A broken chain? Colonial history, middle-class Indian migrants and intergenerational ambivalence

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Abstract

The article explores ambivalence among middle-class Indian migrants who return to India after their retirement. It discusses intergenerational ambivalence from the dual perspectives of the relation between older migrants and their parents, and that linking the former to their migrant children today. Older migrants' transnationalism is an important yet under-researched topic. It offers insights into the temporal dimension of ambivalence: how family contradictions accompany and change throughout the life course, and how they orient migrants' understandings of the past, present, and future. Central to the analysis is the relation between migrant intergenerational ambivalence and the historical development of the Malayali middle class at home and in the diaspora. Moving beyond studies on ambivalence that mainly focus on Euro-American societies, it explores the phenomenon in postcolonial locations. The article discusses the extent to which colonial forms of socio-geographical mobility shape older migrants' ambivalence across generations, vis-á-vis broader middle-class expectations around educational/professional attainment, reproductive choices, and care provision. It suggests that a temporal perspective on ambivalence is useful to highlight how transnational family ambivalence is shaped not only by present-day uncertainties but also by political and cultural history. It also enhances our understanding of how dispersed families negotiate ambivalence in the long term, and the cumulative effects of these negotiations in the production of novel care arrangements in the present.

Keywords

This article explores the relation between migration, intergenerational ambivalence, and class mobility in postcolonial contexts. It draws from ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews conducted in Kerala[1] (South India) with Hindu and high-caste Nambudiri migrants. It analyzes ambivalence as a feature of migrant kinship relations, in a context where transnationalism is key to class mobility. By focusing on older migrants who have returned to Kerala after retirement, I look at intergenerational ambivalence from two interrelated perspectives, focusing on the relation between older migrants and their parents, and that between the former and their migrant children today.

While ambivalence in sociological literature emerges as a feature of intergenerational relations at large,[2] I consider transnationalism as a context of 'accentuated ambivalence' (Madianou, 2012: 287):

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dispersed kin are compelled to rework their relationships in the light of new socio-cultural exposures and related lifestyle expectations, increasing the contradictions involved in kinship (Baldassar, 2008; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011). I see ambivalence as a condition marked by the existence of contradictions emerging from the socio-economic uncertainties, geographic separation, and cultural plurality that shape migrant family life across different contexts. Specifically, migrants' intergenerational ambivalence is understood as constituting 'mixed or contradictory feelings and attitudes toward a family member in another generation' (Lendon et al., 2014: 272) who is neither living in the household nor participating in daily family care.

The analysis presented here explores ambivalence in the under-researched context of older people's international mobility (Gardner, 2002; Walsh and Näre, 2016; Zontini, 2015). It has three interrelated aims. First, it moves away from a prevalent conceptualization of ambivalence as an individual phenomenon. It looks at how contradictions in migrant families are produced by processes of middle-class formation in a transnational setting and, importantly, at how coping with ambivalence brings older migrants to reframe care work arrangements so as to reduce their own vulnerability. Second, it complements an overall synchronic approach to ambivalence by developing a much-needed historical perspective (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips, 2011; Peletz, 2001) on the prolonged effects of history on migrant family contradictions. Finally, it addresses the fact that studies of ambivalence mainly focus on Euro-American contexts and explores the phenomenon in postcolonial locations.

The article begins by reflecting on the importance of bridging two largely disconnected bodies of literature: sociological work on intergenerational ambivalence and socio-anthropological literature on transnational families. I outline the colonial roots of Malayalis' socio-geographical mobility since the beginning of the 20th century. The empirical sections discuss the impact of history on older migrants' ambivalence at two interrelated levels. The first focuses on older migrants' direct experiences of mobility since the 1920s and identifies a fundamental source of ambivalence across generations in the tension between caste, migration, and class mobility. The second traces the legacy of past ambivalence in relation to older migrants' dilemmas concerning their children's transnationalism. In the final section, I discuss how intergenerational ambivalence enables renewed forms of joint family living as a strategy of care provision.

The article suggests that migrant intergenerational ambivalence is the result of cumulative colonial and postcolonial invalidation of traditional kinship, with the latter seen as a hindrance to socio-geographical mobility. From the colonial period onward, caste belonging and genealogical continuity became inconsistent with emerging middle-class family models centered on self-determination and international exposure. This tension between 'old' and 'new' family models accompanies older migrants' experiences of international mobility, and frames their ambivalence toward ancestors. Furthermore, the legacy of the past holds relevance for the mixed feelings older migrants have toward younger generations: their appraisal of the freedoms available to young people as well as the anxieties about family dispersion and care that accompany their late maturity.

Intergenerational ambivalence and transnational families

Family ambivalence is traditionally analyzed in terms of individual emotions (Smelser, 1998; Weigert, 1991) at the expense of broader explanations centered on family relations (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips, 2011). Exceptions stress the importance of studying family ambivalence within the context of changing socio-economic structures and how prolonged ambivalence produces new kinship relations (Connidis and McMullin, 2002). However, empirical analyses remain limited. A relational perspective on ambivalence is important to understand how contradictions are generated by coexisting – though at times incompatible – expectations around attitudes, beliefs,

and behaviors assigned to a specific social status (Merton and Barber, 1976). It offers insights into how the ambivalence generated by contradictory norms is actively conceptualized, experienced, and negotiated by migrants in relation with other family members and with society more generally (Gallo, 2015; Madianou, 2012). In the context of the present analysis, a relational perspective on ambivalence underscores how older migrants' contradictory feelings toward their ancestors and children arise from long-term processes of middle-class formation through international mobility, and the resulting emergence of models of the 'modern' middle-class family. In addition, it allows us to see how prolonged intergenerational ambivalence prompts older migrants to initiate changes in their family relations and residential patterns to ensure they receive adequate care after their return to Kerala.

The limited use of the concept in understanding transnational families partly results from the fact that the possibility of negotiating intergenerational ambivalence is often associated with spatial proximity and frequent contact (Ko, 2012; Lee, 2010). Yet it is important to theorize mobility and absence as a common feature of family life (Gallo, 2008; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011), and to understand how intensified population movements shape care relations 'at-a-distance' (Nobles, 2011; Parreñas, 2005). Different reasons can be advanced for considering transnationalism as a context of accentuated ambivalence. Migration challenges conventional understandings of the household by questioning the unity between dwelling, home, and kin (Gardner and Grillo, 2002). Yet it also produces networks of dispersed kin who may retain a sense of collectivity, mutual dependency, and welfare commitments (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002). Transnationalism exposes families to uneven distributions of resources and lack of reciprocal exchange, as well as intergenerational disappointment and prolonged kinship tensions (Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Huang et al., 2012). Existing work focuses on parental care (Boccagni, 2012; Madianou, 2012) or on adult migrants' concerns about their aging parents (Baldassar, 2007; Maehara, 2010). Limited studies explore how old age brings migrants to critically evaluate the past, present, and future, and how ambivalence accompanies transnational life throughout the life course (Attias-Donfut and Waite, 2012; Gardner, 2002). Little attention is paid to the meanings of growing old within transnational families (Walsh and Näre, 2016; Zontini, 2015). Furthermore, while studies stress the importance of mapping how present transnationalism is rooted in the globalizing tendencies of colonialism (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Vuorela, 2002), the question of how older migrants (directly or indirectly) engage with colonial history is rarely addressed.

Ambivalence and temporality

As noted above, transnational studies implicitly pave the way for the adoption of ambivalence as an analytical category to understand how migrants orient themselves among contrasting kinship possibilities, and how they rework family relations accordingly. This article draws from and contributes to this literature by exploring the meanings of ambivalence in older migrants' transnational families from a temporal perspective, and placing these meanings in relation to postcolonial sending contexts. It develops a *historical* understanding of how present-day intergenerational ambivalence is rooted in colonial history.

Ambivalence is usually analyzed in the context of (non-migrant) nuclear families in Western contexts (Cohler, 2004; Sarkisian, 2006). Less attention is paid to mobile families from postcolonial locations who build their relations across borders. The limited use of ambivalence in transnational studies partly results from a persistent bias in the representation of (migrant) families from postcolonial countries. As some authors note, the latter are often depicted as more influenced by traditional (and de-historicized) structures of kinship solidarity, or as destabilized by conflicts emerging from their encounters with a (supposedly) Western individualist ethos (Gallo, 2008;

Osella, 2012). This reading leaves limited room for an understanding of the deep changes in sending contexts that have historically accompanied migrant families and of how these changes shape ambivalence in kinship relations across time (Gallo, 2017). The study of the prolonged nature of ambivalence in postcolonial contexts is necessary to go beyond prevailing family paradigms centered either on *solidarity/continuity* or on *conflicts* (cf. Lüscher and Pillemer, 1998), and to see contradictions as a constitutive and transformative element of kinship across time. In many postcolonial contexts, migration and transnationalism do not uniquely reproduce customary kinship relations, nor do they necessarily cause untreatable family disruptions (Gardner and Osella, 2003; Vuorela, 2002). Since the late-19th century, people in Kerala – and in India more generally – have engaged with transnational migration in a context of deep transformations in kinship structures initiated both under colonial rule and by indigenous nationalist movements active in Kerala from the 1920s onward. These changes reframed the contours of 'modern' caste- and class-based communities, while also opening spaces for contradictions in family relations (Gallo, 2015; Kurien, 2002). Migration both reflects and generates renewed intergenerational contradictions that may bring migrants to transform their family relations and to limit or enlarge their kin networks in novel ways. The analysis developed here suggests that present ambivalence in older Nambudiri migrants' intergenerational relations is the result of this group undergoing a long-term shift from caste elite status toward that of a modern middle class, with resulting invalidation of customary kinship norms.

I suggest that a focus on ambivalence that connects past, present, and future is particularly useful to highlight how transnational family ambivalence is shaped not only by present-day uncertainties but by political and cultural history. It enhances our understanding of how transnational migration has historically served to transform intergenerational relations against the backdrop of postcolonial modernity, how contradictions are negotiated at a distance in the long term, and the cumulative effects of these negotiations in the production of novel family arrangements.

Research contexts and methods

This article draws from 3 years of fieldwork conducted with middle-class Malayalis between 2000 and 2009 in the port city of Kochi, central Kerala. Kerala is a multi-religious state with a high rate of social development (demographic control, high life expectancy and literacy level), yet it also has a low gross domestic product (GDP), a high rate of youth unemployment, and a long history of emigration. The Malayali middle class is an internally composite group whose origins are largely rooted in colonialism. Its postcolonial development was further influenced by the combined effects of state-planned development (Devika, 2008) and mass migration from the 1970s onward (Osella and Osella, 2000). Caste markers remain important to some extent in the legitimation or invalidation of class status (cf. Donner and De Neve, 2011). I focus here on the high-caste group of Nambudiri Brahmins.

In colonial India, Brahmins were at the forefront in making use of the opportunities for socio-geographical mobility made available by the British (Fuller and Narasimhan, 2008). However, Nambudiris were also distinct because their caste orthodoxy was criticized as 'backward' by colonials. British rule undermined the traditional caste status of Nambudiris as aristocratic landlords, and enhanced the upward mobility of Christian and other Hindu communities. Unlike in other parts of India (Leonard, 1992), Nambudiris in Kerala did not have the 'licence to leave' (Baldassar, 2007: 282), and pioneer migration took place against the wishes of kin. The interest in this community lies in the specific dialectic between caste and class – and between continuity and change in kinship relations – that accompanies their generational experiences of migration and produces family ambivalence (Gallo, 2015).

The research combined archive research, semi-structured interviews, and family life ethnography. The archive research included family-policy documents produced between the 1920s and the mid-1940s by British officers and by the Nambudiri reform movement, the Yoga Kshema Sabha (henceforth YKS). This located the analysis of pioneer migration within the context of *ongoing* transformations in gendered family norms. A total of 25 Nambudiris (16 men and 9 women) aged between their early 60s and mid-/late 70s were involved in the research. All had experienced colonial reforms personally or through kin; they had all migrated following childhood and achieved professional status in the diaspora (mainly as lawyers, doctors, teachers, or engineers). Many owned their own houses in Kerala and benefited from a pension in a foreign currency, with at least one child living abroad and others working within India. While they form a privileged group in Kerala, this did not prevent anxieties around legal, financial, and relational insecurity related to their own migration and that of their children.

Interviews aimed at understanding how intergenerational ambivalence accompanied older migrants in their life course, and the influence of the past on the present. I asked participants which specific aspects of their own and their children's migration raised mixed feelings and determined contradictory responses. These often unraveled how present ambivalence was determined both by longer-term caste changes and present normative models of how a 'good middle-class migrant family' should be. The use of direct questions about mixed feelings is often adopted during interviews to invite active reflections by participants on which circumstances generate ambivalence (Connidis and McMullin, 2002; Lendon et al., 2014). Ambivalence also constituted a 'folk concept', in my experience, spontaneously adopted by respondents during interviews to make sense of specific situations.

Preliminary interviews laid the ground for a more relaxed acquaintance, and for a participatory observation of family life dynamics. The latter was crucial to understanding how Nambudiri men and women negotiate in the home the ambivalence emerging from different class and family expectations related to their kinship roles as 'modern' parents (cf. Hochschild, 1989). Participant observation encouraged a better understanding of how mixed feelings and contradictory attitudes spontaneously emerged in daily family relations and talks. Involvement in the daily routine facilitated the collection of narratives, understood as life stories which imply a temporal ordering of significant events and which are narrated to make sense of contradictions (cf. Etherington, 2007). Narratives offer insights into how history shapes the more 'private' domain of family relations (Gardner, 2002; Mand, 2013) and shed light on more 'spontaneous articulations of ambivalence' in older people's understandings of care (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips, 2011: 207). Furthermore, narratives allow us to go beyond Smelser's (1998) original understanding of ambivalence as an unconscious individual response to emotional dissonance, and therefore as an attitude that slips away from people's critical awareness of their social locations. Older Nambudiris actively oriented themselves toward compassionate or harsh appraisals of their family lives: they actively reflected on the causes, contours, and consequences of ambivalence.

My position as a White, European, middle-class doctoral student both benefited and limited my fieldwork. Initially, persistent colonial legacies and Brahmin elitism led to my acquaintances holding a defensive position when discussing their family histories (Gallo, 2011). They often laid claim to Indian families' moral superiority in comparison with the European 'individualistic ethos'. Slowly, however, this attitude gave way to more relaxed conversations. My educational background identified me as 'similar' to the Brahmin community, which claims higher education levels. My age during the fieldwork – between 27 and 30 years old – encouraged older Nambudiris to establish a teacher–pupil relationship in guiding me through the intricacies of Malayali migration history.

Colonial migration, family change, and middle-class formation

In Kerala, pioneer migration resulted partly from a structural tension between caste and genealogy, on one hand, and new forms of class mobility, on the other. In turn, it produced new contradictions in community and family belonging. Present intergenerational ambivalence among old Nambudiri migrants should be analyzed in relation to the historical processes of class development and of related reforms in the joint family structure, marriage, and intergenerational hierarchies. Through land reforms, the creation of a modern state, and international mobility, colonialism transformed the political and socio-economic premises of 'traditional' hierarchies. New class privileges were only partly built on caste structures and often conflicted with them (Osella and Osella, 2000; Raman, 2010). The tension between 'old' and 'new' became particularly evident in the domains of kinship and family. Colonial documents show the emergence in the late-19th century of an ideological association between socio-geographical mobility and new family forms: renouncing old-fashioned Malayali family hierarchies was necessary in order to take up the migration possibilities of the time. Nuclear families began to be preferred to joint families, and young couples were encouraged to free themselves from the 'oppression' of older generations (Devika, 2007). Yet for a long time, Nambudiris refused to abandon polygamy or the system of primogeniture. With the exception of the eldest son, Nambudiri men could only entertain relations with lower-ranked Hindu women. The children born out of these unions were not recognized as Brahmins, had no relationship with their biological fathers, and were barred from entering Brahmin houses. Nambudiri women were usually married polygamously to older Nambudiris. They were frequently widowed at a very young age but could not remarry. These features of Nambudiri kinship concerned British officers and Malayali middle-class reformers, including young Nambudiris. The 1891 Malabar Marriage Commission Report (Malabar Marriage Commission, 1891) criticizes the Nambudiri community for indulging 'in old fashioned family structures' and having little use for 'the progress of the Indian nation' (p. 64). The invalidation of old kinship norms went hand in hand with the erosion of Brahmins' land privileges, as well as migration: Brahmin properties were increasingly confiscated and Nambudiris' presence in the state bureaucracy was challenged by the new Christian and Hindu middle classes.

Against this backdrop, in the early 1920s, the YKS began advocating that young Nambudiris should marry and move freely, refusing the dictates of older kin (Nambuthiripad, 1926). Given that only a small percentage of children were considered legitimate members of the Nambudiri community, changes in kinship rules were considered imperative in preventing demographic decline. Challenging kinship norms was key to obtaining better educational and working skills, in common with other Malayalis. Young Nambudiris began leaving Kerala as skilled and semi-skilled migrants from the 1930s onward. However, migration remained a sacrilegious act resulting in caste/family exclusion up until the 1970s (Gallo, 2017). Only after this period did migration become a widespread community practice. New job opportunities in Persian Gulf countries, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia – as well as in developing Asian states like Singapore – encouraged Nambudiris to emigrate.

Since the late 1950s, migration has also overlapped with Kerala's implementation of family planning and sterilization policies. Drawing from the colonial delegitimation of old joint family hierarchies, these asserted a new progressive association between small family size and responsible (and mobile) citizenship (Devika, 2008). Sterilization allowed women to reduce the 'burden' of child-rearing and gain flexibility of movement. Many distinctive features of Malayali development depend heavily on international mobility and foreign-currency remittances. Kerala is often depicted by migrants as 'cultivated' yet 'provincial', failing to reward its youths with adequate work opportunities and lifestyles. Migration for young Nambudiris is today a rite of passage toward attaining or consolidating middle-class status.

The beauty and shame of mobility

Older migrant Nambudiris are among the bearers of the colonial and postcolonial transformations outlined above. They were initiated into migration by their pioneer parents, or by their own decisions as young migrants, and have built lives abroad. After Indian Independence (1947), some migrants returned to India to work as government officers or professionals, while some went back to Kerala temporarily before moving on again to the Persian Gulf. For others, colonial mobility represented a stepping stone to migration to Europe, the United States, or Australia. Gendered migration patterns saw a pioneer Nambudiri man and a 'following' wife. Wives often refused traditional 'housewife' models, investing in education and subsequently obtaining semi-skilled or skilled work. Their children differed in their exposure to international mobility: some never lived in their parents' home country, while others migrated after spending their childhood/adolescence in Kerala; some returned to Kerala later but emigrated again in search of better opportunities.

Pioneer Nambudiri migrants saw migration as a route to class mobility and modern family models. Being away from restrictive caste rules of primogeniture (for men) and forced spinsterhood (for women) made marriage and parenthood possible, as the stories below illustrate. However, the establishment of new kinship relations in the diaspora carried a high cost. First, for many years, transnational migration meant sacrificing the privileges of a high-caste status and being excluded from the reassuring dimension of a collective identity. Second, pioneer migration took place in a context of tense kinship relations produced by contrasting models of family and community life emerging under colonial rule. These contradictions made it difficult for migrants to view past generations as a source of genealogical continuity or to be nostalgic about the homeland. Rather, there was a mixture of criticism of old caste structures, and the desire to contribute to the birth of a new Brahmin identity, that framed pioneer migrants' ambivalence with respect to their kin in Kerala.

Krishnan's[3] story exemplifies the tension experienced by Nambudiri migrants between modern parenthood, on one hand, and having to rework their relations with kin and caste fellows in Kerala, on the other. In 2002, Krishnan, a 72-year-old Nambudiri doctor, was living in Kerala after a long life in the United Kingdom. He entered the YKS in 1945, aged 15, to campaign against the kinship rules of elder Nambudiris. Tense relations with his parents made him decide to move to Delhi, were he worked as waiter to fund his education. In the late 1950s, he moved to the United Kingdom with his wife. Migration led to his exclusion from his family and community, and for many years, he and his parents refused to talk to each other. Krishnan's parents considered him a traitor to the Brahmin community, complicit with colonialism. Krishnan saw his parents' orthodoxy as the cause of Nambudiri backwardness. The passage below highlights how the colonial tensions between 'old' kinship rules and 'modern' family models accompanied Krishnan's migration, and shaped his feelings toward his parents:

Ester:	How do you feel when you think of your parents?
Krishnan:	It is not easy. When I was young I thought that they did not love me: they never accepted my decision to go abroad. They never helped me in difficult moments. They were sons and daughters of their own time.
Ester:	In what sense?
Krishnan:	Sometimes there is the need of breaking rules.[4] My parents believed that only the oldest son could marry, that young people should stay at home. If I had followed them I would have not become a doctor and had my own family. With all my years abroad, I have gained a family and lost another one.
Ester:	What do you mean?
Krishnan:	My marriage with Sunitha, my daily life with my own children, my work as a doctor: all this is normal for us today, but in colonial times it was a big scandal!

> I was condemned to be a sterile young dependent: no spouse, no kids, no job. In order to have a happy family life I left Kerala. This meant not to be a Brahmin, to deny your own past blood relations: this is what migration was about for us. But in doing this we paid homage to modern Kerala, and we saved Nambudiris from decay! I helped my family a lot from [the] UK, despite their disdain.

For Krishnan, as for many Nambudiris I spoke to of his generation, rights to marriage and fatherhood in colonial times strongly depended on the questioning of old kinship rules. Migration was key to this project: had he remained in Kerala, marriage and parenthood would not have been possible. Migration produced family conflicts but also allowed him to transform his identity from that of a young Nambudiri cadet into a mature professional; to join the ranks of young Malayalis who grasped the opportunities offered by colonialism. Despite prolonged tensions, Nambudiris like Krishnan also remained committed to helping younger kin in Kerala: their remittances served to fund their relatives' education and improve their lifestyles. Transnational migration brought difficulties in complying with customary intergenerational care responsibilities, but it also raised the possibility of gradually rebuilding kinship connections through new forms of commitment at-a-distance.

While mobility in colonial times bore the stigma of compromising caste orthodoxy in favor of colonial and nationalist projects of social change, it also opened up paths to new kin relations, class mobility, and modern citizenship. Tension between the sacrifice of old relations and the opening of new kinship possibilities frames older Nambudiri migrants' ambivalence with past generations. The meanings of intergenerational ambivalence are deeply informed by the broader turmoil generated by colonial rule and by indigenous reformist movements like the YKS. On one hand, conservative Nambudiris accused pioneer migrants of betraying community tradition in the name of international exposure. On the other, migration allowed pioneer Nambudiris to commit to the nascent Malayali middle-class model of monogamy, equal marriage, and parental rights. In the process, transnational migration represented proof that Nambudiris were able, like other Malayalis, to become responsible citizens and to actively participate in nationalist projects of family and class modernity.

Among old Nambudiri migrants, the recalling of colonial mobility revealed an ambivalent sense of loss and gain regarding family pasts. They rarely stressed an intention to limit relations with their parents during their years abroad. Rather, during these years, they constantly tried to convince elder kin to look more positively on their 'unorthodox' decisions. At the same time, Nambudiris' memories voice their difficulty in accepting past histories of decay and isolation. Older migrants' ambivalence arises from the impossibility of viewing the relation between past, present, and future in a linear way: from a persistent conflict between the search for a reassuring genealogical continuity and the appraisal of family breaks as liberating events. Ambivalence toward ancestors, in particular, results from the desire to rebuild past connections while in the diaspora, combined with the difficulty of seeing the past as a source of stability.

There is an important gendered dimension to intergenerational ambivalence. Nambudiri men experience a heightened tension between the appraisal of class mobility and the troublesome witnessing of their forebearers' decline. Older Nambudiri women's ambivalence stems more from contradictions inherent in their kinship roles: the appreciation of their own marriage and maternity choices in the diaspora coexists with the unpleasant sense of having been denied their filial rights back in the homeland. Older migrant women's intergenerational ambivalence toward their parents results also from the fact that their experiences as wives and mothers abroad were not in line with their mothers' family models. Historically, Nambudiri women were subject to strict seclusion (*purdah*); colonial mobility had profound consequences in terms of their family relations. The case of

Umadevi unravels the coexistence of contradictory models of womanhood since colonial times, and how this has produced intergenerational ambivalence which persists today. Born in 1932, Umadevi was married at 14 as the third wife to an old Nambudiri man. When her husband died 6 months later, relatives from the YKS organized a secret marriage for Umadevi with a young Nambudiri lawyer working in Tanzania. Her re-marriage drew strong condemnation, but moving to Tanzania allowed the couple to have their three children 'away' from kin constraints. When Umadevi's second husband died in 1960, she went back to New Delhi to work as a teacher. In 1965, she married a Nair[5] man against the wishes of their kin. The extracts below illustrate the mixed feelings among older Nambudiri women in assessing migration as both painful and liberating:

> I often thought that living like my mother could have been easier: she had a more protected life in *purdah*, but old rules would have left me with no future and joy. […] Under old kinship rules my children would [not have been] meant to be. When I left my village I stopped being a daughter for many years, but instead I could become a mother.

Migrant women's experiences of wifehood and motherhood find little resonance in past family histories. In bearing the stigma of unorthodox life choices, migrant families' decisions are remembered today as a source of suffering. This feeling was exacerbated by geographical and emotional distance; perhaps more importantly, ambivalence toward kin and caste community, however, produced a renewed transnational commitment. Through remittances or by funding migration, pioneer Nambudiri women not only fought against the sense of disconnection, but more poignantly supported younger kinwomen and relatives struggling to gain family and educational rights.

Old Nambudiri migrants look back at ancestral relations with both longing and sharp criticism. Their parents' lives provided reassuring models, but also symbolized backwardness: following ancestral paths would have bound them locally, and prevented them from having their own families and/or gaining modern Malayali citizenship. The tension between these informs the ways in which old migrants conceptualize their class mobility across history: leading toward traumatic community ostracism but also disclosing social possibilities across territorial and socio-cultural difference. This is a key feature of many older middle-class Nambudiris' transnational identity, and their experiences have also formed a model for future generations.

Overall, transnational mobility both resulted from and channeled a critique toward the caste orthodoxy of previous generations and their resistance to colonial change. It both resulted from and produced ambivalence in migrants' intergenerational relations, in turn. Migration in colonial times challenged conventional understandings of the household, its hierarchies, and distributions of resources (Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Gardner and Grillo, 2002). It questioned younger generations' subordination to the authority of Brahmin elders. It also produced a generational gap between a decaying landed elite and a mobile class of Nambudiris, who were gradually able to compete with other Malayalis for better educational or job possibilities abroad.

Being elderly: 'when everyone leaves'

Older migrants' ambivalence toward generational relations markedly influences their sense of belonging to Kerala, and their decisions to return 'home'. On one hand, like many aging migrants, most Nambudiris have seen the return to their homeland as being in line with a 'good' old age (Bolzman et al., 2006). It represents a way to access cheaper care facilities and to rebuild kin connections within the Brahmin community. On the other hand, however, Kerala is still regarded as too conservative when set against the more liberal environments of destination contexts. Ambivalence

toward past generations also informs migrants' residential choices after return. Older migrants rarely chose to go back to their native villages, preferring 'houses and lands without a past' – as one informant put it – in the city center. This reflects a search for balance between recreating a sense of 'home' and reinventing its premises.

Return also poses new challenges to older Nambudiri migrants in their relations with migrant youth. One key consequence of mass emigration and family planning since the 1970s is that many older people in Kerala find themselves in a situation of uncertainty with respect to family care provisions (Rasi and Sudhir, 2012). In addition, older Nambudiris today face a structural contradiction in the way normative 'middle-class family' models are promoted at the public/domestic level. On one side, migration and transnationalism are part of a wider social critique of the effects of consumerism. Migration impacts on the growing number of resource-rich children, who are seen as characteristic of contemporary Malayali middle-class families. Present-day Kerala is experiencing a moral public crisis (Chua, 2011): nuclear families are depicted as sites where intergenerational temporality is dramatically contracted, and where the success of modern parenting is questioned by the increasing rate of youth suicide. Mass migration is condemned for leading to materialism, kinship fragility, and care deficits. In the context of my research, this moral discourse is typical among urban middle classes. The model of a (superior) sober and caring family is contrasted with the vulgar and unedifying behavior of those nouveaux riches who have more recently entered international flows. Yet this discourse does not go unquestioned. Migration is still largely seen as a necessary and desirable way to successfully achieve adulthood and socio-economic independence (Osella and Osella, 2008). Remittances are determinant in achieving (residential) independence for young couples, and in 'proving' their move from provincial to cosmopolitan culture to wider society.

Overall, moral criticism of mass migration coexists with renewed appreciation of it as a path to class mobility and youth transformation. During arranged marriage negotiations, for instance, Nambudiri middle-class parents often struggle to find a balance between the desire to find a cultivated and 'well-connected' spouse in the diaspora, and the moral need to secure a partner with 'good' care values and who is ultimately rooted in 'Malayali' culture. I suggest that this tension between cosmopolitanism and territorially based notions of care shapes older Nambudiris' ambivalence toward their migrant children. Mixed feelings toward new generations are generated by older migrants' engagement with two coexisting models of middle-class families, both generated by a long history of transnationalism. The first model draws from long-term Malayali migration history and exalts transnationalism for offering exposure to new socio-economic and cultural possibilities which, in turn, pave the way for independent nuclear families. The second model asserts the value of family norms/roles which are more centered on youth responsibility and caring, even if carried out at-a-distance. It denounces the risks of international migration which, combined with the effects of family planning, has left an aging population without certainties around care provision. This duality of class-based family models shapes how older migrants relate to present youth migration. Older Nambudiris wish to let their children continue the project of self-assertion they struggled for themselves. Yet they also wish to mitigate the fears of loneliness and physical fragility that accompany their late maturity. Importantly, such mixed feelings do not only address concerns relating to family futures. They also reflect older Nambudiri migrants' anxieties around being recognized as progressive – in contrast to how they perceived their own elders in colonial times.

Dickey (2012) notes that middle-class status in India has a deep relational value: it needs to be acknowledged by others in terms of conformity to normative family ideals. Older Nambudiri migrants today aim to be recognized as 'modern' by other Malayalis. At the same time, they shun being categorized as overly liberal or materialistic parents, who raise children unable to care for

others. Nambudiris regard their children's migration as a cumulative process of family/personal growth which nevertheless presents relational and moral risks. In the passage below, Kavitha, 72, makes sense of her children's mobility by drawing on her own personal migration history:

> *Ester:*   What do you think about your children living outside Kerala?
> *Kavitha:*   Here there is big talk [of] old people being abandoned by our children. I am now 72 and I am worried. But I do not have the courage to ask my kids to come back here: it would not be correct after all the struggle in our community to respect youth freedom. I do not like loneliness, but I also think that in this way I am a good mother … and what would people think of us today? That we are acting like past Nambudiri ogres?
> *Ester:*   What would people think of you?
> *Kavitha:*   Migration has never been obvious for us … in colonial time it meant suffering, isolation, caste conflicts. We were called traitors. I think we need to be aware of this, to build on the sacrifices made by people who had the courage to change, to challenge old habits. If today I impose choices on my children, I would not only feel to betray my own history, but I would also have to confront with Malayalis thinking that Nambudiris have gone back to an orthodox past.

Old Nambudiris like Kavitha are often concerned about the risks of being considered backward by modern Malayali middle classes, despite their struggle to make migration and family change accepted in their own community. The need to legitimize their class status has accompanied Nambudiri migration since colonial times: today it leads them to commit to a liberal attitude toward their migrant children. Nevertheless, the rewards of showing appreciation toward present forms of migration do not outweigh the fragilities of old age. Intergenerational ambivalence in this respect thus results from the coexistence of a sense of pride in supporting their children's mobility with the awareness of 'losing control of youth' and 'getting prepared' for long-term loneliness.

Youth reliability in providing care to aging parents is integral to Nambudiri ideas of a 'good old age' (Vatuk, 1990), and transnationalism challenges long-term generational reciprocity. However, older Nambudiri migrants also associate 'good parenting' with the degree of freedom they allow their children. Older Nambudiris' anxious yet wishful participation in youth migration is shaped by the awareness that public condemnation of international mobility would relegate them to a backward colonial past. Older migrants' understanding of intergenerational relations is therefore shaped by simultaneous contrasting ideas about youth migration: it symbolizes at once a temporal continuity with pioneer mobility and modern family change, and the risks of future uncertainty. More specifically, ambivalence in intergenerational relations emerges in relation to the career choices of migrant adult children, reproduction, and the educational values of grandchildren. Again, these mixed feelings are gendered. Older women I spoke with worried about the reproductive choices of their migrant daughters. In line with the commitment to active Malayali citizenship among pioneer Nambudiri migrants, postcolonial acceptance of family planning is taken today as a symbol of loyalty to the Keralan national development project. Having only one child facilitates international mobility and transnationalism: it frees women from the burden of raising many children and allows funds to be channeled into higher education and future forms of transnationalism. Yet the decision of young migrants to stick to a one-child model also concerns old Nambudiris in terms of future care reciprocity. Ambivalence toward youth migration is generated here by mixed feelings on the long-term effects of family planning. Small families are often contrasted with more oppressive extended kinship networks. Older Nambudiri women express sadness about care deficits in the sending context of Kerala, but at the same time, they are aware of the double burden that their

middle-class daughters face in the diaspora: to be professional working women while caring fully for their children.

Concerns also involve long-distance communication strategies. Limited communication facilities also affected older migrants' feelings toward their elders. Memories focus on 'prolonged silence' between different contexts: distance allowed more freedom but was also as an obstacle to rebuilding relations. Today's technologies offer aging Nambudiris better opportunities for reciprocal communication. However, rather than reducing ambivalence (see Singh, 2016), technology *accompanies* older migrants' concerns about their children forgetting what one of my informants called 'flesh and blood contacts'. Respondents complained that when in Kerala for vacations, their children spent little time 'at home' and preferred 'hanging around' visiting friends or going to holiday resorts. Many older Nambudiri fathers remarked that they were happy their children could enjoy better financial security but also criticized the latter's tendency to conflate 'good care' with 'making a call or bringing many gifts'. Older Nambudiris were often ambivalent about their children's visits, commenting that they would prefer them to come with empty hands but more time for a relaxed chat or a walk. From the other side, in separate interviews, migrant youth often shared their guilt over not fulfilling parental expectations during home visits. While they stressed that their parents exaggerated the extent of their absence from home during vacations, they also noted that Kerala offered them consumer, tourism, and lifestyle opportunities which were becoming increasingly difficult to afford in the United States or Gulf countries.

Overall, Nambudiris' intergenerational ambivalence toward their migrant children should be located in the wider context of Malayali middle-class family history and structure. The joint family model declined alongside increasing socio-geographical mobility. Both processes are taken as a valuable expression of middle-class status. Yet demographic change, an aging population, and high youth unemployment in Kerala combine with class competition to make intergenerational care a moral concern and a highly debated issue among mobile Malayalis.

Coping with ambivalence and new family arrangements

Older Nambudiri migrants are caught between powerful memories of past caste/kinship norms and the 'modern' relations they create with their children. The ambivalence that emerges from this tension between past and present contributes to reshaping kin relations and producing novel care arrangements. Indeed, ambivalence toward migrant children emerges more forcefully in relation to the worsening health of older parents. While my acquaintances were adamant that family life should allow children to be independent, older migrants also expected their migrant adult children to be more physically present in the event of their own decreased autonomy. Narayanan's words, below, clearly reflect his ambivalence toward his children's emotional and financial neglect:

> I started to have diabetes problems a few years ago, when I turned 75. I have a good pension, but the private care expenses in Kerala are growing. Sunil, our son, seemed very distant and reluctant to help us: he said that life conditions in Dubai are difficult, that he did not have leaves and that if he is fired his visa expires. I understand that for Sunil it is more difficult than what it was for us, but I also think that he could have tried harder to show his closeness. I was away when my own father died, in colonial times we have never had good relations. This left a big scar on me. I think I have been different from my father, and I would not want Sunil to feel guilty as I did … I told him to learn from our family history.

To some extent, older migrants accepted the failures of migrant children in meeting intergenerational expectations, noting like Narayanan that working conditions abroad have worsened in recent decades. However, the burden of past family tensions has a continuing importance in old Nambudiris' relations with their children. In order to avoid falling back into past difficulties – and in keeping with

their liberal attitude toward their children's migration – old Nambudiris also expect to build closer relations with their children through transnational kin work (Baldassar, 2007; Gardner, 2002). Significantly, ambivalent feelings toward their children are located within a longer family history (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips, 2011) in which present relations are assessed and valued by drawing from past forms of communication with or disconnection from ancestors.

Ambivalence is a socially embedded condition that can act as a catalyst for coping strategies and for resulting changes in intergenerational relations (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips, 2011). In light of worsening health conditions, older migrants try to shape new family arrangements at two interrelated levels: first, by questioning patrilineal residential forms and second, by reinventing new forms of joint family living. In principle, many older Nambudiri parents had higher expectations of their sons than their daughters. This is partly due to the influence of patrilineal and post-marriage patrilocal residence: sons are expected to repay generational debts by taking care of their aging parents, while daughters 'belong' to their husband's families. However, migration challenges these patrilineal structures and principles, often leading older migrant parents to willingly accept living with their daughters' families. Older Nambudiri widows in particular appreciated the possibility of living closer to their daughters, as they felt more comfortable with being assisted by a blood relative than by a daughter-in-law. They reflected on the fact that this was impossible under old family rules, whereas it is common in Europe or the United States, and valued the move away from the patriarchal joint family as an outcome of their personal mobility history.

Prolonged ambivalence toward migrant (male and female) children also prompted older migrants to question the need to rely solely on their children's support, and to envisage complementary care strategies. This reduces their dependency, releases children from excessive anxiety, and softens possible conflicts. One significant change taking place in Kerala during my research period was the diffusion of (re)renewed forms of joint living, which differed from 'traditional' forms. Among Nambudiris, the joint family used to include three to five generations with a resulting demographic expansion, and strictly followed patrilineal principles. Present forms are significantly reduced in genealogical depth and membership, and often combine matrilineal and patrilineal kin: they may include an older migrant person/couple together with their younger siblings and the latter's families, for instance, or younger nephews and their children. In both Kochi city and the surrounding area, daily care needs were met by inviting younger relatives from the countryside to live with migrant elders whose children were abroad. In exchange for care assistance, poorer relatives were provided with board and lodging and the opportunity to study or find jobs (usually part-time) in the city. In general, the specter of inadequate care provision readies many older Nambudiris to adjust to alternative family arrangements. These result from older migrants' intergenerational ambivalence toward the emotional and relational shakiness of contemporary nuclear families: small families are considered appropriate for nurturing couple intimacy and independence, but expose older members to negligence and loneliness.

Older migrants try to cope with the intergenerational ambivalence generated by new family residence patterns by embedding their lives within limited networks of selected kin, so as to reduce vulnerability. In this respect, reaching late maturity leads Nambudiri migrants to reinvent joint family arrangements beyond 'traditional models'. This is considered important to provide youth with chances for socio-geographical mobility and older migrants with necessary intergenerational care.

Conclusion

Ambivalence is important for understanding the tension between (changing) kinship norms and unpredictable/unconventional ways of 'making' families in the diaspora. In the context of the present analysis, intergenerational ambivalence is not an expression of individual feelings (Smelser,

1998; Weigert, 1991). Rather, it historically results from the colonial encounter between contrasting kinship models, and from the longer term processes of caste/class change produced by transnationalism since the late-19th century. It may well be argued that postcolonial citizens cannot but have ambivalent feelings toward their family pasts. Indeed, as the history of Nambudiris shows, colonial migration both invalidated old kinship rules and opened up new possibilities for 'making families'. This generated mixed feelings toward the past and the future of family life: old migrants have come to terms with the losses and gains in their community status and kinship history. Yet the legacy of colonialism in present family ambivalence is rarely interrogated. This article demonstrates that older Nambudiris' ambivalence toward their children and ancestors should be understood in the broader context of transition from 'traditional' caste structures toward 'modern' middle-class status – a transition largely shaped by transnational migration. For Nambudiris, this transition also needs to be legitimated in the present vis-á-vis other – and more successful – middle-class Hindu and Christian communities.

Overall, despite its potential for analyzing transnational mobility, insufficient attention has been paid to the ambivalence of the immigrant experience (Kivisto and La Vecchia-Mikkola, 2013; Gallo, 2015). This article addresses this gap and develops a dialogue between sociological studies of intergenerational ambivalence and the literature on transnational families. Going beyond the Euro-American context, it explores how older Indians' engagement with colonial and postcolonial migration shapes the complexity of intergenerational care. Taking into account long-term changes in postcolonial sending contexts is valuable in two main respects. It avoids explaining intergenerational ambivalence in transnational families as solely the result of a departure from an essentialized notion of 'traditional family solidarity' often associated with the kinship culture of sending countries. Furthermore, it locates intergenerational ambivalence within a deeper history of family change taking place in related contexts of mobility.

Subscribing to the need of fostering our understanding of older migrants' transnationalism (Walsh and Näre, 2016), I explore intergenerational ambivalence in older migrants' relations with their (immobile) ancestors and their (mobile) children. I locate intergenerational ambivalence within the broader processes of transformation of Nambudiri Brahmins from an old caste elite into a modern middle-class group: this has been closely linked with international migration from colonial times onward, and has impacted on genealogical rules. In states like Kerala, characterized by a deep history of socio-geographical mobility, the analysis of older migrants' narratives offers a vantage point for the temporal understanding of intergenerational ambivalence. Older migrants' narratives act as a *trait d'union* between the ambivalence generated by pioneer forms of mobility and those related to contemporary mass migration, and map continuities and novelties in intergenerational dialectic. They also allow us to connect the contradictions emerging in 'private' family domains with class mobility processes and to trace the effects of colonialism on present intergenerational ambivalence toward migrant youth. Indeed, temporality is much needed in order to go beyond a dominant static conceptualization of ambivalence, and to see its transformative properties in family relations (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips, 2011; Peletz, 2001).

Since the 1930s, Nambudiri migrants have been confronted with historical changes promoted by colonial and indigenous middle-class reformism and, in postcolonial decades, by state development projects and related family planning models. Middle-class family arrangements stand as a precondition, and an outcome, of socio-geographical mobility: they promise liberation from past intergenerational constraints, and yet produce experiences of isolation and fragility. Intergenerational ambivalence accompanied the Nambudiri move from large patriarchal family structures toward smaller family units, the negation of old kinship rules, and engagement with renewed marriage and parental models. Marriage and parenthood required older Nambudiris to challenge genealogical

connections to the point of being excluded from their community. Class achievements and new family roles in the diaspora coexisted with unease over 'left behind', 'backward', and 'decaying' older generations. Today, the attainment of a progressive model of Malayali citizenship requires older Nambudiris to cope with their children's choices (such as sterilization), and to sacrifice proximity and daily care in the name of liberal parenthood.

Older migrants actively reflect on family *gains* and *losses* entailed by socio-geographical mobility. They confront across time the coexistence of conflicting kinship norms, emotions, and aspirations, and negotiate between them (Connidis and McMullin, 2002) in order to (re)frame and make sense of their family relations. Ambivalence toward parents/ancestors reflects a wider ambivalence toward community history: a sentiment toward the past which cannot be captured only in terms of migrants' nostalgic search for continuity, nor the passive acceptance of genealogical breaks. Vuorela (2002: 69) rightly notes that displacement makes individuals very conscious of how their experience is located within the 'the chain of historical events' (see also Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002). Among older Nambudiri migrants, ambivalence is less an unconscious or unspoken state, and more an emotional and relational situation that prompts them to critically assess the past, present, and future. Older Nambudiri migrants actively reflect on how history shaped their lives, and on the contradictions generated by their moves across different contexts and changing community and family codes. Yet, in making sense of the temporal orientation of transnational families, Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) tend to conflate an 'orientation toward the past' with 'nostalgia'. However, as this articles highlights, older migrants' engagement with their colonial pasts is not necessarily marked by nostalgia for 'lost' family models. Rather, for aging Nambudiri migrants, past domestic relations associated with the homeland do not necessarily – and certainly do not uniquely – constitute a reassuring nest in which to nurture genealogical continuity. Their transnational experiences prompt them to critique of ancestral kinship models, and yet also to express the desire to rebuild kinship connections on a new basis.

The ethnography of Nambudiri Brahmins shows how transnationalism gradually became an integral component in intergenerational relations, and how the contradictions prompted by past mobility bear significantly on the ways in which older Nambudiris engage with present migration. Older migrants negotiate intergenerational ambivalence toward their children in the attempt to preserve the value of youth freedom without excessively weakening parental connections and care possibilities. In the process, new kinship arrangements in the forms of 'modern joint families' are established as a way to lessen possible intergenerational tensions. In this respect, intergenerational ambivalence does not necessarily stem from an absence of solidarity or from direct conflict, nor is it resolved simply by choosing between kinship roles (Connidis and McMullin, 2002). Rather, in opening up spaces for negotiations between different contexts – and between related social roles and affective codes – ambivalence also brings with it substantial transformations in intergenerational and family relations. In this respect, ambivalence offers alternative and nuanced interpretive tools to the solidarity-versus-conflict models, and does so by inviting us to consider how transnational family relations are dynamically constituted out of the coexistence of opposing social forces across history.

Notes

1. Kerala is a South Indian state created in 1956. Kerala citizens are called Malayalis.
2. See the next section for a discussion of the literature.
3. All names have been changed.
4. The idea of breaking kinship rules is expressed through the concept of *aajaras*. This term literally means the questioning of traditional (caste and kinship) customs: it has a negative meaning insofar as it is used to describe acts of disrespect toward tradition. However, in daily usage, the term also conveys a positive evaluation of those behaviors and circumstances that have led to new life opportunities.
5. Nairs are a Hindu community, of high status but traditionally ranked below Brahmins.

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