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Autor: Killias, Olivia

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FOLLOWING THE MAID

MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY IN TIMES OF «TRANSNATIONAL» DOMESTIC LABOUR

Keywords: Fieldwork · Transnational migration · Freedom of movement · Domestic work · Malaysia

OLIVIA KILLIAS

In recent years, a growing body of anthropological literature has dealt with issues of migration, mobility and transnationalism, simultaneously reconsidering some of what have been regarded as core elements of the discipline; in particular, the idea of the classical, single-sited ethnographic «field», which has long been thought of as one of the main distinguishing features of anthropology and the central «rite de passage» for becoming an anthropologist, has been reassessed.

Ulf Hannerz and George Marcus were among the first to explicitly propose a methodological alternative to the institution of the field, namely multi-sited fieldwork. Yet, according to these authors, the practice of multi-sited fieldwork was not necessarily new as such and, especially in migration studies, it had been used quite extensively (see Marcus 1995: 106). Interestingly, studies on migrant domestic labour seem to have remained at the margins of these theoretical and methodological developments.

In fact, while concepts such as «transnationalism» and «mobility» figure prominently in most accounts of contemporary studies on migrant domestic workers, only very

few of these studies are actually based on mobile, multi-sited fieldwork. A look at recent studies on transnational domestic labour in Asia reveals that most researchers have focused on either the country of origin (e.g. Silvey 2004; Purwani Williams 2004) or on the country of destination of migrant domestic workers (e.g. Chin 1998; Yeoh and Huang 2000; Lan 2006)¹, without actually questioning the «nation-state» as methodological lens and unit of analysis, and leaving the practices of actors involved in the «maid trade» but located outside of the nationally delimited territory largely unattended.

In this paper, I will present some experiences I had with multi-sited fieldwork, which I carried out between September 2006 and July 2008 in different research sites in Northern Java and in Jakarta, Indonesia, as well as in and around Kuala Lumpur and in Penang, Malaysia, for a research on Indonesian women who migrate both within and beyond the Indonesian national borders to get employment as domestic workers. These observations will hopefully shed some innovative light on the debate on multi-sited ethnography, especially in the context of migrant domestic work².

¹ The publications by Rachel Parrenas (2001, 2005) on Filipino domestic workers are based on multi-sited fieldwork and are noteworthy exceptions.

² I would like to thank David Bozzini from the Institute of Ethnology, University of Neuchâtel, for his inspiring and thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also grateful to Prof. Dr. Heinzpeter Znoj, Institute for Social Anthropology, University of Bern, for suggesting me to write an article about my experiences with multi-sited ethnography.

My fieldwork started in a Javanese village, in the most classical of ethnographic traditions. However, even that single village probably never corresponded to the colonial representations of the «Javanese village» composed of «cultivators living closely and harmoniously together in a community with a high degree of institutional self-sufficiency» (Breman 1982: 189) as it had long been integrated in the global economy through a tea plantation established under colonial rule that still exports all its tea to Europe and Japan (Semedi 2007). Far from being isolated, this village was in the midst of international flows of labour, goods and capital, and this is something one could clearly sense in everyday life interactions. Since the mid-Nineties, international labour migration attracted especially younger women from the area; getting employment as a maid in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Hong-Kong or Taiwan indeed represented an attractive alternative to the strenuous and badly paid work on the plantation.

I started my research in that village by talking to return migrants, to several local brokers and to the families of women who were currently abroad for work. In the course of interviews, sites other than the ones I had initially been thinking of, namely the points of «departure» and «arrival» of these women's labour migration, proved to be important as well. I got especially interested in the places where women stopped on their way to Malaysia, places like the camps where they were kept and trained during several months before being sent abroad.

Along with the identification of such potentially interesting sites of research came the awareness that mobile research required additional negotiation and was logistically not always easy to organise, not least because of research permits that were meticulously linked to specific places. A change of research location in the course of fieldwork required formal justifications on the part of the researcher, a time-consuming procedure, with no guarantee of being issued a permit at the end of the day. Other, subtler obstacles to doing mobile research were certain uncooperative informants, like local brokers, who first tried to stop me from digging too much into their trans-local connections; they clearly did not like the idea of having someone trying to understand too much about the labour migration system.

In fact, by «following the people» (Marcus 1995: 106), I realised that the migration of individual Javanese women was part of a larger system of labour export, a system that was organised around different but interconnected stages (recruitment, training, certification, placement, employ-

ment, exit), sites (recruitment agencies in Indonesia, placement agencies overseas, airports, employers' homes, etc.) and actors (workers, local brokers, government officials, non-governmental organisations, agents, employers, etc.). As Marcus (1995: 107) has argued, one of the main strengths of the multi-sited method is the fact that it «allows the sense of system to emerge ethnographically and speculatively by following paths of circulation».

After several weeks of following workers, brokers and recruitment agents, mainly in Jakarta, I went back to the village in Northern Java and started to tell people about my project of going to Malaysia. I told them that I would like to meet their relatives who were working there as domestic workers. Many of my informants were afraid that my visit to Malaysia might provoke the anger of their relative's employer, not completely without reason, as we will see below. However, after some initial hesitations, those who had family in Malaysia proved willing to help me to get in touch with their relatives. It then turned out that many families did not have any information about where their relative was actually staying in Malaysia or how she could be contacted, and it required a lot of time and work to get together at least some addresses or phone numbers. Some had not heard anything from their migrant daughters or wives since the day they had parted and these people started to hope that I would be able to find these women and bring back good news. It was a difficult balancing act to acquire information while trying not to create expectations that I could not fulfil.

Furthermore, a few families had pictures and letters from their relatives abroad and they showed these to me. I especially remember one photograph showing Mega, a woman in her thirties, together with three or four other Indonesian women. They were posing in front of the famous KLCC towers in Kuala Lumpur, wearing trendy clothes and make-up. They seemed to be having a good time, walking around the city and doing some shopping.

After my arrival in Malaysia, I tried to contact the workers that I had been able to get some information about. Unlike other labour sectors like industrial production, where employees are working collectively in one single factory, for the case of domestic work every single interview needs to be negotiated separately because maids work for individual employers in private households.

The task of contacting employers and negotiating a meeting with them and/or their employee was far from easy. I had to adapt to a completely new context of doing

research: people had little time and were apprehensive about letting me into their homes; they required formal documents such as letters of support from the local university before even considering the matter. A situation, in short, that was very different from what I had experienced in Indonesia and which required a renegotiation of my role as ethnographer. As George Marcus put it: «In practice, multi-sited fieldwork is [...] always conducted with a keen awareness of being within the landscape, and as the landscape changes across sites, the identity of the ethnographer requires renegotiation» (Marcus 1995: 112).

Mega, the woman in the photograph mentioned earlier, was on my list of contacts. I was able to talk to her personally as she had a mobile phone and during our conversation she told me that we could meet anywhere, preferably outside of her employer's place, however. We agreed to meet in a shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur. On the day of our appointment, it was only thanks to an excellent taxi driver that I eventually managed to find that particular shopping mall, which turned out in fact to be a small, local grocery store. The setting for our appointment somewhat surprised me at first, but later on I understood that in the seven years Mega had been working for her employer, she had simply never gone out on her own any further than that grocery store, which was situated about twenty metres from her employer's home.

When Mega and I met, she was extremely excited and urged me to walk quickly to a nearby bus stop where we could sit. There she asked me about the pictures that I had taken of her son and I gave them to her. She started crying when she looked at the image of her ten-year-old boy in school uniform. She told me that the last time she had seen him he had refused to talk to her for days and how he could only slowly get used to the idea of having his mother back again, even if only temporarily. A few minutes later, while we were still sitting at the bus stop, Mega explained that she had to hurry to get back home to her employer's. «I told her that I needed to buy some fruit in the local grocery store, so I can't stay very long, otherwise she will get suspicious».

This encounter with Mega was very different from what the photograph she had sent back home suggested and from what she might have been telling friends and family back home, namely that she had many Indonesian friends in Kuala Lumpur and that she was leading a fairly independent life as a maid in Malaysia, owning a mobile phone and being able to go to town now and then. In reality, she had been to the KLCC towers, accompanied by her employer,

three or four times in seven years and the other women in the picture were the maids of her employer's friends. In reality, Mega was working in complete isolation and rarely met anyone else other than her employer.

Even though it was the first time we had met, and albeit that our encounter only lasted a few minutes, Mega talked very openly to me about her life as a migrant. After our encounter at the bus stop, she often called me to chat. I had similar experiences with the other women from the village that I was able to talk to in Malaysia – somehow trust was established almost instantly, because this was based on the fact that I had gone to their villages, that I had met their families and that I had brought along pictures that actually attested to what I was saying. As Ulf Hannerz put it, «to some extent, personalizing encounters in the modern, multi-sited field comes not so much from deepening particular interactions as from the identification of common acquaintances – from placing the ethnographers in the translocal network of relationships» (Hannerz 2003: 209).

When interacting with the Malaysian employers of the women originating from that particular village on Java, I could not make use of such prior common acquaintances. Instead, my familiarity with their workers' families and friends back on Java provoked suspicion and incredulity. I realised that this was partly related to the fact that the «maid trade» was based on the isolation of individual domestic workers. In fact, from the very moment a woman entered a recruitment agency in Jakarta, she was deliberately cut off from her former social networks and phone numbers of kin or friends in Malaysia were confiscated. Later on, in Malaysia, maid agencies claimed that a worker's contact to other Indonesians in Malaysia was a source of bad influence and increased the chances that she would run away. Hence, by showing up at employers' doors with pictures of their maid's family in hand, I connected two sites, that of «home» and that of «work», that had voluntarily been disconnected, and in that sense, the presence of the mobile ethnographer who had been both «here» and «there», represented a potential threat; nobody was supposed to actually make this «link» between the home back in Indonesia and the working place here in Malaysia.

Consequently, not all of the employers that I contacted agreed to meet me or to let me meet their employees. I have done interviews with employers standing in front of their house fence, without being allowed to even see their domestic worker. I have talked to maids from about fifteen metres distance because they were locked in their employ-

er's house and could only speak through a small window while I was standing on the other side of the high fence surrounding the house. Not one of the workers that I met who had departed from that very village in Central Java was allowed to walk around freely on her own. Two women from the same hamlet of that village were working practically next door to each other in Kuala Lumpur but neither of them had been aware of this for two entire years.

The complete immobilization and isolation of essentially mobile workers certainly represents one of the core findings of this multi-sited ethnography. It led me to reconsider the whole idea of «transnational» domestic labour. In fact, if one understands «transnationalism» as «processes of constructing and actively maintaining social fields across borders» (Kokot 2004: 4), it is indeed very questionable whether these domestic workers are engaged in such processes; my data rather shows that workers are actively kept from entertaining such transnational connections. In fact, by following the migration paths of a few Javanese women employed in Malaysia, I realized that in the course of their journey, these women were gradually and deliberately disconnected from their former social networks: they were not allowed to bring along phone numbers and addresses, they were kept in isolation both in the training camps in Jakarta and in their employers' homes and their families back in Indonesia sometimes did not even know whether they were still alive. While the private, profit-oriented recruitment, training and placement agencies were actively engaged in transnational networking, Indonesian maids were kept from doing so. Consequently, by allowing me to follow the migration paths of Javanese domestic workers, multi-sited fieldwork allowed me to identify the

ruptures that characterized these paths and to reveal the absence of actively maintained transnational social ties. In reality, there seem to be far fewer practices of «transnationalism» in migrant domestic labour than is currently assumed in most studies and one might conclude like Wimmer and Glick Schiller that «much of transnational studies overstate the internal homogeneity and boundedness of transnational communities» (2002: 324).

In short, multi-sited fieldwork has allowed me to recognize that migrant domestic labour is a process, that there are different, separate stages, sites and actors involved, and that it is all more complex than the «maid-madam» relationship. It has also allowed me to see «my» village on Java as a particular case of legal contract labour migration, with particular networks leading to particular situations abroad; in Malaysia, encounters with female workers from other regions of Java showed that networks specializing in «illegal» migration monopolized certain areas of the island, again with different consequences for the situation of the workers that used these channels. Finally, multi-sited fieldwork allowed me to hear different versions of the «migration story»; only in Malaysia and at a safe distance from village life did women relate the unmentionable, namely sexual abuse.

By allowing encounters with various actors occupying different, sometimes opposed, positions and by giving the researcher access to the different stages and sites of a circulation path, multi-sited ethnography generates various, simultaneous perspectives on one phenomenon, ultimately offering the possibility of a more nuanced, multi-shaded ethnography.

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AUTHOR

Olivia Killias is presently working on her dissertation project on «Indonesian Domestic Workers at Home and Abroad» under the supervision of Professor Ellen Hertz, University of Neuchâtel, and Professor Heinzpeter Znoj, University of Bern. Her PhD project is part of a comparative research project on «Contemporary Forms of Bonded Labour in Southeast Asia», which has been funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Institut für Sozialanthropologie, Universität Bern, Länggassstrasse 49a, 3000 Bern 9
olivia.killias@anthro.unibe.ch