*Article*

Ethnicities

Ethnicities
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–22

DOI: 10.1177/14687968211069376
journals.sagepub.com/home/etn
SAGE

# Domestic religion and the migrant home: the private, the diasporic and the public in the sacralization of Sikh dwellings in Italy

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## Abstract

Migrants' home, as a notion and a set of related experiences and locations across countries, is subject to an increasing research interest. Little of this, however, has looked at their ways to circulate and emplace religion, through portable beliefs, artifacts, and practices, as a form of home-making. Likewise, little of the debate on home and migration has explored the home, not just in terms of housing conditions or material cultures, but as an infrastructure for migrants to reproduce their collective identities through religion. We contribute to fill these research voids with a case study of "domestic religion" among Sikh immigrant families in Northern Italy. We specifically analyze the religious practices whereby some migrants, building on certain objects and ways to use the domestic space, turn ordinary dwellings into meaningful homes. Their ways to "sacralize" the home through temporary or permanent infrastructures of religiosity illuminate changing uses and meanings of home. Moreover, they reveal the critical interdependence between the home and the public and diasporic spheres of religion. This opens up a potentially very rich field for research on the lived experience of domestic space, showing how religion (re)shapes the home, and the home (re)shapes religion, across immigrant groups, and life course positions.

## Keywords

religion, immigration, Sikh, domesticity, sacralization, home-making

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## Introduction

"You can leave your shoes here," Simran tells me, pointing to a corner in the corridor and handing a *dastar* to cover my head. She opens the gate that goes up the stairs to the prayer room. She holds a plate with some of the food we will eat tonight—thinking of me she cooked pizza—but the guru eats first. Her children come with us and we go up slowly in a row, as in a procession. The prayer room is heated. I sit aside while I watch them do the *Sukh Asan*, the evening ceremony with which the *Sanchi Saroops* are closed and placed in a special bed. Everyone knows what to do with expert gestures. I feel welcome to a very intimate part of the home. Then the light is dimmed and the door closed: we can go back to the kitchen for dinner.

(Bertolani's fieldnotes, October 2020)

Home may assume key symbolic and emotional functions that exceed its basic remit as a sheltering place, but also its expected qualities like comfort, privacy and security. For people who live away from what used to be "home" like international migrants, in particular, the domestic space may embed significant extra-domestic functions. One of them involves the possibility to reproduce meaningful traits of one's lifestyles previous to migration, protected from the gaze of so-called *receiving societies*. Religion, we maintain in this paper, provides a rich repertoire for these micro-forms of "domestication." Although the everyday practice of religion has a major public and collective resonance, it is also mediated by domestic objects and rituals whereby some migrants feel more at home, in two overlapping respects: cultivating a sense of continuity and consistency with cherished traditions of the past, and achieving an emplaced sense of security, familiarity, and control over space in the present (Boccagni, 2017). Such a twofold sense of home is, intriguingly, both *hyper-local*, as it rests on special ways to use micro-portions of space, and *close-to-global*, as it connects them with remote domestic and public locations in the country of origin.

Interestingly, empirical research on the domestic experience of religion among international migrants is rather infrequent and scattered across disciplines (see, however, Hirvi, 2016; Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 2004). This may have to do with the typical challenges of social research into the intimate and private space of the home. Yet, as we illustrate through our case study of Sikh households in Northern Italy, the significance of these day-to-day practices for dwellers themselves should not be underestimated. Their societal implications are worth exploring further. In order to do so, we investigate migrants' lived experience of religion precisely through the prism of home, both as a special location and a multi-scalar form of place attachment and differentiation (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Boccagni et al., 2020). The dwellings of our Sikh informants emerge as intimate stages for religious practices. In turn, these practices re-signify the domestic environment and connect it with external scales of identification and belonging. On one hand, the domestic celebration of rituals that are foundational to the Sikh collective identity reshapes the home environment and supports the development of family relations and the transmission of Sikh values over time (Hirvi, 2016; Nesbitt, 2004; Singh, 2012).

On the other hand, the domestic experience of religion impinges on private–public relations, as it interplays with the public sphere of gurdwaras. Furthermore, this religious practice affects migrant connections with domestic and religious life in India and in the diaspora.

As we were let into the homes of our Sikh immigrant informants, we encountered spatial and temporal thresholds between the mundane and the sacred, based on certain ways to readapt and appropriate domestic interiors and objects. Similar developments are still little visible in the literature on migrants' emplacement of religion, as we show in *Section 1: On the domestic emplacement of religion as home-making*. After a brief description of our case study, we explore the sacralization of immigrant homes and its social consequences in three respects: the literal home-making, that is, day-to-day gendered routines of care and ritual appropriation which lead to a substantive differentiation of the domestic time-space for religious purposes, and shape the sense of home of dwellers themselves; the transnational circulation and portability of religious objects and symbols, which reveal emotional and practical connections between domestic spaces in Italy and Punjab; the everyday interdependence between religious practice in the private and public domains, hence the (dis)continuities and mutual influences between the lived experience of religion at home and in gurdwaras. In sum, through our exploratory case study we aim to move forward in addressing two research questions on home and religion among migrants: How do religious practices shape, and possibly change, the domestic space? And, how does domestic space reshape religious practices inside it?

## *Section 1: On the domestic emplacement of religion as home-making*

The study of the emplacement of religion in everyday life has gained increasing salience over the last decades (Knott, 2010; Tweed, 2006). As long as religious practice makes certain places special, separate from the rest and subject to distinctive emotional attachments, it can be seen as a form of place-making; indeed, of *home*-making, whenever this involves the (re)production of meaningful traits of one's idea of home, including multi-sensorial connections with it (Ahmed, 1999). This research focus is particularly promising for people like international migrants, who may carry their erstwhile religious habits and practices into new, initially less familiar, life contexts (Kivisto, 2014). Not by chance, an extensive literature is available on the role of religion in immigrant adaptation. Among other aspects, religious institutions may facilitate their local inclusion (Ebaugh and Chalfetz, 2000), the socialization of second generations (Hall, 2002; Nesbitt, 2000; Singh, 2012) and the reproduction of transnational networks (Jacobsen and Myrvold, 2015). Much of this research, so far, has involved the institutional and public aspects of religion. These are more visible, easily observable and politically challenging, as long as they entail claims for readaptation of the public space (Dwyer, 2016). Far less research has been done on religion within private homes, and hence on the central question of this paper: how immigrants use their domestic space to enact their religious identities, and ultimately to make themselves at home.

There is a situated materiality in migrant ways of home-making, including those mediated by religion, which should not go unnoticed. Although a number of international

migrants do engage in transnational and diasporic lifestyles, this is not in contradiction with their need to anchor a sense of home into distinctive local settings (Boccagni et al., 2020). Their own dwellings may be subject to meaningful readaptations accordingly. As Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2004) maintain, the home—as an infrastructure and a repository of artifacts, affordances and situated practices—plays an important role for identity continuity and cultural transmission. At the same time, it actively shapes it. For example, certain domestic infrastructures remind migrants of their erstwhile domestic space, or of their homeland in general (Lozanovska, 2019). Domestic material cultures may connect them with other meaningful places and relationships, including religious ones (Levin, 2016). Some objects in particular operate as transitional tools (Metha and Belk, 1991): once incorporated into the home through particular rituals, they enable migrants to interconnect their present and past life experiences (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996).

More generally, migrants may transform their standard housing spaces following family needs and moralities of appropriateness and comfort that are contextually redefined through objects, furnishing, and décor (Hadjiyanni, 2007; Vahaji and Hadjiyanni, 2009). In the case of the Sikh households in our study, the use and the presence of certain religious objects modify the lived experience of the domestic space and the feelings of home embedded in it. Rather than having only functional or esthetic value, these objects hold a thresholding function that is both spatial and temporal (Shove, 2003). They are activated in ways that differentiate home interiors and family routines between sacred parts and surrounding, mundane ones.

At the same time, it is important to explore how the transposition of religious performances within private dwellings affects the individual and collective practice of religion. This needs to be reconciled with the infrastructures available indoors and with the rhythms and tasks of family life. Moreover, the domestic emplacement of religion occurs in relation to, and is shaped by, alternative settings and infrastructures: those preceding migration, the current ones in India or elsewhere in the diaspora, the virtual ones of online communication and the public ones of gurdwaras. We approach these distinct but interrelated spaces as different *scales* of religious practice. Their ongoing entanglements mirror people's position over the life course as well as broader societal conditions and constraints, like the pandemic-related ones. Before discussing this, we present our case study and methods.

## *Section 2: Research context and methods*

This article is part of HOMInG, a comparative study of migrant views and experiences of home, including their religious practices as ways of home-making. Within this broader research design, Bertolani conducted exploratory fieldwork with 10 male and female Sikh migrants and their families in Northern Italy. These were selected for having built dedicated religious infrastructures in their dwellings. In-depth interviews with them, except in two cases, were part and parcel of multiple home visits (Ratnam and Drozdzewski, 2020) within religious spaces ranging from prayer rooms to specially adapted domestic corners. Bertolani conducted this part of fieldwork between September

2020 and March 2021, against a twofold, pre-existent background: her decade-long familiarity with local gurdwaras, which has recently enabled her to interview 20 young and middle-aged Sikh immigrants about the meanings of home and religion in everyday life (Bertolani, 2020a); and her visits to their communities of origin in Punjab (Bertolani and Boccagni, 2021), resulting in participant observation in their domestic spaces and in twenty more interviews with relatives of her informants in Italy. These interviews were paralleled with the observation of non-textual materials such as home-related pictures and videos, as well as religious objects, books and garments. Although the Covid-19 emergency did slow data collection, Bertolani's familiarity with the interviewees allowed her to be well received in their domestic spaces, while complying with the emergency rules. Furthermore, she conducted some Skype interviews with informants that would have been hardly accessible otherwise.

Admittedly, this research design had its own dilemmas, particularly in terms of reflexivity. However, listening to her informants' accounts and observing their religious practices, Bertolani was still approaching them as specially enacted performances. Although these ritual practices are highly codified, they might follow slightly different lines in the absence of an outsider. Both Bertolani's confidence with several informants and her previous expertise on Sikh religious life, however, militated against the risk of a skewed representation. Moreover, such dilemmas are constitutive of social research in any domestic space (Boccagni, 2017). As we aim to illustrate, they may well be counterbalanced by gains in understanding people's everyday life from "within." Overall, then, our analysis is exploratory in scope, and yet based on privileged access to hard-to-reach domestic spaces. To our knowledge, no comparable research has ever been done on Sikhs in Italy, due to the difficulty of approaching intimate religious spaces with the already intimate space of the home. The scarcity of similar research elsewhere across the Sikh diaspora (except from Hirvi, 2016) makes it difficult to make comparisons or generalizations. In the UK case, with the Sikh population being concentrated in certain urban areas, local gurdwaras are an obvious and accessible option for daily prayer (Bertolani, 2020b; Bertolani et al., 2021). However, family prayers at home are equally critical to the transmission of religious identity (Ballard and Ballard, 1977; Singh, 2012). The lesser diffusion of gurdwaras in Italy, often in suburbs that are hard to reach by public transport, may encourage even more the domestic practice of religion. This occurs, as we shall see, in variable forms and degrees.

Sikhs in Italy, mainly coming from Punjab, make up the majority of Indian residents in the country. They are also the largest community in continental Europe, around 70,000 (Thandi, 2014). Their number has grown since the early 1980s, due to the civil war in Punjab and the limitations in reaching English-speaking countries. Sikhs mainly reside in the north and are well-integrated in the local economy. Their local settlement has been paralleled by the setting up of over 40 gurdwaras, mostly in permanent buildings owned by the local religious community. This has favored the prevalence of a public identity narrative based on the *Khalsa*, that is, the *amritdhari* Sikhs (Nesbitt, 2005). This is a politically active minority that respects a strict code of conduct and wears religious symbols. In fact, social and religious differentiation within Sikh communities (Bertolani, 2018) has so far prevented the development of a unitary leadership and an official

recognition from Italian public authorities. This, in turn, may stimulate domestic religious practice. Intimate spaces host and enable forms of religious resignification of the home that we approach in themselves and through their connections with public and diasporic religious spheres.

## *Section 3: Exploring the sacralization of home interiors*

How do our informants reproduce the sacred in their homes? Domestic sacralization stems from the ritualized use of particular objects and spaces, which emplaces physical, temporal, and emotional thresholds. Following Rose (2011: 124), religious objects are significant in themselves as markers of a metaphysical presence. Since they may be linked to memories, people, practices and homes elsewhere, they are also a "material stake" to mark what "is materially absent or elusive." Their ritual use results in a "religious landscape" that conjugates sound-, smell-, visual-, taste- and touch-scapes (Eck, 1981; Hirvi, 2016), creating ecstatic atmospheres (Bille, 2017). It is worth exploring in fine grain how this process affords people to connect with communities and temporalities beyond the here-and-now.

*Objects as affordances for sacralization.* In visiting the dwellings of her Sikh informants in Italy and Punjab, Bertolani encountered religious objects and spaces that varied from a few artifacts, wherever located, to prayer rooms packed with sacred objects. This diversity had to do with the size of a dwelling and the number of household members, but also with the variable significance of religious material cultures as repositories of family identities and memories over time.

Certain objects were present in all the homes Bertolani visited: breviaries (*gutke sahib*, small books containing daily prayers), *rumallas* (richly decorated fabrics that wrap them), and the gurus' images. Those of Nanak and Gobind Singh (the first and last guru), in particular, are likely to be found in most Sikh families in the diaspora. Along with photographs of sacred places like Amritsar's Golden Temple, these pictures visually distinguish Sikh homes from those of other South Asians. As an iconography, the representation of the ten gurus embodies the history of Sikhism and conveys its symbols and values. Through the repetition and visual transmission of the same historiographic narrative, a collective identity and a shared history are recreated and shared. Such a recurring symbology makes the home aesthetically suitable to Sikh values (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 2004) and operates as a "visual vocabulary" for the diaspora (Tolia-Kelly, 2004).

Fundamental to domestic sacralization are the *Sanchi Saroops,* a version of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikhs' sacred book, printed in two or more volumes. This was present only in some of the houses visited by Bertolani, and was considered particularly precious and worthy of devotion, care and respect. Once the *Sanchi Saroops* are in the house, daily family routines and the use of domestic space may be readapted accordingly. As one participant, Kulbir Singh, noted, "without *Sanchi Saroops*… it is not home." Like "a guru in the house" and a living presence, this object turns the house into a home by virtue of the words it contains and of the intimate relation with God that its ritualized use enables. From

an "emic" or insider perspective (Kilde, 2013), the presence of the *Sanchi Saroops* in the house transforms the domestic space and enforces certain expectations. "Anyone who has *Sanchi Saroops* at home," says Kulbir, "knows that they must behave in a righteous way, not be violent, not raise their voice, respect their family." At the same time, ritual engagements with them may act as structural spaces of in-betweenness that reduce the separation between the human and the divine (Turner, 1977).

*Everyday routines and needs of domestic adequacy.* The maintenance of domestic adequacy for this sacralization is enmeshed in the fabric of everyday life. It may be mostly a woman's task, through grocery-shopping, cooking, eating, laundering, and cleaning. All these forms of social reproduction become a "yardstick of one's religiosity" (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 2004: 77). For example, wearing shoes may not be allowed inside the home, just like alcohol, tobacco and non-vegetarian food. The laundry of the clothes that wrap the *Sanchi Saroops* for the night should be done by hand at least once per week. The food should be offered first to the guru, then mixed with the rest and ingested by the whole family. Access to the domestic spaces in which religious objects are enshrined should be allowed only under certain conditions. There is a private and intimate dimension to these objects that Tajinder Kaur, a woman in her 40s, acknowledges by keeping her breviaries in a cabinet in the kitchen, despite having a much larger and less used living room.

> [In the living room] people of all kinds may come, right? And I can't stop them from entering the house... someone might have been drinking, someone might have eaten meat, so... we don't want to keep there the religious part [of the house]. In the kitchen, you know, I'm there, I cook, no one enters without my permission. So, we decided to... keep that space cleaner and respect religious things.

Domestic adequacy in Tajinder's place is maintained thanks to the living room acting as an inner threshold between the outside world and the most intimate region of the home (Martsin and Niit, 2005). In this case, the control of domestic space merges with a religious need. It is not only the family but also the religious objects that need protection. For the same reason, Tajinder's parents, who live in an apartment next to her, keep their breviaries in a small handmade wooden cabinet in the pantry. In spite of having a different function, this is their innermost room, nested in the kitchen and inaccessible to outsiders (Figure 1).

In the homes where rooms perform both worldly and religious functions, specific interior areas are made suitable for prayer through gestures and rituals like preparing one's body—washing it, taking off shoes and covering the head—and arranging the space—closing the door, turning off the telephone and television, unfolding a mat, moving furniture and taking the breviaries. These sets of practices are like mobile and temporary thresholds that modify and activate the space, turning it from mundane to ritually appropriate. Moreover, they are adapted to the morphology of the house and to the places where sacred objects are enshrined. Wherever a room is permanently dedicated to prayer, instead, a staircase, corridor or vestibule are structural thresholds, or liminal spaces (Chidester, 2016), between the mundane and the sacred. In practice, even prayer rooms

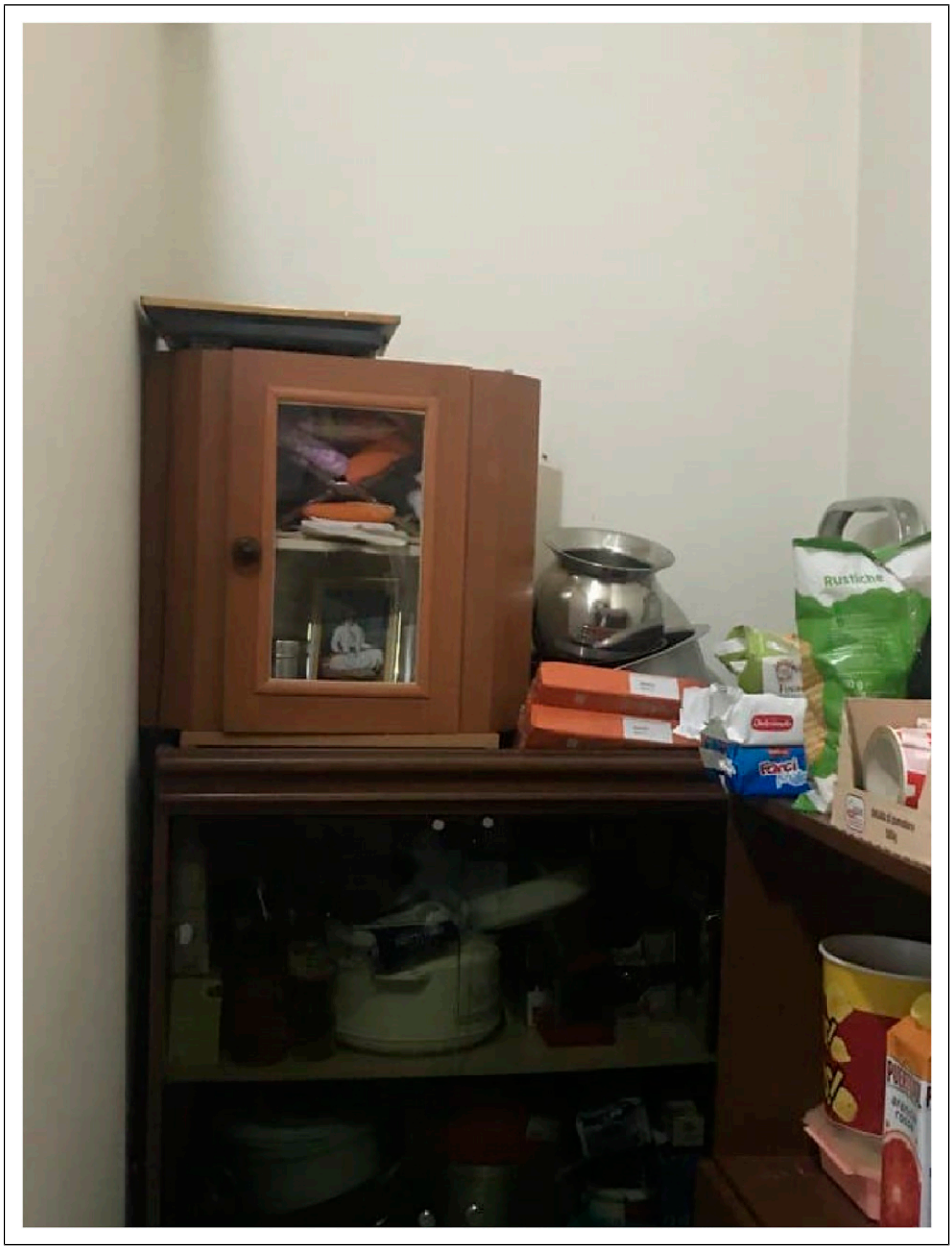


**Figure 1.** The pantry as the safest place in the house.

may be hybrid spaces, due to family needs and routines. "We may use the prayer room to store water bottles or to iron and fold the laundry," explains another informant, Daljit Kaur. Nevertheless, she adds, "you have to take off your shoes and cover your head and no one except family members usually enters there" (Figure 2).

The presence of sacred objects and the requirements of religious practice may change both the use and the perception of a house. In smaller or overcrowded dwellings, dedicating an entire room to prayer and to religious objects demands that some family members give up their own bedrooms. For instance, Sonni Kaur, a young woman in her 20s, lives with her parents and adult brother in an apartment with two bedrooms. Since the family dedicated the main bedroom to the *Sanchi Saroops* 8 years ago, the parents have moved to the smaller room and brother and sister have been sleeping on sofas. The decision, the girl says, came after a growing commitment to religion of the entire family. This led to changing ways to use their domestic environments and to a different understanding of home itself. However, as our fieldwork shows, the *Sanchi Saroops* and other religious objects may well be kept in normal furniture, inside rooms with different functions. Since what matters are not the objects in themselves but the message they contain, our informants engage with everyday prayers in many different ways, often coexisting and contextual. One can even pray by reading the digital versions of the sacred texts, or by listening to the prayers on TV or on a PC. This can be done any time with little previous preparation, as "you don't always have to wait to be cleaned or to go into the room." We could wonder, then, why several of our informants chose to substantially readapt their domestic space to religious objects and practice. This ritualized modification, we maintain, is a form of home-making that helps building connections and continuities with past religious practice, with people living elsewhere and with other meaningful environments (Cieraad, 2010).

*Domestic sacralization as spatial and temporal thresholding.* Importantly, however, domestic sacred spaces are *evolving* sites. Their aesthetics and content change along with personal and family needs and life stages (Tolia-Kelly, 2004). In this process, the tuning of prayer and religious practice with daily family life and rhythms is the result of mutual adjustments. The timing of religious practice may be fixed by certain time boundaries, or by overlapping religious and worldly times and activities, such as the ordinary domestic chores. In the latter case, work itself—both inside and outside the home—can be conceived as a form of adoration and prayer, in a sort of worldly mysticism whereby "work is worship" (Pace, 2005).

In any case, religious rituals contribute to mark domestic time by defining a "before" and an "after" to which specific actions pertain. In doing so, they have a good degree of flexibility to adapt to the commitments of daily life, especially regarding the frequency and duration of prayers. However, the timing of religious practice at home is not irrelevant. Precisely because the domestic space fulfills different functions, each activity needs its own allocation of time and space (Douglas, 1991). In this way, "the home as a temporalized space reveals itself as practiced through home-making" (Miranda-NIeto, 2021a: 106). For example, before praying, many of our informants take care of their body cleansing and then attend to the spiritual one. The morning prayer marks the beginning of

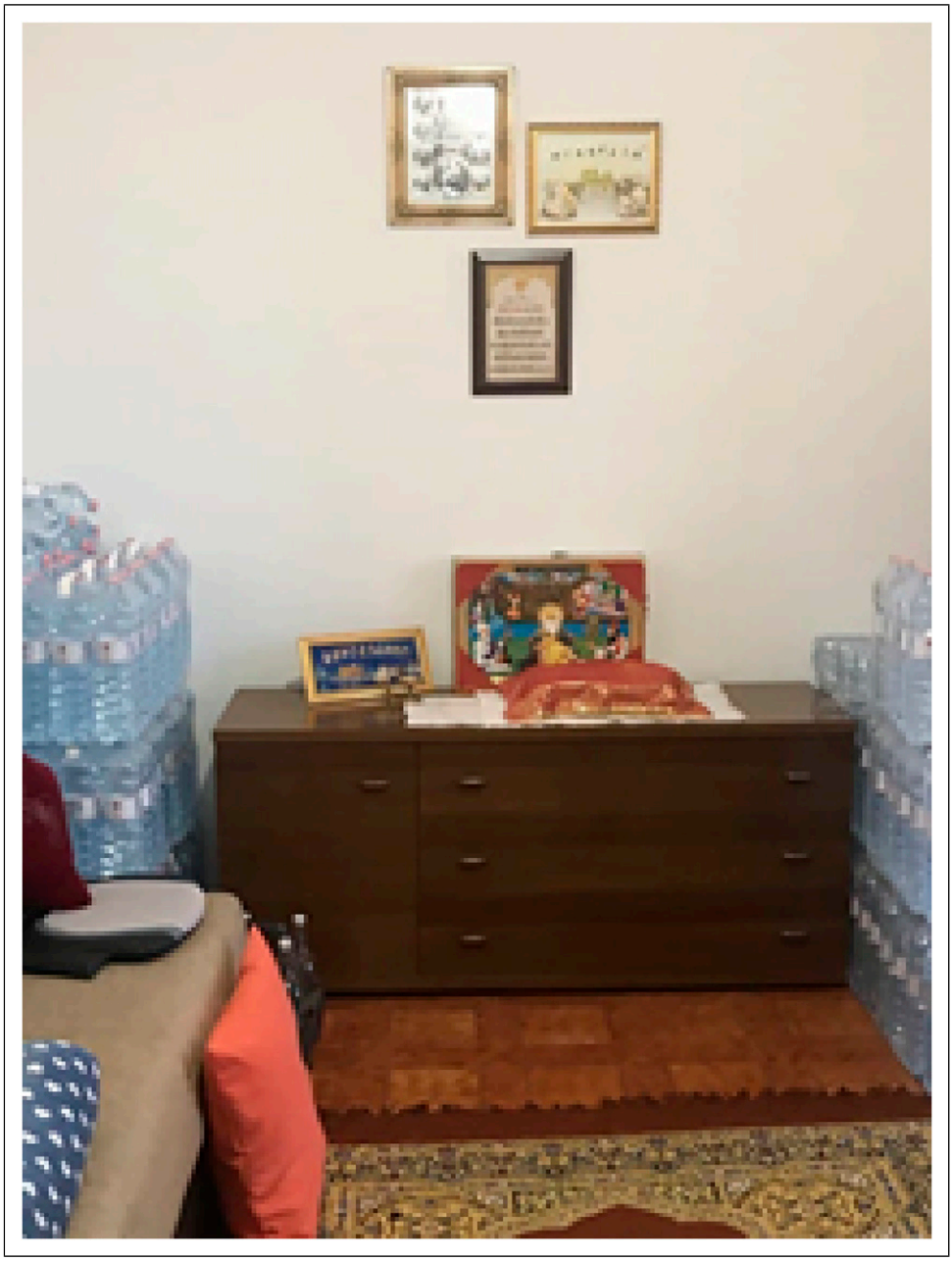

**Figure 2.** Daljit Kaur's prayer room.

the working day with the blessing and guidance of the guru. Afternoon and evening prayers circumscribe dinner and sleep time and mark the end of the day. In short, religious practice results in temporal thresholds that contribute to recreate the domestic space day after day, through both repetition and variation.

Importantly, religious practice at home recalls the past by connecting with memories of childhood objects, places and people. This creates a continuity in people's lives and links between different homes. How were certain rituals performed in the grandparents' Punjabi home in the past? How do they fit in the diaspora and at present? This opens up to the multi-scalarity of home-making through religious practices, to be analyzed in its own right.

## *Section 4: Domestic religion and diasporic connectedness*

The emplacement of migrant religiosity in the home is not mediated only by domestic objects and spaces. It also relies on references and connections with other places, times, and relationships—in short, other scales of religion and home—and acquires meaning in relation to them. We understand scales, here, as an analytics to capture the interdependence between different spatial and temporal settings of religious identification. Scales, in this optic, are spatial as much as temporal, relational, and evaluative (Miranda-Nieto, 2021b).

In the case of Sonni Kaur's family, the extra-domestic connection is both material and emotional. As her pictures and videos show, their prayer room is meant to reproduce an analogous space in her grandfather's house in Punjab, with the same objects, decorations, and colors, arranged in similar ways. In the prayer room of the Italian house (Figure 3), Sonny recounts, "we sit together, our parents read [the *Sanchi Saroops*] and we listen." Likewise, "when we return [to the Punjabi house] we all get together for the evening prayer, the grandfather sits and prays and we listen. We have always done so." In the process, religious objects trigger personal emotions and memories about past homes (Cieraad, 2010). The domestic space dedicated to religion, therefore, is much more than a room for individual prayer. It is primarily an affordance for family and kinship continuity and for reproduction of the underlying emotional bonds (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 1999). Ritualized religious practices in the prayer room assume their distinctive meaning in relation to similar rituals taking place in other homes, in other temporal contexts, among other family members. There is a lived experience of translocality (Appadurai, 1995), as well as of "transtemporality" at stake here. At least for the families (or their individual members) that cultivate this domestic religiosity, the special objects and infrastructures they use in a specific space enable the reproduction of "a global sense of migrant place" (Gielis, 2009; Massey, 1992). Religious domestic space, therefore, may be "active" or productive, thereby influencing religious experience and practice (Lefebvre, 1991).

More specifically, the domestic religious space of a Sikh immigrant family may be connected with pilgrimage sites or spiritual guides that elicit meaningful memories. Joginder Singh and his family are devoted to a Sikh *sant* (Singh Tatla, 1992) who leads the gurdwara of Bulandpuri Sahib in Punjab. Their prayer room hosts images of that sacred

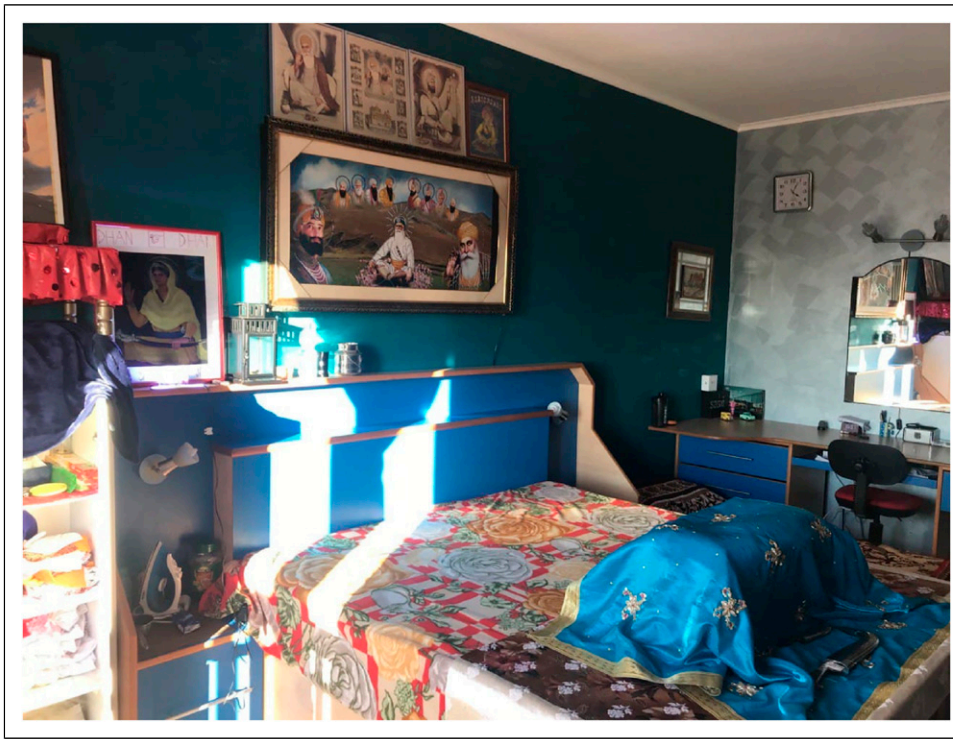

**Figure 3.** Sonny's family prayer room.

place and a faded photograph of Joginder's grandfather with the *sant.* These are precious relics (Tolia-Kelly, 2004), just like the dried rose petals Joginder received from the *sant* before leaving for Italy some years ago. Although showing Bertolani the prayer room in his Italian dwelling, Joginder says that his "moral home" (Riccio, 2000) lies elsewhere, in the previous experiences that give meaning to his present life. It was the *sant* that supported his family's migration and entrusted them with the duty to open a gurdwara abroad. Although currently living in Italy, Joginder and his family are making themselves at home by talking, dreaming, and remembering about a special place in Punjab. Home-making, for them, occurs through family and collective religious practices, both in the private domain and in the public one (the local gurdwara). However, there is more to this process than hanging a photograph, arranging furniture, or decorating a space that recalls a remote location. Home-making is also mediated by intimate conversations about religion and memories of the past (Kabachnik et al., 2010). Recalling them, for Joginder, is a way to make himself at home again through religion.

The very mobility of some religious objects presupposes the ritualization of domestic space through ceremonies that involve different spatial, relational, and temporal scales. In the case of Kulbir Singh, the *Sanchi Saroops* were brought home by an uncle from Switzerland. Their transportation followed strict ritual rules, as did their entry and

emplacement into his house. The sacred books were ceremonially opened and read, prayers were held in the presence of relatives and friends, and ritual food was cooked and distributed to the neighbors. In other cases, the *Sanchi Saroops* were brought directly from India with the help of friends. Either way, the ritualization of the house as a way of home-making (Werbner, 2018) transcends its physical boundaries and inhabitants, involving a variety of extra-domestic scales. Even in the everyday, Kulbir may refer to his uncles in Switzerland and India through WhatsApp whenever he needs advice on ritual engagement with the *Sanchi Saroops*. Likewise, daily WhatsApp group calls among Sikh devotees in different European countries open up a de-materialized and collective space for prayer and meditation (Helland, 2002). Although these religious practices take place in the home, due also to the Covid-enforced limitations, they extend beyond it (Miranda-Nieto, 2021b), thereby encompassing spaces that are both material and virtual, private and collective.

The domestic religious spaces of our Sikh interviewees may even shape the conception of their future homes. Kulbir, for instance, aspires to buy a single house to recreate a "real" domestic gurdwara enshrining the Guru Granth Sahib—like the one he remembers in his grandmother's home in Punjab—instead of the promiscuous space where he is praying now. Likewise, Daljit Kaur, who is currently searching for a new house, stresses the need for a special prayer room:

> When we go to visit the houses [for sale], which we have already seen many, sometimes in somewhat smaller houses, the question arises in the family: 'Ah, but where will we make the room to pray?... how will we do? Where are we going to put [religious objects]?' So yes, it is important to have a space... for prayer.

Objects themselves acquire different worth according to changing social and evaluative scales over time. Some are very common in Sikh houses in India. Within diasporic homes, however, they are heirlooms that hold meaning due to the narratives tied to them or the relationships they embody and disclose (Cieraad, 2010). They may become enacted memories passed on, artifacts for family or for personal re-memory (Tolia-Kelly, 2004) serving as conductive threads of one's entire life. The old and threadbare breviaries of Kulbir Singh and Tajinder Kaur are a case in point (Figure 4).

Kulbir received his breviary from his grandmother before leaving India for Italy, as a reminder of his "true identity" and a "compass for not getting lost." Tajinder's breviary is the first one she received 20 years ago, when she got "baptized" in the gurdwara. It is the symbol of an important identity transformation. More recently, Tajinder moved to the UK with her husband for 1 year, only to decide to return to Italy, where her parents live, as her experience there had not met her expectations. Her husband still lives in the UK for economic reasons and they have not yet decided where to settle permanently. Meanwhile, Tajinder has kept her breviary "at home" in Italy because "it is very precious to me and I leave it still, where it is." Like an anchor for her identity, the breviary should stay in the place where she wants to live. In a similar but opposite way, Tajinder's husband "carries the breviary with him wherever he goes." The ways of relating to this ordinary object articulate their different positions and aspirations, relative to migration, and settlement. At the same time, the breviary is a functional equivalent of their domestic hearth. As such, it

**Figure 4.** Kulbir Singh's old breviary.

should never be abandoned. It is no coincidence that, in Tajinder's house in Punjab, which is closed and uninhabited by now, the prayer room hosts artefacts like the photos of the gurus covered with sheets to protect from dust, but not the breviary. This was taken away when they left, thereby "unmaking" the house (Baxter and Brickell, 2014). They will reposition it upon the next visit, adds Tajinder, once the room is open and clean again.

As these examples suggest, religious objects are critical affordances for the "uprootings and regroundings" of home (Ahmed et al., 2003); that is, for people to "retain a meaningful sense of home, away from the physical milieus that used to underpin it" (Boccagni, 2017: 52). Domestic ritualization relies on people living in a place and cultivating certain practices with(in) it. However, the sacred is not inherent in the domestic space. Instead, it is mediated by people's mobility and by the circulation and emplacement of special objects. Domestic religion is not at odds with circulation—if anything, it depends on it. All this being said, the expected characteristics of a dwelling space to host these objects are no marginal detail. Daljit Kaur recalls that, after moving to Switzerland with her family, she slept for several months in a warehouse that had been made available by her employer, as she was struggling to find a place. In the meantime, her *Sanchi Saroops* were left in a safe place in Italy, only to be carried back to the family once they found accommodation. Religious objects require the space hosting them to be stable and protective, to afford the ritual engagements that turn it into home.

## *Section 5: Between the private (home) and the semi-public (gurdwara): Still the same religious practice?*

As we showed in the previous sections, religious objects and practices do change the perception and spatialization of the home. However, how does the domestic emplacement of religion affect its lived experience in this particular migrant community, relative to a public place of worship? Is the transposition from the gurdwara to the home a simple translation, or does it lead to significant changes in the practice of religion? If so, among whom, and in which respects?

Technically speaking, a gurdwara is a unique institutional space to host and ritually handle the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh sacred scripture considered as a "living guru" (Myrvold, 2007; Singh, 2014). In the case of Italy, gurdwaras have a three-decade-long history. Particularly in the North, they have significantly facilitated the local inclusion of Sikh communities. Sikhism was effectively presented to the receiving society as a universal religion, one whose symbols were folklorized as harmless traditional objects (Bertolani, 2018; Gallo and Sai, 2013; Ferraris and Sai, 2014). On the inner side of the community, instead, day-to-day activities in gurdwaras have to do also with cultural reproduction, advocacy and welfare (Bertolani, 2020b); in fact, with forms of home-making (Bertolani et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there are fundamental differences between a Sikh house of worship and a Sikh family house.

From a religious perspective, the difference has primarily to do with the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. Although private houses can be regarded as gurdwaras whenever they host the sacred text, this is usually a temporary condition, for instance, upon pre-wedding ceremonies or on the purchase and inauguration of a new home. Upon fieldwork,

**Figure 5.** The holy card of the Virgin Mary in Sonny's family prayer room.

Bertolani encountered examples of permanent "domestic gurdwaras" only in Punjab, while some homes of her informants in Italy hosted the *Sanchi Saroops*. Unlike the latter, the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib demands the daily performance of a series of rituals according to predefined times. As a religious institution (Ebaugh and Chalfetz, 2000), a gurdwara is constantly sacralized through its own maintenance: the entire space is institutionally defined as religious. On the contrary, the domestic separation between the sacred and the mundane demands thresholds that are internal, diverse (as they follow the morphology of house interiors), and situated. The home as a multifunctional space needs to be specially activated and ritualized to be suitable for religious practice. Its sacred space is remade and unmade, potentially several times in a day.

Precisely for its constitutive openness to the "profane," however, the home can be a site for encounter between different religious backgrounds and experiences (Hirvi, 2016). As Kirat Singh said, while welcoming Bertolani in his prayer room, "We are Sikhs, but we need to study and understand other religions as well, as our Sikh gurus have done in the past." His *Sanchi Saroops* lay on the top shelf of a closed cabinet that hosted, on a lower shelf, a copy of the *New Testament* and a few books on Sikhism. This coexistence may involve religious symbols too, with Sikh, Hindu and Christian iconographies sharing the same religious space. In the prayer corner in Jaswant Singh's bedroom, for instance, Sikh breviaries, wrapped in orange fabric, were next to images of Hindu deities. These were reminiscent of his parents' prayer room in Punjab, one of them being Sikh and the other being closer to Hinduism (Nesbitt, 2004). Sonni Kaur's prayer room, instead, included the metal engraving of a landscape with a holy card of the Virgin Mary wedged between the glass and the frame (Figure 5). "Both were left by the family who lived here before us,"

Sonny said. "We didn't feel like taking them off, we think that they bring us luck." However, their presence would obviously be impossible in the institutional space of the gurdwara. "They are more professional there," adds Sonny. Relative to a gurdwara, the domestic experience of religion can be more flexible and mirror contingent needs and family characteristics.

In fact, the domestic practice of "lived religion" is highly diverse among different family members (McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 1999). A few believers treat the *Sanchi Saroops* as if they were the Guru Granth Sahib, hosted in dedicated prayer rooms, and follow the gurdwara rituals accordingly. Many more approach these objects discontinuously, depending on the time available and on personal interest. Some read the *Sanchi Saroops* in tune with the time cycle of the family, starting on the birthday of one of the children and ending on the birthday of another family member, to then begin all over again. For others, the *Sanchi Saroops* are rather a tool for study and spiritual improvement through reading and meditation. They engage less with its materiality than with the content. For this reason, they may be read through electronic devices in any part of the house, while certain ritual manifestations of respect (such as covering one's head and taking off one's shoes) are creatively readapted.

All this being said, within the boundaries of our exploratory fieldwork Bertolani did notice some distance between how a Sikh person—in particular, a woman—prays in a gurdwara and in her own prayer room. Scaling down religious practices from the public to the domestic leaves some room for adaptation of family rituals, depending on personal choice and interpretation. This makes domestic religious practice a powerful identity and spiritual resource, even in contexts of codified ritual practices. "When I have time," Simran Kaur says, "I enter this room, sit down and start meditation." This is a more spontaneous and open-ended practice than an ordinary prayer. It is facilitated by the greater intimacy and familiarity people have in their domestic space. "At home I do everything with *Sanchi Saroops,*" Simran Kaur explains, referring to rituals and prayers normally made in the gurdwara:

> I learned how to do them from television and looking in the gurdwara. I recite [all the prayers]... but in the gurdwara I don't: I would like to, but there are the *granthis* [the caretakers] there.

Importantly, going to the gurdwara implies dealing with the gendered control of this (semi)-public space. As the feminist literature shows (Nast, 1994), the social construction and accessibility of space tend to articulate major power inequalities along gender and generation lines. This is not without consequences, especially for women. In institutionalized Sikh spaces, all devotees are encouraged to participate in religious life through *seva* (free service) according to their capabilities (Canning, 2017). Nevertheless, women are mostly relegated to supposedly female tasks like cleaning and preparing food in more hidden spaces like the kitchen (Bains, 2020; Bertolani et al., 2021). Men, in turn, are more likely to be involved in food distribution and in the *guru seva* alongside the *granthis*. This entails a public performativity and a degree of symbolic power, religious authority, and personal prestige. Although the underlying gender inequalities have not been

unchallenged (Bertolani, 2020a), they are interdependent with still another axis of social stratification in the gurdwara: being *amritdhari,* that is, "baptized Sikhs" initiated into the *Khalsa* brotherhood, or not. *Guru seva* is typically their prerogative.

Deep-rooted inequalities along lines of gender or group status are also present in the domestic space, of course. Nevertheless, engaging with religious practices in the home may reflect contingent aspects, including personal inclinations and time available, rather than being primarily shaped by gender or religious differences. "All Sikhs can have the *Sanchi Saroops* at home," says Kirat Singh, "because they are used to studying and learning…if you don't study them, how can you become an *amritdhari*?" Potentially at least, the domestic religious space seems to have a more inclusive character than the public and institutional one. It is not by chance that religious commitment and daily care of the *Sanchi Saroops* at home are often (but not exclusively) carried out by women and children, even if they are not *amritdhari*. Moreover, the same people prefer praying in their homes on certain occasions, with full control over their intimate space, while acknowledging the importance of congregational practice. Most of our informants were also engaged in local gurdwaras. The latter inevitably hold more social effervescence, as Sonni Kaur says with her own words:

> We feel more united and involved when there are so many praying *[in the gurdwara]*. Then... everyone feels it in his own way, there are those who prefer to pray alone and have this relationship with God alone and those who prefer together… For me it depends on the moment... if I'm sad I prefer to be alone, but maybe if I'm happy I prefer the gurdwara.

In sum, space is an active participant in shaping religious experiences (Lefebvre, 1991). The ways of ordering interiors, whether in gurdwaras or private homes, embody hierarchy, and power relationships among users of that space (in our case study, according to gender, seniority, and religious engagement). This, of course, is not meant to suggest that all people in the same household are equally involved in domestic religion—or for that matter, that they are necessarily in harmonious relations. Managing religious spaces in the home can generate significant tensions, even only for the lack of autonomous and private space, like for Sonni Kaur in the previous example. It is like a balancing act between family members in unequal power positions—a question on which more empirical research is in order.

Last, we should not forget that enacting religious service in compliance with the formal rules of a gurdwara entails costs and space availability—ideally, one dedicated prayer room—that may be unsustainable for an "ordinary" immigrant Sikh family. Affording them does not simply show how pervasive religious practice is in a family. It may also display its wealth and power vis-à-vis other families. In this sense, domestic sacralization has something to suggest on social stratification within the local Sikh "community." Although religious practice in gurdwaras displays a formal egalitarianism (although the difference in devotees' donations or voluntary engagement may reveal their unequal positions), religious practice in the home reproduces the underlying material inequalities within, and between, households. This ultimately leads us back to the function of status display inherent in a house as such (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995). Relative to an

institutional setting, domestic religious practice embodies and displays intra-group inequality, as long as it mirrors the different resources available to sustain it.

## Conclusion

As a socio-historical approach to religious space suggests, every site is sacralized within a broader political context. Its construction contributes to the identity formation of insider groups with respect to other external ones. Religious space is therefore culturally constructed in dialogue with the surrounding social environments (Kilde, 2013). This applies to semi-public religious spaces such as gurdwaras, but also to the private homes of Sikhs, whose religion is not yet formally recognized by public authorities in Italy. As our exploratory study shows, the "domestication" of religion does change the homes of those Sikh immigrants who follow traditional religious prescriptions. Besides reshaping family routines and house interiors, domestic religion conveys a normatively positive sense of home, both as continuity with past lifestyles and as an embedded sense of intimacy and spiritual adequacy. At the same time, domestication may change the lived experience of religion. It opens it to influences from different religious or cultural backgrounds, and enables believers to have more control and personalization over their own practices. Although this is a result of the protection from the public gaze that the home affords, it is not necessarily a subversive effort. It does not challenge the gender and status hierarchies that are a subtext of much religious practice in gurdwaras (Bertolani, 2020a). As long as there is any divide, this is rather between closer and more distant worshipers, wherever located. For the former, domestic religion is a unique source of spirituality and intimacy, but also of efforts, dilemmas, and costs.

If a key insight can be drawn for the general study of migrants' experience of home, this lies in the paradoxical interdependence with the public and the transnational of even the most protected and intimate religious practices in the home. This is only one more instance of the irremediable "porosity" of home (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Steiner and Veel, 2017). Although Sikh immigrant believers may well see it as private and intimate, they would have little likelihood to nourish and reproduce it without an ongoing exchange of symbolic and material resources with the outer world.

Overall, zooming down into the lived and material experience of the home is the only way to appreciate the wealth and complexity of its meanings and functions, even within relatively disadvantaged life conditions such as migrant ones. That said, a focus on domesticity alone is not enough. What circulates, with the attendant range of hybridizations, is as important as what is domestically embedded to appreciate religion as a resource for migrants to make themselves at home. They do so by relying on an assemblage of beliefs, artifacts and practices that have a potential to mean home to them—and afford them to feel at home—wherever located. They do so, nevertheless, only within the material boundaries of a particular domestic space which, in turn, is shaped by external political and economic constraints. In this respect, the contribution of religion to migrant local and transnational home-making awaits only for more systematic and comparative research, possibly along theory-driven lines such as those advanced in this article.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study was supported by H2020 European Research Council; HOMInG 678456.

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