

## **A wedding in the family: home making in a global kin network**

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***Abstract** Rituals such as weddings and funerals are significant for transnational family networks as events where scattered relatives meet and validate shared kinship and common origins. They are particularly important when taking place at a family 'home' that has been a centre of social and economic relations and locus of emotional attachment. This article analyses a wedding on a Caribbean island involving a large global family network, which occurred at a critical point in the family's history. It became an occasion when members asserted their notions of belonging rooted in the 'home', not just as members of a common kin group, but as persons whose life trajectories had involved them in different social, economic and geographical contexts. Individually they had dissimilar interpretations and expectations of their place in the home, and these were played out at the wedding. The gathering allowed a display of family solidarity, but was also a site where differing views of individuals' contribution to the global household were expressed, and rights to belong in the family home and, by implication, the island were contested.*

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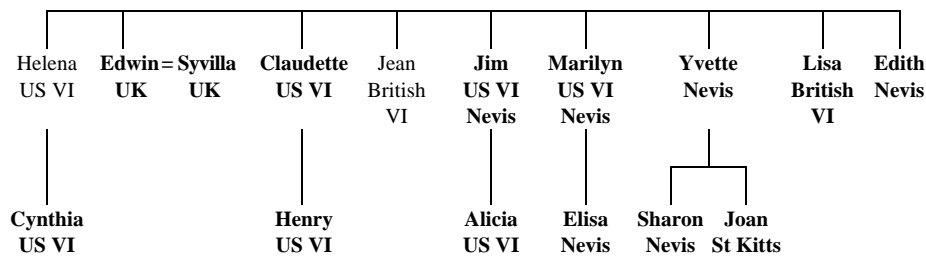
Weddings and funerals are of crucial importance in migratory family networks because they constitute events where scattered relatives can meet and validate their shared kinship and common origins. Such rituals are particularly important when they take place at the family home that has been an important centre of social and economic relations as well as a locus of emotional attachment for individual family members. In 1996 I attended a wedding on the Caribbean island of Nevis that involved a global family network. It provided a rare opportunity to see relatives, in a large and spatially scattered family network, get together and interact in relation to a major family celebration. This event occurred at a critical point in the history of the family, and it became an occasion where family members particularly clearly asserted their notions of belonging in the family 'home'. They did this, however, not just as members of a common kin group, but also as persons whose various life trajectories had involved them in different social, economic and geographical contexts. Individual family members' perceptions and practices of belonging in the family accordingly varied a great deal and involved a fair amount of contestation. The wedding celebration therefore allowed an examination of the complex social, economic, emotional and cultural relations that are involved in the construction of home and the variegated meanings of home that surface and become contested in the process.

Like most other Caribbean islands, Nevis has been subject to large-scale emigration since emancipation of the slaves in the middle of the nineteenth century, when

islanders began to leave the faltering plantation society in order to improve their social and economic condition. During the first half of the twentieth century important Nevisian migration destinations included Panama, Bermuda, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and, during the past 50 years, the United Kingdom, the British and United States Virgin Islands, the Dutch Antilles, Canada and the United States have been the most popular destinations. There are no certain figures of out-migration for Nevis as such, but it is widely believed that the population of around 10,000 inhabiting the 93-square-kilometre island today comprises only a small part of the global community of Nevisian migrants and their descendants who maintain active ties with Nevis and the people living there (Frucht 1966; Olwig 1993; Richardson 1983).

The wedding celebration I attended on Nevis concerned Jim Smith's marriage to a woman from the same village on the island. As is common when migrants marry on their island of origin, the wedding was attended by a large number of friends and relatives living abroad (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The main actors at Jim Smith's wedding**



The figure shows all family members mentioned in the analysis by name and their place of residence. Those who were present at the wedding are shown in bold. (VI = Virgin Islands)

Jim's siblings, many of their children and grandchildren as well as other relatives had travelled from the American and British Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, the USA and Great Britain to attend the event. A large number of Jim's friends had also arrived from the American Virgin Islands where he had worked most of the time since the 1960s. The bride's family and friends had similarly come from far and near to participate in the celebrations. For Jim's side of the family, the wedding provided an important occasion to meet, because it took place in the village where the old family home was located, a few years after the death of Jim's and his siblings' parents. This home had been a centre of life for all their children, and most of their children in turn, since the 1940s. Indeed, the home had not just been the place where the siblings and many of their children had spent all, or much, of their childhood. It had, in effect, functioned as an extended household for all these family members long after they themselves had moved away. For those who had moved abroad, the home therefore had become a concrete site of identification and belonging on Nevis. With the (grand)parents' death, the main anchor persons in this home had disappeared and the future of the home was somewhat uncertain. Jim and his siblings therefore were keen to assert their continued solidarity and unity as a family and their strong ties to Nevis, by organizing and putting on a major wedding celebration in the home village.

### **A wedding**

I arrived on Nevis two days before Jim's wedding was to take place and found the family at Jim's house preparing food for the wedding. Marilyn and Yvette, two of Jim's sisters who were living in the village, were the masterminds behind food preparations and they were busy directing the cutting up and spicing of the goat meat. 'It is impossible to have a wedding without goat meat,' they explained. They looked with obvious pleasure at the hectic activities around them and Marilyn exclaimed laughingly, 'if there is something the Smith family can agree to work on together, it is *food!*' This was not said without a certain sense of self-irony because many of the Smith siblings are corpulent. Marilyn, Yvette and their sister Claudette, who had come from the American Virgin Islands, had completed most of the cutting and were now working on the goat heads that would be used to cook goat soup. They had to cut the goat lips and ears extra carefully so that they would blend anonymously with the other ingredients in the dish. Some of the meat from the goat heads was being cooked by Jim in a big pot placed in a coal pot made out of the inner part of a car wheel and would be served for lunch to everybody helping with the wedding preparations. Jim's brother Edwin, who had arrived from England with his wife Syvilla several weeks before the wedding, acted in a big-brotherly fashion and expressed concern about whether the meat would spoil before the wedding celebrations two days later. They assured him that everything was under control. Edwin returned to the house where he was staying, a modern home owned by a cousin of his living in Puerto Rico, and explained that he had to prepare the wedding speech he would be expected to make as best man. Syvilla stayed behind to help cut the goat heads.

Yvette and Marilyn explained that Claudette and their niece Cynthia, daughter of Helena, another sister in the American Virgin Islands who been unable to come, had done most of the actual shopping for the wedding celebration on St Thomas. Jim had footed the bill and the bride in Nevis had approved everything. Claudette and Cynthia had bought chicken, ham, turkey and roast beef, other important items on the wedding menu, and they had purchased liquor, tinned beer, coke and sprite. They were responsible for the head table where there would be bone china, glass, stainless steel cutlery, cloth napkins and a tablecloth with lace. The bride and bridegroom would even drink out of real champagne glasses. The rest of the wedding guests would use paper plates, plastic cutlery and paper on the table. Cynthia and Claudette had also been in charge of the colour scheme (peach and light green) and the selection of all the items that fitted into this scheme. These included the printed programmes for the church ceremony, the corsages that would be pinned on wedding guests, the small boxes in which the cake was to be served, and the little scrolls with the bridal couple's thanks that would be distributed at the end of the wedding feast. Finally, Claudette and Cynthia had sent a catalogue with wedding gowns to the bride, and ordered the outfit she had chosen, and last but not least they had selected the wedding rings.

Having finished cutting the meat, we all went to the old family home nearby where Lisa, another sister visiting from the British Virgin Islands, had just finished doing the entire family's laundry. Marilyn and Yvette now supervised the glazing of the cake that would be served to the guests. They had baked the cake the day before, together with Lisa and Yvette's daughter Sharon who lived in another village on Nevis. Claudette's youngest son Henry had made the glazing because they thought

that he was especially good at this. Yvette's other daughter Joan, who lived on the neighbouring island of St Kitts, made the bridal cake itself, she being an expert at baking and decorating this important showpiece. After a while, Jim arrived with the goat dish and began to scoop it out to everybody. Syvilla tried to decline, saying that those who had helped most that morning must have something first (pretending to decline to eat what was to her an unsavoury concoction because she herself had not helped much). When the others insisted she have some, she asked to have only the broth and no goat meat, causing the local family to comment that 'she has been too long in England!' Syvilla later referred with dismay to this comment and emphasized that she went to the family home to 'show her face' and make sure that nobody in her husband's family would blame her for not helping with the wedding preparations.

The following day wedding preparations continued with the cooking of more food, preparing bouquets for the bridesmaids, and cleaning and decorating the church in which the ceremony was to take place. When I arrived at the family home, Marilyn's oldest daughter Elisa, who lived in the family home, was giving hair treatment to several family members, first straightening it and then setting it in carefully arranged curls. Claudette mentioned to a cousin visiting from New York that she looked forward to returning to her own home. She added that she was unhappy that the old family home was not kept as nicely as when her parents had been alive and quoted the St Thomian proverb 'Man die, bush grow to the door mouth of the house.' She was happy that she stayed in her sister Helena's well-kept house down the road. Many family members were beginning to look tired, but they knew that they would have to get up early the next morning to cook the last food. When all the food was prepared they would have cooked seven goats, three turkeys, two hams and 50 pounds of rice.

After many days of preparation the wedding day finally arrived. The church was festively decorated with peach coloured and white balloons and matching crepe flowers, but was nearly empty when I arrived 15 minutes before the time designated for the church ceremony. About 45 minutes later, however, the church was nearly full, and the wedding could take place. Everything went according to the book, following the strict instructions of the female pastor and the hired photographer. After the church ceremony the bridal couple drove off to the reception in a BMW, borrowed from a friend of Jim's who was a famous cricket player. The celebrations now continued in a hall at the other end of the island that had been rented for the reception. When the food they had been preparing for so long was to be served, few family members helped, most of them sitting down at the tables ready to eat. Jim's four sisters therefore struggled, along with a couple of nieces, to serve the more than 200 people seated in the hall. The serving became somewhat chaotic with those sitting closest to the door grabbing the dishes of food before the sisters could bring them to the other guests, including those sitting at the head table. Eventually, everybody was served and the toastmaster invited the guests to make speeches to the couple. Edwin spoke first as best man and amused everybody by suggesting that his brother say 'I love you' to his wife every day. Friends and relatives, including Jim's adult daughter Alicia, made other speeches and a local music group entertained with a few pieces of traditional string band music. Then the cake was cut and passed around in the small peach-coloured boxes with matching napkins. Soon afterwards, the lights went out and the festivities came to an abrupt stop. Claudette moaned, 'Now, that is something that we didn't think of!' As soon as the electricity came back on everybody rushed out

of the hall while there still was light. The party was over. When I drove back to the village with Edwin and Syvilla, they were disappointed that the party had stopped so early. They were used to partying all night in England, and we stayed up late on the gallery of their house drinking various rum concoctions.

The following afternoon Jim held a large party in the yard by his house for all the villagers, most of whom had not been invited to the formal reception. Whereas the wedding guests the previous day had dressed to kill, the villagers dressed informally, many in slacks and T-shirts. Again Jim's sisters had helped cook the food – goat soup, grilled chicken, corned pork and dumplings. There was plenty of food and drink for everyone, and Yvette noted with pride that her dumplings were so soft that one could eat them with plastic forks without any difficulty. A local band played calypso music, including a special rendition of *Sagt mir wo die Blumen sind* ('Where have all the flowers gone?'), and some children were dancing to the music. Most guests just stood around in the yard chatting, eating and drinking, some of them heavily, and at a certain point two men started a brawl. They were quickly separated and told off by the bride, who stated that she did not want any kind of fighting. After dark, the guests began to leave and the party stopped soon after.

In the evening, Edwin asked his siblings to get together for a family meeting to discuss how to divide the property that the parents had left. The parents had willed the house and land around the house to Marilyn, who had never married but stayed in the family home with her three children and helped care for the parents in their old age. The remainder of the land had been willed for the children to divide among each other. Edwin was concerned that they decide how to do this. The next morning, Edwin told me that they had been unable to reach an agreement on how to distribute the land and, it turned out, the siblings interpreted the will somewhat differently. Some even suspected that the will did not really reflect the parents' wishes, and that the parents would have made it differently if the lawyer involved had advised them properly. Edwin was concerned that it would be very difficult ever to agree on a course of action. Those living in the Virgin Islands had already left Nevis early in the morning and in a few days he himself would be travelling back to England.

The following day, when I met Marilyn and Yvette in town, they expressed satisfaction at the way in which the wedding had gone, although they were a little upset at the serving of the food at the reception. They complained that the bride's family had hardly helped even though it is normally expected to host the wedding. Also, a few of the guests had complained about not getting enough food. They shrugged it off – some people just demand and don't contribute anything themselves. Jim wanted a big wedding. He paid for everything and his family did virtually all the work. He had been happy about the wedding and that was the most important thing.

### **A site of family reunion and contestation**

Jim's wedding provided an occasion for the relatives who had grown up in the old family home to unite and work together as a group to organize a major family celebration. In the process, they demonstrated their respectability in the community, reaffirmed family unity and loyalty and, finally, individual family members asserted a place of belonging in the family home and, by implication, on Nevis. The relatives had lived their lives in different social, economic and personal circumstances. Their

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notions of respectability, loyalty and belonging accordingly varied a great deal and the family reunion therefore also became a site for the contestation of socio-cultural values, economic resources and personal prestige. In the end, important issues were left unresolved and it seemed unlikely that they would find a solution in the near future. This had important implications for the kind of belonging and site of identification that family members would be able to nourish and sustain in Nevis.

*A demonstration of respectability in the community*

One of the most poignant moments at the wedding reception occurred when Jim's adult daughter Alicia gave a speech. She congratulated her father on getting married and said that his father and mother, her grandparents, had always wanted him to do so. She was therefore very happy on her grandparents' behalf and wished they could have been there to join in the wedding celebrations. She ended the speech by asking everybody to rise for a moment of silence in memory of the grandparents. Like her two older brothers, Alicia had lived with Jim's grandparents since she had been a small child while her father was a construction worker in the American Virgin Islands. Jim had lived with several women and had four adult children with three different mothers before meeting his present wife. While this pattern of procreation is quite common in the Caribbean, marriage is an important ideal and Jim's marriage therefore was a significant event that heightened the family's respectability in the community.<sup>1</sup>

The community in which Jim was asserting a position of respectability was not confined to the local village or, for that matter, to the island society of Nevis. It was a much wider community of social fields of relations that extended between important migration destinations abroad and in Nevis. Philpott (1973) first noted the importance of large communities of social fields involving people in migrant destinations as well as in the Caribbean society of origin; (see Olwig (1993) for an analysis of social fields pertaining to Nevisian migration). The family had never had such a large wedding feast on Nevis and everybody was eager to make it a great success that would reflect well on the family. Many of the wedding guests came from the extended global community and the celebrations were very much designed to give a taste of local culture to those who had travelled from abroad to attend the wedding, while demonstrating the family's mastery of modern ways. The wedding celebrations included traditional Nevisian goat soup and music, called real 'culture' by several in the family, as well as modern imported goods such as the carefully colour-schemed paraphernalia, the well-decked head table and the bridal car, all of which followed latest fashions abroad. The local food emphasized the family's identification with Nevis and grounding in the small village in which they had grown up. Thus, when Edwin's wife was not keen on eating goat ears and lips, even if they were local culture, family members living on Nevis put her firmly in her place with the stinging remark that, 'She has lived too long in England.' The imported goods reflected the modern, global arena where most of the family members had staked out their lives and showed that the local family knew the latest styles and fashions.

An informal, open-air party held at a rented hall located outside the village, and open to all villagers who cared to participate, followed the formal wedding reception for invited family and visitors from abroad. At this party there was a great quantity of food and drink, freely served to all who came, and there was no set schedule of

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events, no speeches, no formal seating. This party emphasized Jim's generosity, his close relations with friends and neighbours, and his firm grounding in the local village. By holding two wedding celebrations, Jim and the family were asserting their respectability in the global fields of relations and in the wider Nevisian society outside the village, while at the same time acknowledging their rootedness in the village and showing that they regarded themselves as being part of the local community.

Jim himself embodied the close interrelationship between the local and extended community. After having grown up in the family home in the village he had travelled to the American Virgin Islands and spent most of his adult life working there. During the last few years, after he had met his wife in his home village, he began travelling back and forth between Nevis, where his wife and young children were living, and the American Virgin Islands, where he worked for longer periods of time. His many years abroad enabled him – or rather perhaps made it mandatory for him – to put on a wedding of this magnitude and lavishness in his home village on Nevis. He noted afterwards,

We started to plan the wedding ... [about eight months ago], and I went back [to the Virgin Islands] and worked hard. I paid for ushers and bridesmaids' clothes. ... The majority was happy with the party, like my friends from the Virgin Islands were very happy. In the Virgin Islands guests bring liquor or envelopes with money. This is not done on Nevis. Here you pay for the wedding yourself. Don't even ask me how much the wedding cost because I don't know. But we got some very nice gifts!

Some of Jim's siblings noted that they would not have spent so much money on a wedding, but they all agreed that the wedding had given the family a good name in the community. This, however, was not only because of its lavishness but also because the success of the wedding had demonstrated that the siblings and their children could unite to organize and stage such a large event.

*A display of family loyalty*

Jim fully acknowledged the important contribution of his family when I talked to him later about the wedding celebrations: 'I made the wedding large to make the girl [his wife] happy. My family said that they would help, and they did. I knew they would help, so I went for it.' Although helping to put on the wedding was a major undertaking, the siblings did not just see it as a chore. They regarded the wedding as providing a welcome opportunity for them to prove to themselves, and to the wider community, that they could work together in unity. This was important because, after the death of their parents a few years previously, the siblings had lost a central locus in the family. When Marilyn exclaimed, 'If there is something the Smith family can agree to work on together, it is food,' she was not just joking about the great pleasure that most family members took in preparing and eating good food. She was also expressing great joy that so many family members had joined up from far and near to participate in staging Jim's wedding. This family collaboration was not left to chance but was carefully organized according to a division of labour that ensured that each individual family member would contribute his or her particular skill. These skills, as noted, were as varied as the coordinating of colour schemes, the cutting up and

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spicing of goat meat, the baking of cakes, the preparing of glazing, the making of the fancy bridal cake, or the straightening and setting of hair. A few months after the wedding Marilyn thus described the family's accomplishment in radiant terms: 'because all pitched in and did what they could, the end product was splendid. It was a work of art done by the family.'

Family collaboration worked best, however, when it was carefully orchestrated. At the wedding reception itself, for example, where Jim's sisters had counted on many helping out, very few did so. It was also apparent, and noted by some of the siblings, that some close relatives in the family had not participated much in the wedding preparations and had done little to help in the final staging of the reception. They included the youngest sister, Edith, who hardly seemed to take part in the activities. It was also obvious that two of the sisters, Helena and Jean, had not come to the wedding despite the fact that both lived fairly close by in the Virgin Islands. When I interviewed these three sisters several months later, Edith and Jean expressed the feeling that their family on Nevis did not care for them and ignored them. For this reason, Jean explained, she rarely visited Nevis and had no intention of moving back. Edith had moved back to Nevis from the Dutch possession of St Martin a few years before the wedding was held after having worked on St Martin for 16 years. She returned on her own accord in order to care for her mother who had become seriously ill. When the mother died within a few months of her return, Edith decided to remain and found work on Nevis as a hotel maid. She felt, however, that for some reason she could not explain, she had a tense relationship with her sisters on Nevis and therefore chose to keep to herself most of the time. Helena simply explained her absence from her brother's wedding by stating, 'I did not go to Jim's wedding because I thought there might be some confusion [namely arguments or disagreements]. Many felt that my father's will was not right.'

Helena's premonition proved correct. The good family feelings the wedding celebrations generated were insufficiently strong to keep unity and peace in the family when it came to settling the inheritance of the family home and land. This inheritance did not merely concern the distribution of scarce resources among the siblings. It also, and perhaps more fundamentally, involved the negotiation of rights to being rooted in a family home that had essentially functioned as a transnational household. The problems that Jean and Edith experienced *vis-à-vis* their siblings on Nevis were most likely related to their rights in this home, though in very different ways.

#### *A claim of belonging*

Edwin called the family meeting to reach an agreement on how to divide the land left by the parents, but the meeting quickly developed into a discussion of who really had a moral right to inherit the home and the land. According to Nevisian custom, those who care for people in their old age will inherit the home and the land owned by these people when they die. The heirs will typically be the children of the deceased, although they may also be more distant relatives or persons who are not related to the deceased at all. When some of the children have migrated – a situation quite typical in Nevis – there are two different ways in which offspring customarily take care of their parents. Either they stay behind with the parents, run the household and care physically for the parents should they become ill and disabled, or they travel abroad and



send part of their earnings and various goods to the parental home, in this way providing the economic basis for its continued existence. Usually, at least one child stays behind while the rest leave to help provide economic support. Furthermore, those who leave for wage employment abroad may send their children back to their parents' home to be reared there by their parents and/or siblings. In this way, the family home turns into an extended household without walls within a global division of labour based on wage employment in developed, industrial areas of the world and the provision of care for children and the elderly in the underdeveloped part of the world.

The Smith family's home had been such an extended household since the early 1960s, when the eldest siblings began to travel for wage labour in St Kitts, England, the American and British Virgin Islands and the Dutch part of St Martin. The father had also worked in the American Virgin Islands for a number of years until he was forced to return to Nevis after an accident. At the same time as most adult members left Nevis the family home received a number of grandchildren from abroad, and several of them ended up spending their entire childhood in the grandparents' home on Nevis.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, those children who were reared by their parents abroad often visited the family home on Nevis on long vacations and thereby developed strong ties with the family. For many years Lisa, the second youngest sibling, had run the family home, which was then occupied by the parents, Lisa and Marilyn and six or seven children, two of whom were Marilyn's, none of them Lisa's. She cooked, cleaned, washed for the entire family and even cultivated provision crops on the land by the house and burned charcoal further out in the bush. When Lisa left, Marilyn, who had spent much of her time outside the home engaged in wage employment, assumed responsibility for running the home. By then there were no small children to rear, except for Marilyn's third child, but the grandparents were becoming an increasing burden. When the grandmother became seriously ill, shortly after the father's death, Edith, the youngest sister, returned from St Martin to care for her on a full-time basis. Throughout its history as an extended household, the home was relatively prosperous, not just because the father received American social security after his accident, but also because the migrant children sent regular remittances to the home. This economic support allowed the family to build its own water cistern and to add a modern bathroom with a flush toilet and a shower to the house. The family also received modern electric appliances from relatives abroad – a toaster, blender, radio, television and a large gas stove – as well as clothing, shoes, canned foods, rice and detergent. The prosperous home was a credit to the strength of the family ties that constituted the essential underpinnings of this extended household, and it therefore symbolized the family's unity and high morals.

The family home functioned successfully as an extended household while the parents lived. At their death only Marilyn and Edith, Marilyn's young child and a few adult grandchildren working on their own were living in the home. While some family members periodically sent presents of money and goods to the home, the household was no longer the natural centre of intense economic and social exchange relations involving relatives living in geographically distant areas. To a great extent, this was because a pivotal point in these exchanges had disappeared with the death of the parents and there was little need to send remittances to a household in which the family members were economically self-sufficient. The absent relatives' declining devotion to the family home, however, also reflected the fact that relations between

the siblings were somewhat strained because the parents had left a will that disturbed the feeling of generalized exchange that formerly characterized relations within the extended family. As noted, the will provided that Marilyn, who had never left the family home, was the sole heir of the home and a quarter acre of the land surrounding the house. The rest of the land by the house, about half an acre, was to be inherited equally by the remainder of the children. Another two-acre plot of land, located in the bush, was to be divided equally among all. The favouring of Marilyn in the will disturbed the siblings' feeling that they had all contributed to the welfare of the family home and therefore deserved an equal claim in the family property.

Edwin, the eldest and only married son before Jim's wedding, explained that several years before his death the father had offered him the house and all the land. Edwin had declined, however, saying that this would be unfair to the other siblings because everybody had helped support the home and the family there. He felt that if certain persons, like Marilyn, were to be singled out for having been especially devoted to the family home, one would also have to include Lisa and Edith. Lisa had worked full time in the family home and kept it in splendid order for many years until she finally left for the British Virgin Islands, and Edith had given up her job in St Martin to care for her mother. Some therefore argued that if Lisa and Edith were not to have a share in the house, they ought to divide the rest of the land next to the house, leaving the less attractive land in the bush to be shared among the remaining siblings. Several siblings seemed to accept this suggestion, although some conceded that the will did give Marilyn a legal right to the family home and surrounding land as well as a ninth of the remaining land. Marilyn, on her part, felt that some of her siblings had no understanding of all the work she had done, mostly all on her own, caring for her parents when they were old and disabled. She emphasized that most of her siblings had left when young, lived virtually their entire life abroad and just sent whatever they could spare to help the family home. Furthermore, some of them had not even done this. She was therefore unwilling to reduce her claim to the land or to share the family home with others. To do so would be to admit that she had not deserved to inherit the house.

For the siblings who wished to build their own house on Nevis it was, of course, important to acquire a plot of land. This group included Marilyn, who had lived on Nevis all her life; Edith, who had returned to the family home from St Martin and continued to live there after the parents' death, although it now belonged to Marilyn; Lisa, who was working in the British Virgin Islands to acquire the necessary funds to return to Nevis and build a house there; and Jim, who had constructed his house on rented land and wished to move it to his own land. It would also have included Edwin, had his wife Syvilla been unable to acquire a piece of land from her father, and Helena, had she not already inherited a piece of her grandfather's land where she and her husband had built a house many years ago. For the siblings who had no need of a house plot, the discussion of land mainly concerned their right to be included in the family legacy and the sense of belonging on Nevis that this afforded. As noted, those who had contributed to the well being of the family home had earned this right. Everybody knew that the amount and consistency of contributions to the family home from the siblings abroad had varied a great deal, as had the siblings' dependence on the household. It was clear to everybody that Jean, for example, had contributed very little, even though several of her children had been reared in the family home on

Nevis. Edith, on the other hand, had contributed a great deal to the household, despite the fact that she never had any children. As long as the parents were alive, and the family home functioned well, the relatives had emphasized the unity of the family rather than the variation in individual contributions. When the parents died and the family property was to be divided up, some of the siblings began to measure and compare these contributions. This led, ironically, to both Jean and Edith feeling excluded from the family home. My guess is that Jean felt unwelcome there because she knew that she had been a poor provider, whereas Edith sensed a tension in relation to her sisters on Nevis because she had no legal right to live in the family home despite her extraordinary contribution to its welfare.

By working together on Jim's wedding the siblings recreated, to a certain extent, the complex extended interrelationship of economic and social ties that had comprised the basis of the family home while the parents were alive. But this unity and harmony did not carry the siblings through the inheritance dispute. Meanwhile, the family home was falling into disrepair and the surrounding land was being invaded by bush. For some of the siblings this collapse of the family home signalled that they had lost an important anchoring point and source of identity on Nevis, and they were uncertain about when they would be coming back again.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have examined the significance of 'home' for a particular group of relatives meeting at the family home to celebrate a wedding in the family. The wedding celebration underlined the significance of the home as an anchoring point and shared source of identification for family members. Yet the family members' ideas of home were closely related to their concrete practice of home making in a global household that had involved all family members in the pooling and extending of social and economic resources, regardless of their physical distance, or closeness, to the physical home site. The family members' attachment to their common home, and the homeland in which it was located, was therefore defined, to a great extent, by the mutual rights and obligations that usually obtain among household members sharing everyday life with one another. In this case, however, the everyday life of the household members had taken place in widely differing socio-cultural and economic contexts, and individual members of the family therefore had different interpretations and expectations of their place in the home. This was played out at the wedding. While the relatives' gathering in the (grand)parental home created an occasion for the display of family solidarity and unification, it also created a site where differing views of individuals' contributions to the global household that had sustained the family home were expressed. The result was a contestation of rights to belong in the family home and, by implication, rights to belong on Nevis. This would have an important impact on the notions of home that these family members would be able to nourish in relation to their place of origin in the time to come.

The sort of home that was made in this particular kin network was both an abstract place of identification and a concrete site of relations, and it was made in local as well as global fields of relations. A greater awareness of the multi-sited and multi-dimensional character of home making would build a better foundation for studies of transnational relations and diasporic identities among migrants today. The notions of

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'diaspora' and 'transnationalism' have become increasingly important in migration research in recent years. Whereas diaspora denotes a largely mental state of belonging, which may be grounded in physical movements that took place many generations back, transnationalism is shaped by present-day movements between two nation states and the resulting cross-border relations. Although the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism are different, and emphasize different aspects of movement and identity formation, they have tended to merge in recent academic discourse centring on the importance of 'home' among migrants. Here home embodies both the idea of a place of origin to which migrants continue to have transnational social, economic or political ties (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Kearney 1986; Mahler 1998; Sutton and Chaney 1987) and the idea of a more distant homeland that provides an important source of diasporic identity (Appadurai 1996; Cohen 1998; Gilroy 1993; Hall 1990). As a result of this merging of terms, 'home' has become a rather generalized notion of an 'elsewhere' that constitutes the real place of belonging for migrants.

The two ideas of home in migration research may be related to two distinct, yet interrelated, meanings of the notion of home itself, as I have suggested in a previous article (Olwig 1998). In the first sense, home is a concrete locus of specific relations of social and economic rights and obligations. In this meaning of the term, home is often described as a domestic unit or a household. In the second sense, home is a more abstract entity of belonging expressed through various types of narratives and other forms of symbolic interchange. These two understandings and practices of home mutually reinforce and implicate one another. A home will not become a nodal point in concrete relations involving socioeconomic rights and obligations unless it receives some sort of recognition and validation through narratives and other kinds of symbolic expression among interacting individuals. Similarly, social and economic practices of home will have an important bearing on the kinds of narratives of home, which will be related by the individuals involved. As long as migration research focuses primarily on the more abstract, symbolic notions of home, as they may be displayed in ethnic organizations and diasporic cultural expressions, it will leave unexamined the practices of home, as a household or domestic unit, in which many migrants also engage. As Sarah Mahler (1998: 82) has noted in a critical discussion of research on transnationalism, it may 'yield detailed information on a limited set of activities and practices, not a clear picture of the breadth of the social field, nor of the demography or intensity of players' participation in all the activities people engage in'.

This can have the unfortunate result that migration research may become oblivious to how migrants make a home a cultural site of belonging in a complex interaction between social and economic relations and more symbolic notions of belonging. An approach that neglects these interactions in order to focus on the rarefied discourse of diaspora risks reifying this discourse, mythologizing its longing for a symbolic home. This may, in turn, have the inadvertent effect that migration researchers may essentialize the migrants' place of origin as their natural place of belonging and not investigate this site as a cultural construction that is made and given meaning in particular contexts of interaction.

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### **Notes**

1. Marriage late in life, after several sexual relationships and the birth of a number of children out of wedlock, is not unusual in a Caribbean context. It was a topic of many of the earlier studies on family structure in the Caribbean and the subject of intense theoretical debate. See, for example, Clarke (1957); Greenfield (1966); Henriques (1968[1853]); M. G. Smith (1962); R. T. Smith (1956 and 1996); and Wilson (1969 and 1973).
2. Caribbean child-rearing practices, and their relation to migration and extended households are analysed in (Soto 1987) and Olwig (1999).

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