

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sacred spaces and border crossing: Sinhalese dreams of a Sri Lanka-Sicily round trip[#]

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the metaphor of the saints' body/border as a means to analyse the social field of the migratory flows between Sicily and Sri Lanka. The saints' body is viewed as important on a symbolic-sacred level, but even more broadly as a centre of what migrants experience in the in-between space spanning 'here' and 'there': as living simulacra of a civic-religious cult that crosses borders, the saints' relics function as a site of agency and a medium of communication. Far from a rigid and pre-established container that constrains migrants' lives, the social field established by the flows between Sri Lanka and Sicily is an embodied and circular space forged in part through civic-religious practices that make migrants feel at home in the borders.

Keywords: Sri Lankan migrants, home-making practices, civic-religiosity, catholicism, Italy.

INTRODUCTION: EMBODYING BORDERS

Douglas (1971; 2003) deserves the credit for having theorised the body as medium of communication, establishing a direct relationship between spatial arrangements and social structure on one hand and corporeal symbolism on the other hand. Mauss (1934) also analysed the importance of the body as a metaphor capable of representing the diverse forms human experience takes in the world. A quite faithful reconstruction of these arguments is found in Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003). The two authors highlight how current developments in cultural anthropology have been powerfully conditioned by a view of the body as the centre of human agency:

“The concept of embodied space underscores the importance of the body as a physical and biological entity, as lived experience, and as a

centre of agency, a location for speaking and acting in the world”.

This idea served as a point of departure for this article. The author proposes to analyse the Catholic saints' body as a model for understanding the production of place in migratory flows between Italy and Sri Lanka. In doing so, the author metaphorically conceptualises the saints' body as an active and mobile border rather than a simple symbolic simulacrum. People make space by moving through it rather than living inside it continuously. The social field produced by transnational flows between Italy and Sri Lanka is created through the material and immaterial movements that touch on the borders between 'here' and 'there', between the departure and arrival contexts. Drawing on this understanding, it is hypothesised that the saints' body/border may function as a navigational aid (a sort of 'sextant') to re-chart migrants' transnational movements between Sicily and Sri Lanka.

The contribution of the article draws on observations that were gathered through fieldwork carried out among the Sinhalese community in Catania (Sicily). The paper will triangulate this experience by integrating existing research on Sri Lankan migration to other Italian regions (Morlicchio, 1992; Martinelli *et al.*, 1998; Cologna, 2003; Avola *et al.*, 2003; Näre, 2008; Brown, 2014; 2016) and in particular, studies whose fieldwork sites include the villages north of Colombo from which this flow originates (Bacciocchi, 2010; Pathirage, 2010; Pathirage & Collyer, 2011). More specifically, these are coastal towns enclosed in the area with the highest concentration of Catholic Sinhalese in Sri Lanka: the area that stretches from the village of Chilaw (on the north western coast of the island) to the city of Negombo¹.

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In order to illustrate the argument properly, the paper starts with a brief description of the area from which Sri Lankan migratory flow to Italy originates, further analysing the position of the Catholic minority in Sri Lanka and its connections with the Vatican in Italy. According to the most credible assumption, in fact, migration between Italy and Sri Lanka results from the transnationalism of Catholic institutions (Bacciocchi, 2010; Näre, 2008). This thesis is supported by the relationship with the sacred that channels the flows towards Sicily and allows the author to explore the nature of the borders that form the transnational space opened by Sri Lankan migration to the city of Catania in eastern Sicily.

The article will then describe how, in this mainly Catholic area of Sri Lanka, the diaspora's growing impact has contributed to strengthening a kind of "dream space" between Italy and Sri Lanka that serves to reproduce the desire for migration. The underground labour of migrant networks is the primary motor reproducing migratory flows. This implies an inextricable link between first-wave migrants and those waiting to migrate: the latter must seek help in terms of intermediation and brokerage, and those who have already migrated must continually work and earn money - even from their country people - to ensure a higher socio-economic position when they return home (Bacciocchi, 2010).

Taking this assumption as a starting point, the author will therefore explore what is still the beginning of a research finding: in the transnational sphere produced by migratory flows between Sicily and Sri Lanka, civic-religious practices enacted along the borders function as a powerful home-making tool². The pilgrimage sites and Saints that belong to the host country (St. Anthony of Padua, the Tindari Madonna in the Province of Messina, St. Rosalia in Palermo and St. Agatha in Catania) serve to increase Italy's symbolic value among Sri Lankan immigrants and to feel the desire for migration among their relatives and friends in the country of origin. By moving along the fault lines in this relationship, the saints' bodies end up intercepting and catalysing migrants' hopes of coming and going. By travelling between the coasts of two islands connected by migration, the Saints' relics are located either 'here' and 'there'. In this way, the saints take on a powerful symbolic value and at the same time, suggest the unexpected possibility of inhabiting the borders.

The main argument intended to develop in this article is that the cumulative effect that previous migrations to Sicily have had on new ones (what Massey calls 'cumulative causation' [1990]), goes beyond solely economic success and material well-being. Drawing on

the situation of Sinhalese migrants in the transborder area between Sicily and Sri Lanka, it will be explored how the cohesion and identity effects of the religious transnationalism between the two islands also contributes to fuelling the desire to migrate and thus the 'demand for Italy'. The cult of the saints helps to shape the in-between space spanning Sicily and Sri Lanka - woven of dreams, life expectations and projects of transmigration - to such an extent that a sort of captivation is produced in both directions (a captivation that is sickness as much as it is love for Italy). The body/border of the saints thus takes on a double function: first of all, it becomes a tangible sign of the connection between the departure and arrival contexts; in addition, it grants to the image of migration the status of a step along the ladder of larger upward mobility, which in turn simultaneously reproduces the desire for new migration as well as for return.

GOOD MORNING ITALY! DREAMING IN-BETWEEN

Fishing and coconut are the main industries in the area north of Colombo from which Sri Lankan migratory flow to Italy originates. However, the revenue these economic activities generate remains primarily in the hands of the few well-off families in possession of fishing boats or agricultural land. Furthermore, the liberalist policies promoted at the end of the 1970s worked to exacerbate the country's poverty levels (Hettige, 2007), progressively increasing dependence on import goods and creating higher consumption expectations in both the middle and lower classes. Nevertheless, it was not only economic and social hardship that drove the Catholic Sinhalese community to migrate to Italy. Another fundamental factor was the increasing impact of the diaspora that generated a culture of migration in the mother country. While socio-economic conditions laid the foundations for the first generation to migrate, a culture of migration then developed, linking the established diaspora back into Sri Lankan society. This culture fuelled a boom in migration to Italy. When the first generation of migrants started to send remittances, the people at home were surprised at the large sums of money they received. They started spending money lavishly, particularly on buying vehicles and clothes³.

In this area there are various markers that evoke Italy: from the names returned migrants choose for their businesses to the names of the neighbourhoods where this diasporic community fashions its own dreams of upward mobility through migration: 'Milano dream', 'Little Rome', 'Visa for Italy'. These signs and experiences emphasised the possibilities of migration from Sri Lanka to Italy and contributed to create a "dream space" (Pathirage, 2010) in between the two islands. Increasing

disparity between families with relatives in Italy and those not yet touched by migration have also been exacerbated by the so-called 'Italian houses': small two-storey villas built in a modern style by migrant families in the villages of Wennapuwa, Marawila, Katuneriya, Nainamadama and filled with 'luxury'⁴ goods thanks to containers that arrive directly from Italy.

The rebound effects of migration to Italy affect not only the material economies of the migrants' home villages, but also local urban planning and settlement patterns. This is one of the outcomes that distinguish migration to Italian cities from the flows directed towards Middle Eastern countries (Gamburd, 1995), or towards the Persian Gulf (Gamburd, 2000; 2010) and the Arabian Peninsula. In the latter case, migration is actually numerically greater, given that it is easier and relatively less expensive to enter those areas, but it is nonetheless not as desirable because salaries are lower and work conditions are more vulnerable (Gamburd, 2010). In fact, migrants' possibilities for earning money in these areas are not sufficient to step up the 'social ladder' that subsequently provides benefits when migrants re-enter the job market back in Sri Lanka (Bacciocchi, 2010). It is also important to note that, for migrants (mostly women) working in the Middle-East countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the opportunities to invest in their native land are rendered notably fewer by the fact that the average wage is not usually much higher than the Sri Lankan national average, around 150 dollars a month (for a worker employed in the domestic service sector), approximately one sixth of the analogous wage in Italy. These various indicators have contributed to symbolically delimit the in-between space between Sri Lanka and Italy, feeding the 'collective imagination'⁵ that functions to maintain migratory networks. Italy becomes a symbolically dense space that, even before setting forth, people dream of returning from in order to fully enjoy the fruits gained through a "circular migration in which return is implicit" (Bacciocchi, 2010).

Cinematographic production has powerfully represented this 'dreamlike' dimension, to be more precise, the desire for wealth and the fantasies of upward social mobility that have characterised the flows between Italy and Sri Lanka from the end of the 1970's to the early 1990's. The first example is the renowned Sri Lankan film '*Mille Soya: Buon giorno Italia!*' (In search of wealth – Good morning Italy!), which has become a cult classic in Sri Lanka. It is the story of a small group of down-and-out young people who have felt the rebound effects of migration in their village and so decide to risk everything: they go into debt to travel illegally to Italy in the hope of gathering the money they would need to realise their dreams of making it big in their own country's music

scene. The 2008 release '*Machan: the true story of a false team*' is another such film, this one by an Italian director. This movie was filmed in collaboration with key figures of the Sri Lankan film industry (including the director Prasanna Vithanage) and uses irony to explore the dream of the West that permeates Sri Lanka. Uberto Pasolini employs a news report set up to narrate the invented subterfuge of a false Sri Lankan Handball team that uses the excuse of a tournament in Bavaria to get hold of one-way tickets to Europe.

The role of television, cinema and media culture in the formation and transformation of diasporic identities has been closely examined in the anthropological literature on migration. Gillespie (1994), for instance, focused on the reinvention of identity among Punjabi adolescents in London as a consequence of media interventions. The notion of 'mediascapes' coined by Appadurai (1996) describes the way that visual imagery, through television, cinema, and above all advertising, impacts migrant subjectivities and their perception of reality. According to Appadurai (1996), mass-media expansion has produced 'virtual neighbourhoods' that, in turn, feed migratory chains at a global scale. The influence of cinematographic production on Sri Lankan migratory flows to Italy (that there is no space here to explore) is certainly another factor to be taken into account when analysing the collective imagination that shapes the Sinhalese desire to travel, directing the migratory route between Sri Lanka and Sicily.

THE HISTORY OF MIGRATORY FLOWS BETWEEN SRI LANKA AND ITALY

The history of migratory flows between Sri Lanka and Italy can be divided into three periods. The first period began in 1977 in coincidence with the free-market policies that the Sri Lankan government (under the influence of the United National Party) promoted at that time, which enabled the workforce to transfer abroad. Migration in this phase was temporary and involved primarily women. Italy represented only a transitional step in a larger migratory project aimed at other European countries, such as Great Britain, Germany and Switzerland, which were more desirable in terms of access to the labour market but more restrictive in terms of obtaining a visa.

The second period, beginning in the 1990s, was characterised by a surge in the number of migrants arriving in Italy, especially in the main urban centres where the Sri Lankan presence had consolidated over time: Milan, Verona, Rome, Naples and Palermo (and the cities of Messina and Catania in Sicily). Between 1992

and 1998, the number of Sri Lankans with regular legal status doubled, from 12,114 to 24,800 (Istituto Nazionale Di Statistica, 2005). In the meantime, there was also an increase in cases of familial reunion, especially following the 1996 Dini decree. After 1998, the ratio of female to male migrants progressively balanced out. Furthermore, the number of illegal arrivals, both by sea (through the Suez Canal) and by land (through Eastern Europe) rose abruptly. In fact, the restrictive policies regarding visa availability produced a consolidation of criminal organisations along the borders. These organisations increasingly profited from the 'desire for Italy' circulating through Sri Lankan villages along the western coast, charging exorbitant prices as high as 10,000 Euros per person (as stated by the migrants interviewed).

The last ten years of migration between Sri Lanka and Italy (2000-2010) have certain characteristics that allow us to define it as a third migratory period. In fact, increasing surveillance⁶ over the Italian territory made it more dangerous to enter the country with false documents or a temporary visa. This restriction was overcome through the consolidation of migratory networks that made it possible for first generation migrants to invest in a migratory market of entry by name, to meet their country people's need for intermediation in order to depart. As a result, in the last decade there has been an increase similar to that of the 1990s: authorised residents in Italy increased from 34,177 in 2002 to 75,342 in 2010 (Istituto Nazionale Di Statistica, 2010). The 'Migrantes' statistical research by Caritas in 2011 reports that the number of authorised Sri Lankans in Italy had reached 81,094 by the beginning of 2010 (Caritas-Migrantes, 2011). The research carried out estimates that the majority of Sri Lankans are Sinhalese families (mainly Catholic) and only 1/3 are Tamil, originating mostly from the north-eastern areas of Sri Lanka, affected by the civil war (Morlicchio, 1992; Baccocchi, 2010)⁷.

A similar trend can be observed in the Sri Lankan migratory flows to Sicily. In the late '70s, migration to Sicily (with Messina, Catania and Palermo as the main destination cities) was mainly an individual strategy facilitated by liberalist government policies in the native country. However, since the '90s it has developed into a broader social phenomena involving powerful repercussions both in Sicily and in the migrants' context of origin, among the people living in the west coast of Sri Lanka. Istat data about the Sri Lankan demographic presence in Sicily show a progressive increase from 2003 to 2008, reaching a total of 8,777 authorised residents. Of these 2,138 live in Catania, where the Sinhalese community (mainly employed in the domestic service and personal care sector) is one of the first groups to have

settled. These migrants are mainly Catholic (about 80%) and only minorities of Hindus and Buddhists.

According to Father Neville Pereira, chaplain of the Sinhalese community in Italy, the Sri Lankan Catholic presence in the country is miscalculated, due to the number of illegal immigrants that are still waiting regularisation. Father Neville Pereira was one of the first illegal workers that arrived in Italy from Sri Lanka in the 80s. At the beginning, his migration project was to earn enough to help his family in Sri Lanka. After five years of hard work as domestic helper, he had enough money set aside for going back to Sri Lanka. However, inspired by a strong faith, he chose to become a priest and be close to the increasing number of Sri Lankan Catholics in Italy.

SRI LANKAN CATHOLICS AND THEIR RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is a multi-religious country where 70% of the population (mainly Sinhalese) is Buddhist, and 15% is Hindu (a segment that coincides almost exclusively with the Tamil groups). The remaining percentage includes Christians (almost 8% and mainly Sinhalese, of which 7% are Catholic and 1% Protestant), Muslims (7%, of whom the majority are Sunni Muslims and Tamil speakers) and other animist religions, practiced in particular among the Veddahs, the descendants of the island's original inhabitants. The position of these religious groups in the country and their relationship are highly unstable.

The Catholic Church was established under Portuguese colonial rule in the 16th century, and gathered followers especially in the island's western coastal areas: from the city of Puttalam (north of Chilaw) to Panadura (south of Colombo), an area that, not coincidentally, includes the villages that have contributed the most migration to Italy. After a period of reduced influence under Dutch rule, the Church in Sri Lanka enjoyed a phase of prosperity during British colonisation from the end of the 18th century to independence (Stirrat, 1992). During this period, many Catholic missionaries and priests travelled there from Europe (including a high number of Italian clergy sent from Rome) and maintained control of the parishes and dioceses on the island until the end of the 1960s. However, the foundations for religious transnationalism between Italy and Sri Lanka were mainly established following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In fact, the Council's ecumenical policies made it possible for local priests to take educational trips to Rome, and subsequently, other Italian cities with a high concentration of Sri Lankans, to hold mass in Sinhala

and offer support to the faithful in their new migratory contexts (Näre, 2008; Baccocchi, 2010).

After independence in 1948, a series of regulations were established in Sri Lanka that essentially favour the Sinhalese Buddhist community to the detriment of the various minorities in the country, including the Catholics. According to Stirrat (1992), control over the schools was one of the most important losses that the Catholic minority suffered after independence. Both the curriculum and the language of education were progressively nationalised, and scholastic institutions were removed from the Christian missionaries and Anglicised Catholic elite⁸.

“To be a ‘true’ Sinhala was interpreted as also being a Buddhist, and Sinhala Catholics became exposed to the criticism that they were not ‘really’ Sinhalese [...]. Catholics were ‘denationalised’, following alien customs, being controlled by foreign missionaries and owing their allegiance to a foreign Pope” (Stirrat, 1992).

In his book, Stirrat (1992) analyses the dynamics in Sri Lanka that brought about a series of Christian sanctuaries (the most prominent is Kudagama, where the local version of Our Lady of Lourdes is worshiped) that have become sites attracting a multitude of pilgrims. According to Stirrat (1992), the highly emotional forms of worship practiced by the Catholic Sinhalese community are explained by several factors:

“A stress on exorcism of the demonically possessed, a stress on direct contact with the divine through the central figures of these shrines, and a stress on what the devotees saw as a return to traditional Catholicism” (Stirrat, 1992).

As the marginal conditions of the Catholic community in Sri Lanka have increased, these pilgrimage sites have gained importance, enabling the emotional aspects of the cult to become more prominent and provoking a strong turn towards exorcism (Stirrat, 1977; 1991). The struggle against the demon world and spirit-oriented practices aimed at relieving people’s suffering or helping them with their daily needs have taken prominence over more canonical liturgical elements. The distinctive features that have characterised the development of the Sinhalese Catholic minority over the last two centuries helped incorporate these forms of spirituality into the delicate political and economical context of post-colonial Sri Lanka⁹. Although they acknowledge their membership in the universal ecclesiastical institution, Catholics in Sri Lanka have built their political-religious identity in

continuous relation with the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, with whom they share a language and culture. This is what motivated Stirrat to study the forms of devotion enacted in Sinhalese sanctuaries. He identifies them as similar to devotional forms in the European Catholic tradition, but at the same time they represent a phenomenon that has been ‘indigenised’ according to local modalities. In fact, under the guidance of Sinhalese spiritual leaders, the relationship with the sacred (the Virgin Mary, Christ, the Saints and the relics) in the sanctuaries is experienced as a way to meet devotees’ needs for protecting against demon attacks and witchcraft.

Although indirectly, Stirrat’s analysis sheds light on the devotional practices of the Sinhalese Catholic community in diaspora. In fact, it is this interpretational path that leads one to the hypothesis presented in this article.

RELICS OF THE SAINTS: AT HOME IN THE BORDERS

For about ten years now, the Sinhalese community in Catania has enacted a procession along Via Etnea (the main city street) to reach the cathedral the second Sunday of October. The ceremony began as a way of expressing veneration and gratitude to Saint Agatha, the beloved patron who Catania’s citizens customarily celebrate a few months later in February¹⁰. During the procession, participants carry a reduced-size version of the saint’s effigy¹¹ and perform, along the way, music, songs and costumed dances that recall similar occasions in native land. Upon reaching the cathedral, they take their seats in the church where the mass is celebrated. The national coordinator of Sri Lankan priests in Italy performs the rite in two languages (Italian and Sinhala); other important figures in the local ecclesiastical hierarchy obviously take part, including the Sinhalese chaplain of Catania and Monsignor Barbaro Scionti, parish priest of the cathedral where the mass is celebrated. In 2011, the Sri Lankan chaplain of Messina and Salvatore Gristina, the archbishop of Catania, also came to attend and pay their respects.

The popularity the cult of St. Agatha enjoys among the Sinhalese community in Catania suggests that religiosity takes on an important cohesion and identity-producing role in the transnational circuit of exchange between the two islands. The Sinhalese feast of St. Agatha is part of the larger context of ritual and devotional practices active throughout the Region, including Saint Rosalia in Palermo and the black Madonna of Tindari in the province of Messina, which have become quite popular with Catholic, Buddhist and Hindu Sri Lankans alike.

This is the context for the development of the hypothesis of the study: that the cult of the saints in the migrants' destination cities can assert the powerful symbolic value that Italy takes on in the predominately Catholic Sinhalese villages where this migratory flow originates.

When they were interviewed to explore the reason for their personal devotion to a local saint, many Sinhalese answered: "Carrying St. Agatha is like returning home in your heart." The same is true of the pilgrimage Catholics, Buddhists and Hindus make to St. Anthony's sanctuary in Padua on May 1, which has become the world's most concentrated gathering of Sri Lankans outside their native land. The migrants' explanation indicates the high sentimental and identity-producing value these forms of devotion take on among Sri Lankan migrants. In fact, the relationships with the sacred that are at work in their native land are refracted in the destination context.

Given space constraints, the author limits to two brief examples of the correspondence between devotional practices 'here' in the arrival context and 'there' in the country of origin. These examples furthermore reveal migrants' analogical attitude towards taking up religious icons and cult sites from Italian Catholicism and embodying them in their own experience of the sacred.

As Sri Lankan devotees know well, the cult of St. Agatha is centered in the *Sacro Carcere* church in Catania, a site that preserves the story of her martyrdom and the events of her sainthood; it is here that visitors can view St. Agatha's footprints imprinted in a slab of lava rock. This religious monument is analogous to the imprint that was allegedly left by Adam (or Buddha, depending on the religious tradition) on the summit of Adam's Peak, an important interreligious pilgrimage site in Sri Lanka¹².

An even more explicit analogy is suggested by the Tamil faithful, who honour St. Rosalia in Palermo by gathering at dawn to climb the scenic road leading to the sanctuary of Mount Pellegrino where the saint's effigy is kept. In fact, the patron saint of Palermo is identified with the God who inhabits Kataragama, another sacred site of pilgrimage in Sri Lanka. These two examples illustrate the strategic importance of studying the devotional practices that surround the saints' body/border in order to investigate the circular home-making dynamics that Sri Lankan migrants enact.

The concept of home-making used here refers to the practices enacted by migrants to domesticate a space in which they can feel comfortably 'at home'. Although this space may not correspond to the idea and experience

of home that they had before leaving, it is nonetheless equally, powerfully charged with meaning not only at a material level but also relationally, symbolically and socially. Migrants' home-making practices may develop in at least three non-mutually exclusive directions: 1) when migrants work to recreate a piece of home away from home by constructing dimensions of belonging in their new host context; 2) when migrants work to build a new space for living in their country of origin, a space where they can place themselves first at the level of imagination and, eventually, physically if they return home (these can be called 'return home-making processes'); 3) when migrants' social practices create a setting that functions as home by cultivating the connections established between the various poles of migration and simultaneously incorporating reference points and ties into the countries of origin and arrival (this third form, which contains the other two, is commonly defined as 'transnational home-making'¹³). In all three cases, investigating home-making dynamics requires a critical exploration of the complex relationship between body, identity and place and attention to spatial and temporal dimension through memory.

The concept of home-making inspires an understanding of place and inhabitation that is not limited to physical spatiality alone; it also helps to think about the concept of home itself, not as a fixed, immobile and a historical entity, but as a mobile, fluid, human dimension that is open to numerous and dislocated modes of inhabiting. By using this particular perspective on migration as a starting point, on the basis of the ethnographic data, the author can make some preliminary conjectures (which, naturally, require further development). The author, therefore, proffer the idea that the saints' bodies function to domesticate the physical and social space of migration. Through the material and symbolic artefacts that convey their civic/religious cult, the saints embody the need and experience of the sacred that characterises Sri Lankan migrants' sense of belonging and their desire for security/protection.

RELIGIOSITY AS SEXTANT¹⁴ FOR RETURNING MIGRANTS

Religiosity shapes the way Sri Lankan migrants construct social spaces that are meaningful in both the country of arrival (as a refraction from the country of origin) as well as the porous in-between zone brushed by migratory flows¹⁵. Migrant religiosity may thus take on the task of granting structure to transnational home-making practices. In fact, using rituality to construct and appropriate a home-place helps Sri Lankan migrants to connect with and maintain their past experiences; it

also helps them to locate their home-making practices within the heart of a civic spirituality (“home as religious space”), that transcends the dichotomy between sacred and profane space, public and private space, the ‘here’ and ‘there’.

The interviews conducted in Catania thus far confirm the hypothesis that is emerging at the national level: that the vast majority of Sri Lankan migrants view their stay in Italy as temporary and maintain the dream of returning. This dream is fed through large financial contributions to relatives and the construction or purchase of real estate in their native country. Viewed in this way, the saints’ body/border represents not only a symbolic dimension that grants meaning to the migratory experience and produces identity among the dispersed diaspora; it also functions as an entryway back into the country of origin for returning migrants.

A few illustrative examples can be presented here: in 2006, Don Malcom Ranjith, the first Sri Lankan to be made Cardinal (in 2010) and current President of the Sinhalese Episcopal Conference, was granted official permission by the Roman Curia to transport the relics of St. Agatha from Catania to a church in Sri Lanka dedicated to the saint. In 2010, the relics of St. Anthony of Padua followed the same route, travelling to Sri Lanka in a packed pilgrimage (March 7 - 24) that touched even the northern areas of the country, which were still off limits to Westerners. The relics went as far as St. Anthony’s sanctuary in Jaffna. In a population that numbers only one and a half million Catholics, three million Sri Lankans came to kiss the saint’s relics.

In addition to their symbolic value, it is tempting to investigate the marked strategic significance of such operations, given that the high officials of the transnational Sri Lankan church operating between Italy and Sri Lanka were the first to call for them. In fact, the saints’ relics seem in some ways to function as a navigational aid for migrants, helping them to maintain their course as they move back towards the country of origin along a circular route capable of constructing, here in Italy, “traces of home” that lead back ‘home.’ From this perspective, Sicily is just one of the shores touched by a migratory flow that transmits not only capital and financial remittances but also ideas, beliefs and civic/ritual practices of home-making¹⁶. Through religiosity, the sacredness of the saints contributes to the reproduction of the warmth of that far-away home and its devotional habits; at the same time, it incorporates the desire to build a wider network of solidarity that spans the border area between the two islands. The saints’ sacredness symbolically represents and paves the way

back home through which so many Sri Lanka migrants in Italy hope to fulfil their dreams of upward mobility.

Within the in-between space – the space of the collective imagination that feeds into the Sri Lankan diaspora in Sicily – returning home becomes a feasible option only if the dream of earning money that is implicit in the migration remains unthreatened. Among the feasible routes for developing equally profitable activities in both contexts, new solutions are taking shape that imply a presence in both the native and destination contexts; these exist alongside the idea of “starting one’s own business” in Sri Lanka that is quite common among migrants on their way back home. In fact, the transnational option of a co-presence¹⁷ relies on the migrant’s capacity to be positioned simultaneously ‘here’ and ‘there’ (Basch *et al.*, 1994; Levitt, 2001; Kennedy & Roudometof, 2002; Brambilla & Riccio, 2010), which is still in an initial consolidation phase in the case of Sri Lankan migration to Sicily.

This strategy is developing as a more desirable option in particular for younger generations. A focus group of young Sinhalese between 9 and 15 years old who attend the *Santa Maria all’Ogninella* church in Catania, very clearly expressed the prospect of starting a business that allows them to maintain a double presence both ‘here’ and ‘there.’ When compared with interviews conducted with Sinhalese youth living in the same city, but belonging to the 18 to 25 age group, the results are illuminating: having come to join their families when they were already adolescents and working mainly in the domestic service sector, these young people imagine their own futures inextricable from their country of origin and experience their time in Italy as a transitory period aimed solely at allowing them to save the money necessary to build a comfortable life in Sri Lanka¹⁸.

The research findings thus suggest that the cult of the saints can offer a lens through which to understand the migration to Sicily as part of a larger project. As a matter of fact, the Sri Lankans’ transmigration trajectories can be maintained as long as Italy remains a rest stop along a Sri Lanka-Sicily round-trip route: travelling towards those sites in Italy where Sri Lanka is kept alive through civic-religious home-making practices and returning to the places in Sri Lanka where Italy is kept alive through continuous symbolic-material references to migration¹⁹.

CONCLUSION

In this paper the author focused on the metaphor of the saints’ body/border as a means to analyse the social field of the migratory flows between Sicily and Sri Lanka. In

doing so, the fluid, dynamic and relational character of this particular 'borderli-ness' is made 'visible' (Green, 2009). The saints' body was viewed as important on a symbolic-sacred level, but even more broadly as a centre of what migrants experience in the in-between space spanning 'here' and 'there': as living simulacra of a civic-religious cult that crosses borders, the saints' relics function as a site of agency and a medium of communication. Far from a rigid and pre-established container that constrains migrants' lives, the social field established by the flows between Sri Lanka and Sicily is an embodied and circular space forged in part through civic-religious practices that make migrants feel at home in the borders. The author therefore, argues that the civic rituality implicit in the cult of saints acts like a sort of catalyst for the dreams and expectations of migrants looking to construct their future between the two islands; it thereby offers migrants a glimpse of the possibility of crossing the borders between Sicily and Sri Lanka without incurring loss. By embodying the need to create transnational home-making practices, the saint cult makes it possible to imagine how life might proceed on both shores of the migration route.

END NOTES

1. Emanuele II n. 49 - 95131 Catania (ITALY).
2. For further information, see Stirrat (1992). See Johnson & Werbner (2010) for a comparison. This study analyses how religion figures in the social life and imaginings of international Asian migrant women, their moral imaginings and inscriptions of faith on sacred landscapes. As the two authors argue, "ritual translocation into the diaspora is not simply about ethnic boundary making processes. Rather, ritual as embodied practice effects cultural renewal and innovation, produces inversions of gender and generational authority, reconciles past with present and reconstitutes a sense of home and personal integrity in the face of rupture and disintegration" (Ibidem, 25).
3. The children who migrated following their parents also attracted attention due to their European fashions and lavish life style.
4. These goods are defined as 'luxury goods' and 'Italian style' exclusively in the eyes of migrants, and especially those families who have remained at home to cultivate the myth of Italy. The definitions do not necessarily mean that these goods were actually 'made in Italy' or represent the higher echelons of the Italian consumer market.
5. Arjun Appadurai (1996) incorporates the concept of 'collective imagination' in anthropological studies of globalisation processes. Appadurai argues that collective imagination represents one of the main tools migrants use to adapt to the field of possible choices available to them. In fact, imagination resources allow diasporic citizens living in de-territorialised conditions to nonetheless create a 'public sphere' where they can share a common social imaginary. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's notion of the 'imagined community' (or 'community of feeling'), Appadurai explains the influence that imagination has on migrants' identity construction processes, especially following the impact of electronic media.
6. See the 'Bossi-Fini' law (Italian Republic, 30 July 2002, n. 189) and the following decree-law 773-B (called 'security package') passed by the House of Representatives in May 2009, which emphasises the pursuit of a policy against not only the so-called illegal immigration, but also the integration of foreigners legally resident in Italy.
7. In Italy, Palermo is the center where the Tamil diaspora is primarily concentrated; while in Europe the most important destinations are England, France, Germany, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries (Fuglerud, 1999; McDowell, 1996).
8. See Hettige (2010) regarding the relationship between Christianity and the Sri Lankan educational system.
9. The effect of colonial policies on the county's institutional and religious organisation has also been investigated by the Sinhalese anthropologist Stanley Tambiah (1992). In '*Buddhism Betrayed?*' Tambiah uses a wealth of historical and anthropological references to explain how a presumably non-violent philosophy such as Buddhism was channelled into an inflexible and aggressive political activism that mainly targeted the Tamil minority. Repeated efforts to make Buddhism the official state religion of the island should be interpreted in the framework of nationalistic demands in the post-colonial period. The same is true of proposals presented to the Parliament in 2005 requesting sanctions against religious conversions in the country. The party comprised of Buddhist monks, Jathika Hela Urumaya, is one of the primary supporters of this measure. The local Catholic Church has contested this proposal because it was considered susceptible to 'arbitrary and subjective' applications in the words of Mons. Norbert Andradi, Secretary General of the Episcopal Conference of Sri Lanka.
10. For more details about St. Agatha's feast in Catania, see: Emanuele Ciaceri, *Culti e miti, nella storia dell'antica Sicilia*, Catania 1910; Santi Correnti,

- L'avventurosa vicenda in Agata nobile e martire, an insert in the magazine "Prospettive", Catania 1991; Maria Adele Di Leo, Feste patronali di Sicilia, Roma 1997; Giovanni Lanzafame, Le candelore, barocco in movimento, Catania 1988; Adolfo Longhitano, Il culto di sant'Agata in Agata, la santa di Catania, Bergamo 1998; Salvatore Lo Presti, Il fercolo in Agata nobile e martire, an insert in the magazine "Prospettive", Catania 1991; Santo Privitera, Il libro di sant'Agata, Boemi editore, Catania 1999; Salvatore Romeo, Sant'Agata V.M. e il suo culto, Catania 1922.
11. The small statue, donated to the Roman Curia, no taller than 30 cm.
 12. Unexpectedly, this detail was even noted by Alan Walters in his guide to Ceylon, which he wrote following a long journey to Sri Lanka at the end of the 1800s (*Palms and Pearls or Scenes in Ceylon*, 1892).
 13. See: Mazumdar & Mazumdar (2009); Sheringham (2010); Walsh (2006).
 14. "Religion as sextant" is an expression that was inspired by the famous question contained in Gerd Baumann's book *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities*: "Religion: Baggage or Sextant?" (Baumann 1999).
 15. Although in a different context, Katia Ballacchino has produced an interesting analysis of the contemporary migration of religious practices. Focusing on the migration of the "Gigli" from Nola to New York, Ballacchino, explores the meanings of religiosity and confessional belonging in the context of migration and argues that the feast represents an instrument that helps to reinforce contact and connections at the transnational level (Ballacchino, 2008). For more information about religious practices among transnational migrants, see also: Warner & Wittner (1998), Warner (2000) and Chafetz (2000; 2002). For an ethnography of religious practices among Sri Lankan migrants in Italy, see: Natali (2015;2013).
 16. Regarding the transnational dimension of the religiosity of Sri Lankan migrants in Italy, see also the work of Luca Trombetta, who details the transformations of Sinhalese Buddhism in the context of migration. Trombetta shows that Buddhist temples in Italy function as "centers for gathering, re-fashioning and diffusing both symbolic resources (ideas, beliefs and practices) and economic resources." In fact, the monks maintain constant contact not only with colleagues in Italy and the various sites of global Sinhalese diaspora, but also with the Sri Lankan monasteries where they come from (Trombetta, 2006). For a parallel study regarding Sri Lankan Buddhist women working in Jordan and their use of Christian churches as arenas for the making and fulfilling of ritual vows, see Frants (2010).
 17. As Ralph Grillo (2006) has made clear, transmigration represents not a single trajectory, but a multiplicity of possible trajectories that are frequently unstable and will probably transform into something else: "Transmigrants are frequently represented as liminal: 'in between', and perhaps 'above and beyond' ". A variety of terms (e.g. transnational itself, translocal, cosmopolitan) carry this implication or convey a presumed creolity, hybridity, or postnationality. Often these representations decontextualise and conflate different personal and institutional subject positionings and overlook the extent to which transmigrants remain bound to nation, culture, ethnicity, and not least, class" (Italian translation in Benadusi, 2006: pp. 107-108).
 18. Of course, the young people who had the chance to continue their studies in the host country have different characteristics. The few university students with a Sinhalese background who are currently enrolled in Catania show a greater propensity for investing in a working future in Italy.
 19. The educational sphere is another channel Sinhalese migrants use to structure home-making practices in the arrival context and enable return migration strategies. As in other Italian cities, two primary schools run by Sinhalese have been opened in Catania since 2009, one located on Via Umberto and the other on Corso delle Provincie. The schools offer an educational program that is quite similar (in terms of both language and program homogeneity) to that offered in Sri Lanka. The opening of Sinhalese schools in Italy functions to maintain the cohesion of the diasporic nuclear family without threatening the dream of a hoped-for re-integration in the country of origin. Sinhalese migrants normally wait to request that children join them until they have completed compulsory schooling at home, and it is not unusual for migrant families to send their children who were born in Italy back home to be educated in Sri Lanka. This choice shows the importance of the return trip in the migratory project, a prospect that would be seriously jeopardized if the children were to be educated in Italy. Another factor that sways the balance in favor of Sri Lankan schools is the fact that

they teach English, which is considered essential for finding a good job not only in Sri Lanka but also in Anglophone countries such as Great Britain, Canada and Australia. In this sense, opening Sinhalese schools in Italy makes it possible to cultivate the dream of upward social mobility through migration by constructing a space ‘on the borders’ that is specifically tailored to this aim: where feeling ‘at home’ means not a stable integration in the host context but rather an ability – refined over time – to maintain solid ties with the country of origin through the diaspora.

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