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The Role of Physical Religious Spaces in Migrants' Journeys

AP Seminar

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Haruki Murakami, a renowned Japanese writer, discussed the changing connections we have to places we hold dear, whether due to physical changes of the landscape or changes in our own disposition, and asserted that this can result in a sense of sorrow (Murakami, 2013). This statement, from Murakami's essay *A Walk to Kobe,* underscores the importance a physical location can have, for it contains irreplaceable memories, stories, and bonds. Murakami further elaborates on how, seeing the disconnect between his memories of his hometown, and its current state, he feels a pervasive sense of loss (Murakami, 2013). This demonstrates how in Murakami's essay, as in life, the fraying of personal connections can have damaging emotional effects. This essay has a resounding sense of resonance for our world's ever-growing migrant population, who deal with physical distance from their hometowns every day.

For migrants, these emotions can manifest in a multitude of ways. According to a qualitative, interview-based study conducted by Valentina Garro, and published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Global Faultlines,* Polish migrants in the United Kingdom (U.K.) did not entirely agree with calling the U.K. home, rather, many had to restructure their notions of identity (Garro, 2024). Additionally, Garro highlights how migrants like "Magda…expressed a sense of loss of community characteristic…" (Garro, 2024). A new country, completely unknown, can result in a sense of identity confusion, as migrants are caught between two worlds, but not entirely a part of either, as well as feelings of sorrow at the loss of their cherished communities. Yet, to these problems, a common solution does arise: places of worship. Places of worship can, and have, alleviated effects of identity confusion and sorrow in migrants, by providing community, familiar rituals and aspects of home, and by serving as a bridge between cultures.

The Emotional Impacts of Migration

In our modern world, more people than ever are migrating, or moving to new nations, where they must rebuild their communities, and identities. Migration inevitably results in loss of the memories and connections that someone has with their homeland. In the study conducted by Garro, which included Polish migrants who came to the UK after the Second World War, persecution in twentieth century Poland, and European Union accession in 2004, participants missed specific smells from Poland, products, and connections (Garro, 2024). It is not simply the disappearance of material, tangible things, as migrants often feel that these severed connections are akin to losing a part of themselves. This disconnection results in a sense of sorrow, as migrants search for a way to reconnect with aspects of home while being far away, resulting in nostalgia that cannot be wholly fulfilled. Haruki Murakami emphasized that the fraying of such essential connections creates conflict between memory and reality, where memories of the bonds migrants once held to their homeland conflict with their reality: disconnection. These Polish migrants experience such confusion everyday, where their minds cannot reconcile the idea of being neither Polish nor from London, resulting in cognitive dissonance and identity confusion (Garro, 2024).

Similarly, Malgorzata Glowacka-Grajper, a renowned anthropologist, conducted a study about Ukrainian migrants' perspective about their social situations, and a priest she interviewed said, "...as soon as they were somewhere abroad…they also felt like migrants…we simply learn…this reality…" (Glowacka-Grajper, 2023). Hence, the experience of moving abroad entails a change in perspective: the migrant is no longer of any specific country, rather, their identity becomes ambiguous. Similar to Polish migrants, these Ukrainian migrants grappled with identity loss, reiterating that migrating spurs a period of uncomfortable growth, where migrants need to

find new anchors for their beliefs. However, feelings of homesickness or sorrow can be temporarily overshadowed by the novelty of a new nation (Garro, 2024). The excitement that arises from relocating can stifle the underlying sense of disconnection, though this often fades over time. For these migrants, a place that grounds them is as essential as ever, as suppressed emotions often result in deeper despair. Thus, a place that serves as an anchor is crucial in the lives of migrants, and this anchor is often a place of worship.

The Historical Relevance of Places of Worship

Such problems of identity confusion and sorrow have persisted, and it is important to consider their impact on historical migrant communities. For example, when Indian indentured servants migrated to Trinidad for work, they faced the emotional discomfort of life in a new country. According to Kalpana Kannabiran, a renowned sociologist, “Thousands of miles away…another seed of India [has been] planted…the Ramcharitramanas…" (Capildeo, 1995 as cited in Kannabiran, 1998). Indian migrants would form religious gatherings, an informal place of worship, and read the *Ramcharitramanas,* a sacred Hindu text centered around a prince’s exile, taking comfort in the idea that their “exile” would also end (Kannabiran, 1998). Religious stories and gatherings thus evoked a sense of peace in the fact that the entire community was facing such adversity together, thereby restoring togetherness within the migrant population. As there was no designated temple for the migrants, they created their own place of worship. These gatherings were a common occurrence, in fact. According to an article in the peer-reviewed journal *The International Migration Review,* there was an evolution where migrant communities first held small religious gatherings, then rented spaces, and then established official places of worship (Hirschman, 2004). This article describes how one of the primary challenges within a historical context was the unavailability of a shared religious place, and how migrant

communities overcame this. Such endeavors then led to places that fostered familiarity, where religious prayers in native languages nurtured emotional connections with others (Hirschman, 2004). In this manner, an implication of places of worship was repairing connections between migrants and their homeland, exemplifying their importance. Murakami also described how objects like Hanshin fans served as a symbolic reminder of his childhood in his hometown, and tethered him to his past (Murakami, 2003). Murakami's essay, along with the articles by Kannabiran and Hirschman, underscore the significance of memories, and related rituals or objects in places of worship, in restoring migrants' sense of belonging.

While maintaining ties with one's culture is crucial for migrants, so is assimilating into a new nation. A case study in the peer-reviewed *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* discussed the migration of Japanese citizens to Hawai'i, and the development of the first Buddhist temple in 1889 (Shimizu, K., & 清水佳理, 2019). This case study outlined that many leaders turned Buddhist *gathas*, or hymns, into Christian-style hymns, leading to greater acceptance among plantation owners (Shimizu, K., & 清水佳理, 2019). In such a manner, these temples are an example of cultural fusion, wherein traditional Japanese religious elements combined with the broader influence of Christianity in Hawai'i. This allowed Japanese migrants to resonate with familiar elements of their homes, but did not limit belonging in Hawai'i, either, bridging cultures together.

Such a manner of bridging cultures, however, has a paradoxical implication: it fuses together different cultures, while establishing universality. This can be seen in another type of religious institution established by Japanese migrants: Shinto shrines, places of worship for Japanese deities. When such a shrine was established in the city of Hilo, it was named Yamato Jinsha, and this "...positioned Yamato Jinsha as relevant to all Japanese…" (Shimizu, K., & 清水

佳理, 2019). Thus, a strange phenomenon occurred: the Japanese migrants were both knowledgeable about, and influenced by Christianity, but maintained their own individuality through places of worship that transcended regional dissimilarities. These examples highlight the historical importance of religious institutions for migrants, as they alleviate feelings of identity confusion and sorrow via familiarity and connection that foster togetherness.

Continuity and Change in the Significance of Places of Worship

With the reliance of technology in the 21st century, there has also been a sharp increase in transnationalism: the idea of social connections crossing borders. In the 21st century, a common argument that considering physical religious spaces and their importance is irrelevant rests upon this question: with technology and the internet, why are physical places still relevant for people at all? These arguments have made many believe that the role of places of worship in the lives of people in faith-based communities, and especially migrants, has decreased, and considering their importance is redundant and inflates the importance of religious structures. However, they fail to consider that these changes in global lifestyles simultaneously transform the role of religious spaces, preserving certain aspects, while expanding others.

Laura Limonic of the State University of New York conducted a qualitative study about the importance of the Chabad–Lubavitch movement, a branch of Orthodox Judaism, in the lives of Latin American Jews; Limonic found that Chabad places of worship serve as spaces for networking and matchmaking (Limonic, 2021). Migrants meet and socialize in events like special dinners on holy days, not just to fill an emotional void, but to further grow their relationships with others. Religious spaces have expanded their reach, by both preserving, and creating, new relationships and bonds of connection between migrants. Similarly, in a study of Muslim

migrants to South Africa published in the peer-reviewed *Journal for the Study of Religion,* "There is a sense of cooperation and responsibility among…the Greyvillea Muslim Association for receiving migrants from Malawi into their community" when they migrate to Durban (Vawda, 2017). In this age of connection, cross-border ties are ever-present, and more essential than ever. Religious ties help facilitate these connections, making the emotional experience of moving to a new country more manageable. Although it may not be exactly like a migrant's home, living with someone of the same religion provides comfort and familiarity in the similar rituals, foods, and experiences, alleviating problems of identity loss. Furthermore, such communities have their own mosques and Quranic schools established (Vawda, 2017). This phenomenon results in a religious community and a sense of familiarity which transcends the sorrow of leaving one's home. Rather than diminish the importance of physical places of worship, transnational developments in the age of technology have reinforced their significance, by serving as conduits for connections to form, and lives to change. As seen in the studies by Limonic and Vawda, religious spaces do not simply preserve, they can expand their impact by allowing connections to flourish within, and outside of, national borders.

As previously stated, some argue that the advancements in technology and the internet have diminished the importance of physical places of worship for migrants. However, many aspects of their significance still remain, underscoring that often, physical places hold memories and power that cannot be fully replaced by the digital world. Jingyang Yu, in an extensive fieldwork study between 2011-2012 and 2015-2016 noted that in the Chinese Christian Church of Berlin (CCCB), many parents believed "'Only here children can really be immersed in the Chinese environment'" (Yu, 2021). In the CCCB, the main goal is not to teach Chinese to

migrants and kids of migrants, rather, it is to emulate a natural feeling of authenticity that invokes discussion and use of the language in everyday life. This highlights functions of religious spaces such as keeping migrants' mother tongue alive, as well as forming places of familiarity, play a key role for many migrants to keep their culture and roots alive in their own lives, and those of their children. Similarly, Nikolas Broy, a religious scholar and part of the faculty at Rikkyo University, discussed how Yiguanduo religious spaces, which is a Chinese-Taiwanese religious movement, have continued to bridge cultures in South Africa by using religious spaces to hold training camps, where they teach others about their religious beliefs (Broy, 2019). Thus, continuity is seen in overcoming cultural differences and allowing for easier societal integration. In fact, there is a sense of assimilation where the migrants integrate, and they also try to inculcate understanding about their religions within their communities, promoting compassion on both sides. Murakami's exigence for his writing stemmed from a realization that time can truly change physical spaces such as his hometown (Murakami, 2013). As seen in the studies by Vawda and Limonic, religious spaces also change over time: they inherently hold the foundations and memories they are built upon, but simultaneously grow to both solve the emotional problems that accompany migration and help their lives blossom.

Conclusion

When migrants leave their homes, they experience sorrow and identity confusion, harming their overall well-being and sense of belonging in new communities. Physical religious spaces can help alleviate these symptoms; they provide a sense of community and connection, familiarity through rituals and aspects, and are bridges between cultures. This need for remembrance is essential, and even Murakami relied on Hanshin fans to remind him of his past. Furthermore, in an analysis of Tibetan migrants, Sara Kohar and Naresh Kumar, PhD scholar and

professor at the Central University of Gujarat, respectively, reveal that organizations like the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) aim to uphold Buddhist religious practices by way of educating youth (Kohar & Kumar, 2025). This analysis shows that there is a greater focus among migrant communities in passing on their culture to the next generation, and one of the most beneficial ways to do this is through physical religious spaces that teach about religious thought and beliefs. These institutions help rebuild migrant identities, and are third places where migrants connect and grow together.

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