Death of a migrant: transnational death rituals and gender among British Sylhetis

KATY GARDNER

Abstract In this article I discuss transnational burial rituals carried out in London and Sylhet. While collective identity and reaffirming social ties are important issues in discussing the burial of migrants in Sylhet, the main focus of the article is on gender. The analysis of what happens when Londonis die reveals a great deal about the differential effects of living between two places on men and women. While transnationalism may in some contexts be understood as potentially subversive, for the majority of Sylhetis in Britain movement between places is highly constrained by poverty and British immigration controls, as well as by particular gender and household relations. These in turn impact on men and women’s experiences of bereavement, as well as on their access to and relationship with the British state.

Transnationalism has been defined as ‘the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement’ (Basch et al. 1994: 7). Yet, while this aptly sums up its most salient features, most research into the phenomenon, at least so far, has focused on political or entrepreneurial matters, or on the hegemony of the nation state, activities that largely take place in the public arena. To understand the meanings and implications of transnationalism for ordinary people, however, we need also to consider activities and relationships within households and families. This returns our attention to issues of gender and generation as well as to the ‘micro-politics’ of resource allocation. It also brings a different perspective to questions of power between places, for while the global political economy is the setting for transnationalism and its analysis must therefore foreground discussion, we need to understand how the global politics of place articulate with questions of identity, status and culturally specific forms of hierarchy and inequality, all of which require research at the local level.

One way to address such issues is to examine ritual, not at the level of transnational or global religious movements, as discussed for example by Werbner (1996) and in the collection edited by Metcalf (1996), but at that of the ceremonies that take place within and between households. As we shall see, the analysis of transnational household rituals tells us a great deal about how places are imagined and acted upon, as well as about the power relations between them. Household rituals, which are often carried out by women, also bring to our attention the much-neglected issue of gender relations, and how these are played out and affected by transnationalism. An associated question, which I do not discuss directly here, concerns relations between generations (see Gardner 2002).
In what follows I shall focus on death rituals – principally on the funerals of Londoni men (in Sylhet Londoni refers to anyone who has been to the UK) but also on other sacred and profane rituals that take place when British-based migrants die. These tell us much about the conceptualization of place and belonging among Sylhetis in Britain and Bangladesh. Accounts of funeral rituals that occur between places also indicate the emotional costs of transnationalism and how these may differ between men and women and between the old and young.

Although my main concern is with the ‘micro’ level of the household and kinship, it is important not to produce a dichotomy between ‘great’ and ‘little’ transnationalisms, namely between transnationalism at the level of state practices, politics and economic affairs, and transnationalism at the ‘local’ (read ‘little’) level of households and household ritual, as if these were somehow separate from the former. As we shall see, the British state asserts an important influence on rituals surrounding the deaths of Muslim Sylhetis in Britain. Its articulation with gender and other processes of social inequality in Bangladesh is crucial in determining what happens to those whose close relatives die. While concerned with the ritual domain of the movement of bodies between places, burial and funerary rites, I therefore also wish to discuss the bureaucratization of death in Britain, and its implications for those in Bangladesh.

British Bangladeshi transnationalism: the historical context

South Asians have been moving between Britain and the subcontinent for many hundreds of years (see Visram 1986), a history intimately connected with British colonialism. Bengalis, in particular, gained a reputation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as lascars or sailors, working on British ships that carried goods from Calcutta around the world. Some of the older Bengalis living today in Britain had fathers and grandfathers who were lascars, a few worked on the ships themselves. While the majority of lascars stayed aboard, a minority jumped ship in London, seeking work as pedlars or in London’s hotels and restaurants. The vast majority of Bengalis, however, first came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s when the second phase of migration to ‘Bilhati’ (‘Blighty’) took place. Prompted by a labour shortage after the Second World War, the British authorities actively encouraged labour migration from its previous colonies and thousands of migrants began to arrive, an era that is described in more detail elsewhere (Adams 1987; Gardner 1995; and more generally Castles et al. 1984).

Arriving as young men in the postwar period most lived and worked in cities such as Birmingham and Oldham, finding employment in heavy industry. Some went directly to London, working in the garment trade as pressers or tailors. Usually living in lodging houses with other Sylhetis, this was a period of unremittingly hard work, for as much money as possible was sent back to Sylhet. According to conventional accounts of this period, the men were ‘sojourners’ rather than ‘settlers’ (Ballard 1994: 11–13). In today’s terminology, the men were transnationals par excellence; they worked and lived in Britain, but returned as often as they could to East Pakistan (which became Bangladesh in 1971) where they were still heavily involved in social networks of kinship and village community, as well as regional and national political activities. Some men returned more than others – it depended on their immigration status, their financial situation and of course their individual situations. For example,
Death of a migrant: transnational death rituals and gender among British Sylhetis

to retain their British entry permits, men who kept Bangladeshi citizenship were legally required to return to Britain after two years if they were visiting the desh (homeland). They were thus forced to move more frequently than if they had British citizenship. In general, however, the most important factor for the continued movement of men between Britain and Bangladesh was the location of the majority of their wives in Bangladesh.

Over the 1970s and into the 1980s conditions started to change. Britain’s heavy industry was in decline and, after losing their jobs in the north, many Sylheti men moved to London to seek employment in the garment or restaurant trades. Crucially, an increasingly number started to bring their wives and children to the UK (Eade et al. 1996). Compared with other South Asian groups (see Ballard 1990), British Bengalis experienced family reunification relatively late. Many first-generation Bengali women from Bangladesh have only been in Britain since the mid to late 1980s, some for as short a time as one or two years. A recent Age Concern report, based on the 1991 census, records 1215 females over the age of 60 as opposed to 4083 men (Age Concern n.d.).

Today, the Bangladeshi population is the youngest and fastest growing in Britain. The 1991 census enumerated a total population of 162,835, of which approximately one-third were born in the UK as opposed to approximately 1000 out of 22,000 in 1971 (Eade et al. 1996). Some 53 per cent of this population live in Greater London, of which nearly half are situated in Tower Hamlets where they form over a quarter of the resident population (in some areas of the borough this figure is higher). While it is important not to represent the Bengali community in Tower Hamlets in wholly negative terms, there is little doubt that as a population they have many problems. Living in one of the poorest and most socially deprived boroughs in London, they face high levels of unemployment and are largely dependent on the council for housing, frequently living in overcrowded and often damp accommodation. Racism is a continual problem and, for a short period in the 1990s, led to the election of the British National Party candidate, Derek Beacon, in local elections in the Isle of Dogs.

Although there is still some movement and settlement back to Bangladesh from Britain, the character of transnationalism has changed quite radically over the last few decades. The predominant form of migration to Britain is now through marriage (for Bangladeshi men with British Bengali wives as well as the other way round), and visits back to the desh may include older children born in Britain who have never been there before. While some households are still being reunited in Britain (a process that invariably involves lengthy legal cases with the British Home Office) many more have completed their reunification, though through choice or problems with immigration status some may remain in Sylhet.

Transnational households and the wider samaj

As the above account suggests, to understand the form and nature of transnationalism we must analyse processes that take place within the household, as well as wider historical, economic and political factors, for, as Ursula Sharma (1985) pointed out some time ago, migration is a household process. The household developmental cycle is an important aspect of this. In Sylhet, once patrilineal households have divided (usually but not always at the death of parents) they are considered to be economically separate units, a process that is given physical expression in the erection of a
bamboo partition or (for wealthy Londoni families) a pucca (brick) wall across what was once one household. While a certain level of cooperation and sharing of resources is likely to continue (for example, the use of ponds or of agricultural or homestead tools), money, land and food are generally separate. This separation may depend on the economic and geographical context: in his work in coastal Noakhali, Ahmed (2000) found a far greater degree of cooperation.

Although one is expected to be generous and give help (shahajo) to kin who are not household members, it is only within the household that one is obliged to share earnings, agricultural produce and so on. Migrants in Britain therefore only send regular remittances to Sylhet if household members are still present there. Indeed, once a household is reunited in Britain, the need to return regularly to the desh is much diminished. Unlike the cases of transnationalism in the Americas reported by Basch et al. (1994), where new technologies and forms of migration mean continued movement between places is a comparatively new phenomenon, in Sylhet processes of family reunification in Britain indicate that the era of transnationalism may, over the next few generations, be drawing to a close, or at least assuming a different character.

Yet, while the household is a useful starting point for analysis, we must be careful not to be blinkered by it. Wider social networks are spread between Britain and Bangladesh and these are also important. Indeed, one of the most common forms of remittance between Britain and Sylhet today involves payment for ritual activities, which take place not just at the level of the household but over the whole gusti (patrilineage) and samaj (local society). At Eid, for example, a British-based migrant may send money for his brother to sacrifice several bullocks, even if officially their households have separated; he may also send money to pay for a milad (a ritual event involving praying by an imam within a homestead, often on the anniversary of a close relative’s death). Other types of exchange, for example gifts of saris and food between women to atio (blood relations), are also important ways in which British-settled Sylhetis maintain their social links with their gustis, their in-laws and local communities (Gardner 1993). In what follows, then, the rituals and exchanges I describe are not necessarily limited to households, but incorporate a more amorphous body of neighbours and relatives. As we shall see, these can be interpreted as investments in the social and cultural capital of the desh, symbolic payments, which, unlike financial investment in land or buildings, are not limited to the household.

Death of a migrant

Abdul Wahed died in his flat in Bethnal Green surrounded by family and friends. He first came to Britain in the 1950s, returning to Sylhet to marry and father his two daughters and eventually bringing his wife and children to London in the mid-1980s. Some years before his death he had suffered a bad stroke and, despite his condition worsening in the last few months and a spell in hospital, he had been sent home to be cared for by his wife, Soyun Nessa. The fact that she was able to nurse him to the end is the key to Soyun Nessa’s reconstruction of events. In her view, his was a ‘good death’ and she took pride in her role in caring for him.

As it became clear that Abdul Wahed would shortly die, his relatives and neighbours arrived at her home to pray for his soul and place zumzum pani (holy water) in
his mouth. He eventually died during the Friday *zumma* (midday) prayer, another reason why Soyun Nessa presented his death as ‘good’. Muslim undertakers based at the East London Mosque, Hajji Tasleem, collected the body. At the mortuary it was given the ritual *ghosul* (cleansing) performed on Muslim corpses. In rural Bangladesh bodies are washed and prepared for burial by close members of the patrilineage, men by men, and women by women. In London, this preparation is done almost entirely by Hajji Tasleem employees. Workers there told me that although relatives do sometimes attend the *ghosul*, most Bengalis are reluctant to do more than sprinkle *zum zum pani* in the deceased’s mouth or nostrils. The reason for this, they suggested, was that while in Bangladeshi villages it is relatively common to see corpses, here such sights are rare, causing a fear of dead bodies shared by most people in Britain. Combined with this, the majority of bereaved relatives lack confidence in how to perform the *ghosul*, knowledge that in Bangladesh would be held with lineage elders. This contrasts with Werbner’s finding among Pakistanis in Manchester, where she observed close family members actively participating in laying out the body of a dead woman (Werbner 1990: 169).

By Muslim tradition it is important for bodies to be buried as quickly as possible because the soul is not thought to leave the body until it is put into the soil. Before that point the deceased are also thought to experience pain, meaning that procedures such as autopsy and embalming are, in theory, to be avoided at all costs. British law, however, stipulates that post-mortems have to be carried out if death occurs unexpectedly and, in some cases, bodies are not returned for several months.

Most Bengali Muslims choose to wrap the corpse in a length of cloth and place it in a simple coffin. In some cases, bodies are buried in the UK without a coffin, though not all graveyards allow this because it is thought that witnessing a non-coffin burial might ‘upset’ other users of the graveyard. The coffin is then taken to the mosque for prayers and either transported to one of east London’s Muslim graveyards or to the airport to be transported by Bangladesh Biman to Sylhet.

The latter was the case for Abdul Wahed. Like many *Londoni* men of his generation, his burial took place in his home village in Sylhet rather than in the country where he had spent most of his life. Soyun Nessa did not return to the *desh* for the funeral, but stayed in Britain while her sons accompanied the body. I was told that the sickness of her daughter was the reason she did not join the funeral party, but it is actually the norm for British-based widows to remain in Britain. One reason for this may be that in their capacity as carers most have children or other dependants in the UK who cannot be left. Life in Britain increases the dependency of children or frail elderly relatives on individual women, for, due to the material constraints of council housing in Tower Hamlets, the majority live as nuclear families rather than as part of extended families in which other women are able to help out. (Tower Hamlets Council advised me in 1996 that it is its explicit policy to rehouse extended families separately.)

Another reason why women usually stay in Britain is the religious injunction that widows should be secluded for 40 days after the death of their husbands. In Sylhet funerals are also the ritual domain of men and not women. Indeed, in Talukpur, where I carried out my original fieldwork, women were not allowed to enter graveyards or accompany funeral cortèges carrying the corpse, but watched at a distance. The same was true for a Sylhet funeral I attended in London. The rituals surrounding Abdul
Wahed’s death were therefore not only spread between places, but were also highly gendered. This is of course hardly surprising in the cultural context of Sylheti Islam, where ideologies of pardah (the veil) stress the division of male and female space and, in particular, rigorously exclude women from formal ritual domains such as mosques, Eidghar and graveyards.

Yet, while Sylheti Muslim rituals and the spaces in which they are performed are nearly always gendered, of particular interest in the case of transnational funerals is the linking of different types of ritual to different places. In Abdul Wahed’s case, female rituals took place in Britain, while the more formal male rituals took place in Sylhet. Although I would certainly not wish to characterize each place as generally associated with male or female ritual (for of course widows also perform rituals in Bangladesh and men bury their dead in Muslim graveyards in Britain), this division of ritual labour between places is suggestive of a more general observation. First, for many British Sylhetis the desh is strongly associated with sacred capital. Second, men have more opportunities to access this capital than women.

**Widowhood rituals in Britain**

When a Bengali Muslim dies, his widow is expected to spend 40 days in strict seclusion, a condition that – not surprisingly – few women can fully observe, especially if they live in a nuclear family on a housing estate in Tower Hamlets. In her account of events, Soyun Nessa told me that she managed to observe the 40-day seclusion, even though, as she explained, widows are only allowed to leave the house in an emergency, such as to cash a giro (or welfare) check or to visit the housing office. As is customary, another related widow (in this case her daughter’s mother-in-law) removed her wedding gold and she changed from the brightly patterned saris of a married woman to plain white cloth. She also held a milad (a religious event when an imam comes to pray) at her house and distributed shinni (the ritual giving out of food, usually uncooked rice or meat) at the end of the 40 days. Although excluded from the death rituals in Sylhet, she was therefore able to perform some ritual mourning in Britain, although today she says that her inability to accompany her husband’s body, or see where it was buried, is a cause of great sadness to her.

A second set of activities, which, if not strictly speaking ‘rituals’ (in terms of their definition as ‘purposive and expressive ceremonialized performances, which in the cases with which we are concerned serve to mark, often to celebrate, the classic “life-crisis” events of birth, marriage and death’), nonetheless marks death in an important way, involved the British state and the bureaucratization of death in the UK. After a person has died, dealings with state bureaucracy often take up considerable time, especially if the deceased were household heads in whose name tenancies were held and pensions drawn. Widows must apply for their widow’s pension, a process that requires proof of marriage and their husband’s National Insurance number. When things go well this is relatively unproblematic: proof of marriage is usually a precondition of women’s entry to Britain. In some cases, however, their marital status, plus the age and working history of their husbands is almost impossible to prove. This may be because, until recently, neither births nor marriages were officially noted in rural Sylhet (a practice that is now changing because of the demands of British immigration authorities). Delays may also result from earlier false statements made by male
migrants to the British state. For example, in order not to pay tax, some men did not have National Insurance numbers; others made false statements about their dependants. In later years these administrative glitches often cause huge problems for their families.

Many widows are therefore left with a huge pile of forms to fill-up (a ‘Banglish’ phrase) and, in order to do this, may seek the help of workers in community centres such as the one where I carried out my fieldwork. This often means that the 40-day seclusion rule is transgressed; in this case the British state literally pushes bereaved women from the private to the public domain. As we shall see, while the bureaucratic onslaught may prove a headache, many widows view the state system as providing them with far greater security than they would get in Bangladesh, where a woman’s access to a pension is far from guaranteed.

Death rituals in Sylhet

Abdul Wahed’s burial in his home village in Sylhet was normal for a migrant of his generation. Although sending bodies overseas involves the Haram (ritually forbidden) process of embalming, the Muslim undertakers Hajji Tasleem estimate that British-based kin send about 60 to 70 per cent of Bengali corpses to Bangladesh. There, they are usually buried in family-owned land close to patrilineal homesteads, or in some instances in graves close to the shrines of famous Sylheti pir (saints), which can be acquired at some cost.

The usual reason British Sylhetis give for returning bodies to Sylhet is that kin in Sylhet need to see the deceased one last time and can regularly visit the grave and pray for him or her there. This prayer, informants told me, plays an important role in the soul’s journey to heaven. Since there are no Muslim burial grounds in Tower Hamlets (due to pressure on space) and visiting the ones at Tottenham, Walthamstow and Forest Gate involves lengthy and difficult journeys across northeast London, the ease with which graves in Sylhet can be reached and the deceased remembered by Bangladeshi-based kin is no doubt important. As I suggest below, however, cultural constructions of desh and bidesh, which link the former with religiosity and cultural capital and the latter with work and material gain, are also key.

Once returned to Sylhet international airport, Abdul Wahed’s body was transported as quickly as possible to his village. During visits to Talkpur, I have observed the return of bodies of dead Londonis on several occasions. In all the cases I came across, the deceased was male. The most probable reason for this is demographic: since men tend to marry younger women, their British-based wives are not yet at an age when death is common. My hosts told me that women might also be buried back in the desh.

In the most memorable funeral I witnessed, the corpse was transported down the river in a traditional covered boat garlanded with flowers, accompanied by male relatives and with a cassette recorder loudly broadcasting Muslim prayers.

Rural funerals involve the whole community. By this I mean the wider networks of locally based neighbours and relatives, which may or may not be included in a single village. Women commonly distribute shinni in the form of sweetmeats to neighbours and village-based relatives to generate spiritual merit at times of special need, such as a child’s exams or sickness. When there is a death, two groups of people gather around the deceased’s bari (homestead). The first, comprising relatives and
neighbours, come out of respect to view the body; a smaller group of lineage members usually participate in praying and burial rites. The second group is made up of the local poor, some of whom are full-time beggars, who congregate at the bari at the time of the funeral to receive shinni, in this case alms in the form of rice, money or, the most sacred form of shinni, meat from a sacrificed bull. My impression is that close patrilineal kin who are not necessarily household members (for example, brothers or nephews) contribute to the shinni; death rituals are not confined to the household, but incorporate the whole gusti.

The distribution of shinni is seen as an important way of aiding the soul in its journey to heaven (Behest). The investment in sacred capital seems very literal; the more resources that are distributed, the more religious merit (suab) is generated for the dead. Similar thought lies behind the holding of a milad on the anniversary of the death, or in the weeks leading up to Shabai Berat. This is an important date on the Muslim calendar, when prayers are held throughout the night to seek forgiveness for sins and build up religious merit, and when the nights are filled with the sounds of amplified prayer. As I have argued elsewhere (Gardner 1993 and 1995), since both ritual distributions and milads require considerable resources, religious merit generated in this way clearly comes more easily to wealthy households.

At the funeral of a wealthy migrant it is therefore common for literally hundreds of destitute people to wait with their begging bowls, squatting on the ground in long lines. After the male members of the deceased’s gusti have distributed the shinni, the body is wrapped in a shroud and carried on a palki (stretcher made of bamboo) to the coverstan (graveyard) where it is buried and prayers are said. Unlike public graveyards in Britain, coverstans in Talukpur tend to be patches of ‘wild’ land, rising like islands from the fields. Although agricultural land is divided between households it tends to be clustered around the jointly occupied homestead and the coverstan is communal, turned into a sacred site by the burial of an ancestor several generations back, and marked by trees and in some cases stone tombs. Other graveyards exist around the shrines (mazars) of local pirs (Muslim saints), the most important of which is the shrine of Shah Jalal in Sylhet town. Migrant families often acquire plots in the coverstans surrounding these mazars in advance, which is a wise investment given their spiralling prices.

The desh as sacred

The transnational nature of death rituals clearly helps reintegrate households based in Britain back into their Bangladeshi families and communities. Through the journeys of dead bodies from east London to rural Sylhet, social links are reproduced and places symbolically tied together across space. People whose relatives have spent most of their lives abroad can finally view their bodies; local kinship ideology, which stresses togetherness and physical proximity, so sorely contradicted by overseas migration, is reinforced once more. Combined with this, generous distributions of alms at funerals and large-scale milads produce both sacred capital for the deceased, as well as social capital – status, patronage and so on – for their living kin. Yet, while functionalist explanations are certainly useful, the reasons why households now wholly based in Britain go against Islamic teachings, embalm the bodies of their dead and spend large amounts of money returning them to the desh, are more complex.
Death of a migrant: transnational death rituals and gender among British Sylhetis

Indeed, transnational funerals reveal profound issues surrounding identity, perceptions of place, and the Islamization of space, both in Sylhet and in Britain. As discussed in my previous work (Gardner 1993, 1995 and 1999), Muslim Sylhetis view their land as particularly holy because the famous Muslim pir (saint) Shah Jalal and his 60 disciples are buried there. While the most sacred place for a person to be buried is Mecca, and some of the richest Bengali Muslims have paid for graves there, Sylhet is infinitely preferable to the decidedly non-holy land of the UK. As I was frequently told during my fieldwork in Bangladesh, because of its religious history Sylheti land is particularly fertile and auspicious. This is physically expressed through a sacred geography of mazars scattered across the Sylheti countryside.

Links between the sacred history of Shah Jalal and his disciples, and the genealogies of local lineages are also crucial. As I have argued elsewhere (Gardner 1993), the ancestors of Londonis are often reinvented as pirs as part of the economic and social transformations caused by migration. There is therefore no strict division between the burial places of ancestors and the sacred sites of mazars. Viewed from this perspective, the burial of migrants, many of whom have acquired merit through the performance of hajj, in the soil of the desh both increases their own religious capital and adds to the sacred nature of the land.

The central issue of identity is closely connected with this. Many Bengali elders still identify themselves as primarily Bangladeshi even if they have British nationality. The majority wish eventually to return to Bangladesh, though they are frequently prevented from doing so by finances, the need to access medical care and the rootedness of their children and grandchildren in Britain. As one elder put it, ‘It’s best to be buried in Bangladesh. It’s our own country and our own earth.’ The return of bodies to the desh therefore represents the final stage in many migrants’ journeys. Finally, they are home, buried in the soil of their gusti.

Yet, if we wish to learn more about the nature of transnationalism, the account given above can only take us so far. For the remainder of the article I wish to raise two issues, both of which I believe to be central to the study of so-called ‘transnational communities’. The first is that, like all households, transnational households and the rituals that help glue them together across space involve internal inequalities. Here, I focus on how these are expressed through relations of gender. The second issue, to which I shall turn in my conclusion, is that transnationalism is a process, not a fixed state of being.

Transnational death rituals and gender

Funerals and burial

One of the clearest findings of my research among Bengali elders in east London was that when their husbands are buried in Sylhet, women based in Britain appear to find their bereavement far harder to cope with than those whose husbands’ bodies remain in the UK (Gardner 1998b). This clearly gives the lie to the notion that transnationalism, or in-betweeness, should necessarily be celebrated as a subversive solution to the hegemonic power of national boundaries. Indeed, while transnational rituals may symbolically express togetherness, the reality is that people are physically apart, and only the very richest transnationals can move between places often enough to stop this from being painful.
Though it would be ridiculous to suggest that only women bear the emotional costs of separation, their movement between places is nearly always more constrained than that of senior men. At a general level, this is because men usually take the decisions concerning migration and the physical organization of the household between places. This is not to say that women are without power; women of the older generation, for example, often have a say in where they are located. I can think of at least two cases in Talukpur where women with adult sons in Britain have visited them there, not liked it, and chosen to return to the village. Nonetheless, these women usually neither have the authority to dictate where other members of the household go nor, if their husbands are alive, do they generally control the household finances or paperwork, which movement between Bangladesh and Britain require. In other cases I came across while working in London, women had been ‘sent for’ by their husbands after waiting in Bangladesh for decades; several had also been separated for many years from their young sons who had accompanied their fathers to Britain. Thus, while poverty and the British state prevent freedom of movement between the UK and Bangladesh for both men and women, it is probably fair to say that women move between places even less frequently than men.

What this means in terms of death rituals is that religious ideology, which decrees that widows be secluded and prohibited from graveyards, plus their role as carers, which tends to be exacerbated by life in Britain, all add to the exclusion of women from their husband’s funerals. As Soyun Nessa tells us, this was central to her experience of her husband’s death:

Q: Do you think that if you had accompanied your husband’s body to Bangladesh you would have felt less grief at his death?

A: I would have felt that at least I saw how he was laid to rest … with my own eyes. I think I would have felt a little more at peace, because I often wonder about how they did what they did when they took him to Bangladesh – who was there, who came, how his *shinni* was organized and how many people came. I didn’t see these things. I didn’t see how he was buried.

While it is true that even in Bangladesh women would be unable to accompany the body to the *coverstan* (and to this extent there is probably a degree of romanticism in women’s construction of ‘how things would be’ if they were in the village) the links made in local kinship ideology between local land, the *gusti* and physical togetherness all make it important for people to be close to the burial place of close kin. In the narratives I collected from older Sylheti women in east London, the themes of separation from relatives and the burial of kin in Bangladesh were returned to time and time again.

This is combined with the support that widows normally receive in Bangladesh. For at least a week, women who have suffered bereavement are not expected to cook rice, and neighbours provide cooked food and help with childcare. While some of the widows I interviewed in London recounted similar support, all had in varying degrees been forced to carry on as normal, taking children to and from school, registering the death and dealing with the bureaucracy that surrounds death in the UK.

More generally, it is important to consider how transnational activities articulate
with different forms of power in different locations. As we have seen, Sylhet is an important source of sacred capital; ritual activities performed there bring religious status and merit to transnational Londonis, the majority of whom are men. Meanwhile, access to Britain (or other wealthy receiving countries) is crucial for economic and (by default) political power in Sylhet. We have seen some of the implications of this for women in Britain. In what follows I want to take a slight diversion and comment upon the fate of women whose husbands have died in Britain while they are living in Bangladesh. This brings me to another aspect of death ‘ritual’, this time played out in Britain, namely the bureaucratic and political processes involved in obtaining a widow’s pension. While admittedly I am stretching the definition of ‘ritual’ given earlier, the British state and its bureaucratic practices are key to Sylheti transnationalism. Its negotiation also returns us to the central theme of my article: the articulation of gender with the wider political economy of relationships between places.

British bureaucracy

The Bangladeshi widows of Londonis who have died in Britain are nearly always dependent on relatives living in the UK to help them negotiate the bureaucracy involved in obtaining their pensions. More than anything, this process throws into relief the ways in which transnationalism, the British state and the inequalities of Sylheti gender relations work together to produce particular results. To conclude this article, I shall therefore turn to the case of a Talukpuri widow who has clearly lost out badly due to both the demands for paperwork from the British state, which involve culturally specific expectations of marital relations, and her own position as a wife without sons in a gusti where she has very little power.

Mala Bibi’s husband was a Londoni migrant, killed (as far as I can tell) in a fight in Britain in the 1970s. Yet, unlike his brothers and their wives who live in prosperity in a large stone bari on the other side of the river, Mala Bibi is one of the poorest women in Talukpur. Living with her divorced daughter in a katcha (bamboo and thatch) hut built on khas (government) land, she survives by labouring for other households in the powerful gusti of which she is part. Radical economic inequalities within gustis are not unusual, but normally they reflect which households have members overseas and which do not. Mala Bibi’s situation has therefore always been difficult for me to understand. While it is possible that her husband never remitted money to her, other widows have received pensions from the British state, or at the very least obtained support from their in-laws.

The reasons for Mala Bibi’s poverty are in fact quite simple. Rather than offering her material support and helping her obtain her pension, her husband’s brothers sold his passport and other important documents. This meant that in her application for a widow’s pension she was unable to supply the British state with evidence that he had worked in Britain. Even worse, other male gusti members had falsely filled out her application form, claiming that rather than one daughter, she in fact had three sons. This was done in the (mistaken) belief that they might be able to send other junior men to Britain, posing as her fictive children. During her interview, conducted at the British high commission in Dhaka, the British official involved therefore had little difficulty in proving much of her claim to be false. Since she could neither supply
documentary evidence of her marriage nor the exact date of her husband’s death (neither of which there is any reason for a village woman to know – calendar dates are not important to rural life) her application was considered wholly false and she was refused a pension.

Sadly, while not the norm, such cases are not uncommon. In a context where older women are usually illiterate and often silenced by the interview style of the British high commission, their ability to negotiate the demands of the British state are limited, especially when their male kin are pursuing their own interests. Here, the answers to the questions ‘who gains, who loses?’ in transnational migration, are very clear.

**Conclusion**

What, then, can the study of transnational death rituals tell us? They clearly reveal a great deal about how the *desh* is constructed and the relationship between place, belonging and identity. As we have seen, funerals are key moments for stressing the solidarity of the patrilineage and its wider place in the local *samaj*. They are also important opportunities for investment in both sacred and social capital. More could be said about all these issues. What I have chosen to focus on in this article, however, are the gender politics of transnational migration, thrown into relief by ritual activities that take place in particular places, the geography of which includes and excludes certain groups. As should by now be clear, transnationalism for those moving between Britain and Sylhet is not a free-flowing series of movements and activities, but is radically constrained by state restrictions, economic factors and locally produced hierarchies.

To conclude, however, I would like to comment briefly on the historicity of transnationalism. The transnational activities I have described above are clearly not ‘fixed’, but fluid and processual, part of an ever-changing relationship between Britain and Sylhet. Indeed, while in some parts of the world and among some groups, transnational movements indicate a new form of ‘in-betweenness’ and fluidity, my material (which admittedly is based on a small group of elders and their families in east London and one village in Sylhet) indicates the reverse: transnational movements between Bangladesh and Britain are decreasing. While marriages between places are still being arranged, so that there is still some primary migration, this is not on the scale of the first movements of labour migrants in the 1960s. Families settled in Britain may return from time to time to the *desh* (homeland). In some cases they may be involved in transnational entrepreneurial projects; in others, members of the first generation may return to die. However, the general drift of activities, investment and ritual is towards Britain.

An important part of this process is that over the next generations British sites are likely to become increasingly Islamicized and burial will take place in Britain not Sylhet. As Hajji Tasleem pointed out to me, were there a cemetery next to the East London Mosque many more families would bury their kin there. Not only would it be located in the heart of the Sylheti community, but also the East London Mosque is itself a sacred site, despite being built on British soil. As Hajji Tasleem’s comment indicates, decisions over where to bury the dead are to a certain extent based on practical considerations. While regular trips to the Muslim graveyards at Forest Gate
and Walthamstow may be so difficult that burial in Sylhet seems preferable, over time new sites will be found (during my research negotiations were taking place around various sites in east London). Combined with this, the location of east London’s Sylhetis will also no doubt change. While what I have described in this article is therefore pertinent for a particular group of first-generation transnationals, in the next few decades the picture is likely to change radically. In sum, we must be careful not to assume that places, and what they symbolize, stay the same.

Katy Gardner is at AFRAS, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, UK.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on fieldwork in rural Sylhet (1987–8), followed by many visits over the 1990s) and among Bengali elders in London (1996–7.) The latter involved research at St Thomas’s Hospice and the London Hospital at Whitechapel, as well as interviews with undertakers at the East London Mosque. It was funded by the Leverhulme Trust to whom I am extremely grateful.

Notes

1. For a more detailed description of household division and kinship organization, see Gardner (1995).
2. All the names cited in this article have been changed.
3. For detailed discussion of pardah, see Gardner (1998a).
4. In 1999 the airport in Sylhet town started to receive international flights from Britain and the Middle East.
5. These issues are discussed in detail in my forthcoming monograph, Gardner 2002.
6. Workers at the East London Mosque, with whom I carried out detailed interviews, made this observation. For further discussion, see Eade (1996).

References

Age Concern (n.d.) Age and race: double discrimination: life in Britain for ethnic minority elders, produced in conjunction with the Commission for Racial Equality.
Katy Gardner