Disconnecting from home: contesting the salience of the diaspora

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In the wonderful Hollywood movie *Mississippi Masala,* director Mira Nair portrays an Indian-African family in Uganda. The film starts in 1972 when the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin expelled all the Asians from Uganda. The family spends a few years in England but then moves on to the United States. Here they live with Indian family members who run a chain of motels. The family eldest, Jay, is full of homesickness. While in the US his main aim is to return home. Home is not India or the United Kingdom, but Kampala in Uganda. After attending a court proceeding on the disposition of his confiscated Ugandan house, Jay relinquishes his long-nurtured dream of returning to Uganda, the place he considered as home.

In this article I would like to present two conceptions of home in relation to peoples in the diaspora. The first is related to Jay and his daughter. It is the acknowledgement that some people move on without returning to their 'homeland'. It is the process through migration in which people disconnect from their homeland. Parminder Bhachu has coined this: *twice migrants*, people who do not move back to their homeland, but move on (Bhachu, 1985). Some even move further and may be coined 'multiple migrants' or 'permanent migrants'. Nevertheless they continue to create a home away from home. And that new home may be inspired culturally by India as well as Africa in this case. There are various reasons why Jay would not resettle in India. Many South Asians in Uganda had left the continent before India was a nation. Jay and his children were born in Uganda, not in India. They had spent their entire lives in Uganda.

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They were educated in Uganda. They adapted to the local Swahili culture. At the same time, their Indian culture changed in an African context, but remained visibly Indian in terms of food habits, dress habits and marriage patterns. They would intermarry within the Indian community, but caste barriers were less strict than in India. Economically and increasingly culturally, they were oriented towards Africa and the United Kingdom (Oonk, 2013). In the early 1950s the Indian Government made it clear that overseas Indians should integrate in the local societies, and not rely on the Indian Government for help. Many African-Indians took that as a definitive 'farewell'. Moreover, due to the complexities of citizenship issues in the colonial world order, many Indian Africans held British passports or were British subjects. During the turmoil in 1972, India opened its borders to a tiny minority who held Indian passports, rather than the entire Indian diaspora in East Africa. A part of the South Asian community in Africa felt betrayed. In short, the institutional setting was not in favour of natural reconnection with the homeland.

In the second conception of home and homeland, we acknowledge that home is not a natural calling. Jay and his family move on to the United Kingdom and later to the United States for two major reasons. First, it is an option because – as British subjects in Uganda – there were no special visa restrictions for them to settle in the United Kingdom. In other words, it was an option. In addition, they moved there simply because they had family members and friends in the United Kingdom and the United States and not in India. In other words, the availability of networks is important, not the homeland as such. Nevertheless, many first and second generation people in the diaspora do share a strong connection with the motherland because of family relations, collective memories, and myths and identification with the nation. But what happens if they do reunite with their places of origin and family members? More often than not, after their arrival in their homeland they face ambivalent feelings. It is not the home they expected. It is a home that may be friendly, but different. This ambivalence is experienced not only by the returnee, but also by those who were left behind. We present a few of these examples in this article.

These two commencements, twice migrants and returning migrants, may be seen as an addition to the concept of diaspora as it has developed since the 1990s. Most books on diasporas use broad 'checklists' of factors defining the groups in diasporas, including the dispersal to two or more locations, the collective mythology of one's homeland, and alienation from the host nation, among others. The notion of home and a common culture is often seen as one of the most attractive features defining a diaspora. Indeed, at first sight, peoples in the diaspora share an umbilical cord with their motherland. Although there are

regional variations in their adaptations, in many ways they display a common cultural relationship with their home country. They may wish their children to prosper in their adopted countries, but at the same time they may prefer them to adopt family values and marriage patterns and to share their common culture. In other words, peoples in the diaspora tend to reproduce their culture, values, language, and religion as much as possible. Moreover, many peoples in the diaspora are currently trying to re-connect with their homeland, either through modern mass media, the internet or personal visits. These reconnections are often seen as a romantic rendezvous with the historical past and their 'original roots'. These 'natural feelings of connection' are reinforced by governments which share good reasons for promoting this notion for economic and political reasons.

The field of Diaspora Studies has also grown mature in conceptualising and theory, along with a number of academic journals, and continues to emphasise the variation and patterns in the ways the umbilical cord between the migrant community and the homeland is structured and organised. The academic field also began wondering how the word 'diaspora' could be useful in understanding migration, migrants and the relationship between the motherland and the host societies. This was highlighted in particular by the establishment of the Journal of Diaspora Studies in 1991. The point of departure for the *Journal of Diaspora Studies* is formulated well by its general editor Khachig Tölölyan, who notes that the concept has been related to a growing field of meanings, including processes of transnationalism, de-territorialisation and cultural hybridity. These meanings are opposed to more 'rooted forms' of identifications such as 'regions' and 'nations'. This implies a growing interest in the discourse of 'rootedness', changing identities and the relationship between the local and the global.

At second sight however, we notice that many migrants may not (wish to) reconnect with their (mythological) homeland and its culture. In fact, over the years they have integrated or assimilated in a new culture in a new environment. They build a new home, with new preferences, prospects and outlooks. They may lose their original language skills and adapt to a new language. They may change their dress and food habits and adapt to the host culture. I do not necessarily refer in this article to processes of acculturation or even creolisation in which 'roots' are increasingly difficult to find. I am referring more specifically to ambivalent relations related to 'roots' and 'origins'. In fact this article argues that the umbilical cord is not self-evident. It needs to be nurtured and negotiated, and even then it might disappear. If we can ask: "When does a migrant belong to a diaspora?" we may also ask: "When does someone who

once belonged to the diaspora disconnect from his or her 'homeland' and vanish in the larger flow of migrants, nationals and nations?" The possible answers may not be definitive in the direction of 'connect' or 'disconnect', but they will be more on the path of ambivalence and uncertainty. Jay transformed from an Indian-African to an Asian American. While he would acknowledge his Indian background, he considered Uganda as his home. His daughter, who is the main character in the film, falls in love with an African American. She considers her love affair as an 'American way of life.'

In general, the field of diaspora studies has grown beyond the initial 'checklist' fixation where it seemed that two questions were most important: what is a diaspora and who belongs to the diaspora? Here, however, I would like to present examples that show the path of ambivalence and uncertainty regarding a migrant's relation to their motherland. They are in line with my previous research (Oonk, 2007) but also confirm Brubaker's critique (Brubaker, 2005) of the diaspora concept. When using the diaspora concept as an analytical tool, it is essential not to overestimate the centrality of ancestral and biological national background as a basis for self-understanding, self-categorisation and group formation. Nowadays scholars acknowledge that there are major differences and variations in migrants' adjustment. They may remain loyal to their homelands, they may adjust to their host-societies or they may evolve in a hybrid set of attachments. We can find numerous case studies in favour of one of these directions (Milton J. Esman, 2009).

Twice migrants: home away from home

Many people migrate more than once. If we take a generational perspective we can easily see that Jay's parents migrated from what is now India to what is now Uganda. Jay and his children were born in Uganda. They had never visited India, but they did consider themselves to be Indian Africans in Uganda. They then move to the Unites States and become 'twice migrants', a term coined by Parminder Bhachu (Bhachu, 1985). In the United States his daughter falls in love with an Afro-American boy. The movie weaves nicely around the various race issues involved, especially the double standard that Jay has regarding his daughter (she should not marry an African-American), and his love for his homeland Uganda. For the sake of the argument, we can see that children of the marriage of his daughter will again have another relationship with India and Uganda. They may grow up as Americans of mixed descent. They will not fit into most definitions of a diaspora. Many of these multiple migrants/twice migrants do not share an idealised alleged ancestral home, nor a commitment to

its maintenance or restoration. Neither do they share a collective memory or myth about this homeland.

Let me illustrate this with a few other examples. Tsuda convincingly shows us that Japanese Americans should not be labelled as part of the 'Japanese diaspora'. They have generally lost their social connections to the Japanese homeland over the generations, and neither have they sustained transnational relations with other Nikkei communities in the Americas. He argues that in these cases of older Japanese diasporas in the United States, they "have become assimilated and incorporated into their respective host countries are no longer really diasporic, but have simply become ethnic minorities which operate in a national context." In these cases there is no reflection of 'home in a mythological motherland'. Home is where they were born, in this case America (Tsuda, 2012). By the same token, the level of local integration plays an important role in the argument of Agarwal (Agarwal, 2016). He argues that twice migrants in Canada, including South Asians, Chinese and Filipinos in particular, were older, were more likely to speak an official Canadian language, were slightly more educated and were more skilled than direct migrants. A lack of job opportunities in Canada forced many twice migrant families to split between two countries. Agarwal means between Canada and the countries from which they migrated, not the country of their roots. In other words, the root country is not a safety net nor a cultural yardstick of orientation.

In places where old and new diasporas of the same root meet, studies show that an ambivalent relation occurs. This is the case in the Netherlands. In the 1970s a small group of Hindus arrived from Suriname, a former Dutch colony. These Surinamese Hindus arrived as indentured labourers in Suriname in the nineteenth century. Some of the descendants of this group eventually arrive in The Hague as twice migrants. They barely intermarry nor interact in daily life with direct migrants from India. However they might celebrate the same Hindu festivals, like Diwali. (Lynnebakke in Oonk, 2009).

Home is not a natural calling

The reconnection with the mother country is one of the key elements in the diaspora literature. It obviously refers to a strong feeling of embeddedness, cosiness, cordiality and the affectionateness of family, friends and like-minded people. Nevertheless, in diaspora literature as well as in family life, homecoming may not be pleasant, joyful or 'natural'. In many cases second, third and further generation migrants in the diaspora may never have visited their supposed home country. They are born in countries that they call home. Second or further generation Jews who are born in the US may never have

visited Israel. Indians born in the UK may never have seen India and Chinese in Singapore may never have stayed in China. For many of these second or further generation migrants, their home-country is the country where they are born. If they visit the country from which their (grand)parents came, they encounter a motherland they have never seen. This may be pleasant and ecstatic, but they may also feel bewildered, surprised and disconnected.

Some communities trace their origin to a certain region or country in the world, but they do not uphold any notion of return or a myth to return to that area. This is the case with Roma (gypsies) for example, who have no interest in gazing at a homeland that once was. Indeed, there is no aspiration to the region that they supposedly left some 1,200 years ago. At the same time they can claim transnational connections through their leadership. Their history shows many examples of local oppression and fragmentation. Despite their efforts to connect at a transnational level, there is no urge, as in the typical Jewish case, to create myths about a safe haven that once existed in the past (Sutherland, 2017).

The Roma are by no means a unique case. The Parsees are another example. The name Parsees means 'Persians'. They are descended from Persian Zoroastrians who were a group of followers of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster. They migrated to India to avoid religious persecution by the Muslims between the 8th and 12th centuries. Their economic, cultural and political importance was acknowledged by the British in India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In those days they developed an intermediary identity between the British and South Asian society. Nowadays they live chiefly in Bombay and in a few towns and villages mostly to the north of Bombay, but also in Karachi (Pakistan) and Bangalore (Karnataka, India). Since the late 1980s many have left South Asia and have settled in the United Kingdom, the United States and other countries. Despite their initial flight from Persia, they do not reproduce any myths about returning to that area. Another interesting example is the Khoja Ismailis, especially the Aga Khanis amongst them. Most trace their background to North-West India where they converted from Hinduism to Islam. Many Khojas migrated and settled over the centuries in East Africa, Europe and North America. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in the aftermath of the Aga Khan Case in 1866 when their spiritual leadership under the Aga Khan was officially recognised by the British. The Aga Khan was instrumental in the resettlement of Ismailis (and other South Asian communities) after the expulsion of Asians from Uganda by dictator Idi Amin. The Aga Khan is the guiding leader of the Ismailis. He speaks in the United Nations, with the Pope and with the various national leaders in the world – but the issue is never a new

home in India, unlike for example the Armenian diaspora. (Daftary, 2009 and Akhtar, 2015)

Coming Home? Homeland and its ambivalences.

Caryn Aviv and David Shneer describe a telling anecdote in the beginning of their book *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* (Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, 2005 p1).

> "Buses whisked a group of Jewish college students from Ben Gurion Airport to the room where the first Prime Minster of Israel signed the Declaration of Independence in 1948. 'Welcome Home!' the trip leader called out to the disoriented and exhausted participants in a Birthright Israel programme. As one of the counsellors on this trip several years ago, I looked around to see how the students would respond. Even as a Jew who felt very strongly connected to Israel, I wondered whether the language of 'at home' reflected my own understanding of the diaspora-Israel relationship. I expected that the young adults wearing baseball caps and sweatshirts with college logos would find this message of homecoming even more bewildering less than two hours into their first trip to the country."

In this case we see that the new state of Israel wishes to reconnect with its diaspora. This first moment of reconnection with a home that was never home, a 'mother' they had never seen, is thrilling. But although mother and child might embrace each other, they have to build up their new relationship. The reconnection was not 'natural' or self-evident. It needed massage and negotiating. And in some case the reconnection may be filled with caution, mistrust and suspicion. For example, there was no mass emigration from Ethiopia by the Beta Israel after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, as with other Jewish communities. Until the 1980s only about 250 Beta Israel managed to reach Israel. However, under pressure from the international community, Israel accepted 7,700 Beta Israel refugees from Sudan under Operation Moses in 1984-1985. Finally, the so-called Operation Solomon brought about 15,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel. Soon however, it became clear that for many of those migrants, Israel was not the 'Promised Land'. When the Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel, these distinctive people faced appalling discrimination, racism and a lack of empathy for their hardships in Ethiopia and during their journey to Israel. Moreover, this was exacerbated by a mixture of bureaucratic insensitivity and incompetence (Hertzog, 1999).

We may contrast the ethnic return migration of peoples who have lived in the diaspora for two or more generations, with examples of first-generation diasporic people who return to the country where they were born. The examples of the Jewish diaspora above belong in the first category. We may find a good example of the second category in the work of Mario Rutten and Parvind J. Patel (Rutten and Patel in Oonk, 2007). They followed a group of Patidar returnees who retired from their jobs in the United Kingdom to resettle in India. Most of them did not resettle in the villages from which they came, but in a neighbouring town. The authors show that the returnees developed special wishes regarding their food (not too spicy), furniture (not sit on the ground, and air-conditioning). Those who stayed behind felt that the returnees wished to be treated like kings. They also argued that because they were managing the land and houses in India, they should have a larger share of the inheritance than those who had left the country. In response, the returnees argued that their earlier remittances and gifts should be seen as compensation for this. In other words both parties held different expectations in the reuniting process.

Conclusion

In the late 20th century a very limited number of states had developed governing institutions to engage with their diasporas. Less than three decades later more than fifty per cent of the countries are active in some sort of institutional reconnecting with their diasporas. Usually these institutions are housed within the foreign ministries, and more often than not they are connected with numerous NGOs and economic and cultural organisations. Nowadays states offer positive incentives for diasporas to relate to 'home'. In return, they desire increasing remittances, investments, philanthropy or acquiring knowledge and experience from foreign-educated 'nationals'. At the same time the governments wish to regulate money transfers, special visa schemes, property rights and social security. The home country thus needs to be involved at the state level. In this article I have argued that the success of these national diaspora schemes needs to be mirrored against the fact that 'homecoming' is not a natural process. In fact, the reason that these diaspora institutions are flourishing reflects the reality that it is not self-evident that people in the diaspora wish to reconnect with their home countries. It needs promoting and nurturing. On the one hand of the spectrum we find people that move on and even disconnect with the homeland. For Jay and his family it was not 'natural' to resettle in India, where his grandparents came from. And even then, many people move on and slowly disappear from the motherland's radar.

On the other hand we find people who actually do reconnect with the homeland. But contrary to the general belief, they are either receives with hostile feelings even from family-members. Or the returnees themselves may feel uncomfortable if their home countries do not fulfil economic, political or cultural expectations. Making and unmaking diasporas goes hand in hand with making and unmaking homes.

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