

Staying in Touch: Used Clothes and the Role of Materiality in Transnational Guyanese Gift Exchange

1 Going 'Foreign'

"I got all my Indian Wear inside some bag down there," Shivanie explained, stood up from the bed, on which we were sitting, and bent down to grab a suitcase and two travel bags from underneath her bed.¹ Laying them on the mattress she described: "I keep them in a special place, because we do not wear them every day." She opened the suitcase and revealed a colorful variety of neatly stored garments that she categorized as 'Indian' on the basis of style and ornamentation. One by one she took out sets of garments, mostly ready-made 'Indian Wear' and Indian garments that she had sewn herself during her teenage years. The self-made ones, she elaborated, were older than the ready-made clothes, as Indian Wear had only become available to the majority of rural Guyanese during the 1990s. According to her, most of the ready-made Indian clothes that she owned had been sent by relatives and friends who had migrated to North America. Shivanie is a 31-year-old Guyanese Hindu housewife, who lives with her husband, parents-in-law, and children in the countryside of Berbice – a region in eastern Guyana.² Here, work in the agricultural sector, particularly the cultivation of sugar and rice, continues to provide the most significant sources of income for much of the local population, including Shivanie's working-class family. During my anthropological research, which I

1 All names in this article have been changed to ensure my informants' anonymity.

2 'Indian' denotes an ethnic group in Guyana, which is socially constructed through othering processes, particularly in relation to Guyanese 'Africans.' (Seecharan 2011; Ramey 2011) Guyanese Indians construct their ethnic identity on the basis of an (alleged) descent from Indian indentured laborers, who arrived under colonial rule in then British Guiana between 1838 and 1917. As discussed elsewhere, Hindu and Muslim socio-religious practices represent and performatively (re)create this 'Indian' identity today, for example through the practice of wearing 'Indian Wear' on religious occasions (Kloß 2016).

focused on the exchange and consumption of clothing in transnational Guyanese Hindu communities, I conducted a multi-sited ethnography among Guyanese Hindus in Berbice as well as among members of the Hindu-Guyanese immigrant community in Queens, New York City, between 2011 and 2013.³ Through participant observation and ethnographic interviews in both ‘nodes’ of this transnational network (Brickell/Datta 2011; Greiner/Sakdapolrak 2013), I examined how intimacy and closeness are (re)created in the course of migration by focusing on clothing and sartorial practices. During my various stays in Guyana, I lived with Shivanie and her in-law family and was furthermore able to visit her parents and relatives ‘overseas’ in New York.

In our conversation on Indian clothing, Shivanie recalled the history of each *gharara* and *shalwar* that she presented to me (Fig. 1).⁴

Not only did she remember on which occasions she had worn these clothes but also how or from whom she had received them. Standing next to her bed, she picked up a red *gharara*, its top and long-skirt adorned with silver beads and sequins. I had seen her wearing this garment before, during a special ceremony at a *mandir* (Hindu temple). ‘Indian Wear’ – a local term for clothes defined as Indian – is only worn on religious occasions in Guyana. My Hindu informants usually dressed in Indian Wear when they performed a *puja* (Hindu ritual to venerate deities), when they addressed deities and sought their blessings in public or semi-public contexts. They may thus be defined as ‘puja clothing’ (Kloß 2016: 53–61). The red *gharara*, Shivanie explained, was her favorite and very special to her. Her mother had sent it all the way from New York City, where she had worn it once or twice before she had passed it on to her daughter.

Radica, Shivanie’s mother, had migrated to South Jamaica in Queens with her husband and two sons in 1994. Although the entire family left Guyana at that time, Shivanie decided to remain in Guyana to live with her future husband in her parents-in-laws’ house. Radica’s migration is not an exceptional case: Guyana has experienced and continues to experience large numbers of emigration each year. This migration is so extensive that it is sometimes referred to as an ‘exodus’ of Guyanese (Halstead 2002: 276). Guyanese frequently comment that today more Guyanese live outside Guyana than within Guyanese

3 The author thanks Christiane Brosius and Anne Brüske for their invaluable comments on this research. Fieldwork for this article was funded by the Heidelberg Center for Transcultural Studies (HCTS) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

4 *Shalwars* and *ghararas* are defined as ‘Indian’ dress for women in Guyana. *Shalwar* refers to an outfit consisting of long pants and a long, loose top that covers at least the hips of the wearer. *Ghararas* are outfits that consist of a combination of a long skirt and a top. Ready-made *ghararas* are usually heavily ornamented with beads and sequins. Both types of dress are usually bought in a set with a shawl.



Fig. 1. Women in a yellow gharara, pink, green and apricot saris, and orange and white shalwars at a temple festival in Guyana, February 2013 (© Sinah Kloß).

national borders. They list the strenuous living conditions, Forbes Burnham's authoritarian rule, and an economic crisis coupled with the 1980s food crisis as triggers for this vast outward migration; these push-factors, I argue, are also coupled with the 'American Dream' that prevails among most Guyanese. In this context, the US or more generally the 'foreign,' a term Guyanese apply to denote 'overseas nations,' have become an epitome for a better life.

Regardless of whether the migration was considered legal or illegal, contact among migrants and those who remain in Guyana was often maintained to the extent that transnational families and communities developed. By 'transnational' I refer to movements and connections across national borders that result in the establishment of 'transnational social spaces,' creating practices that do not exist in either of the localities but are a result of transnational migration (Glick Schiller/Basch/Blanc Szanton 1995). Transnational social spaces produce new social phenomena that are a result of this interconnectedness (Pries 2001). Not any international practice or connection may be considered as transnational, however. Only when there exists a certain density and continuity of interactions between social actors in the sending and receiving societies, a social space may be considered transnational (Faist 2001). First-generation

Hindu-Guyanese migrants in New York and their relatives in Guyana have established such transnational communities and maintain these on a long-term basis.

When transnationalism or transnational practices are discussed in academic literature, the lower cost for international communication or financial remittances are addressed often, highlighting them as support for families at ‘home’. Less frequently, the relevance of material remittances and transnational gift exchange practices are highlighted. Apparel continues to be exchanged in transnational communities and households, and they move on and travel; it is therefore important to address the topic of transnational gift exchange practices and to raise the question: what is the role of materiality in transnational migration? This article demonstrates how material gifts and remittances, particularly clothes, create, visualize, and materialize relationships between people who are separated as a result of migration. It addresses questions such as: how is contact and touch facilitated by material gift exchange? How is intimacy (re)created between giver and receiver through the exchange of clothing?

2 The Practice of Sending Barrels

Most transnational gift exchange and particularly the exchange of clothing is facilitated by the socio-cultural practice of sending barrels.⁵ Barrels are 400-litre containers filled with consumer goods such as food items and textiles, which Guyanese migrants in North America pack and which are then shipped to Guyana to be “shared” (distributed) among family members and friends. The sending of barrels is a practice conducted by a large number of Caribbean migrants, and shipping companies have specialized in providing this service to various Caribbean nations. Barrels are sent throughout the year, Christmas forming the high season. According to my Guyanese informants, the average cost of barrel contents was around US\$ 600 and a cost of US\$ 130 for packaging and postage in 2012. In the limited literature in which barrel-sending has received attention, the practice was discussed as a means to support nutrition and prevent poverty in the home country. Scholars and barrel-senders noted that the primary items sent and listed were staples such as rice, flour, and/or oil (Plaza 2014). While staples continue to be among the sent items, my Guyanese informants, who regularly send or receive barrels, point out that specific branded and luxury consumer goods such as ketchup or instant cake mixtures are

⁵ The most common method of sending gifts, however, is to hand a small parcel to a relative or friend who is travelling to Guyana or North America. These gifts are usually food items or garments in much smaller quantities than the quantities sent in barrels.

included. For instance, when preparing meals in her kitchen, Shivanie casually (and at times, emphatically) pointed out that the food item she was using or the package we were looking at had been sent to her by her mother in her latest barrel. However, most items and brands that are frequently ‘barreled’ have become available for purchase in Guyana – if not in rural areas then usually in the urban centers of Georgetown, Linden, and New Amsterdam. This raises the question: why are barrels still being sent if the items could be purchased locally and senders could choose to send monetary remittances instead?

This question becomes even more relevant when taking into consideration that the practices of packing, sending, and receiving barrels are discussed in terms of fatigue and stress. Barrel-sending, when interpreted in terms of gift exchange, is a practice that (re)creates, visualizes, materializes, and maintains relations, families, and communities even in the course of migration. Barrel-sending is a creative and connecting practice which requires efforts on both sides and thus (re)produces relations through a joint effort. It is an action of transnationally sending and receiving gifts, a practice that is indicative and the result of transnational migration. Regardless of whom and where I asked about sending or receiving barrels, Guyanese always referred to the process in terms of ‘fatigue’ and sacrifice. Senders describe the process of packing and sending barrels as tedious and costly. According to them, it takes time, money, space, and patience to pack a barrel (Kloß 2016: 228–231). For example, Basmattie expresses her feelings with regard to the ‘fatiguing’ process of packing barrels:

No, because you got to go *shop*, you got to go *shop* and then it’s you alone, then you got to go shop, is a lot a *ting!* And then, [...] you get working, when you come home, you’re tired, then you got to shop every day, got to shop lil by lil, lil by lil. But if you find like... have somebody to *help* me, [...] and, two person go and you shop, which mean you can full up you barrel...
(Basmattie, 63, female, Richmond Hill/New York)⁶

Basmattie is a 63-year-old Hindu-Guyanese widow who migrated to New York City in 2006. Between 2006 and 2012, she sent three barrels ‘home’ to Guyana, as she explained in our extensive conversation in her basement apartment in Richmond Hill in April 2012. She defined the receivers of her barrels as her extended family as well as neighbors and members of her former Hindu temple

6 “No, because you got to go *shop*, you got to go *shop* and then it’s you *alone*, then you got to go shop, it is a lot of *things!* And then, [...] you have to work, when you come home, you’re tired, then you got to shop every day, got to shop little by little, little by little. But if you find like... have somebody to *help* me, [...] and, two people go and you shop, that means you can fill your barrel.”

Unless stated otherwise all quotes in Guyanese Creole have been translated into English by the author.

community. Her daughter usually was the addressee and therefore responsible for the distribution of the items that Basmattie had packed. As her motivation to send barrels, Basmattie highlighted that her friends and family in Guyana are “happy” about and “glad” of the items she sends.

Barrel-receivers in Guyana similarly describe the practice of barrel-receiving as fatiguing; a circumstance that is often met with surprise among those Guyanese who do not send or receive barrels. They sometimes interpret these complaints as ingratitude or voracity of fellow and allegedly greedy Guyanese, especially those who live in the capital Georgetown. Barrels are usually transported to the port of Georgetown, where they need to be picked up because the international shipping fare only includes an on-site drop-off.⁷ Particularly barrel-receivers who live in Berbice or other rural areas describe the process of ‘clearing’ the barrel as a hustle, trouble, or stress. They need to travel to Georgetown to clear their barrels and arrange their transport to Berbice, a trip my informants describe as expensive and time-consuming – 1.5 to 2 hours each way by car, longer by cheaper mini-buses. Recipients need to deal with customs and taxes, a procedure that often includes the bribing of custom officials or porters of shipping companies.⁸ In this context, Parvathi, a 57-year-old widow from rural Berbice, described that her son-in-law usually takes over the clearing of the barrel for her. She explained: “Me nuh able wi de barrel stuff! Me nuh able wi duh ting! That fuh go clear de barrel! When you meet, sometime they break you barrel! And they tief out a whole set a stuff!”⁹ Similarly, my host sister-in-law Shivanie elaborated that her husband takes charge of clearing the barrels which her mother sends, as this part requires a lot of strength. He would usually borrow someone’s truck or minibus, as the 400-liter containers require a lot of space to be stored on the way back to the countryside. Fuel and bridge tolls make this undertaking costly for the mostly working-class rural population, who describe even the much shorter trip to New Amsterdam as negatively affecting their budget if undertaken on a weekly basis. Particularly for those people who do not hold a driver’s license or for elderly people in Berbice, the process of clearing barrels becomes a nearly impossible task. Shivanie

7 Only few people afford or are willing to pay for door-to-door delivery. In case the ‘door-to-door’ option is booked, this almost doubles the transportation price to US\$ 200.

8 In a letter to the editor of the daily Guyanese newspaper *Stabroek News*, a barrel-receiver complains for instance: “Before you see your box/barrel, some of the porters would make an impressive show looking for it and would take a long time unless you offer a ‘top-up’ (\$1,000); if there’s more than one they claim that it must have ‘automatically’ separated and that takes longer and the ‘top-up’ increases.” (Bates 2012: n.p.)

9 “I cannot stand this barrel stuff! I cannot handle that thing! To go and clear the barrel! When you reach there, sometimes they have unsealed your barrel! And they’ve stolen a whole lot of stuff!”

and her family thus considered the process of clearing as fatiguing. Consequently, the practice of sending barrels needs to be interpreted as a twofold effort, because the process of receiving barrels is part of the practice and effort of sending. Through this practice and on the basis of joint efforts and actions, families and communities are (re)established transnationally. Barrel-sending is a practice that emphasizes communal and familial relations.

Despite the efforts and the expenditure for packaging and postage, barrels are usually discussed in terms of saving money. Most of my informants emphasized and acknowledged that the items they send are cheaper in North America. In this regard, the sending of monetary remittances would result in a subjective ‘loss’ of money, as local items would be bought at a more expensive rate that would exceed the cost of barrel transportation. Indeed, shopping for and spending money on barrels are practices of thrift, practices in which the money saved and spent is directed towards and invested in the maintenance of family (Miller 1998). For example, Basmattie remembered that besides sending food, curtains, and clothing, at one point her main objective for sending a barrel was to provide her family with a grass cutter:

...Wan time I sent home in wan a de barrel, [...] you know de grass cutter? The thing you slash the grass with it in Guyana? I buy wan a duh and loosen it up, in two well three pieces and ah put it in de barrel. Ah wrap it up like wid towels, towel. And ah put it in de barrel and ah sent it fuh dem. Because is like so expensive dey, and I pay like a hundred and thirty dollar fuh it heh, and duh is like twenty-five thousand Guyana dollar and is like, over fifty, sixty thousand dollar in Guyana. So I mail de barrel and ah put wan fuh dem. And they onto now, because when you see the yard in de front, they cut the grass with it.

(Basmattie, 63, female, Richmond Hill/New York)¹⁰

The act of purchasing and sending the grass cutter as well as the expenses related to its sending were expressed in terms of saving money.

10 “...Once I sent home in one of the barrels, [...] you know the grass cutter? The thing you slash the grass with in Guyana? I bought one of these and loosened it up, in two well three pieces and put it in the barrel. I wrapped it up with towels, towel. And I put it in the barrel and I sent it to them. Because it is so expensive there, and I pay like a hundred and thirty dollars for it here, and that is like twenty-five thousand Guyana dollars and there it costs like, over fifty, sixty thousand dollars in Guyana. So I mailed the barrel and I put one for them. And until now, because when you see the yard in the front, they cut the grass with it.”

3 Creating ‘Touch’ through Used Clothing

Clothes are usually among the items sent in barrels. The vast amount of these barreled clothes consists of garments that are considered ‘used.’ The practice of handing on used clothing is a common phenomenon in Guyana and is described in general as thrifty behavior, because it is considered inappropriate to dispose of clothes as long as they are deemed wearable. A garment that a person no longer wears is given to a friend or family member, who will reciprocate this gift at a later point in time. For instance, mothers pass on garments to daughters, sisters, and so on, and as a result (re)create social relations and families. The exchange of (used) clothing creates relations between people, defines givers and receivers, links and delineates families, and “provides an opportunity to evaluate their relationship, defining ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders.’” (Norris 2010: 107) Most Guyanese living in the rural areas of Guyana experienced a clothing boom in the 1990s. This increased the numbers of garments that can be given and “handed on,” intensifying the practice of sharing used apparel among family members and friends. Especially when clothes are categorized as ‘used,’ tacit but significant rules of exchange apply, which may either create social closeness or increase social distance. As is the case for all kinds of gift exchange, negotiations of social hierarchy are intricate to these practices. Receivers of gifts are in lower status positions compared to the senders. In order to re-establish prior status or subvert this hierarchical positioning they need to reciprocate the gift (Mauss 1966; Parry 1986).¹¹ When clothing that is considered unwearable or of bad quality is handed on, particularly if it is categorized as ‘used,’ this practice reinforces and influences hierarchy between giver and receiver. The handing on of items which need to be fixed expresses and emphasizes hierarchical relations, whereas the process of handing on ‘wearable’ garments is more likely to express equal and friendly relations (Norris 2010).

While pointing out the various sets of clothing in her suitcase, Shivanie was able to identify precisely who had given her which garment in which context. The red gharara, which she had described as her favorite, had been sent to her by her mother in one of the barrels. Barrel-sending thus enables the continuous exchange of garments among Guyanese and has become an intricate aspect of maintaining familial relations that are affected by migration. The practice also influences negotiations of social status and hierarchy, however. Guyanese migrants in North America usually have greater financial means to send clothing; further, they have the exclusive possibility to send barrels

¹¹ For an elaboration of Hindu-Guyanese gift exchange, hierarchy, and reciprocity cf. Kloß 2016, chapter 5.

because shipping companies offer this service only from North America to the Caribbean. Guyanese in Guyana (seek to) reciprocate these gifts by handing small parcels filled with pickled goods, dried fish, or *cassareep* (cassava sauce) to an acquaintance or relative who travels to North America.

Migrant Guyanese usually acquire a higher status for having migrated and for demonstrating their higher economic capital. But also within the community in Guyana, social hierarchy is contested and negotiated through barrels. By receiving goods that are visibly ‘foreign’, for example ready-made and fashionable Indian Wear or branded food items (like in Shivanie’s case), those who stay at ‘home’ acquire social and cultural capital that transforms their status in the local community. By displaying these specific goods and emphasizing that specific items have been sent from a relative living abroad, one demonstrates and creates social capital (Bourdieu 2010) and enhances one’s status by visualizing the family’s access to the ‘foreign’ and ‘overseas nations.’ Through barrels and ‘foreign’ goods, the general status of the transnational family is raised due to the intricate display of social, cultural, and economic capital.

Used clothes and their exchange manifest the presence of absent family and people. Gifts of used clothing are imbued with the identity, spirit, or substance of their givers and former wearers, and thus exceed the capacity of merely defining and (re)creating relations. They actively transform people and bodies. In this context, transnational gift exchange exceeds the idea of creating contact, but its material implications facilitate a means to stay in touch. In this analysis, I do not use the terms ‘touch’ and ‘contact’ interchangeably. Based on my ethnographic observations and interviews, I propose touch to be a temporary union, which implies a transformation of objects that touch physically, sensorially, and/or spiritually. The ‘act of touching’ creates contact that results in a temporary proximity and possibly union between two entities. Touch exceeds contact, in the sense that it exceeds a mere proximity or closeness of two or more entities but emphasizes a process, a transformation, an exchange, and/or transmission between entities such as clothing and bodies.

Garments, which my Hindu-Guyanese informants regard as material objects, create a temporary union with the body. This temporary union is based on the transmission between entities and a temporary amalgamation. According to them, humans and objects are in a constant process of exchange and are therefore not distinct. Instead, bodies and dress are regarded to “exist in dialectic relationship to one another.” (Entwistle 2011: 139) For instance, cloth may ‘take on’ its wearer by receiving human smell, sweat, or shape (Stallybrass 2012). Body fluids such as sweat are excreted by (human) bodies. They transpire or are transferred to clothes and other items of dress with which they are in contact. They become attached to and part of material objects and vice versa: while bodies may transform the color, feel, or structure of textiles, clothes on

the other hand also impact human bodies, for example if they cause wounds when rubbing the skin or when they mold bodies, as is the case with corsets or brassieres.

Touch, in this context, has to be understood as the transmission of substances and essences between bodies and clothing. In this sense, touch is a reciprocal process that influences both body and garment, as “to touch is to be touched.” (Turney 2012: 305) According to Guyanese Hindus, during acts of consumption, for example when clothing is worn or gifted, substances and energies are transferred between bodies and dress. Clothes become dwelling structures that may contain and store these substances (Kloß 2016: 233–248). Particularly worn clothes are considered to contain such substances and energies that may be transported to a subsequent wearer. In this sense, the “gift of a piece of cloth is the gift of a detached fragment of oneself; it links the giver and the receiver, bringing them into a more intimate relation yet creating a hierarchy in the process.” (Norris 2010: 118) When Shivanie’s mother sends garments to her daughter that she has worn before, she sends clothes that are symbolically linked and related to her and also carry her smell or energies. The exchange of used clothing hence offers a special means of facilitating intimacy and forms an intricate part of (re)creating transnational families and communities through the maintenance and recreation of physical touch.¹²

4 Exchanging Auspicious Clothing

The exchange of clothing and the (re)creation of touch exist on various levels in the described context of (Guyanese) Hinduism. Clothes are also exchanged between deities and humans, for example in ritualized gift-giving processes termed *charhaway*. Guyanese Hindus give garments to deities during puja, the ritual veneration of deities in front of their *murtis* (representations and manifestations of deities). In particular, they charhaway saris and dhotis, styles of clothes that are categorized and considered to be the most ‘authentic’ Hindu clothing. The offered items are placed next to the *murti* on the altar, an act through which the deity receives the clothing. He or she then consumes and touches it, and ultimately transforms it into an auspicious object. The garment becomes imbued with blessings and divine energies as a result of this divine consumption and the proximity to the *murti* (Fuller 2004). *Murtis* do not solely

¹² Elsewhere I elaborate how used clothes are considered to become a likeness of their former wearers. Highlighting the aspect of material similarity, I argue that these conceptualizations further contribute to the creation of closeness and intimacy in migrant families and communities (Kloß 2016).

wear painted clothing but are dressed in ornamented Indian-style clothing. In case the offered garment is later chosen by the temple committee to be the next apparel the murti will be adorned in this transmission intensifies.

Guyanese Hindus consider items offered to and (partially) consumed by deities, including clothes, as a kind of *prasadam*. *Prasadam* may be translated to '(auspicious) leftovers' and refers to objects that have been offered to a deity and have been transformed through mutual touch. As these objects are described to be imbued with divine power and energy, the devotee internalizes and incorporates this power when consuming the *prasadam*, for instance when he or she eats or wears edible or sartorial leftovers. This practice, intricate to all pujas, performatively reconstructs the hierarchical relations between deity and devotee, marking and creating the deity's superiority (Fuller 2004; Michaels 2004). Textile *prasadam* and clothes offered to a deity 'store' divine blessings and energies and therefore must not be discarded as waste. My informants frequently explained that a human body needs to wear such blessed clothes in order for the blessing to 'transfer'. For example, Pujari Romesh, who arrived from Guyana in the mid-2000s and is head pujari and founder of a Guyanese temple in Queens, explains in a conversation on murti clothing: "What comes off of the murti, you have to wear it! You have to wear it. After you finish with it, then it could do decoration with it."

In the Guyanese diaspora in New York, a large number of migrants are able to afford saris and dhotis for offerings during puja. Only the affluent are able to purchase ready-made Indian Wear for the practice of charhaway in Guyana, however, and the rural Guyanese population usually offers five yards of cloth as a kind of 'substitute'. The relatively lower cost of US\$ 10 for a simple but ornamented 'puja sari' and their higher purchasing power enables Guyanese Hindus in Queens to not only offer one sari in the course of a puja; often, a family offers various saris and dhotis to the respective deities. In some temples, this practice leads to an excess of offered charhaway items, as murti clothing is only changed twice a year and the vast amount of garments cannot be worn by the murti. Temple communities and committees hence send this surplus in barrels to affiliated temples in Guyana. Here, surplus saris are given to members to be worn as 'puja clothing' in the future, and the most beautiful garments are taken aside to be dressed on murtis when it is time to change their clothes. This sending of 'surplus barrels' demonstrates how material gift exchange facilitates the (re)creation of transnational communities, (re)creating transnational social spaces by transforming old and molding new patterns and structures that only exist as a result of migration.

Material gift exchange is furthermore affected by place, national borders, and other aspects such as citizenship. As material gifts are not free-floating objects that cross time and space unrestricted and without hindrances, notions

of place and locality continue to be of relevance when analyzing the practice of exchanging (used) clothes and transnationality. Generally, place and locality remain important influences in the formation and maintenance of highly mobile, transnational communities and families (Greiner 2010; Verne 2012; Greiner/Sakdapolrak 2013). The concept of translocality highlights this aspect. Translocality has to be understood as a “form of ‘grounded transnationalism’ – a space where deterritorialized networks of transnational social relations take shape through migrant agencies.” (Brickell/Datta 2011: 3) The concept highlights the situatedness of people who are mobile but also of those who are not. It focuses on people whose lives and environments are influenced by global and local dynamics and puts emphasis on specific ‘nodes’ and localities which influence people and their transnational socio-cultural practices (Hannerz 1996; Smith 2001). Material objects, which travel between and connect the various nodes of transnational networks, cross national borders and are impacted by transportation, import, and customs formalities. My informants, for instance, frequently explained their ongoing struggles for being granted duty-free concessions to import surplus saris to the various temple communities. They expressed their discontent about the alleged favoritism of government officials who are said to discriminate Hindu groups as opposed to Christian groups. They frequently point out that Christians do not need to apply for duty-free concessions concerning imported altar wine and bread (Kloß 2016).

Citizenship and nationality are furthermore relevant in transnational gift exchange. As discussed earlier, material gifts have a specific capacity in providing and facilitating contact and touch. This gains particular significance in the context of ‘illegal’ migration. A significant share of international migration from Guyana to North America has taken place under conditions defined as illegal. Shivanie’s mother Radica, whom I introduced earlier, arrived in the United States with her family as illegal immigrants in 1994. 18 years later, at the time of my fieldwork, she and her family were finally granted US citizenship. She explained that they had spent approximately US\$ 30,000 on fines, immigration fees, and lawyers. As it was impossible for her to leave the country, travel home, and visit her daughter during this period, sending parcels and barrels with gifts provided the only means for her to maintain touch. She, like many others, elaborated that letters and cards, which she often tried to send in the beginning, never “reached” and “got lost” in the postal system. She described how she spoke to her daughter regularly on the phone and sent text messages, but that this did not feel to be “enough.” Indeed, I witnessed that Shivanie and Radica were texting each other various times a day when I was living with Shivanie in Guyana. Even during our conversation on Shivanie’s clothes, her mother was somewhat ‘present’ in the bedroom by way of text messages. However, both of them expressed happiness and feelings of closeness whenever a

‘physical’ gift arrived. In the red gharara that Radica had imbued with her identity and essence, which she had handed on, and which was now lying on Shivanie’s bed, Radica was present on a symbolical and material level.

5 Conclusion

Materiality and local contexts influence the creation of transnational families and communities. As elaborated in this article, the exchange and consumption of used clothing present a special means to (re)create familial closeness and hierarchy. The practice of barrel-sending, which always includes the practice of barrel-receiving, enables and requires joint actions and joint efforts between dispersed communities and families, a process usually described as ‘fatiguing’ but upheld in the name of family devotion. The sending of barrels, which enables the continued exchange of used clothing in Hindu-Guyanese families, further facilitates the continuity of touch.

Two years after my doctoral fieldwork and a year after the legalization of her family’s status, Shivanie was also granted permanent residence in the US through a family-based immigrant visa. In 2014, she moved to New York City to live with her family, taking along her children who, by now, have settled in their new Queens home. Shivanie had been expressing her intention of leaving Guyana and reuniting with her family from the beginning of my fieldwork, as was commonly the case for Guyanese with relatives in North America. However, her hopes and wishes remain yet to be fulfilled, because her migration and subsequent US legal restrictions have separated Shivanie’s family once again, although on a different level. Her husband was unable to join her due to the fact that they were only married by Hindu and not Guyanese state law. She thus needed to legally marry him and file yet another application for a family-based immigration visa with the US government. As this process may take several years and because Shivanie is unable to visit her husband as she is unable to afford the high costs of travelling, she has resorted to sending barrels and parcels filled with food items, chocolates, and clothing, recreating touch and familial closeness for the time being.

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