

# MOBILE BODIES MOBILE SOULS

*Family, Religion and Migration in a Global World*

Edited by Mikkel Rytter and Karen Fog Olwig



Aarhus University Press



## Mobile Bodies, Mobile Souls



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Family, Religion and Migration  
in a Global World

*Edited by*  
Mikkel Rytter and  
Karen Fog Olwig

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Karen Fog Olwig and Mikkel Rytter  
Copenhagen, 2010



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# Introduction:

## Family, Religion and Migration in a Global World

MIKKEL RYTTER AND KAREN FOG OLWIG

As long as people have been on the move as explorers, colonizers, traders, tourists, refugees or labour migrants, religious ideas, practices and institutions have travelled as well. Religion itself also has a long history of movement personified by, for instance, Christian missionaries, Sufi-sheiks and Buddhist monks, or materialized in the form of various routes and sites where devoted pilgrims have commemorated religious figures. Lately religious ideas and imaginaries have been circulated worldwide, at an unprecedented speed, in emerging mediascapes of radio, television and the internet. During the present period of massive global migration, religious ideas, imaginaries, practices and identities seem to have become more important than ever, as displaced people adjust to life in new settings. Indeed, for many migrants religion provides a fundamental resource in their ongoing endeavour to create and recreate social relations and moral orders in a changing world.

In the decade following ‘September 11, 2001’ there has been growing interest in religious beliefs and practices among migrants in western societies. Islam, and the religious life of Muslim citizens in general, has been especially scrutinized. A broad range of politicians, commentators and researchers have been concerned with understanding how religious ideas and activities may connect and mobilize people in transnational religious communities; and a number of studies have investigated various religious movements, organisations and networks, formal as well as informal. These studies have attempted to understand how religious practices, imaginaries and beliefs are transmitted by religious leaders; how people become radicalized, and how organisations and media affect the life worlds of migrant populations in local western settings and/or in transnational networks. Much of this research, however, has been done ‘from above’, focusing on the global and public dimensions of religion and religious practices. Furthermore, with its focus on Islam there has been less emphasis on the significance of religion as a fundamental cultural and social phenomenon

of general significance, just as there has been little discussion of religious practices from a wider comparative perspective.

This volume aims to fill in some of these gaps by entering this area of study ‘from below’. It brings together ethnographic studies from Pakistan, Palestine, Senegal, Turkey, Iraq, Britain, India, Peru and the Caribbean in order to explore how religious ideas and practices take form, are negotiated and contested within the intimate and often private domain of the family – understood both as the local household comprising two or more generations and as the wider family and kin networks stretched out between disparate locations in transnational social fields. Through different empirical case studies and analytical frameworks the chapters of this book describe and analyze the complex triangular relationship between the key concepts of *family*, *religion* and *migration*. Even though each chapter works with different ‘figure-ground’ configurations of the three concepts, they all explore the complex relationship between ideas and practices of religion and kinship in migrants’ attempts to sustain, create and contest moral and social orders in the context of their everyday life and the local as well as transnational networks of relations that this may entail. At a more general level the volume therefore offers a contribution to the still underdeveloped empirical and theoretical border-zone between studies of religious practices, family and kin relations among mobile people.

In the following we discuss how we understand and employ the key concepts of *family*, *religion* and *migration*, what kind of relationships they may involve, and how these relationships mutually shape each other in particular cases as notions and practices of family and religion are played out within the context of migration. Finally, we discuss how the case studies in this book, individually and from a comparative perspective, shed new light on the contemporary global world inhabited by mobile bodies and souls.

## **Family, religion and migration**

‘Family’ and ‘religion’ are universal phenomena we often expect to be the basis of strong lasting emotional ties and personal engagement. An important aim of this book is to critically examine the nature of ties grounded in notions of family and religion in situations of mobility, the converging and diverging meanings and practices associated with these ties, and the ways in which they are evoked in varying contexts of life. While ‘family’ and ‘religion’ have been important topics of investigation in migration studies, they have generally been treated in separate studies. Indeed the contours of two clusters of studies are taking form:

One concerned with ‘migration and family’, the other with ‘migration and religion’.

In studies of migration and the family, much emphasis has been placed on how family networks facilitate the migration process or help newly arrived immigrants to settle and find jobs after arrival. The family is often presented as a significant push-pull factor in migration processes. In recent years we have witnessed a ‘transnational turn’ (Olwig 2003; Glick-Schiller 2005) in migration studies, which has manifested itself in studies of ‘the transnational family’ (Bryceson and Vureola 2002; Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 2004) or ‘the global family’ (Eastmond and Åkesson 2007; Olwig 2007; Paerregaard 1997; 2008a; Sørensen 2005). Studies have examined how mothers and children, separated through migration, practise and experience ‘transnational motherhood’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997) or ‘transnational childhood’ (Anderson 1999; Olwig 1999); the role of ‘transnational marriages’ in the sustaining of family and kin networks dispersed through time and space (Ballard 1990; Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Charsley 2005; 2006; Charsley and Shaw 2006; Constable 2004; Kofman 2004; Shaw 2001), and the ways in which family relations and intimacy may be reinterpreted and restructured in the process of migration (Foner 1997; Rytter 2010). These studies, which only represent a small part of the large number of works on transnational families and kinship networks that have appeared in recent years, all focus on the implications of migrants being engaged in more than one place simultaneously (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). They emphasise that transnational migration poses a challenge to the institution of the family, as intimate relations, positions and structures of authority and emotion, identities and notions of being and belonging are negotiated on a global scale in family and kinship networks.

In the second cluster of studies, on migration and religion, important topics have been how religion and religious practices may enable migrants to engage in communities in multiple locations (Levitt 2003, 2007; Paerregaard 2008a, 2008b) and organize themselves in different kinds of transnational networks (Werbner 2003; Allievi and Nielsen 2003). Studies have explored how religious travel and imaginaries are related to sites of pilgrimage (Eade and Sallnow 1991; Evers Rosander 2004; McLoughlin 2009), how spirits travel themselves (Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010), and what impact nation state politics may have on religious networks and organisations (Rudolph and Piscatori 1997). Furthermore, numerous studies have examined continuity and change in migrants’ religious ideas and practices, but few have had particular emphasis on the role of family and household rituals (Grillo and Gardner 2002; Pedersen 2009). Some of the studies mentioned above focus on individuals, others on religious

organisations of different scales. There is therefore a need to explore how migrants draw on notions and relations grounded in family and kinship as well as religion as they seek to create, sustain or change social and moral orders. This is the topic of the present volume.

## Conceptual approaches

All the chapters in this book conceptualize religion as a dynamic web of shared meanings used variously in different situations rather than as a fixed set of predefined elements. In order to emphasise and maintain this bottom-up perspective, we use the notion of ‘religious practices’, rather than religion as such. ‘Religious practices’ cover a large spectrum of practices from institutionalized liturgy and orthodox rituals to more occult activities often characterised as superstition or ‘folk religion’, such as acts of sorcery, use of amulets, experiences of possession or interactions with different kinds of spirits. Accordingly, we investigate how migrants in pragmatic and flexible ways engage in different religious activities in order to create meaning, continuity and/or radical change in their lives in varying local settings.

The chapters also share a conception of family and kinship as continually shaped in the course of ongoing social life. We suggest that the concept of ‘relatedness’, proposed by Janet Carsten (2000, 2004), offers an important alternative to previous, more biological and functionalist understandings of family and kinship. Studies of relatedness require that we explore indigenous idioms of relatedness and look for the concrete as well as symbolic practices implicated in the creating, maintaining or contesting of particular notions of family and kinship (Carsten 2000: 4). Applied to migration studies, this urges us to look at the local as well as transnational practices through which family relations are constructed and reconstructed (Eastmond and Åkesson 2007; Olwig 2007; Pedersen 2009; Rytter 2010).

The concept of relatedness has a twofold meaning. Firstly, it refers to the indigenous idioms of family and kinship and underscores that even seemingly irreversible metaphors of shared blood or substance must be locally enacted in order to be more than imagined connections between people. In short, we do not just *have* family (as the biological argument seems to claim) we *do* family. Secondly, notions of relatedness are intertwined with ideas about identity and belonging rooted in different places, such as a village, region or nation state, or, at a more abstract level, certain conflicts or imagined communities. In this respect, relatedness constitutes a specific relationship between people, places and occurrences articulated within an