortable middle class life without ever recurring to migration. Over the last couple of years since his retirement he had been involved with Italian migration because one of his sons was engaged to a Sri Lankan girl who grew up in Italy, but also because he had been working part-time as an agent contacting Italian employers to locals who were planning to leave. His opinions about migration were drastically different from the ones held by migrant workers. In his view, migration was no longer a good work strategy because of the rising costs of travel, difficulties in obtaining visas and lack of good employment opportunities in Italy. It was difficult for him to explain why people insisted on migration to Italy and were unable to imagine other alternatives.

Mr. Perera said,

When my brother left to Italy twenty years ago it was an adventure for him. I didn't go because I had a college degree and was able to get

a good job here, if not I would have joined him. But today things are very different. People seem to be obsessed with Italy and willing to pay or get into a lot of debt. Today people will pay more than 15 lakhs[...] If I had that kind of money available I would buy some perches of land with coconuts and not go to clean bathrooms in Italy!

My argument in this chapter suggests that when talking to people like Mr. Perera, the class dimensions of Negombo started to show the contrasting expectations that fishermen and others had of migration. He was right in pointing out that with less than \$20,000 it was possible to buy a small coconut plantation or start many kinds of businesses locally. Perera further pushed his argument by rhetorically asking, “Should I sit in my house under the fan until the trees have ripe coconuts? Or should I work everyday scrubbing other people’s floors?” Yet this was not speaking to the better decisions that he was able to take in comparison to the life paths of migrant workers. In the Sri Lankan context, money was not simply measured by its purchasing power, it needed to be considered in a tight relation to the person who had it. Fifteen lakhs in the hands of Mr. Perera had very different uses than fifteen lakhs in the hands of a fisherman.

This also signaled to other kinds of financial decisions that returnees took that could not be counted amongst luxuries. Ostentatious consumer goods were obviously visible and had become a symbol of the achievements of migrants, but there existed other less notorious ways in which return migrants made use of their money. For

example, people that managed to build good houses and were not caught in the exhibitionist frenzy had expendable cash that they used to buy perches of land. These plots were often in neighboring towns because the real estate prices had increased exponentially over the last two decades in Negombo. Buying land was a smart way of saving money, some people would even speculate that in a few years time they could sell it and make a substantial difference. However, as opposed to the productive lands that Mr. Perera had in mind, for the migrant workers this was not an investment in the economic sense, it produced no output and generated no employment.

Mr. Perera's case was interesting because it showed that the indifferent attitude that I attributed to migrant fishermen was not a generalized consequence of the economic changes that had transformed the region over the last two decades. In fact, people like Perera were actually benefiting economically from migration, without ever migrating themselves. Transnational migration was actually opening many new business opportunities in Sri Lanka, but few of them were including the migrant workers that made them possible in the first place.

While money from migration had the advantage of releasing fishermen from the worries of daily subsistence, it still did not allow them to change the way they imagined their lives without being forever tied to the fishing industry. A certain amount of money for Mr. Perera meant a myriad possibilities of investment in land and business, but to return migrant workers these possibilities were not available. This

is why consumption in luxury goods was not a mere decision that people took, it was almost the only financial outlet available to them. At the end of the day, the biggest winners from migration in Negombo were those who had historically concentrated the economic power in the island.

Three supermarket chains had opened large stores in Negombo with shining, air-conditioned spaces and replete with imported items that cast a shadow on the small vegetable posts and the small shops that sell by the pound. Traditional stores from Colombo that sell home appliances and electronics also opened branches in downtown Negombo. Huge illuminated signs on the main road could be seen from hundreds of yards away advertising architectural firms and construction companies that would make people's dream of their luxurious "*Italian style*" home come true. This was all made possible by Italian money, but once again, the productive aspects of this wealth would go to the hands of the traditional Sri Lankan business class.

It can be argued that these chain stores and international banks doing business in Negombo generated employment for a certain portion of the local population and helped transform Negombo into one of the busiest urban centers in the country. Yet migrant workers were only welcome to this new world of market economies and transnational capital as consumers, as those who injected foreign capital into the local economy. While they were the main engine of the local consumer economy, migrant workers remained ambiguously marginal to the business and investment circles.

To cultivate an attitude of indifference can sometimes be a form of luxury itself. Who can have the alternative to do this, to ignore the demands of society and trace their own path if not someone who can afford it in the first place? The path of indifference became a kind of luxury in its own right because the availability of alternatives and the freedom to choose were almost an extravagance for people who never had the chance to experience this before. And when spending lavishly was virtually the only manifestation of the surplus created by work in Italy, the possibility of acting indifferently was the real luxury that migrant workers enjoyed. The public dissipation of wealth became the only way of aspiring to prestige and social mobility when all channels to investment had been obstructed.

After their claims to equality were rejected and the hierarchical character of society reasserted, to turn their back on Sri Lanka represented a kind of symbolic attempt at challenging this imposed marginality.

Why Return?

The reality of Negombo's youth dramatically changed over the last twenty years when the dream of migrating to Italy became an actual possibility for thousands of young boys. The dreams of prosperity that propelled those who migrated earlier were substantially different from those of today's youth who increasingly saw migration as their only way out of Negombo (Collyer & Pathirage 2009, Bacciocchi 2010). While in

the past young men had embarked on the adventure of migration as an alternative to fishing; for the new generations, Italy became the only option worth pursuing.

Many non-migrant families in present day Negombo cared little for school education or for teaching their children the trade of fishing, constitutive of their regional and caste tradition (Stirrat 1988; Subramanian 2009; Raghavan 1961). Levitt and Lamba-Nievas point out that young prospective migrants are “less likely to invest in local institutions and more likely to choose occupations that will help them succeed once they move” (Levitt and Nieves-Lamba 2011, 6). The problem was that when the only jobs available to Sri Lankan migrants in Italy were as domestic workers, the pursuit of educational qualifications became an obstacle rather than an incentive for migration. The only businesses managed by returnees that seemed to thrive were those who tutored Italian language and helped young people prepare documents to apply for visas. Although quality of education still remained a symbol of pride and prestige in the entire region, it had systematically deteriorated over the last decades and its role in the formation of the local identity had been displaced by other symbols of success (Hayes 2010, Levitt 2010).

But regardless of the changing motivations that inspired people to migrate across different generations, an overwhelming majority of migrant workers shared the dream of returning to Sri Lanka. This project of return encountered many obstacles for its completion because migrant families in Italy returned to a place that had

changed too much over the years. Frustration manifested amongst the Negombo Catholic community in two distinct ways. It was the common reaction to a Sri Lanka that was unwelcoming to new investors, but it was also the answer to a Negombo that fell short of fulfilling the moral requirements of migrants. People expected Negombo to provide an appropriate setting to educate children, but the comforts and luxuries that these children grew up with had drastically altered the conditions of their education and the measure of their values.

To most parents, instilling values of hard work and humility in their children was very important. They considered that Italy was not a good place to do this and only by bringing their children to Sri Lanka they would be able to share with them these values. However, children in Negombo grew up surrounded by luxury and saw their family members either trying to leave or enjoying the fruits of migration by staying at home. In such circumstances, communicating the values of hard work and humility required much more than bringing them back from Italy and sending them to a parish school.

When Return Becomes Unappealing

Sitting on the verandah of a house outside Negombo on a weekday morning, I conversed with Sarath and Deepika, a migrant couple in their early fifties who had been back for two years. We sipped coffee while we sat on their Italian plastic garden

chairs. They were proudly showing me around the three-floors of the house they had recently finished building after more than eight years of construction. I asked them what were their plans for the future now that the house was finished. Sarath smiled and said that now it was time to go back to Italy since the money was all gone. His wife would stay with their two children in Negombo, but he needed to go back to Milan to find work.

I wanted to know if they thought that spending all their money in building a huge house had been a wise decision, maybe they were thinking of other investments with the family or had some business plans for a future return date. Sarath dismissed this possibility and told me that working in Sri Lanka was not a good idea unless one had the connections to find a government position. Too much work, little money, corruption and cheating made an explosive combination that had led him, as well as many others, to believe that working or investing in Sri Lanka was a hopeless dream. He said,

We don't have much education, most of the people that went to Italy didn't learn any trade there, just cleaning. I even lost the little English I learnt in school [...] It would be nice to have some kind of business here, but it is not a good idea for us. Doing business in Sri Lanka is for rich people, you need to be powerful and have connections. We come from small villages, we would be taken advantage of if we wanted to start something.

People like Sarath developed the notion that Sri Lanka is only good to spend

money in, not to produce it. This became a recurring theme in the experience of most migrant workers in the country: high levels of unemployment, low salaries, corruption and lack of education combined to encourage returnees to migrate again. The consequences of this were not merely financial; people become increasingly alienated from their communities of origin due to the difficulties they faced when they wanted to be assimilated back. This meant that for all practical purposes it was extremely difficult for them to be re-incorporated into the local job markets and the daily concerns of the average Sri Lankan.

The contrast between the life of people like Sarath and Deepika in Italy and Sri Lanka was sharp: one place was the site of hard work, austerity and cramped living spaces; the other, the place where to live extravagantly and leisurely until the money runs out. In Italy, the immediate consequence was the deterioration in the social life of migrant workers who worked full-time and took extra jobs on the side cleaning offices in the nights or other houses on Sundays. Most migrants also preferred to save their money to send back to Sri Lanka, so even when they had a Sunday off work, they rarely did more than go to Church or visit relatives. The situation when they returned to Sri Lanka was radically different, but the fact that people refused to look for work or engage in any kind of investment was also directly affecting the quality of their social interactions.

Relatives of migrant workers in Sri Lanka many times looked forward to the

return of those in Italy expecting them to invest at home and share some of the benefits of the years in Italy. Talking to people from the Negombo area who had relatives in Italy, they said that when those in Italy returned they had some money to invest and sometimes partnered with non-migrants to handle the business. But even in the few cases when this happened, the investors always ended up going back to Italy and leaving the local partners working alone. A priest in neighboring Munnakaraya told me how, when fishermen wanted to leave to Italy ten years ago, they sold all their belongings and fishing gear to finance their trips. After a few years some would come back and invest in fishing apparel and boats. However, they rarely went back to fishing as their own daily activity and left some relative in charge of it while they remained exclusively the financiers of these business ventures.

Most migrants were generous with their families but always at the level of consumption, rarely wanting to invest locally. As a consequence, luxury consumer goods plagued the towns around Negombo but little improved in regards to institutions, investment and infrastructure. Ultimately, the inflow of cash from Italy pushed up retail prices increasing the cost of living for everyone; and without generating new sources of income for those who stayed, the gap between those leaving and those staying became wider than ever (Levitt, Nieves-Lamba 2011).

An Estranged Community

The ties that bonded together a community were in this way slowly eroded, replacing networks of support and labor with tokens of economic prosperity. Meanwhile, those families who never embarked in migration offered a glimpse of life (partially) unaffected by Italy. These were the people who remained poor and struggling daily with the sea and the Church. The austerity of their lives was still in harmony with the humble surroundings of Negombo fishing areas, but in stark contrast with the towering homes built by returnees and the bustling of cars and motorcycles going in and out of their garages.

This contrast between the world of fishing and the world of Italy was sometimes evident within the same households. In Pitipana Veedy, I met an old fisherman who had considered going to Italy in the 1980s, things hadn't worked out for him so he stayed in Sri Lanka with his family. He had a son and a daughter; the son had been working in Italy since 2003. I asked him which of his neighbors had gone to Italy. He smiled and said, "it's easy, just look at any of the houses that is closed and has two floors, they're all in Italy." There were two boats in his backyard and he was sitting on a stool surrounded by fishing nets that he was fixing. Behind him, the old family home was being remodeled. When I asked if his son was sending money to renovate the house he – slightly offended – denied that he was taking money from his son. After a while he said that his son in Italy was not helping with

the new construction, but had paid the medical bills of his wife who had recently died.

Although he was a hardened fisherman, age was starting to catch up to him; his movements were slow and he was evidently in some physical pain. I wanted to know if he wouldn't rather have his son at home, helping him with the many chores associated with fishing rather than working as a domestic worker in Italy. He shrugged and said that it was better this way. His son in Italy never learnt to fish and he didn't want him to learn anything about it. The father sighed with resignation and said it was for the better,

In fishing there are two seasons, one you catch the other you don't. Italy is stable, you always have work and you always know how much you're getting at the end of the week. It's better for him to stay there, what would he do if he came back?

The distance that existed between migrant workers and their hometowns and communities became larger every year, and the disconnection of those who left to the world of employment in Sri Lanka turned into a gap that was very difficult to bridge. Not only migrant workers got used to levels of income that were unthinkable for workers without qualifications in Sri Lanka, they also got used to relating to employers who were more serious and respectful than local employers. Virtually every person I talked to had personally experienced some form of corruption related to the workplace in Sri Lanka and had been cheated either by employers, government

officers or employment agents. When I asked about the benefits of working in Italy, besides the obvious advantage of a better pay, most people agreed that employers in Italy were respectful and stuck to their word. In Italy, one could rest assured that you would get paid on time and receive exactly what had been agreed; this was unfortunately far from their experience in Sri Lanka.

Besides this, like in any country with high levels of unemployment, people in Sri Lanka were used to treasuring their jobs, not knowing when they would come across a new opportunity if they lost their current source of employment. Employers thus tended to enjoy a position of virtually limitless power, aware that workers would endure anything to stay employed. This dynamic was totally different from the reality of Sri Lankans in Italy, who easily got used to respectful and relatively professional relations in the workplace. As I explain in Chapter 1, this situation often provided migrant workers with a relative freedom to change jobs with ease and not have to put up with situations they did not like.

This did not mean that domestic work in Italy was an idyllic situation, as several authors have described, racist and paternalistic relations were common in Italy towards Sri Lankan workers. Many transnational migrants also contributed to their racial stereotyping by exacerbating apparent cultural affinities with their employers to exploit comparative advantages vis-à-vis other migrant communities (Paul 2011). Nonetheless, people migrating to Italy valued being treated respectfully, being paid

fairly and on time. But while Italy was clearly the preferred site to get employed, Sri Lanka remained the place where migrants looked forward to returning, raising their families and spending their money.

One of the main problems they confronted was that although people wanted to return, their space of action in Sri Lanka became very limited. Not being able to invest or get employed in Sri Lanka – and finding it morally difficult to take the decision to settle permanently in Italy – migrant workers were caught up in a situation where paradoxically, their alternatives were very few. Thousands of people that refused to give up their dreams of returning to Sri Lanka, found that although today they had purchasing power, they still remained marginal to Sri Lankan circles of power and business that persisted in the hands of a small elite. And even though their improved financial situations gave them a certain level of prestige amongst the local communities, this did not translate into roles of more social importance for them.

Perpetually Foreign

Although Negombo transnational workers truly developed a life in-between Sri Lanka and Italy, rather than having active and fluid relations at both ends of their lives they seemed to increasingly be disconnected and alienated from the two places. Rhacel Parreñas, writing on Filipino domestic workers in Italy, characterized them as “perpetually foreign” given the difficulties they faced to integrate and participate in

the Italian society. Parreñas, who worked extensively on Filipino transnationalism, stressed that the ability of migrant workers from the Philippines to integrate to the local job markets did not translate into social integration (Parreñas 2008). Female migrant workers rarely inter-married or decided to stay permanently in Italy and when they did, they remained mostly invisible to the Italians. A similar observation could be made of Sri Lankan cosmopolitan transnational workers in Italy, but Parreñas' notion of being perpetually foreign could also be extended to the sending communities, where Sri Lankans who had been to Italy seemed to be foreign in their own communities. Migration was producing changes that went beyond the mere financial improvements and the cultural diversity introduced by years of contact with the Italian, generating a kind of isolation that was probably *as burdensome* in Italy as it was at home.

Successful narratives of transnationalism told stories of migrant communities that establish solid and integrated communities in the receiving countries while upon return, migrant workers are welcomed as those who are sacrificing abroad for the family and the nation (Levitt 2000). In the case of people from Negombo traveling to Italy, a different dynamic took place because migrant workers were not seen as people who sacrificed for the family. They were often perceived as escaping to a place where money comes effortlessly and moral standards are easily bent.

A conservative Catholic morale and the dynamics of small town gossip

combined explosively in a place like Negombo. On the other end, Italian liberalism together with distance from home also merged allowing young men and women to enjoy their lives away from the judging gaze of the community. And while this licentious lifestyle was far from the reality of most migrant workers in Italy, it nevertheless constituted the common perception that most people in the community had of migrant workers.

This alternative narrative of transnationalism as “escape” that emerged in places like Negombo was reflecting other underlying and more complex issues that involved a particularly narrow understanding of the national self. In this sense, *indifference* on the part of migrant workers was no more than a reaction to the *indifference* of the nation that, as Michael Herzfeld says “arises from competing claims over the right to construct the cultural and social self.” Following Herzfeld’s argument, the lack of space for migrant workers to be different is partly consequence of a nationalist discourse that insists in re-affirming a particularly exclusive definition of who is to be included as a worthy member of the nation (Herzfeld 1992).

People from Negombo firmly believed that life in Italy was far from a life of toil. This belief was reinforced by returnees who instead of debunking this myth, contributed to it by telling stories of success and moral freedom. The image that non-migrants had of Italy was therefore severely distorted and affluence and freedom were perceived as a given rather than an unlikely outcome. As a consequence of this,

migrant workers were hardly seen as the heroes of the nation sacrificing for the community and upon return it became extremely difficult for them to defend positions of moral authority. Even when the possibility of failure and conflict was acknowledged, people continued to place the blame on the excessive greed and craving for luxuries instead of considering them a risk inherent to migration.

Talking Nonsense

Lawrence had initially migrated to Italy in 1987. He finally decided to stay in Sri Lanka as his only son was of school age now and he wanted him to go to school in the country. He said that there were very few Sri Lankans in Italy in the early 1990s, but that soon changed when people started to think that Italy was a better destination than anywhere else. He said,

Sri Lankans that go to Italy talk a lot of nonsense, and this is a big problem [...] When they go there for a while they come back and say everything is wonderful, that they succeeded, that people love them, etc. It makes others jealous but also makes them dream of Italy [...] That messes up the expectations of everyone in the country [...] In UK, employers only care about the way you work. If you're a good worker you'll move ahead, regardless of where you're from. In Italy, race matters, nationality matters. My brother just recently got his Italian citizenship and the first thing he did was move to UK.⁵⁹

Lawrence's frustration with the way Sri Lankans exaggerated the virtues of Italy

had eventually led him to decide to return and settle at home. The reason for Sri Lankans to enjoy Italy so much was that they had very low expectations of migration and not that it was a comparatively better destination. According to Lawrence, people only started going to Italy when they encountered difficulties to migrate to the United Kingdom. As other informants also suggested, Italy offered little opportunity for progress and integration. But it was possible to make substantial amounts of money if the migrant worker could renounce any other aspiration of social mobility. This was partly the reason why humble fishermen with low levels of education and little command of English found in Italy such an appealing destination.

Imagining a Different Self

Migrant workers were aware that their families and friends were awaiting their arrival with gifts and cash, but they also came to realize that most of those who stayed in Sri Lanka rarely valued the efforts they had to make: struggling with language, employers, landlords and an Italian community that for the most part saw the Sri Lankan migrant worker as the ideal, docile and kind-hearted domestic helper (Näre 2010).

Although migrants dreamt of returning from Italy to stay in the country, they soon found out that they had become marginal to their own communities and that to many, they were more useful staying in Italy and sending remittances. Even when they

had made enough money abroad to stay for long periods of time in Sri Lanka, most migrant workers rarely engaged in community activities or initiatives and were usually at home fixing or painting some detail, or simply watching TV and preparing meals. They wanted to stay in Sri Lanka, but they realized that they could only sustain their lifestyle by going back, once again, to Italy.

It was in this way that many Sri Lankans appeared to be trapped in an endless circulation between the hometown and the Italian metropolis without being able to make a home in either of them. What was meant to be an adventure of youth and a way to improve the life-conditions of the family turned into decades of commuting with families and entire communities growing apart from each other. The many conflicting demands that migrants and returnees faced, the questioning of their morality and their own competitive aspirations, had the consequence of alienating them from their dream of re-integration.

The task of asserting their identity in a small place like Negombo was extremely difficult and seemed to only be possible by embarking in a spiraling consumerism and a competitive struggle to stand out, which was reflected in mansions full of eccentric details and in expensive consumer goods in every house. But in order for this to happen the migrant worker needed become increasingly indifferent to the opinions and banter of relatives and neighbors, and their competitive ambitions exclusively aimed at fellow migrants who became the only ones

who they related to. As Abbas noted for Shanghai, the flip side of embracing the new and the different, is a certain loneliness and isolation from the rest of the nation. In this sense, linking to the world beyond Sri Lanka not only meant exploring new alternatives and experiencing a certain kind of freedom, it also implied delinking from older ways of being Sri Lankan (Mignolo 2007).⁶⁰

Probably the most important change that transnationalism introduced was the possibility of imagining new and different ways of being Sri Lankan that were unthinkable to previous generations. But friction emerged when migrant workers started conceiving their lives as *different* but returned to a place that did not allow for this. There was a constant disagreement reflected in the contrast between the dream of returning that inspired them to go out of their way to settle in the country, and the indifference they showed towards the expectations Sri Lankan society had of them. Indifference was an expression of the repeated frustration they felt over years of transnational labor and the recurrent obstacles they encountered when they wanted to pursue a different kind of life at home.

What this community expressed in its frustration with their inability to return *and be different*, became a particular sort of transgression in a culture where egalitarianism and individualism were only potentially valuable within the larger framework of the nation. Bruce Kapferer's work on Sinhalese nationalism is useful here because by stressing the hierarchical conceptualization of the state in Sri Lanka it

sheds light on the persisting marginalization of minorities and the kind of challenges that a community confronts when it no longer accommodates to its subordination (Kapferer 1988). In this sense, the desire of these migrant workers to return to their hometowns and make something different was not only hampered by corruption and lack of resources but by the notion that to question their position within the national hierarchy was to question their very belonging to the state. Kapferer writes,

In cosmological conception the state protectively encloses the nation of Sinhalese Buddhists, whose integrity as persons is dependent on this encompassment. The state in such a conception encloses other peoples or nations who are not Sinhalese Buddhists. But critical here is that these peoples are maintained in hierarchical subordination to Sinhalese Buddhists. The encompassing and ordering of the state is hierarchical, and the integrity of nations, peoples and persons within the Sinhalese Buddhist state is dependent on the capacity of the state to maintain by exercise of its power the hierarchical interrelation of all those it encloses. (1988: 7)

The dismissive comment of “*Oh those Catholics, they still think they’re Italian!*” was testimony that to be Sri Lankan required them to accept a particular kind of hierarchical subordination. But when a community questions its subordination to the authority of the majority the problem is not merely a struggle for relative power – it becomes a question of how to define belonging to the nation. *Indifference* thus, emerges as probably the only alternative available to those who want to embrace their national identity but who nonetheless reject the notion that *to belong* requires the

passive acceptance of a static subordination that social and political institutions assign them.

The experience of Catholic migrant workers in Italy and the difficulties they faced upon return can be read as a symptom of multiple layers of friction that converged at the local level. Individuals and families seemed to be compelled to embrace a kind of *indifference* that told much more than stories of individualism, eccentricity and success. The benefits of economic prosperity were once again overwhelmed by their cost in isolation, alienation and the disappearance of a space where to imagine a new and different self.

Past the frictions and alienation that returnees had to face in their communities and in the nation in general, what remained was a migrant population that stubbornly insisted on returning and making Sri Lanka their home. And beyond the dire economic and political prospects that Sri Lanka had to offer , they nonetheless wanted to spend their hard earned money in the country and educate their children in their hometowns.

Notes to Chapter 5

⁵⁴ This can also be interpreted in terms of Chakrabarty's notion of "History 2", where the purpose is not to write histories that provide alternatives to the narrative of capitalism, but rather to provide narratives that can interrupt the totalizing thrust of capital. (2000, 66)

⁵⁵ The cultural and economic consequences of transnationalism in Sri Lanka and many other labor exporting countries have been widely explored already so I will limit myself to mentioning previous work by authors that stress the ambivalent or plain negative impact that transnationalism has on family life. On the positive side of labor migration, it is worth noting the spaces for self-determination that it generates for female workers who in many cases have become the principal providers for the family and more generally have also become one of the main sources for foreign currency at the national level. Authors that have explored in ethnographic detail the specific case of Sri Lanka include Michele Gamburd, Elizabeth Frantz, Malsiri Dias and Swarna Jayaweera.

⁵⁶ Authors like Lena Näre and Michael Collyer have made reference to the fact that while domestic labor is not new to Italy, until three decades ago it was mainly performed by internal rural migrants. At the same time, the rather recent economic development of Italy transformed the country from a labor exporting country to a destination for migrant workers from the developing world. The combination of these two phenomena together with the lack of an enforced migratory policy made Italy an appealing destination for thousands of migrant workers since the 1980s.

⁵⁷ While Näre points to a kind of embarrassment manifested by migrant workers who are performing what they would consider to be female work in Sri Lanka, my own impression from conducting fieldwork with male returnees was that what they found somehow amusing was that they could make so much money with it. They probably found that domestic work was not a worthy activity, but at no time they felt their virility or reputation was at stake.

⁵⁸ Some people sent wooden furniture, like large almirahs and bookcases. But while in Italy people would regularly send back home items that would be easily found in Sri Lanka although of different brands and, according to them, lesser quality. Amongst the most usually listed items were cleaning products for the bathroom and kitchen, concentrated fruit juice and pasta and pomodoro sauces.

⁵⁹ It must be noted that obtaining Italian citizenship is extremely difficult today, compared to laws regulating citizenship in countries like the United Kingdom and France, which have similar number of foreign residents living within their territory. However, access to work and residency permits is relatively easier.

⁶⁰ Briefly returning to the work of Akbar Abbas on Shanghai, "This grotesque element hints at something quite significant about Shanghai's cosmopolitanism, which could be extended even to the cosmopolitanism of other cities. It suggests that the cosmopolitan attitude in this case consists not in the toleration of difference but in the necessary cultivation of *indifference* [...] Furthermore, to some extent the colonial experience had shattered the innocence of difference. The end result of having to negotiate a multivalent space that makes so many contrary demands on the individual was the cultivation of indifference and insensitivity to others."

CONCLUSION

When I first became interested in this ethnographic project in 2008, my main objective was to approach the process of labor migration to Italy from the perspective of transnational studies. As my previous research work had been focused on diaspora communities and immigrant lives in the context of globalization, the transformations that I could observe at a glance in Negombo, neatly corresponded with those interests. However, as my fieldwork advanced, I realized that transnational studies and globalization were unable to shed light on some of the questions that became central to my project.

I encountered two main problems. The first was that transnational approaches were mainly concerned with the ways in which individuals try to maximize benefits in the context of globalization. From this standpoint, decisions that people took to uphold the values of the community and had no utilitarian justification, were simply not considered within the scope of transnational studies. The second problem was that globalization studies generally intended to explain transnational connections in the context of recent technological and ideological developments. Even when they recognized that contemporary global networks were often built on older connections, their interest was to examine the novel aspects of these rather than the continuities that could be observed.

The work of some of the main scholars of transnationalism – mainly Peggy

Levitt, Steven Vertovec and Nina Glick-Schiller – was useful to interpret utilitarian decisions that migrant workers took. Particularly when it came to issues of financial and social remittances (Levitt 2001) and the ways in which these transformed Negombo, transnationalism approaches provided a useful theoretical framework to interpret the consequences of cultural contact.

Negombo Catholic migrants developed their lives in an authentically transnational space (Guarnizo & Smith 1998), where decisions were taken after careful consideration of the consequences that their actions would have in both of their places of residence. But although migrants cared about the potential ramifications of their decisions in Italy and Sri Lanka, their actions did not have equivalent effects in the two places. Some decisions taken in Italy stayed in Italy, while others were altered and exaggerated by the work of distance and gossip – their meaning transformed by the time they reached Sri Lanka. Yet other times, the absence of appropriate cultural references necessary to interpret certain actions in Italy led to plain misunderstanding and confusion when evaluated in a Sri Lankan context.

While migrants were not free from responsibilities towards the community when in Italy, distance attenuated and sometimes distorted the way in which migrants and non-migrants perceived the lives of each other. This was one the negative consequences of the process of becoming cosmopolitan. As migration allowed people to discover different ways of living life that suited them; those who had not

left, perceived these changes as the consequence of the loss of ethical values and of the uncritical embrace of capitalist moral codes.

Levitt and Nieves-Lamba (2011) have recently remarked that by focusing on the economic aspects of remittances and migration, scholars and policy-makers have ignored the fundamentally cultural character of migration. Studies intended to assess the economic impact of remittances and the potential for success of development initiatives not only fail to acknowledge the cultural aspects of migration, they also fail to approach migration as a preeminent cultural action.

Examples of new studies on social remittances that Levitt and Nieves-Lamba use to support their argument have focused on the transfer of certain cultural practices to new social settings; however, they still appear to leave fundamental aspects of ethical values and moral reasoning aside. For example, some authors have found that wives of Mexican male migrants in the U.S. tend to smoke less and exercise more often than their non-migrating counterparts do. Others have shown that migrants from Morocco and Turkey take particular reproductive decisions based on what are the common practices that they encounter in their destinations – families that travel to Europe tend to have fewer children while those who go to the Middle East have more. But although these new studies acknowledge the relevance of culture to migration and remittance flows, they are unable to offer arguments that can explain which practices are people more likely to adopt. The importance of an ethical

approach to transnational migration studies is that it can offer a way to distinguish between practices that will be evaluated using a practical kind of rationality and others that will be evaluated using an ethical kind of reasoning. It is these practices that migrants will be more reticent to approach critically, as they are deeply seated within the core values of the community and are believed to be fundamental markers of their identity.

This brings me to my final point, which is to reiterate the need to consider the *longue durée* when approaching cases of transnational migration. Critics of globalization approaches have correctly pointed out that many of the distinctive features of globalization are not entirely new; they are often the re-articulation of older historical practices in a new technological and ideological context. This perspective states the need to critically approach globalization and transnationalism studies in order to determine what is truly new about the cases that they are examining and focus exclusively on these. The problem with such an approach is that it implies that whatever is not a new phenomenon should be left to the study of historians and only used as contextual information. However, by stressing the importance of ruptures with the past, these critics of globalization obscure the importance of certain continuities that can shed light on contemporary transnational flows.

This notion has gained particular acceptance amongst anthropological and historical studies of Islamic transnational networks that relate contemporary flows of pilgrims, commerce and migrant workers with older connections established by merchants and other Muslim travelers (Ho 2006). The Indian Ocean became the natural space where to study a web of decentralized networks that did not trace bidirectional trajectories between an imperial center and its periphery. A myriad of port cities and littoral societies that extended from East Africa to Southeast Asia was approached as the precedent for contemporary global connections. But as Simpson and Kresse (2008) have noted, approaching the Indian Ocean as a highly integrated region and observing continuity between old and contemporary networks may be a too ambitious project.

With this caveat, my ethnography took inspiration in the work of some of these Indian Ocean historians and anthropologists to approach transnational migration amongst Catholic Sri Lankans in the context of larger cultural flows made possible by the expansion of Christianity across Asian coastal populations. As with Muslim travelers, there appears to be a particularly cosmopolitan awareness amongst many of the people who migrate for work in Italy and periodically return to renew ties of affection and responsibility with the hometown. These transnational links do not need to be taken as a sign of continuity with older traditions, but the presence of history – manifested in churches, family names and aspects of a shared faith with the

new employers – certainly provide cultural beacons on which contemporary migrants can draw connections.



I started this monograph saying that everyone wanted to leave Negombo. To conclude, I use an ethnographic vignette that brings into question my opening statement. While interviewing a girl in her mid-twenties whose brother had been living in Italy for the last six years, I insistently asked about what she thought of people from Negombo obsessively consuming Italian food and how this had changed eating habits and other aspects of the local culture. Slightly exasperated, she dismissed my question with an argument that threw my project back into context and made me quiet and reflexive for the next few days. She said,

It is not that people love Italian food too much, Sri Lankans in Italy love our food, they love and miss rice and curry, but it is fun to try something different sometimes, we all like a little change once in a while, no?

Her words stopped my endless inquisitiveness about something that to her represented a rather superficial and trivial matter. People returning or wanting to return from Italy were not facing multiple “identity crises.” They had a clear notion of who they were and a very acute understanding of their country and the possibilities available for their return. At the end of the day, return migrant workers were

confronted with a radically different way of living in Italy, with experiences and practices that would have been unimaginable only a few years earlier. They had successfully adapted to different lifestyles that demanded an enormous mental and moral flexibility. After this life journey, most of them had realized that in spite of all the advantages that could be derived from migration, they wanted to live in the country where they grew up, and they wanted to raise their children in that same place. If they had been able understand difference in Italy and live with it for years, it comes as no surprise that they demanded a similar attitude from their community and their country, and that they expected to imagine a different way of being Sri Lankan.

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