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## **Translating Faith: Field Narratives as a Means of Dialogue in Collaborative Ethnographic Research**

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## Abstract

This article presents research from a collaborative ethnography in four faith settings in London, UK. In particular, we show how a group of researchers from diverse cultures teach and learn from each other through the use of field narratives. After outlining a sociocultural approach to learning and discussing how faith situates itself within this frame, we show ways in which field narratives provide a bridge between the past, present and future of cultural events and practices and allow a polyphonic gaze by different researchers describing the same setting. We show how researchers learn to reflect upon their own research site, compare it with those of others, and, ultimately, become more aware of their own. This process is iterative and dialogic, which enriches not only the knowledge of the researchers themselves but also provides a mosaic of different interpretations to a wider interested audience.

**Keywords:** field narratives, emotion, dialogue, faith

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## Introduction

*When I'm in the Temple, how can I manage to pray and do research at the same time?*

The work portrayed in this article is part of a collaborative ethnography of children's language and literacy development through faith in four large communities in London, UK—Bangladeshi Muslim, Tamil Hindu/Saiva, Ghanaian Pentecostal, and Polish Catholic. We ask how researchers, whose work experience has hitherto been in education and classrooms, go about translating their own faith practices to other team members and the outside world while simultaneously negotiating their faith and researcher identities. Starting with the words quoted above from one of our researchers, we acknowledge that researching one's own place of worship is different from work undertaken in other settings because it may easily appear intrusive, insensitive, and even disrespectful. Although people can generally conduct research in their own classrooms, faith has always been a very private part of life. If one is known as a member of a congregation, how can one take on the role of researcher instead of worshiper? How does one balance the different roles? Additionally, the emotional distance between member and non-member is likely to be much greater than in most other settings. It is commonly held that only members of a faith are able truly to understand and empathise with the beauty and magic of rituals involving holy recitations, prayers, hymns, chants, and performances. How does one manage to convey such magic to those outside the faith?

In this article we show how researchers can address these tensions through the dialogues generated in *field narratives* and, through these, enlighten other team members, as well as a wider outside audience, who may have different or no religious beliefs. We argue that field narratives provide a rich mosaic of different interpretations within and across faith settings. Finally, we hope that the methods we suggest might contribute more generally to collaborative cross-cultural research in other sensitive multilingual settings.

In the following sections, we present our theoretical starting-point of faith as a cultural practice and then review studies arguing for its unique nature in terms of exclusivity and membership. After a brief description of the study and the four settings in which it is taking place, we explain how our methodology addresses the aforementioned tensions through the use of field narratives. We propose that field narratives comprise a written dialogue, an interactive way of teaching and learning from each other, and a way of sharing emotions with those who have deeply held belief in their faith. Using examples of field narratives from one faith setting, the Hindu/Saiva Tamil Temple, we show how researchers from inside and outside the faith work together to contribute to a wider understanding and a deeper empathy not just of literacy and culture but of faith practices as an important aspect of everyday life.

## Theoretical Perspectives

### Faith as a Social and Cultural Practice

Our study is informed by research that views language and literacy learning in terms of social and cultural practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Heath, 1983). This work is underpinned by the understanding of culture in anthropological studies as comprising the patterns of human activity and learned behaviour of individuals within the systems of meaning of the group (Geertz, 1973). Participants engage in a variety of literacy practices in different cultures, possibly using different languages, scripts, and cognitive styles, and become members of these communities of practice through active participation and apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Within this perspective, learning to become a member of a particular community does not just mean gaining familiarity with the material artefacts and texts of its practices, but also gaining knowledge of a particular way of thinking and understanding. Vygotskian and neo-Vygotskian studies (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1985) focus on this aspect of sociocultural learning. Vygotsky (1962) views learning as taking place along inter- and intra-personal axes, in other words, between individuals before learning is reworked in the individual's own mind. Through participation in the practice, children imbibe the symbolic knowledge needed to become a member of the community of practice. By *imbibe*, we understand a more active process than to absorb knowledge. Although imbibing faith knowledge may well be an unconscious act, we see children as *active* members of their communities, learning through guided participation (Rogoff, 2003) with adults or more knowledgeable members of the faith. Between individuals this symbolic knowledge may comprise the cognitive and linguistic skills pertaining to enacting the practice (Cole, 1996; Scribner & Cole, 1981), the appropriate language and patterns of discourse, scripts, or dialogues (Bakhtin, 1981/1994; Gregory, 2008), or the accepted gestures or movements needed for performing tasks.

A sociocultural perspective on learning also encompasses a sociohistorical viewpoint. Becoming a member of a community emphasises the way in which mind is viewed as interiorised culture and culture as exteriorised mind (Cole, 1996). In this sense, learning is passed across generations through a process of prolepsis in which the caregiver projects into the child's future through drawing upon events from her own past and passing this prediction to the child. Children also learn through interaction with important "mediators" of practices (Baynham, 1995, p. 39), such as parents, siblings, grandparents, or other more knowledgeable people able to scaffold learning (Jessel, Gregory, Islam, Kenner, & Ruby, 2004; Rogoff, 2003; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Through this interaction, children gradually learn the cultural and linguistic practices of their community and, with them, the cognitive faculties and skills of the associated tasks (Cole, 1996; Heath, 1983) and the identities ensuing from them (Creese, 2006; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Within this sociocultural and sociohistorical framework, we see how deep-seated beliefs such as those of faith practices may well be part of a dialogue both within an individual and between members sharing cultural practices and understandings. However, faith knowledge is likely to draw upon implicit beliefs held since childhood, possibly knowledge that has never been made explicit to others. Through the reflexive process of writing field narratives, researchers make this knowledge explicit, not just to others but also to themselves.

### **Faith Literacy Practices, Their Uniqueness and Exclusiveness**

Recent studies are beginning to focus on the unique nature of faith literacy practices in comparison with other cultural practices. For example, a number of studies examine the special way in which religious beliefs about signs or semiotic ideologies are passed on from one generation of believers to the new generation— signs that are not shared by non-believers (Fader, 2008). In her study of Hasidic literacy practices amongst young Jewish girls in New York, Fader suggests that, through faith, words are not arbitrarily related to their referents as they are in everyday culture and community life, but directly to God. She goes on to claim that, as a consequence, what is taken for granted in other cultural sites cannot be assumed in faith settings. Fader shows how a set body of prayers relating to moral values are seen as divinely inspired and are imbibed and recited by young children as early as three years old. There is no attempt at interpreting these prayers; they must be just recited fluently and accurately. The communication practices of the membership are also unique because communication flows not between each member, but directly to God: "you don't pray to a teacher, you pray to God and he is everywhere" (Fader, 2008, p. 626).

When practices are shown to have unique qualities, there is the issue of exclusiveness. The exclusion of those who are outsiders has important implications for the researcher's positioning in the field. Indeed, some studies of faith literacies, for example those by Fader (2009) and Rosowsky (2008), indicate the difficulties of being able to conduct research unless accepted as an insider to the faith. Fader is Jewish, but not an Orthodox Jew, and was often positioned as an outsider to the faith by other Orthodox Jews. In fact, she was not allowed to continue her research in the boys' Orthodox school because parents complained to the school's direction that she could potentially contaminate the boys' religious upbringing. Sarroub (2005) discusses critically her researcher identity positioning as "the White woman doing research" by the high school students in the Yemeni-American community in which she worked: "the underlying assumption among my informants was that I would not understand them if I was not really Muslim as they were. As an outsider I could never capture their reality" (p. 17). She explains how her mixed ethnicity (Algerian and Greek) and non-religious stance were sometimes seen as a problem by some of her informants who attempted to change her into a practicing Muslim. Other researchers suggest that being a member of the faith is a crucial criterion for acceptance as a researcher in the faith setting (Rumsey, 2010).

Fader, Sarroub, and Rumsey also highlight issues related to gender in researching faith practices. As women, they were aware of the exclusive nature of certain practices, which dictated where they were allowed to visit, who they were allowed to talk to, and what they were allowed to do, as well as the propriety expected of them. Sarroub (2005) talks about her experiences of being both a researcher and woman and the constraints her gendered identity imposed on her fieldwork:

Only two out of six [boys] in the community centre agreed to speak to me, and only one allowed me to shadow him once. My very presence as a woman in their school and home lives constituted social embarrassment and peer harassment. The fact is that my work made sense to the Yemeni only in the context of women's lives. (p. 16)

## **Design and Methodology**

### **Setting**

The excerpts presented below form part of a corpus of data collected during Year 1 of a three-year study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (2009-2012). The project aims to provide rich and comparative descriptions of children aged four to twelve as they learn language and literacy through faith, both in formal faith settings and informal home settings. To complement the field narratives of children's faith socialisation in the faith settings, in Year 1 we interviewed the faith leaders. In Year 2, we collected in-depth audio and video interactions of children's home and faith class learning and interviewed the children and their parents. Four key participant children were selected from each faith site based on their own and their family's engagement with the faith and their willingness and commitment to participate in the project. Year 3 will provide an intergenerational analysis as the children produce a book or other artefact with an older person over 50 based on the "then and now" of the faith. We will also interview the faith teachers. During Years 2 and 3 of the project, children will keep scrapbooks to document their language and literacy learning through their faith. This study is taking place in London, UK, one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world. Within this context are our four faith communities: a Bangladeshi Muslim, a Tamil Hindu/Saiva, and a Ghanaian Pentecostal community in east London and a Polish Catholic community in south-east London. The four researchers represent each community in their individual membership.

Although each group has a longer history of migration to Britain, their numbers increased greatly only after 1950. The Hindu/Saiva Temple in Newham, East London is the site we focus on in this article. The Hindu Tamil community began its voyage from Southern India and Sri Lanka to the UK during the 1940s and since 1990, as a result of persecution and war in Sri Lanka, has grown considerably. Tamil language schools and Temples across London are important sites of learning in the lives of young Tamil children, both immigrants and second/third generation British born. The Temple is consecrated to Lord Murugan, an important deity for the Tamil Hindus. In 1984, the local Tamil Hindu community purchased the land and transformed the existing property into a temporary Temple. The present Temple was commemorated in 2005 and has been built following the architectural style of monumental Temples in South India. Even though Sanskrit has a special place in worship as the liturgical language, Tamil plays a key role in devotional practices and is the language of communication between the priests and the devotees.

### **Methodological Framework**

Our aim during Year 1 of the study was to produce rich descriptions of ceremonies, rituals, and events in the places of worship across settings. Each of the four researchers both represented and was responsible for one faith community and was partnered with a project co-director. All team members visited each research site, and the whole team of ten (one director, four co-directors, four researchers, and two postdoctoral Research Fellows, spanning eight nationalities and an age-range from twenty-four to sixty-five) met fortnightly in order to build a collaborative research team. We drew from existing work on collaborative and team ethnography (Conteh, Gregory, Kearney, & Mor, 2005; Erickson & Stull, 1998; and, in particular, Creese, Bhatt, Bhojani, & Martin, 2008). These authors refer to the way in which field notes and the discussion around them enable a dialogue between researchers themselves and participants in the study to build a cultural account (Jones, Martin-Jones, & Bhatt, 2000); facilitate the systematic sharing of observations (Erickson & Stull, 1998), and permit the possible challenging of interpretations (Creese et al., 2008). However, these issues become much more complex in faith settings, where researchers enter as members of different faiths and each setting requires different gestures, words, and actions during celebration of the faith. Additionally, explaining the action of practising or performing a faith together with the emotion of doing so was not included in collaborative field notes from non-faith sites we had read. A crucial question for our study was: Could we discuss and share the emotional attachments involved in being a member of a faith through a dialogue with outsiders whose own faith was different? If so, how might we do this?

We then turned to autoethnography (Coffey, 1999; Ellis, 2004; Muncey, 2010) as a further lens through which to view our work. Defined by Muncey (2010) as “an artistically constructed piece of prose, music or piece of art work that attempts to portray an individual experience in a way that evokes the imagination of the reader, viewer or listener” (p. 2), this approach has its roots in Bakhtin’s (1994) notion of dialogue in authoring, whereby writing is an act of creative answerability/responsibility in which the writer needs to confront issues of voice and emotion in presenting others: “the word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (p. 293). The dialogic nature of autoethnography has since been stressed by Mykhalovskiy (1996), Ellis (2004), and Sparkes (2002). These authors refer to autoethnographic research as being able to foster “acts of witnessing, empathy and connection that extend beyond the self or the author and contribute to sociological understanding in ways that among others are self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing and self-luminous” (Sparkes, p. 222).

We were particularly aware of the differences in knowledge between the insider and the outsider to the faith settings. We use these terms in both the ethnographic and phenomenological sense. Ethnographically, we agree with Geertz (1973) in that ethnographers need to belong to the cultural practices of their participants so that they can empathise with them whilst at the same time try to step outside the immediate situation to bring an outsider's perspective to these practices. Phenomenologically, we draw upon the work of Schutz (1964) who argues for the special situation of the stranger or newcomer to a community or group who, for an exceptional and short time, is able to question the taken-for-granted world of the members. To take advantage of this initial period of our research we decided upon collecting longer in-depth accounts of visits to each setting, which we refer to as field narratives. For the purpose of this article, we have chosen to focus on dialogue arising from the Tamil Hindu/Saiva setting because Arani, the researcher for this group, best illustrates the insider role. She has attended this Temple since the age of three, has learned Tamil in London, and was born and lives in the centre of the community. The faith she practises is so familiar and natural to her that the task of making implicit knowledge explicit for teaching others is no small feat. The other three researchers are outsiders because they have no knowledge of the Hindu faith and have never visited a Temple until now.

We acknowledge that underlying the insider/outsider binary categories we all approach the research setting with our own long-held beliefs, stances, and positionings. We concur with Irvine and Gal (2000) that "there is no 'view from nowhere', no gaze that is not positioned" (p. 36). Moreover, our researcher identities are intertwined with other identity aspects, such as our ethnic and cultural backgrounds, age, and, crucially, gender. All the researchers in our project are women; all the faith leaders are men. We are, therefore, mindful that we would be hearing and experiencing faith as women, and that our interpretation of rituals and perception of events would be gendered. Our gendered perspectives as they intersect with other identity aspects will be illustrated in the field narratives that follow.

### **Data Analysis**

In total, each researcher wrote up approximately ten longer narratives when visiting her own faith setting and three other narratives when visiting the other faith settings. These were also complemented by the narratives of the director and co-directors, who visited each site at least once. Each narrative was posted on Ning, an online platform for creating social websites that all team members had access to. This allowed team members to read, respond to, and post comments on the field narratives. Field narratives were also discussed in fortnightly team meetings. Through this collaborative and iterative process key themes started to emerge as we sought individually and as a group to make sense of the different faith settings. These themes included reflections on aspects of the faith that the researchers took for granted, the similarities and differences between faith sites and faith practices, and the emotional responses triggered by the faith sites. For the purposes of this article, the authors coded the field narratives written for the Hindu/Saiva Temple based on the key themes we had identified in our online and offline group discussions. We then selected for presentation those excerpts that best illuminated these themes. We chose to present excerpts from field narratives written by Arani, an insider/researcher in the Hindu/Saiva Temple, because of her long and intense engagement with the faith setting before the start of our research project. Arani's excerpts are followed by excerpts from other team member responses to visiting the Temple. The excerpts presented are only part of one narrative by each researcher. In our subsequent analysis, we examine how three researchers and two team directors teach and learn from each other through three layers of dialogue: (1) an intrapersonal (inner) dialogue within the self, (2) an interpersonal (interactive) dialogue with other researchers, and (3) a sociohistorical (outer) dialogue using other documentation and contextualising the site historically and socially within the outside world. This analysis represents, therefore, a three-way dialogue: an inner

dialogue within the researcher as she reflects upon her own history and knowledge of the faith and how she might translate it to others; a second dialogue with the other researchers through comparison between her setting and their own; and a third dialogue with the world outside, i.e., the audience who will read and interpret her work. In some ways, these layers reflect the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociohistorical learning in which sociocultural theories are grounded. The narratives reveal interconnected conversations that draw upon past and present experiences to better understand the known and begin to understand the unknown.

### **The Intrapersonal (Inner) Dialogue: Making the Implicit Explicit**

The data presented below show an inner dialogue where reflection is principally for oneself. We begin with the Temple and Arani. The following excerpt is part of a much longer narrative from her first visit to the Temple as a researcher. Although very much an insider to both the faith and this particular Temple, she attempts for the first time to look at the Temple as if from the outside, thus, teaching others in the team not only facts, but also how she feels about her faith. In so doing, she reflects upon aspects of the faith she has simply taken for granted over the years and inserts original Tamil and Sanskrit words where they cannot be satisfactorily translated into English. Also embedded in her narrative is a detailed floor plan of the Temple (Figure 1). Throughout her detailed description, she reflects upon the personal meaning in her own life of each architectural feature and imbues artefacts with personal memories; thus, she brings what might be considered very strange into the lives of those from other faiths:

#### *Field narrative excerpt 1*

The first view of the Temple peeking out of the rows of terraced houses is its iconic white *Gopuram* (tower like structure) soaring up towards the heavens. In fact this is the representation of the feet of the man lying down facing the sky – as the Temple is designed in the structure of a human being looking upwards – it comes to represent humanity’s longing for the divine and also that the divine is within the human being! When people enter through the feet and circulate round the *Garpagraha* (the womb-like spaces where the deities reside), they are also reminded that since God is within them the first duty one has is to one’s own body: architecturally bringing to life the saying “your body is your temple.”

(A. Ilankuberan, field narrative, October 6, 2009)



Through her personal narrative Arani makes explicit to herself what she has implicitly imbibed since the age of three and, at the same time, reveals to others what it means to be a member of this faith. We learn that the Temple itself symbolically represents the body—a body that should be cared for as if divine. In other words, she teaches others personally and emotionally what it means to be a member of her faith. She continues her narrative, combining detailed facts with explanation, making the implicit explicit to both herself and to the other researchers, who are her visitors:

*Field narrative excerpt 2*

Once through the doors [of the Temple] the first sight is of the gold plated flagstaff (*Kodimaram* – in Tamil / *Dwajasthambam* – in Sanskrit). The structure is beautiful, shiny and tall. I touch it, look up and pray bringing both my palms together. In the Temple body structure, the flagstaff relates to the umbilical cord and again it being raised shows the connection between humans and god as creator/mother.

On my right is a shrine for Goddess Durga [...] adorned with a bright sari and surrounded by flowers, oil lamps and silver containers full of *Kungumum* (red powder based on dried turmeric and lime). I pray to her for strength and her protection and apply *Kungumum* onto my *Thali* – this is equivalent to the wedding ring in Western traditions, the *Thali* is a thick gold necklace with two gold coins hanging either side of the *Thali* which has a ‘M’ shape and as it represents my marriage I place the *Kungumum* on it for blessing. Once a woman is married she no longer wears a black *pottu* (dot placed in the centre of the forehead) but *Kungumum* instead – although everyone can place *Kungumum* on their forehead in the Temple. Unmarried women also have a black dot on the middle of their foreheads whilst married women wear only the *Kungumum*.

(A. Ilankuberan, field narrative, October 6, 2009)

Arani’s narrative echoes the following observation by Srinivasan (n.d.) that the Temple “enables man to feel the spiritual presence and to find it in the cavity of his own heart. It is not so much to pray that a devotee visits Temples as to feel the divine presence” (p. 2). As she walks us through the Temple performing her usual rituals and prayers, Arani also translates the rules, procedures, and specialist vocabulary of the faith and relates them to her own personal history (e.g., the rituals attached to her wedding necklace). Her experience is clearly gendered in her focus on the *Thali* (the wedding necklace) and the differences in the application of *Kungumum* and the black *pottu*, depending on a woman’s marital status. In this translation, she responds to her co-researchers who will share corresponding artefacts and rituals known only by women in their own faith.

### **The Interpersonal Dialogue: Learning Through Comparisons**

Below we examine how Arani reaches out to her co-researchers through comparing practices in the Temple with other sites. Here she reflects on the role of language in comparison with the three other sites:

*Field narrative excerpt 3*

As I sit through the afternoon *poosai* (a religious service that takes place throughout the day in Temples) with an aim of transcribing the prayers, it struck me that although I had sat through numerous *poosais* for many years, I hadn’t understood a word but I was fine with that as I had become conditioned to experience the *poosai* in a certain way. It seemed that of all the faith settings explored in the project the Temple is the one that least

emphasises the understanding of the prayer – in both Churches the teachings in the Bible and the understanding of it are crucial to the prayer that takes place, similarly in the Mosque too the Imam also does sermons explaining the teachings in the Qur'an to people as part of the prayer service. Here, however, an understanding of Sanskrit is neither necessary nor encouraged for people to be able to access the prayer being performed. Instead, the observation of the rituals taking place inside the shrine and just listening to and absorbing the positive vibrations created when the priests chant the Sanskrit prayer is enough for the devotee to be elated into a spiritual and religious mind-set. All settings contain religious chanting that is quite similar, memorable and is so because of its repetitive qualities but here the focus is on the power of the sounds of the words as opposed to the meaning of the words.

(A. Ilankuberan, field narrative, October 6, 2009)

As Arani sits in the afternoon prayer trying to transcribe, she considers for the first time the fact that she has never understood Sanskrit, the liturgical language of the Temple, and that this lack of understanding has not hindered her from performing her acts of devotion and developing an appropriate emotional response (e.g., feeling elated into a spiritual and religious mind-set when listening to chanting in Sanskrit). She draws analogies between her own faith setting and the others she has visited, exploring both the differences (e.g., the lack of explicit focus on understanding prayers in her setting) and similarities (e.g., the ubiquitous presence of chanting of prayers across all four settings).

In the next excerpt, Malgorzata, a researcher in the Polish Catholic Church, contemplates the plight of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, which triggers a comparison with the displacement of Polish people as a consequence of World War II and the imposition of martial law in 1981.

*Field narrative excerpt 4*

When Arani arrives we decide to walk to the Temple and I have an opportunity to see the residential area around the Temple. It is very tightly built up with Victorian terraced houses and Arani points to signs of a Tamil presence: pictures of gods with Tamil writing or Tamil flags in the windows. This reminds me of the plight of Tamil people in Sri Lanka and how hard it must be to live here with the knowledge of all the hardship of people in their country. I guess many Polish people in London during World War II or when the martial law was imposed in 1981 must have had similar emotions.

(M. Woodham, field narrative, January 28, 2010)

Malgorzata goes on to observe similarities and differences between the Temple and the Polish Catholic Church. She compares the Temple to a Gothic cathedral in size and notes the similar wealth of symbols compared with those in the Catholic faith. She also comments on the emotional regime of the two sites—the Temple is “more relaxed and informal” than the Catholic Church—and her own emotional response to the Temple, “it feels very special to be there.”

*Field narrative excerpt 5*

We apply holy ash and paste on our foreheads and enter the Temple. I am surprised. I expect to be overwhelmed by the height of the Temple inside, a little like when you enter a Gothic cathedral. In contrast, the ceiling of the Temple is flat and modern with fitted lights and although it is high the inner space of the Temple is very warm and cosy and centres on its lower parts. The main shrine is located at the heart of the Temple and is raised but other, smaller shrines in the walls around are easily accessible. There people

place their offerings of fruit such as bananas, coconuts and apples bought from the chief priest. I am struck by the vibrancy of colours in the shrines. The deities in shrines are adorned with shiny, mostly gold and red sumptuous decorations and garments, with glittering jewellery and garlands of fresh flowers, some of them, like white jasmine, flown in especially from India. The vibrant colours and the fact that priests look so different to any priests I have seen, with their bare torsos and colourful tunics transport me straight into India or Sri Lanka. This vibrancy of colours also reminds me of a book I have recently read, where the main character, who emigrates from Sri Lanka to England, comments on how she misses the heat, the strong light and the colours of the country she was born in [...]

When I look at the people busying themselves at the Temple I ponder how different its atmosphere is compared to the one in the Catholic Church. It is much more relaxed and informal. However, I also cannot help thinking how similar it is in the fact that it is full of symbols and it feels very special to be there.  
(M. Woodham, field narrative, January 28, 2010)

Another researcher, Halimun, notices many similarities with her own faith setting, the Mosque. She engages with Arani through a comparison of Hinduism with Islam, which is her own faith:

*Field narrative excerpt 6*

As soon as I walk into the Temple I am welcomed by the scent of strong incense and Indian music, which is very different to when walking into the Mosque in silence [...]. Many people do their individual prayers around the shrines of their selected Gods, it is very busy and a lot is going on at the Temple, however it is about 12pm when a majority of the people around the Temple come together for the communal prayer, we all sit collectively near the Planet Gods (the nine planets have an important place in Hinduism and are worshipped as Gods). Some sit, while others stand, Arani and I decide to sit, while others stand behind us watching over our heads. I watch the Priest uttering some prayers, the worshippers are unaware of what is being said, it is all based on trust, but they watch the priest carry out the duty with great interest and concentration. At the Mosque, the Imam leads the prayers in Arabic where many people are unaware of what is being said, nonetheless due to the diversity within the mosque, many understand the language, while others educate themselves to gain a full understanding of the complicated Arabic language [...]

It is time to dress the planet Gods so everyone swiftly moves over to the other Gods to pray, giving the Priest and the Deities some privacy. I observe the Priest follow the same ritual to the main deity at the middle of the Temple who happens to be a big black stone, decorated in a pretty colourful cloth. A man comes in front and decides to perform *Sujda* next to me [this is an Arabic term used to refer to when people prostrate down, where the knees, forehead, tip of the nose, the hands are all touching the ground; Muslims perform this when praying], I am amazed to see this taking place at the Temple so I turn to Arani excitedly and tell her, "Muslims do this too", I am stunned to see the man go down on his knees and hands and prostrate in such a familiar manner. Arani is pleased to inform me that this is also another style of prayer that takes place at the Temple [...]. I wonder if the man is saying anything. The following are said three times when Muslims go down in Prostration, "*Subhaana rabbiyal' Alaa*" which means Glory to my Lord, Muslims pray and prostrate towards Mecca in Saudi Arabia. It appears Hindus go down in prostration towards the Gods at the Temple [...]

During the second half of the prayer the Priest raises his voice to fill the Temple. The worshippers join in with this, I can feel the musical beat within me and for some strange reason the music seems very familiar. It makes me feel somewhat excited to hear this. The high and low pitched tone of voice, the worshippers sway left to right according to the soft melody. I want to also join in but sadly I don't know the words, but I watch the people around me joining in with great joy and enthusiasm.  
(H. Choudhury, field narrative, October 27, 2009)

Similar to Malgorzata, Halimun juxtaposes the cultural and religious practices in the Mosque with those she observes for the first time at the Temple. Her observations regarding the lack of understanding of the liturgical languages (Sanskrit and Qur'anic Arabic respectively) and similarities in the praying positions show the many aspects that cross faith boundaries and are held in common between the two faiths. Her field narrative reveals the emotional regime of the research site where music is an integral part of worship, as opposed to the Mosque, where silence prevails. Her observations of the devotees swaying to the soft melody as they pray illustrate the emotional response of the congregation as devotees who "join in with great joy and enthusiasm." The whole experience is strange, yet somehow familiar, to Halimun. She uses a term from her own faith, *sujda*, to describe the prostration so familiar to her, and she reflects on her own emotional response to the service she is witnessing: "I can feel the musical beat within me and for some strange reason the music seems very familiar. It makes me feel somewhat excited to hear this."

### **The Sociohistorical (Outer) Dialogue: Communicating with the Outside World**

Part of the rich mosaic of the field narratives is the contribution made by members of the team who are directing the work and partnering with the researchers, but who are not members of any of the faiths being researched. Team members bring individual perspectives from their own history, that of their family and the country and culture where they were brought up. Their narratives are steeped in their own social and cultural backgrounds, family stories, and beliefs.

We conclude the tapestry of narratives with two excerpts from the authors of this article; we are members of the team who have very contrasting backgrounds and experiences. The first narrator's origins are from Greece where she was brought up as a member of the Greek Orthodox Church. She is unfamiliar with this part of London and, like all the other members of the team, was unfamiliar with this faith prior to starting the project. Below are short excerpts from her narrative of her second visit to the Temple. She shares her early impressions of the neighbourhood where the Temple has been built and of the Temple as an architectural monument:

#### *Field narrative excerpt 7*

I get out of the station and turn right on High St North. The high street is typical of many multiethnic/multicultural neighbourhoods in London: shop and supermarket chains sit comfortably next to ethnic restaurants and shops offering services and selling goods from Asia and beyond. I recall reading on the Borough of Newham website ([www.newham.gov.uk](http://www.newham.gov.uk)) that the borough is one of the most ethnically diverse in Britain [...] On East Avenue I immediately notice a Church that has now been turned into a community centre. The Church is big and impressive but somewhat crowded out by the small terraced houses built in close proximity to its walls and all along East Avenue. As I'm snapping away, a car parks right in front of me. Inside the car, I notice a man and a woman – she is completely covered in a black veil. They look young, probably in their early 20s. I walk along East Avenue and turn into Browning Street – according to my

map the Temple is at the very top of Browning Street [...] A little further down I come across a bridge. From the top of the bridge, I can see the Temple, the front part of it – which in architectural terms would be the feet. I find it fascinating that the Temple is likened to the human body and that the different parts of the Temple are named after different parts of the human body. The Temple as human body metaphor resonates with the Greek Orthodox understanding of the Church as constituted by its worshippers – originally it was a space constituted of human bodies. Later, it came to include the physical space of the Church too [...] On the train back to central London I reflect on my morning at the Temple and how rich an experience it had been – how very similar but also how very different from other religious experiences I have had.  
(V. Lytra, field narrative, October 6, 2009)

In her excerpt, Vally attempts to capture how the Temple and Tamil/Hindu community it serves are situated in the physical space of this culturally, ethnically, and linguistically rich area of London. By the mid-nineteenth century, this area had been transformed from a rural, agricultural community into a bustling industrial hub, which is reflected in the high number and monumental size of its Churches. With the arrival of new immigrant communities from the 1950s onwards, the area witnessed rapid changes. Although the Tamil/Hindu presence in the area can be traced back to the 1940s, migration peaked first in the 1960s and then in the 1980s as a result of the escalation of communal strife into civil war in Sri Lanka. The present purpose-built Temple, completed in 2005 in the architectural style of South Indian Temples on Church Road, is considered a remarkable achievement of the London Tamil/Hindu community, particularly if one considers its humble beginnings in 1975 when community members worshipped in rented halls. As the Tamil/Hindu community grew in numbers and wealth, the drive to create a permanent Temple gained momentum. It was linked intimately with community efforts to protect and promote Tamil language, culture, identity, and the Hindu/Saiva faith. As the excerpt illustrates, the Temple is a testament both to the journey of the Tamil/Hindu community and to the transformations of this part of London over time.

The next excerpt is written by the team member with the longest memories of the area. Members of her whole family were born and brought up there when it was dominated by the largest docks in the world and the Churches were mainly Anglican, long before the Tamil community had arrived. Her father's stories recount a time from the early twentieth century when Forest Gate was really the gate to Epping Forest and Manor Park was home to wealthy city merchants taking advantage of direct links to the City by train. Newham is now very different. Results of the census in 2001 show that this area has the second highest levels of deprivation in the UK and the highest percentage (61%) of non-white residents, making it the most ethnically diverse Borough in London. However, it also has the youngest population of the UK with 41% of its residents under the age of 24, and it is now undergoing vast rebuilding plans due to be completed for its hosting of the 2012 Olympics. This area's youth, redevelopment, and hope for a better future give it a vibrancy and energy lacking in many other economically deprived areas. Below is a short excerpt of Eve's narrative where she situates her own family (who used to work in the pub that is waiting to be demolished) in the Temple site:

*Field narrative excerpt 8*

Again, as we approach, I am struck by the beauty of this building, floodlit against the night. Its white gleaming stone stands in stark (and sad) contrast with the derelict Victorian pub waiting to be demolished next door and the ugly 1960s built secondary school across the road. Yet there are some similarities to the pub, which would have been an impressive edifice in its time, fostering (in a different way) a community spirit. Arani

said that the names of the deities were inscribed in the stone of the Temple and I direct her to the Victorian library just down the road where the names of great poets and authors (Dickens, Thackeray, Tennyson, Keats etc) are also inscribed in the stone and suggest she takes a photo of that. We also talk about the architectural beauty of the pubs which are now being lost at the same time as the beauty of the Temple is being gained and what this shows about the resident population. Arani also mentions that a number of Temples are being built across London in streets called 'Church Road' and we realise that they are emerging on the site of a demolished Anglican Church. "Yes, pubs and Churches provide our sites" says Arani. And we smile [...] Later, we discuss the changing nature of the community and the beauty represented. I say "Well, the Temple is very beautiful..." To my surprise, she responds, "Yes, but whose beauty is it?" [...] Such thoughtfulness by someone who is just twenty-four.

(E. Gregory, field narrative, November 7, 2009)

Arani's final comment brings the field narratives and our dialogue back to where it started. Through her dialogue with an outsider to her faith, but an insider to the area and its history, she begins to see not just other buildings in the area, but also her own Temple and its beauty in an historical perspective, part of the flow of history in the area. And so she returns to her own inner dialogue, a reflection upon her faith.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

How do field narratives provide possibilities for researchers to engage in dialogue in faith sites or other sensitive settings? Using Bakhtin's (1994) notion of dialogism, we see how field narratives are polyphonic in that the author "does not retain for himself, that is exclusively for his own vision, a single essential definition, a single characteristic, a single trait of the hero" (p. 62) but allows "each of the contending viewpoints to develop its maximum strength and depth, to the maximum of plausibility" (p. 93). The dialogues are polyphonic because they draw upon different voices, different experiences, and different funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), as well as the past and the present. Similarly, the narratives provide examples of "double-voiced utterances"; the speakers/writers "insert a new semantic intention into discourse which has ... an intention of its own. Such a discourse must be seen as belonging to someone else" (Bakhtin, 1994, p.189). For example, Malgorzata empathises with the plight of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and, in so doing, reflects back to the similarity of the history of her own community in Poland. Both Arani and Halimun realise through their writing that in neither faith do worshippers understand the Sanskrit or Qur'anic Arabic of the prayers, but trust and believe in the faith leader's interpretation of God's words.

As we have begun to illustrate in this article, field narratives share important features and aims. Six of these are revealed in the excerpts examined above. First, field narratives present a piece of well-formed prose, rather like a longer vignette, which might start or finish with a poem, a prayer, or any other significant or important (paradigmatic) moment characterising the event. Second, they set events within the history, rituals, procedures, emotional regimes, languages, and literacies of the faith portrayed. Third, they include emotions experienced by the researcher as she participates in the faith. This includes emotion towards the beauty of the setting, its rituals, etc. Fourth, they enable the researcher to reflect upon personal memory as a faith member as well as the collective memory of the community. This reflection is iterative, moving between the past to the present and future. Fifth, they provide a response to field narratives from other members and allow a comparison with other settings and, thus, produce a dialogue with members of the other faiths. Finally, they often include photos, figures, and digital recordings of artefacts, events, ceremonies, festivals, etc., which accompany the narratives.

In this article, we have shown how field narratives can be a responsive approach to both collecting and interpreting data in faith settings. We view field narratives as an extension of field notes to highlight the important role of promoting dialogue in ethnography. For our research, they are a crucial interpretative layer because they acknowledge emotions, which we see as inherent in faith. When Arani and Halimun speak of not understanding Sanskrit or Qur'anic Arabic, but emphasise their trust in what the faith leader says, this entails a particular emotive stance, which is cultivated by faith. Such emotion needs to be set in a wider context of past, present, and future to be explained adequately. This interplay between past, present, and future weaves itself through and between the narratives of the researchers.

Faith settings serve as an example where field narratives provide the possibility for rich interaction between researchers. Through the brief excerpts presented in this article, we suggest ways in which a collection of field narratives by insiders and outsiders offers opportunities for in-depth analyses of other individual practices where researchers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds work in collaborative settings.

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