INDIFFERENCE WITH SRI LANKAN MIGRANTS[1]

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Sri Lankan Catholic migrant workers who return home from Italy with money re-migrate after a short time. They do not find Sri Lanka a welcoming country for investment or work. The dearth of opportunities for returnees is frustrating and leads them to act with indifference towards the place they cherish. Instead of using their savings to invest locally, people spend their money building large houses and buying expensive consumer goods; and when their money runs out, they return to Italy. Unable to be upwardly mobile, their only alternative is to become indifferent to the opinions of those who mock them for "becoming Italian." However, their indifference can be interpreted as their understanding of the country and of the rigidity of cultural norms that do not afford them recognition for their efforts. (Circular migration, indifference, transnationals, Sri Lankan Catholics)

Negombo in Sri Lanka is known for its fishing industry and a strong attachment to the Catholic Church. After the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 many who inhabited the western coast of the island converted to Catholicism. Being relative newcomers from South India, people in this region were not entangled in Sinhalese social structure and were more receptive to outside influences. This facilitated the establishment of commercial and cultural connections with Europeans (Raghavan 1961; Roberts, et al. 1989). With the removal of Portuguese domination and 140 years of oppression under Dutch rule, the arrival of the British in 1796 was warmly welcomed. Members of the Karāva caste, who had secured a good position for themselves as ship-owners and merchants, took advantage of new opportunities in business and education brought in by the British (Wickramasinghe 2006). Most of those who could not take advantage of the opportunities for upward social mobility are the Catholic fishermen found today on the west coast of the island between Negombo and Puttalam (Sivasubramaniam 2009).

Since the start of the civil war against Tamil separatists in 1983, difficulties for fishermen became intense. Those that lived in the region of Negombo had historically escaped the monsoon seasons to the island of Mannar (160 miles to the North) or to the northeastern village of Kokkilai (200 miles away) in Mullaitivu district. The uncertainties and dangers of the widespread violence in the late 1980s forced many of these seasonal movements to stop (Winslow and Woost 2004). But even before ethnic conflict

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made it dangerous for fishermen to move about, the market reforms introduced by the government since 1977 have made their livelihood increasingly difficult and precarious (Gamburd 2000, 2008; Lynch 2007; Hewamanne 2008; Frantz 2008). It was in the context of the complications generated by market and structural reforms and the escalating ethnic and political violence that transnational migration became a popular alternative for young Sri Lankan fishermen.

Negombo and its neighboring towns have been sending workers to Italy since the late 1970s. After the first waves of workers returned with evidence of economic success, mass departures began. Fishing trawlers leaving almost daily carried up to 200 people at a time. The prospect of working in Italy took hold, and young men and women were ready to pay more than $3,000 to be taken illegally to Italy (Collyer and Pathirage 2001; Henayaka-Lohbihler and Lambusta 2004). After the government cracked down on traffickers in 2004, massive emigration stopped. But the Catholic town of Negombo's change became embodied in its nickname—Little Rome.

Fieldwork with Sri Lankan migrant workers was conducted in Negombo over 12 months in 2010. Returnees often greeted the mornings over coffee made with their Italian espresso machines, and with conversations that drifted from Sinhalese and English to scruffy Italian. Large flat-screen TVs, Italian kitchen appliances, and Italian furniture were standard in most homes of migrant workers. Many had regularly sent home large parcels of pasta, pomodoro sauces, fruit juices, candy, toiletries, and even cleaning products for the kitchen. Statements in fashion also made evident who had been to Italy or had family members working there. Young men and girls in downtown Negombo often sported big sunglasses, t-shirts with the Italian flag, or football jerseys marked "Milan" or "Napoli."

But evidence of Italian earnings was not exclusively the consequence of what many in Colombo described as the Catholics' obsession with "showing off." Rather, the ubiquitous Italian presence can be interpreted as an expression of the frustration experienced by returnees who found no opportunities for investment at home. This frustration was caused by national economic and political structures that denied investment opportunities to those who returned with money. But most important was the dearth of ways to live differently that migrant workers encountered when they tried to settle back in their hometowns. Where difference is severely restricted, then indifference emerges and can be expressed in disruptive ways.

A reaction comparable to the attitudes of these return migrants was displayed by Shanghai's Chinese bourgeoisie in the inter-war period when acting indifferently towards the standards of modernity, elegance, and taste that were imposed by the European colonial elites (Abbas 2000). This

indifference inspired many acts of eccentricity with which fortunes eroded in a senseless way, while showing a profound insensitivity towards the extreme poverty that lived side-by-side with the bourgeoisie's opulence. But indifference was also an attitude that allowed Shanghai's emerging elites to ignore the judgmental gaze of Westerners, enabling them to imagine the kind of city they wanted for themselves (Abbas 2000). Their actions generated spaces that they could appropriate and use to construct a Chinese version of modern cosmopolitan culture. These two kinds of cosmopolitanism described by Abbas (2000) can be usefully applied to Sri Lankan migrant families that return from Italy and try to settle in their communities of origin. But while the Shanghai Chinese acted indifferently towards Europeans, Sri Lankan transnational workers embraced the foreign as a way to transcend the constraints imposed by Sri Lankan society. Return migrants were commonly scoffed at for their "Italian pretensions" when they built large houses in modest neighborhoods and adopted exotic fashions and food preferences. The indifference they showed towards those who mocked them was an attempt to question the status that Sri Lankan society had historically reserved for them.

In the district of Negombo, with a population of 120,000, nearly 100,000 identify as Catholic. The exceptional devotion of the Catholic communities that extend to the north of Negombo for more than 100 miles is reflected in the dozens of churches that dot the area, the hundreds of shrines in homes and businesses, in the constant work to remodel and expand parish buildings, and in the competitive effort to hold the most elaborate festivals in honor of the local patron saint (Stirrat 1977, 1992). Every year, different towns produce large-scale passion plays at Easter, bringing professionals from Colombo to handle technical matters, and investing tens of thousands of rupees in costumes and stage productions which attract audiences that number in the thousands.

The fondness that Negombo people have for things Italian is not only a consequence of their migration. A history of maritime connections has made them take an interest in what is beyond the horizon. This cosmopolitan history inspires the attitude with which people approach migration. The experiences of people before migrating strongly determine what people will do abroad and what they will bring home (Levitt and Nieves-Lamba 2011). The name "Little Rome" is not new, although in the last decade it has taken a dramatically different dimension.[2] Rather than being a consequence of transnational migration or of the new "Italian style" symbols of status and success, Negombo's connections to Italy are built on a history of religion and education strongly inspired and led by the Catholic Church for more than a century. Some of the best schools in the country are located in towns like Negombo and have educated a strong middle-class of professionals and teachers for generations

(Perniola 1992; Perera 1941). However, in the last three decades, the reasons Negombo bears a heavy influence of Italian culture have had less to do with religious devotion than with the way "Italian" has become metonymy for kitsch luxuries and conspicuous consumption. A closer examination of the transnational experience of Sri Lankans in Italy suggests there are more complex problems that are deeply constitutive of the national culture.

WHY RETURN?

Negombo's youth dramatically changed over the last 20 years when working in Italy became a possibility for thousands of young men. The dreams of prosperity that propelled those who migrated earlier were substantially different from those of today's youth, who see migration as their only way out of Negombo. While in the past, young men embarked on migration as an alternative to fishing, Italy is the only option worth pursuing for present generations. As Fr. Anthony, the parish priest in one of the smaller churches outside Negombo said,

> People now want to go to Italy and don't think about anything else. They see neighbors and friends who went and made money and they think it will be the same for them. ... They don't even consider going anywhere else. Italy is the only place they can imagine.

Many families in Negombo today care little for a school education or for teaching their children the craft of fishing, which is constitutive of their regional and caste identity (Stirrat 1988; Subramanian 2009; Raghavan 1961). Young migrants are "less likely to invest in local institutions and more likely to choose occupations that will help them succeed once they move" (Levitt and Nieves-Lamba 2011:6). As the only jobs available to Sri Lankan migrants in Italy are as domestic workers, the pursuit of educational qualifications becomes an obstacle rather than an incentive for migration. The only businesses managed by returnees that seem to thrive are those which tutor Italian language and help young people prepare applications for visas. Although a quality education remains a symbol of pride and prestige in the region, it has deteriorated in recent decades, replaced by other symbols of success (Collyer and Pathirage 2010; Hayes 2010).

Despite the changing motivations across generations that inspired people to migrate, an overwhelming majority of migrant workers still want to return to Sri Lanka (Collyer 2009). For all their penchant for things Italian and the indifference they show towards those who mock them, transnational migrants strongly desire to settle in Sri Lanka. Migrant parents do not consider Italy a good place to raise a family. Imparting good values to children requires raising them in Negombo. Only there can they be brought up as good Catholics—

respectful of their parents and worthy members of the extended family and local community.

Achieving these objectives encounters many obstacles because families return to a place that has changed very much. Frustration is manifested in the Negombo Catholic community in two distinct ways: the common reaction to a Sri Lanka that is unwelcoming to new investors, and the reaction to a country that falls short of fulfilling the moral requirements of migrants. People imagined that Negombo would be appropriate for raising children, but the comforts and luxuries that these children become familiar with drastically alters the conditions of their education and the measure of their values. Children in Negombo grow up indulging in luxuries that were unimaginable a generation earlier; and they see their relatives either trying to leave or enjoying the fruits of migration by relaxing at home. In such circumstances, the safe haven that migrants imagined in Negombo is far from the reality they encounter upon their return.

Transnational Sri Lankans of Negombo adopted what for them is a very satisfactory way of life working in Italy while having residence in Negombo. Sarath and Deepika, a migrant couple in their early fifties, are typical. They were interviewed while they were sipping coffee on their patio, seated in their Italian garden chairs. They were proud of their three-story house they recently finished building after more than eight years of construction. Having been back for two years, they were asked what plans they had for the future. Sarath said that it was time for him to go back to Milan to find work since their money was all gone, but Deepika would stay with their two children. Asked if they considered making financial investments or had some business plans, Sarath said that working in Sri Lanka was not a good idea unless one had connections for a government position. Too much work, little money, corruption, and cheating made investing in Sri Lanka a hopeless dream. Sarath said, "It would be nice to have some kind of business here, but it is not a good idea for us. Doing business in Sri Lanka is for rich people. You need to be powerful and have connections. We would be taken advantage of if we tried to start something."

This couple held the notion that Sri Lanka was good only for spending money, not for producing it. Most migrant workers in the country experience high levels of unemployment, low salaries, corruption, and a lack of education, which combine to encourage returnees to migrate again. As a consequence, people become increasingly alienated from their communities of origin due to the difficulties they face when they want to be assimilated and re-incorporated into the local job markets. For people like Sarath and Deepika, the contrast between life in Italy and life in Sri Lanka is sharp—one place is the site of hard work, austerity, and cramped living spaces; the other is where to live

extravagantly and leisurely until the money runs out. In Italy, there is virtually no social life for migrant workers who take extra jobs on the side cleaning offices at night or houses on Sundays. Even when they have a Sunday off work, they rarely do more than go to Church.

Although Negombo transnational workers truly developed a life in-between Sri Lanka and Italy, rather than having active and fluid relations at both ends of their lives, they seemed to be increasingly disconnected and alienated from the two places. They are like the Philippine migrant workers in Italy, described as perpetually foreign, unable to integrate and participate in Italian society (Parreñas 2008), but incapable of returning home due to the problems of finding employment there. Those who do return to Negombo pass through several phases—from the incautious young returnee who squanders all of his profits to the experienced and withdrawn returnee who refuses to "help" family and friends in need (Osella and Osella 2000).[3]

Migrants, while usually generous with relatives when it came to consumption, rarely wanted to invest locally. As a result, luxury consumer goods abounded in and around Negombo, but there was little improvement in institutions and infrastructure. Making matters worse, the inflow of cash from Italy raised retail prices and increased the cost of living for everyone, without generating new sources of income for those who stayed, and widened the gap between migrants and those staying home.

Migration generated a kind of isolation that was as burdensome in Italy as it was in Sri Lanka (Gallo 2006; Charsley 2005; Perreñas 2001; Paul 2011). Transnational workers were aware that their families and friends appreciated their return with gifts and cash, but they also realized that most of those who stayed in Sri Lanka rarely appreciated their struggles with language, employers, landlords, and Italians who, for the most part, saw Sri Lankans as the ideal "docile workers" (Näre 2010). Upon returning from Italy, migrants soon found that they had become marginal to their own communities and that, to many at home, they were more useful staying in Italy and sending remittances (Dias and Jayaweera 2002). The returning migrants wanted to stay in Sri Lanka, but realized that they could sustain their lifestyle only by returning to Italy.

People who remained in Negombo believed that life in Italy was far from a life of toil. Returnees, instead of debunking this myth, contributed to it by telling stories of success and moral freedom. A conservative Catholic morality and local gossip combined explosively in Negombo, while Italian liberalism together with distance from home merged to allow young men and women to enjoy life away from the judging gaze of Negombo. The image that non-migrants had of Italy was therefore severely distorted, with affluence and freedom perceived as a given rather than an unlikely outcome. As a

consequence, migrant workers were hardly seen as sacrificing themselves for others; and upon return, it was extremely difficult for them to defend positions of moral authority in the face of those who had stayed home.

CONSUMING AND INVESTING

A main point of this essay is to understand why return migrants find it difficult to remain in their own community and soon re-migrate. After years of work in Italy, people want to return home, but not to live like impoverished fishermen. Once in Sri Lanka, however, their economic ambitions and their capacity for investment are discouraged, and they are mocked for "becoming Italian." Their alternative is to go back to Italy, and/or to be indifferent to the opinions of others.

Although economic hardships at home fuel migration, when people work abroad, more than money keeps them in a circular pattern of migration. Despite suffering abuse, feeling the burden of loneliness, and missing home, there are things people like about being abroad. One informant, Duminda, expressed this simply:

> Italians have good systems for work. At first Sri Lankans struggle to understand their work methods, but eventually you realize that it is much better. I wish I had gone to Italy when I was younger so that I could have gotten used to the system there faster. Employers there are very respectful; they pay you on time and are very honest. If you work hard and you are an honest person you will always do well. … Life in Sri Lanka is better, but sometimes things get too difficult. People don't understand how much we work in Italy and how much you miss your home and your family. They think we go there to have fun.

Having lived in Italy since 2002, Duminda returned to Negombo in 2010. His wife, Sunnita, was not concerned about his having delayed his return for several months because she thought that this time Duminda was coming home to settle. But Duminda decided to stay for two months and then return to Milan where he had a steady job at a restaurant. His plan to start some business in Negombo and settle with his family had been postponed more than once.

Besides the financial rewards that Italy provides, most migrant workers mentioned that when they were away they enjoyed a freedom that was unavailable at home, the possibility of fashioning themselves in new ways, the work discipline, and the existence of simple rules that were much easier to follow than the ones at home. A tension exists between the desire to be away from one's community to meet family responsibilities and the desire to be back in one's community. Remittance money sent home from Italy is used for the requirements of family and community, yet a large portion remains and is geared towards acquiring luxury goods. Wealth not used for subsistence or development constitutes a kind of "excess energy" that needs to be consumed

somehow. One of the main ways of getting rid of this surplus is on luxuries—"sending it up in smoke" (Bataille 1988:22). The migrant workers' increased capacity for earning money is not matched with investment opportunities in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the surplus funds that migration produces cannot be geared to productive investments and are diverted to luxury consumer goods. As Bataille (1988:22) wrote, "the remainder is consumed senselessly and obscenely." What seems eccentric on their part can be better interpreted as a frustration arising from the migrant workers' awareness of the social and cultural restrictions that hamper their opportunities for upward social mobility (Vigh 2009).

Contrary to what people commonly believed in Sri Lanka, migrant workers were not unwise investors. Money from Italy is used for the needs of the community and to enable new paths for its development. But the limit of these two faces of capital is quickly reached when there is no room for the returnee to start a business locally or to invest in anything that is unrelated to the fishing industry. Community projects that are financed by diasporas in other communities (Levitt 1998) are scarce with Sri Lankan Catholics and only take the shape of providing financial aid to the efforts of local priests. One of the benefits of community or investment projects initiated by migrants is the renewal of ties and strengthening of relations to the hometown through labor, investment, and cultural channels. The lack of these opportunities for investment in Sri Lanka not only generates a large number of transnational workers with expendable cash, but also a migrant community with decreasing ties to non-migrants. When returnee migrants encounter difficulties using wealth to forge bonds of solidarity and reciprocity with others, the alternative is to spend large amounts of money building mansions and buying expensive consumer goods. The migrants' response to the inability to engage with Sri Lankan society is to act with indifference and dissipate their wealth.

BECOMING INDIFFERENT

Although Sri Lanka is no longer controlled by English-speaking pseudo-aristocratic families of the colonial era, the Sinhala nationalist elite that rules the country today continues to dismiss the creativity and ingenuity of laboring groups like the migrant workers with expressions like, "Oh, those Catholics! Always pretentious and having crazy dreams. They think they're European!" While the Catholics in Sri Lanka were a rather privileged community during the colonial era, little of that history remains. As one informant succinctly put it, "if we had any privilege left today, we wouldn't be jumping on boats like crazy to get out of here." The efforts of Catholic migrant workers who try to do something different in Sri Lanka are laughed at, and after years of trying to re-engage with their country, many stop trying. Some who give up stay in

Italy, but there are many others who give up by showing no interest in politics, the economy, or any social issue. They have become indifferent about the future of their country.

Sri Lankan migrant workers are regarded as nouveau-riches who mismanage their money. But their behavior says more about their understanding of Sri Lankan society and about the anxieties of migration than about their apparent eccentricity. Returnees are deeply skeptical of their prospects in business in Sri Lanka and are convinced that the unwise thing to do is embark on any venture that would risk their hard-earned money. It is in this sense that the spendthrift character of returnees is more a manifestation of their low expectations in Sri Lanka than evidence of eccentricity.

An example of the contrasting mind sets of migrants and middle-class Sri Lankans appears with the views of Mr. Perera, an engineer recently retired and living in Negombo. Mr. Perera spoke perfect English and had developed a very comfortable middle-class life without ever migrating. In the years since his retirement he worked part-time as an agent linking Italian employers and locals who planned to leave. His opinions about migration were drastically different from the ones held by migrant workers. In his view, migration was no longer a good work strategy because of the rising costs of travel, difficulties in obtaining visas, and a lack of good employment opportunities in Italy. It was difficult for him to understand why people insisted on going to Italy and were unable to imagine alternatives. He said,

> When my brother left for Italy 20 years ago, it was an adventure for him. I didn't go because I had a college degree and had opportunities here. People seem to be obsessed with Italy and willing to pay or get into a lot of debt. Today people will pay more than 15 lakhs (approximately $14,000 in 2010). … If I had that kind of money available I would buy some … land with coconuts and not go to clean bathrooms in Italy!

People like Mr. Perera showed the class dimensions of Negombo with the contrasting expectations held about migration. He was right in pointing out that with less than $20,000 it was possible to buy a small coconut plantation or start many kinds of businesses locally. Perera further pushed his argument by rhetorically asking, “Should I sit in my house under the fan until the trees have ripe coconuts? Or should I work every day scrubbing other people's floors?” Of course, he was able to make better decisions than migrant workers. In Sri Lanka, money is not measured simply by its purchasing power, but also by the person who has it (Bourdieu 1984). Money in the hands of Mr. Perera had very different uses than in the hands of a fisherman.

Ostentatious consumer goods are clearly visible and had become a symbol of migrants’ achievements, but there exist other ways by which return migrants used their money. For example, people that managed to build good

houses and were thrifty with their purchases had expendable cash for buying parcels of land. These plots were often in neighboring towns because the local real-estate prices had increased exponentially over the last two decades. Buying land was a smart way of saving money. Some people even speculated that in a few years they could sell the land for a substantial profit. However, this was not an investment in the economic sense, as it produced nothing and generated no employment. Mr. Perera's case shows that the indifference of migrants is not a general consequence of the economic changes that have been transforming the region over recent decades. In fact, people like Perera were actually benefiting economically from migration without ever migrating themselves. Transnational migration actually opened new business opportunities in Sri Lanka, but few of them were owned by the migrant workers who made them possible. While money from migration had the advantage of releasing fishermen from the worries of daily subsistence, it still did not change the way they thought of themselves—as forever tied to the fishing industry. This is why consumption in luxury goods was not merely a decision people took, it was almost the only financial outlet left to them.

At the end of the day, the biggest winners from migration in Negombo were those who had historically held economic power. Three supermarket chains had opened large stores in Negombo with modern fixtures and imported items that contrasted sharply with the small vegetable stalls and small shops that used to dominate the commercial district. Stores that sell home appliances and electronics also opened branches in Negombo. Huge illuminated signs advertising luxury home architectural firms and construction companies sprang up, all made possible by Italian money that quickly came into the hands of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

It can be argued that these chain stores and international banks doing business in Negombo generated employment for some of the local population and helped transform Negombo into one of the busiest urban centers in the country. Yet migrant workers were welcomed to this new market economy only as consumers. While they were the main engine of the local consumer economy, migrant workers remained marginal to the business and investment circles.

The people from Fr. Anthony’s parish were among the pioneers in the migration to Italy, dozens of them leaving before 1990. Most of these migrants had become Italian residents and even citizens, speaking fluent Italian and having progressed in their occupations. While initially domestic workers, many had become restaurant chefs and lab technicians. After they acquired a stable position in Italy, their wives joined them and many of their children were born there. Although they all shared the dream of return, many chose to stay in Italy and reserved Sri Lanka for vacations or for retirement.

Some who had returned to Sri Lanka intending to remain there went back to work in Italy for a few more years. The "Italian style" for which this region is now known began to flourish in sleepy villages, with people buying land and building two- and three-story houses. Most of the time, people added onto their old family homes, in small plots of land that could not comfortably contain the kind of construction they could now afford. As a result, real estate values rose consistently and areas became crowded, with houses cramped on both sides of narrow streets, with virtually no gardens or backyards.

Fr. Anthony explained that people's obsession with Italy and money is understandable as virtually all the fishermen involved in transnational migration had grown up in a world of austerity and hard work. Transnational migration was the first opportunity in several generations to do something other than their ancestral occupation. Many things combined rapidly to generate a situation that overwhelmed young people, who found themselves with a lot of money that came relatively easily. It is not that domestic work was effortless, but that doing housework, an occupation that is seriously underpaid in Sri Lanka and reserved for women, became the source of tens of thousands of rupees every month for male migrants. That domestic work was an occupation in demand and paid over a thousand Euros a month was simply unimaginable to a teenage fisherman, especially as he could make a far larger sum of money by cleaning houses than by spending ten days at sea risking his life.

Fr. Anthony was highly critical of the houses and the shopping sprees many migrants embarked on when they returned to Sri Lanka and related how a migrant worker from his parish had asked him to bless his new family home, a mansion filled with ostentatious luxury. "There was a fireplace ... in Negombo! Can you believe that? Why do you need a fireplace in Negombo? I didn't know what to do. They asked me to bless their home. They are good people, you know, but this was too much!"

People in Colombo used the term "Little Rome" more as mockery than as a name. The house with a fireplace in Negombo is but one example. Other houses had elevators and underground garages and exemplify how migrant workers pushed the limits of what motivates migration. The changing nature of transnational work for these Sri Lankans raised the stakes involved in migration to Italy to the point where decorum was almost frowned upon and where ostentation became the mark of success. Although rationales used by workers in support of their migration remained virtually the same as those used by previous generations, the notions of success in the context of transnational migration changed to include unrealistic expectations for an unsustainable standard of living (Levitt and Nieves-Lamba 2011). In this way, symbols of opulence took hold of the lives of those who grew up seeing the

success of earlier migrants. Upon returning from Italy, migrants hired domestic workers and rented cars to travel the country with their families. Even those who had been in Italy only a short time felt compelled to show their success by spending all they brought home.

Although transnational workers returned with money that could be invested in productive ventures, business initiatives continued to be monopolized by a small group with the resources and connections necessary to navigate Sri Lankan bureaucracy and business networks. Therefore, the money that returnees brought to Sri Lanka cannot be counted as capital because it could be used only for consumption.

To Bataille, once resources have been dissipated, the only thing that remains for the person who wastes is the acquisition of prestige. Waste itself becomes an object of acquisition (Bataille 1988:73). But when return migrants opted for showing off their wealth as a means to improve their rank in society, they were ridiculed for their pretentious ambition. Their intention of obtaining recognition only got them scorn and social avoidance.

But cultivating an attitude of indifference can itself be a form of luxury. Who can have the ability to do this—to ignore the demands of society and set their own path—if not those who can afford to do so? The path of indifference became a kind of luxury when spending lavishly was virtually the only manifestation of the wealth from work in Italy. Acting indifferently was a luxury that migrant workers enjoyed. The public dissipation of wealth became the only way of aspiring to prestige and social mobility when the means for investment had been obstructed. After their claims for social equality were rejected, turning their back on Sri Lanka became a symbolic attempt at challenging the marginalization that had been imposed on them.

AN ESTRANGED COMMUNITY

The ties of solidarity and responsibility that bound the Negombo fishing community have eroded, replacing networks of support and labor with tokens of economic prosperity. The austerity of the lives of those who never embarked on migration and their humble surroundings are in stark contrast with the large homes built by returnees and the cars and motorcycles in their garages. This contrast of worlds is sometimes evident in the same household. An old fisherman who did not migrate to Italy but stayed in Sri Lanka with his family had a son who had been working in Italy for almost ten years. As his old family house was being remodeled, he was asked if his son was sending money to help with the renovation cost. His son was not helping that way but had paid the medical bills of his wife who had recently died. Asked if he would rather have his son at home to help with fishing, he said that it was better for his son to be in Italy for he had never learned to fish and didn't want

to learn about it. The father said it was for the better because "in fishing there are two seasons, in one you catch and in the other you don't. Italy is stable, you always have work and you always know how much you're getting at the end of the week. It's better for him to stay there."

The social distance between migrant workers and their hometown communities grows larger every year, and the gap becomes increasingly difficult to bridge. Not only do migrant workers become accustomed to levels of income that were unthinkable for workers without qualifications in Sri Lanka, they also get used to employers who are more respectful than those found locally. Virtually everyone has experienced in Sri Lanka some form of corruption in the workplace and cheating by employers, government officers, or employment agents. Domestic work in Italy is hardly an ideal situation. Racist and paternalistic relations towards Sri Lankan workers are common there. But the migrant workers value being treated respectfully, and being paid fairly and on time.

Questions regarding their morality and their competitive aspirations increasingly alienated them from prospects of re-integration. The task of asserting their membership in the Negombo community appeared possible only by refusing to engage with others as they had before migration. Migrant workers thus become increasingly indifferent to the opinions and banter of relatives and neighbors, and fellow migrants become the ones they can relate to. The flip side of embracing the new and the different is a certain loneliness and isolation from the rest of the nation (Abbas 2000). Linking to the world beyond Sri Lanka meant not only exploring new alternatives and experiencing a kind of freedom, but also the loss of older ways of being Sri Lankan.

CONCLUSIONS

Indifference on the part of migrant workers is a reaction to the indifference of the nation that "arises from competing claims over the right to construct the cultural and social self" (Herzfeld 1992:1). The lack of opportunities for migrant workers to be different is due to a discourse that insists in affirming an exclusive definition of who is to be included as a worthy community member. Kapferer (1988) explains that the Sri Lankan state is protective of the Sinhalese Buddhist nation yet inclusive of other peoples and nations—only as long as the hierarchical subordination is maintained. The ordering of the Sri Lankan state is thus dependent on its capacity to enforce the hierarchical interrelation of all those it encloses. Friction arises when migrant workers start conceiving their lives as different but return to a place that does not allow for deviance, and welcomes only those that accept the structuring of the country along the lines imposed by the Sinhalese Buddhist nation.

The desire of the migrant workers to return to their hometowns to do something new is hampered by the notion that to question their position in the Sri Lankan system of social stratification is to question their own belonging to the state. The dismissive comment of "Oh those Catholics, they still think they're Italian!" is testimony that for them to be Sri Lankan requires accepting subordination. But to question one's subordination to the majority is not merely a struggle for relative power, it is a question of how to define belonging to the nation. Indifference thus emerges as perhaps the only alternative available to those who want to embrace their national identity but who nonetheless reject the notion that belonging requires the acceptance of a static subordination that social, economic, and political institutions assign them.

People returning or wanting to return from Italy have a clear idea of who they are and what possibilities are available for them on their return. The migrant workers were confronted with a radically different way of living in Italy, with values and moral codes that were unimaginable to them only a few years earlier, and they successfully adapted to lifestyles that demanded an enormous mental flexibility. Most of them realize that in spite of all the advantages derived from migration they want to live in their own country. Despite the alienation that returnees face, they form a population that stubbornly insists on making Sri Lanka their home. Beyond the dire economic, social, and political prospects that Sri Lanka offers them, they nonetheless continue to spend their money and educate their children in their town of origin. If they could understand difference in Italy and live with it for years, it comes as no surprise that they expect a similar tolerance from their community and their country, and to be allowed to imagine a different way of being Sri Lankan.

NOTES

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2. The 2001 government census has the urban population at approximately 65,000. About 7 percent of the country's population identifies as Catholic, which indicates the high concentration of Catholics in this region.

3. Filippo and Caroline Osella develop a useful classification of the different attitudes displayed by return migrants to Kerala from the Gulf. When applied to the migrant community of Negombo, one can clearly distinguish among the attitudes of young migrants who return home for the first time and carelessly spend all of their money, older migrants who have become wiser investors, and those who try to avoid migrants as much as possible.

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