

open space

Investing in the family's future: labour, gender and consumption in Highland Ecuador

Emma-Jayne Abbots, University of Wales, Trinity Saint David, Ceredigion, UK
e.abbots@tsd.ac.uk

Key words labour • gender • consumption • migration • investment

In this commentary I examine the ways that consumption maintains affective relations and facilitates the long-term reproduction of the transnational household. Drawing on my primary research among the peasantry in the Ecuadorian Andes – who use remittances sent from male kin residing in New York to conspicuously consume household objects and build ‘ostentatious’ villas – I contend that the wives and mothers of migrants are active producers who enact gendered relations of familial obligation by transforming remittances into material objects. The objects purchased and houses built occupy the space left by migrants, creating social value and reputation in the process. As such, I argue against the notion that migration results in fragile kin relations and that the women who remain at home are passive ‘victims’ of global economic processes, and seek to show that consumption, in this context, can be understood as the performance of kinship and marriage. Thus, rather than applying a model of marriage that assumes that the transnational family is dispersed or separated and/or that consumption and material comforts can alleviate this supposed separation, I contend that it enables and enacts a united family. To this end, and to better reflect the temporalities, moralities and reproductive intent involved in ‘conspicuous’ purchasing practices, I prefer to use the term ‘investment’.

It was a Saturday evening with the Rojos, a ‘peasant’ family living in the Ecuadorian migrant-exporting community of Jima. Conchetta, the head of the household, had been entertaining, and the remnants of the extensive meal that she, and her domestic servants, had produced from the fully fitted kitchen with the aid of an electric rice-steamer, blender and microwave oven, remained strewn over the lacquered dining table. Jose and Luis, Conchetta’s youngest sons, were wearing new leather jackets – gifts from their recent first holy communion – together with jeans and trainers, and the others around the table, both adults and children, were similarly attired. Many of the objects and clothing on display had been purchased in the nearby city of Cuenca, but others had been received as gifts from physically absent male kin in the United States (US), and there was a concentration of US emblems, including a ‘Big Apple’ sweatshirt, New York Yankees baseball cap and Tommy Hilfiger tracksuit. The young teenagers were bored and kept trying to escape upstairs to play games on the new computer recently installed in their ‘den’, but had to sit and wait for all the guests to record a message, on the new digital video camera, to Conchetta’s husband – the boys’ father – and elder sons, all of whom had been living in New York for a number of years. Later everyone retired upstairs to the upper salon, where they played cards and

watched television on the 50" flat screen before pushing the six-seater sofas to the sides of the room to start dancing, which was accompanied by music that emanated from the substantial stereo system and surround-sound speakers.

This brief slice of life is not atypical and echoes those found across the region that has, in the last two decades, become characterised by extensive levels of semi-permanent, gendered migration and material displays of remittance prosperity (Kyle, 2000; Whitten, 2003). To all intents and purposes, Jimeña women are 'conspicuous consumers'. This practice provokes dismay, concern and alarm among the chattering classes, and a popular discourse circulates in which the 'ignorant, *nouveau riche* peasant' who foolishly and wastefully spends is mocked and morally judged (Miles, 2004; Klaufus, 2006). Emulation, social mobility and competition between neighbours are common tropes within this discourse, and academic attempts to untangle and understand these processes are not infrequently anchored in a Bourdieusian framework of distinction and the politics of taste (cf Stirrat, 1989; Walmsley, 2001). It is also tempting to lament the pervasive and destructive logic of the market and global economic processes, which purportedly encourage people such as the Ecuadorian peasantry to ditch 'traditional' mechanisms of status and prestige and replace them with 'northern' commodities (Orlove, 1997); or, conversely, challenge such models of passive consumers by celebrating the constructive hybridisation and creativity of consumption (Miller, 1998; Colloredo-Mansfield, 1999, 2003). Furthermore, it is not uncommon for local agencies, particularly those concerned with rural development, to invoke (perhaps somewhat flawed) concerns over economic sustainability and security in their attempts to encourage the channelling of remittances towards 'productive' economic activity, such as increasing agricultural yield, petty entrepreneurship and/or banking the funds for future use. Consequently, regardless of whether it is cast as constructive or destructive, positive or negative, or passive or agentic, consumption is defined in this context as antithetical to investment.

Yet, a closer inspection shows that remittances are invested, albeit not in the economically 'rational' or self-maximising manner advocated by the chattering classes and development agencies alike, but in the long-term future of the family, however geographically dispersed it may be. Jimeño use of remittances is restricted, and this is informed by a moral framework in which the reproduction of 'the house' and kinship relations are central. Jimeña women only spend remittances on household objects and for the benefit of children: as the brief vignette above indicates, in addition to new homes, remittances are channelled towards televisions, stereos, computing equipment, furnishings, toys and clothing for children, household appliances, domestic and care labour, and education.

Spending money earned by your male kin can, of course, be a leisure activity, but it can also be a form of labour (Miller, 1998). Yet this latter approach is curiously absent from accounts of transnational families that depict gendered migration as reflective of stratified relations and patriarchy, with men being the pioneers and labourers, and women the docile recipients of men's 'hard-won' earnings (see Kyle, 2000). As such, the precarious position and abandonment of women, and the breakdown and separation of the family unit, are recurring themes. However, these arguments are not only premised on a series of flawed – often ethnocentric – assumptions about marriage and family relationships, but also make judgements regarding the social and economic worth of consumption: the suggestion being that the women left 'at home' are not engaged in any 'productive' economic activity as they are neither labouring

nor investing, but spending. They are consuming – read wasting – money and precious resources, not producing and augmenting them.

Marriage relations among peasant households have long been established as complementary in the Andes (Harris, 2000), and while the nature of labour is evidently changing in Jima (Abbots, 2012), the shift in household economic strategy towards gendered migration and waged labour does not, I argue, diminish this complementarity nor inevitably result in fragile kinship relations. Rather, Jimeña women labour to transform and ‘depollute’ remittances into household items, a process that both produces ‘the house’ and reproduces family relationships (Carsten, 1989, 1997). For although their ‘tastes’ are popularly derided and negatively valued, the women with whom I worked associated the large houses they built, and the goods with which they filled them, with secure and consistent remittances. These objects, then, not only showcase a migrant’s successful economic endeavours, but also communicate their continuing obligations to, and unity with, their family. As Felicia commented upon viewing a large villa: “[The owner] must have lots of children and a husband in the United States ... she is lucky; it is a good house, a big house. She has good children, a good husband.” This comment is of interest in two ways. First, it shows that the peasantry make an association between the conspicuous display of commodities and migration. And second, rather than disparaging such tastes and practices and reading them as a sign of family breakdown, they are interpreted as a sign of ‘good children’ and a ‘good husband’; good being, in this context, the fulfilment of kinship duties to their mother and wife. As such, commodities symbolise continuity amidst change, reproduction as well as production, and family unity across dispersed geographical ‘sites’.

Lévi-Strauss (1987) has shown us that houses make intangible, and potentially precarious, kin relations material, robust and concrete. This continues in a migratory context, I suggest, with houses and household objects making the joint labours of husbands and wives materially manifest; a process that roots the migrant within the Jimeño household and maintains their position within the family. Thus, migrants become symbolically present, and the objects acquired through remittances act as ‘place-holders’, materially occupying the physical void they have left. This argument is found across a range of migratory contexts (see Colloredo-Mansfield, 1994; Thomas, 1998), and resonates with Gell’s (1998) thesis of distributed personhood, which argues that material objects can embody social actors and thus become extensions of the self across space and time. Thus, the fame of a migrant, as defined as a ‘mobile, circulating dimension of the person [that] travels ... apart from his physical presence’ (Munn, 1986: 105) circulates through the Jimeño community through the tangible, material display of remittances. Munn further demonstrates that women play a critical role in this circulation, but this tends to be overlooked in migratory contexts and they are typically represented as guardians of ‘migrant’ houses, rather than active participants in their production. In Jima, however, such houses would simply not get built nor occupied – with people and objects – without the investment practices of women. Migrated male kin may supply the monetary means, but my female research participants liaised with architects, purchased supplies and materials, negotiated with workmen and merchants, and furnished the house. Without female labour, remittances would not be transformed into a material presence. And without this materiality, migrants would not be able to maintain their symbolic presence and visibility ‘at home’, nor would the family be reproduced.

There are multiple interpretations that can be attached to the form of consumption observed in Jima and I am not seeking to deny the aspirational and class 'distinction' role of consumption. Nor I am seeking to make light of the global economic processes that inform the transnational flows of people and objects. Rather, I have wanted to draw attention to the social logics, of collectivity and kinship, that can inform spending, as well as indicating how a wider understanding of what constitutes investment can illuminate how gender and kinship are enacted through the purchasing of commodities.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Luci Attala, participants of the School of Archaeology, History and Anthropology research seminar at the University of Wales, Trinity St David, and those attending the Intimacies, Families and Practices of Consumption study group meeting for their questions and comments on an earlier version of this commentary. My thanks also go to the Zhunio family for being such generous hosts, and to the Royal Anthropological Institute for funding my fieldwork in Ecuador through an Emslie Horniman (starred Sutasoma) award.

References

- Abbotts, E-J, 2012, In the absence of men? Gender, migration and domestic labour in the Southern Ecuadorean Andes, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 44, 1, 71–96
- Carsten, J, 1989, Cooking money: gender and the symbolic transformation of means of exchange in a Malay fishing community, in J Parry, M Bloch (eds) *Money and the morality of exchange*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 117–41
- Carsten, J, 1997, *The heat of the hearth: The process of kinship in a Malay fishing community*, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Colloredo-Mansfield, R, 1994, Architectural conspicuous consumption and economic change in the Andes, *American Anthropologist* 96, 4, 845–65
- Colloredo-Mansfield, R, 1999, *The native leisure class: Consumption and cultural creativity in the Andes*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press
- Colloredo-Mansfield, R, 2003, Consuming: Andean televisions, *Journal of Material Culture* 8, 3, 273–84
- Gell, A, 1998, *Art and agency: An anthropological theory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Harris, O, 2000, *To make the earth bear fruit: Essays on fertility, work and gender in highland Bolivia*, London: Institute of Latin American Studies
- Klaufus, C, 2006, Globalization in residential architecture in Cuenca, Ecuador: social and cultural diversification of architects and their clients, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24, 69–89
- Kyle, D, 2000, *Transnational peasants: Migrations, networks and ethnicity in Andean Ecuador*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press
- Lévi-Strauss, C, 1987, *Anthropology and myth: Lectures 1951–1982*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Miles, A, 2004, *From Cuenca to Queens: An anthropological story of transnational migration*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press
- Miller, D, 1998, *A theory of shopping*, Oxford: Polity Press
- Munn, N, 1986, *The fame of Gawa: A symbolic study of value transformation in a Massim (Papau New Guinea) society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

- Orlove, B (ed), 1997, *The allure of the foreign: Imported goods in postcolonial Latin America*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press
- Stirrat, RL, 1989, Money, men and women, in J Parry, M Bloch (eds) *Money and the morality of exchange*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 94–116
- Thomas, P, 1998, Conspicuous construction: houses, consumption and 'relocalization' in Manambondro, Southeast Madagascar, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, 3, 425–66
- Walmsley, E, 2001, Transformando los pueblos: la migración internacional y el impacto social al nivel comunitario, *Ecuador Debate* 54, www.dlh.lahora.com.ec/paginas/debate/
- Whitten, NE, 2003, Introduction, in NE Whitten (ed) *Millennial Ecuador: Critical essays on cultural transformations and social dynamics*, Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1–45