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## **Long-lived sociality : a cultural analysis of middle-class older persons' social lives in Kerala, India**

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# INTRODUCTION

This study's topic, focus, methods and presentation are reflections of my personal appreciation of cultural anthropology. Anthropology, like no other discipline I know, offers tools for a busting of the myth of the homogeneous other.<sup>1</sup> It can offer insights into contemporary changes (in time) and movements (in place) and can—because of its track record in focussing on marginality—provide starting points for a dissection of power relations. Anthropology is also the study of common sense but at the same time fights essentialisms that seem like common sense. Finally anthropology is the study of society in culture but with due recognition of agency (Herzfeld, 2001). Anthropology thus offers unique ways to study the world that open up wonderful possibilities as well as frustrating limitations. A wish to use these possibilities and to complement other disciplines has informed the entire process of setting up and executing this research.

In this introduction I will subsequently introduce the focus on sociality, the writing process and the structure of this thesis. Subject matter and research methods were closely related, as I tried to maximise the extensive possibilities—as indicated above—of anthropological fieldwork. Because of this close relation, references to research methods are made throughout this work, especially when they had a direct and substantial impact on the findings and the writings. There is therefore little additional information on research methods in this introduction. The subject matter too, deserves such elaborate theoretical and methodological situating that this is done in the first few chapters. The research population and research site are therefore only shortly mentioned here and further elaborated upon later. The discussion of the writing process is useful in explaining the many theoretical choices that inform the structure and lay-out of this work. Writing in anthropology is part of the ethnographic exercise and to a great degree influences interpretations and theoretical preferences. While some of these choices may remain implicit, there are some that when made explicit will enable the reader to better contextualise and evaluate this work.

## STUDYING SOCIALITY

This thesis is about a particular category of older persons' sociality. Shortly put the older persons of this study were at the time of research (2003-2008) above the age of 60, highly educated, (upper) middle class English speaking persons living in the capital city Thiruvananthapuram of the Indian State of Kerala. For each of these labels however, there are some critical nuances to be made. To mention two: not all above the age of 60 said they

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the history of our discipline tells us that the myth of the homogeneous other is deeply entrenched and has exercised durable influence on anthropological theory (Herzfeld, 2001:18; Kuper, 1988). Nevertheless, the methodological tools anthropology currently offers together with a critical awareness of how this myth has been reproduced in the past offer ideal possibilities for busting it.

were ‘old’ or ‘older’ and not all who were in the city at the time of this research were permanently living in Thiruvananthapuram. Since these nuances are many and important and the above mentioned labels need adequate and critical discussion, the whole first chapter called *Senior Citizens Associated* is devoted to their discussion. This introduction will consequently focus not so much on the exact research population or location but rather on the themes and focus of this study.

These themes centred around the older persons social life, or better said: their sociality.<sup>2</sup> Sociality can be seen as the ways in which people associate with others and form, keep or break different social ties. Interesting about this concept is that it can be used to think about social relationships on a more abstract level than when simply describing the relations as they are.<sup>3</sup> Social relations cannot be interpreted correctly without taking account of this layer of cultural substance, or the ‘constitutive quality of relationships’ (Ingold, 1991:372).

“For it is in and through relationships that persons come into being and endure in the course of social life. It might be helpful to think of social relations as forming a continuous topological surface or field, unfolding through time. Persons, then, are nodes in this unfolding, and sociality is the generative potential of the relational field in which they are situated and which is constituted and reconstituted through their activities. Power, trust, domination and exchange are all terms that refer to aspects of sociality” (Ingold, 1990: 221).

Sociality is a more neutral and therefore all-encompassing concept than for instance society. The term ‘society’ is historically entangled with a certain type of individualistic, non-affective, systematised social life (Ingold, 1996: 62; Overing & Passes, 2000: 14). Society is therefore not only historically, but also culturally distinct and not applicable to each and every cultural context. In their research on Amazonian social life, Joanna Overing and Alan Passes for instance preferred to speak of ‘conviviality’, as they found that term more suitable to describe the affective, collective and informal social relations among Amazonian people (Overing & Passes, 2000: 10).

Sociality then encompasses ‘society’ as well as ‘conviviality’ as it is abstract enough to be used in diverse cultural settings, but precise enough in that it relates to both to the ways people interact and the explicit and implicit concepts they use in that process. Sociality thus allows recognition of the cultural values and ‘habitus’ that influence relationships, their formation and the attitudes persons have towards them. Ideally, the use of sociality unravels

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<sup>2</sup> Risseuw, 2006; Strathern, 2005; Overing & Passes, 2000; Douglas & Ney, 1998; Ingold, 1996; Enfield & Levinson, 2006

<sup>3</sup> Most scientific research on social relations sees these relations on an individual level or as a dyad (Adams & Allan, 1998). However, “Individuals do not generate their relationships in a social or economic vacuum, any more than they do in a personal vacuum” (Adams & Allan, 1998: 2-3).

both articulated and unarticulated cultural patterns behind social behaviour (Doi, 1973; Lamb, 2000).<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Strathern called such a focus, one of the key strengths of an anthropological approach to social life.

“Thus a focus on the relational remains one of social anthropology’s key strengths, and it does so among other things because of anthropology’s willingness to move between conceptual and interpersonal relations in its descriptions of social life. I believe anthropology thus arrives at a certain truth about sociality that could not be captured in any other way”. The two kinds that principally interest me here comprise the conceptual (or categorical) and the interpersonal. On the one hand are those relations seen to make connections through a logic or power of articulation that acquires its own conceptual momentum; on the other hand are those relations that are conducted in interpersonal terms, connections between persons inflected with a precise and particular history (Strathern, 2005:7-8).

Practically speaking, studying the sociality of highly educated older persons in Thiruvananthapuram meant joining them in many a club or association meeting, talking with them about their children, friends, relatives and neighbours and visiting them frequently in order to get an as complete as possible image of their social lives. As older persons themselves experienced great joy and sorrow from their social lives and consequently found the subject extremely important, they were given a lot of initiative to co-shape my research activities. They did not seem to mind bringing me along to social activities or talking about their children.

On the other hand older persons were rarely interested in my analysis of their sociality. If they were, they often disagreed or found that I pointed out the obvious. Analysing sociality is analysing a specific part of people’s habitus (Bourdieu, 1977: 76-95): behaviour, thoughts and actions that are not explicit and ‘have no words’ (Risseuw, 2006). These reactions could therefore be taken to underline how the constitutive quality of relations is nearly invisible to the participants to these relations. Nonetheless, I hope I have allowed enough space for older persons’ own ideas and views on these matters. Ethnographic (counter-)examples are given in order to illustrate cultural patterns and power dealings as well as older persons’ agency to deconstruct, use or manipulate. In other words this study concerns the “‘anthropology of the everyday’ through which to explore, with greater insight, the ‘contrary’ ways of [...] sociality where the moral virtues and the aesthetics of interpersonal relations, and not structure, are the overriding concern” (Overing & Passes, 2000: 7).

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<sup>4</sup> Takeo Doi in *The Anatomy of Dependence* (1973) and Sarah Lamb in *White Saris Sweet Mangoes* (2000) give two descriptions of a feature of sociality in a specific cultural context. Doi’s concept of *amae* and Lamb’s *maya* form parts of a theory that explains the values in social life.

Although a study of sociality requires a particular focus, social relations still include nearly everything. The subject matters that will be discussed in this thesis are therefore both varied and broad and range from mobility to discipline and from duties to notions of self. What these topics have in common is that they are described in relation to cultural discourses and ideas about both ageing and social life. In their descriptions I have focussed in particular on those aspects that get easily missed out on in more common quantitative studies on older persons, as will be elaborated upon below.

Several subjects could not be incorporated in this study even though they touched upon both ageing and social lives. Death and dying for instance were titanic subjects that merit far more consideration. Bodily changes and medical problems too deserve far more attention than I chose to give them. Because of space and time constraints, all these topics surfaced scarcely and then only in direct relation to aspects of older persons' sociality. Finally older persons' private life was given some consideration but only in relation to cultural ideas about their private life that related also to their social life.

Whereas many aspects to social relations—their number, the frequency and duration of contacts—can be best studied quantitatively, sociality is best studied qualitatively. Only through a (partial) entrance in other persons' social worlds can that constitutive quality best be exposed. I have always found research methods both fun and imperative to think about. My initial interest and liking for qualitative methods was soon followed by attempts to explain and advocate these methods to others. Sceptical questions from my economist-friends and colleagues at the Centre for Development led me to even write my first scientific article on the added value of a qualitative approach to the study of older persons sociality (Bomhoff, 2006). Five years later however, I don't feel the need to be as explicit. Anthropology's track record is telling enough and for those readers who remain sceptic, I hope to demonstrate throughout this thesis what qualitative methods can and can't do.

Kreager & Schröder-Butterfill rightly observed how "Quantitative description of population ageing is very suited to revealing the potential of impersonal, aggregate trends and differentials to shape people's lives. But in so doing it predisposes us to see these lives as increasingly powerless and depersonalised"(2004, 2). Some of my attempts to contest this powerless and depersonalised representation through both research and writing will be further explored next.

## WRITING OLDER PERSONS

"For the lay person, such as myself, the main evidence of a problem is the simple fact that ethnographic writing tends to be surprisingly *boring*. How, one asks constantly, could such *interesting people* doing such *interesting* things produce such dull books? What did they have to do to themselves?" (Pratt, 1986:33)

In this famous quote Mary Louise Pratt vocalised a real and ever lurking problem: that of the potential discrepancy between anthropological experience and anthropological writing caused by a contradiction within anthropology between scientific and personal authority. Although I agree with this general problem, I must add that there are many wonderfully written ethnographies that cannot possibly be labelled as boring. Two wonderful monographs that have for instance greatly inspired me in the field of anthropology of aging have been Lawrence Cohen's *No Ageing in India; Alzheimer's, the Bad Family and other Modern Things* (1998) and Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our Days* (1979). However, it does seem as if certain requirements for academic writing can clash with what makes interesting reading.

An interesting text in my eyes is not the end but the means. One of the primary aims of an anthropological study should be to convey a part of other persons' realities. But since those realities are intrinsically interesting, so should be the analysis and so should be the writing. Nevertheless, academic requirements—and habits—such as an elaborate positioning within the scholarly field, references to other literatures, claims to objectivity and demonstrations of abilities can easily come in the way. Perhaps potentially even more so for young scholars who need a good start of their academic careers with a solid PhD thesis. Risk aversion thus potentially leads to conventional and therefore boring works.<sup>5</sup>

During the years that I have been researching older persons, I often came across stereotypical expectations that this subject too would be boring. Another stereotypical idea that I encountered was that this research would be depressing or sad. Interestingly enough, even the most politically correct academics, those who treaded carefully around concepts like race and gender, could have no problem in stereotyping older persons. At one seminar for instance I was told how older persons always complained and at another academic reading session, a senior researcher told me how depressing he found my chapter since it reminded him of older persons he knew.

But research in Thiruvananthapuram was all but boring. The older persons' lives were full of interesting turns and unexpected events. They contained the whole spectrum of emotions from sadness to laughter. And while some persons found themselves in difficult situations with a loss of their health and mobility, others were enjoying life as never before. One of my greatest ambitions for this thesis is therefore to do justice to these interesting persons and their experiences and counter at least some of the strongest and mostly negative stereotypes on older persons.

Another recurrent preconception in studies on older persons in India is that they, or their number, or their health or their situation form a problem. A starting point of these studies is that there are problems that need to be described and then solved. As Lawrence

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<sup>5</sup> For more about conventionality in academics (but then concerning language) see Bourdieu, Passeron & de Saint Martin's (eds.) (1965) [transl. 1994] *Academic Discourse: Linguistic Misunderstanding and Professorial Power*.

Cohen writes: “[...] the problem of ageing is taken as an originating point. It is assumed, not demonstrated” (Cohen, 1998: 89). More than a decade ago already Cohen classified a type of studies that he called the *Ageing in India* books. Cohen illustrated that these books share similar titles<sup>6</sup> and similar discourses (1998:89-93). Discourses that consist of a negative, problematising approach towards both the individual ageing experience and collective ageing. “The book[s] begin[...] by assuming “problems,” but what they are remains unspecified and their timing is vague: “sooner or later”. The numbers themselves are the principal signifiers here. Throughout the *Aging in India* series, demographics are used not to supplement but to represent the meaning of old age and the condition of old people” (Cohen, 1998: 90-91).<sup>7</sup> These negative assumptions and a focus on older persons’ (posing) problems in so many academic works only reinforce already present stereotypes.

The overemphasis on problems is not unique for studies on older persons in India and can be extended to the study of gerontology. Because gerontology is closely related to both Western Medicine and policy making (or even activism), it is influenced by problem-solving approaches. “Gerontology [...] runs the risk of simply collecting confirming cultural evidence in the sense of uncritically answering questions set within an existing framework and finding solutions to the way the problems are posed there. An awareness of diversity in ageing has the potential to provide a powerful antidote to such an assumptive reality” (Biggs & Daatland, 2004:4).

In order to avoid these pitfalls in my own work I have believed it helpful to research and write as blank as possible. In research that meant asking primarily open questions and staying away from most social scientific constructs and categories—such as ‘caste’ or ‘old’—until they were brought up by older persons themselves. What this meant in writing will be further explored in the following paragraphs.

Writing is making decisions. In my case these decisions were made with a broad readership in mind. In theory then, this work should be readable to anthropologists as well as other (social-) scientists, and to those with prior knowledge of India and those without. Since anthropology can function as a provocation to other disciplines, (Herzfeld, 2001: xi), I believe its fruits should be there to read for all. Although there may be theoretical parts—as this introduction—that are most interesting to fellow anthropologists, the majority of this

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<sup>6</sup> Cohen mentions titles as *Aging in India*, *Aging in South Asia*, *Aging in Contemporary India* and *Aged in India* and explains that the repetition merits analysis. “Aging” implies a universal, the idealized object of international gerontology, a thing that can be *in* India. Yet “India” is not a universal. “Aging in India” is oxymoronic” (1998:89). Two examples of later works that fit the *Aging in India* series title wise and content wise: *The Elderly in Urban Indian Families* (Rabindranathan, 2006) and *Ageing in India; Socio-Economic and Health Dimensions* (Alam, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> I have incorporated Cohen’s critique in several ways. First of all, when using demographic data, I have tried to remain as neutral as possible and have refrained from using parameters that are based on unproven suppositions concerning elderly people (such dependency ratios). Secondly, when discussing the growth rate of the senior population of India and Kerala, I have limited myself to simply stating the available data, without copying the often accompanying doom-scenarios. Thirdly, during interviews about individual experiences, I have urged the interviewees to talk about all aspects of growing older, both good and bad.

thesis should be readable to anyone with an interest and some free time. In the remainder of this introduction I will explain the use of time and tenses, my presence in the text and the mirroring of social life and older persons experiences in the structure of this thesis.

## **TIME & ME**

“ [...] methods, channels, and means of presenting knowledge are anything but secondary to its contents” (Fabian, 1983:116).

A lot happened between the start of my first visit in the August of 2003 and the saying of the last goodbyes at the end of my third stay in the August of 2008. And even though most communications—notwithstanding occasional e-mail and phone contact with some older friends—came to a halt after those goodbyes, time did not. The writing and the analytical process continued and led me further still but then without new materials from Kerala. It is impossible to attach a precise date to each piece of information or insight in this thesis, however it is important to stress that all moments belong to a now recent past.

In many anthropological writings time has been used as a distancing device. Through a manipulation and generalisation of the specifics of research the Other is denied coevalness—a presence in the same time (Fabian, 1983: 31). In Fabian’s words: ‘The Other’s empirical presence turns into his theoretical absence, a conjuring trick which is worked with the help of an array of devices that have the common intent and function to keep the Other outside the Time of anthropology” (Fabian, 1983: xi). One of these devices is the use of the present tense in ethnography, which gives incorrect staticism to a historical experience.

Fabian’s critical warnings are still current today and seem doubly appropriate for research on older persons. Perhaps more than those in other social categories, older persons are often denied coevalness in the way social scientists write and research them. By speaking of ‘the old’ for instance, researchers ignore the great heterogeneity that exists within this artificially constructed category. Furthermore, since that category often consists of those above a certain age, relative age differences within the category are paid no heed. This results in a disregard of both the variations within the category but also of the ongoing changes within the lives of the included individuals. It is as if after a person reaches the age of 65 time is stopped and evolution and dynamics are no longer important. In gerontology furthermore, change is often only considered as having negative consequences for those involved (Biggs & Daatland, 2004: 5).



There are many large and small ways in which I have tried to grant the older persons I spoke with their correct place in time in this thesis.<sup>8</sup> Most evidently the use of past tense dominates descriptions of the ethnographic material. Only at times when the historical moment is made clear and it enhances easy reading did I chose to use the present tense. Further, I have tried to give many specifics for all larger interview fragments and quotes, to enable the reader to contextualise the material. To further this contextualisation this thesis records many of the changes that occurred between 2003 and 2008. In order to avoid staticism I chose to incorporate factors of change in the description of every arena of the older persons' social lives. This meant incorporating the effects of migration when talking about child-parent relationships and combining a discussion of marriage with the mention of death and divorce. The structure of the text, more about which later on, is therefore made up in such a way that it mirrors some of the dynamics and interlinkages in the studied lives. Incorporating changes to this degree inevitably influences the shape of the text and may make it seem unstructured. But this is exactly what life sometimes was to the persons whose life I studied. Narrating it as as changeable, difficult, encouraging and interesting as it was seemed the only possible way to do justice to older persons' experiences and coping abilities.

In order to emphasise *our* coevalness there also had to be references in the text to my own participation. The nature of participant research and on top of that the subject of sociality demand such an active presence. The development of some forms of relations is inherent within anthropological practice. One cannot observe interactions while remaining aloof from close social contact (Bell & Coleman, 1999). This close social contact was in itself often one of the greatest sources of information and (embodied) knowledge. It would therefore be unwise to ignore that source or downplay its importance. This insight is of course not new in anthropology but remains challenging to incorporate in practice nonetheless. It is complicated to strike a balance between writing oneself out of the text and devoting too much attention to one's own persona. In this thesis I have tried to reflect the different ways in which I was present during fieldwork: at times and with certain persons intimately involved and personally present, at times observing from a certain emotional distance. I will devote some space to the ways in which my relations with different persons evolved, since it helps to contextualise some of the information they gave. However, I did not develop a close connection to all persons I interviewed and there were also persons with whom conversations remained very unilateral. Since there was little room for my own opinions or feelings in these interviews it feels unwarranted to devote too many words to my role or presence –even though of course this always mattered (Crapanzano, 1986). Also, I found it more important to reserve additional space for an elaboration on research methods in the case of extremely sensitive issues than in less personal subject matters. That is why a

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<sup>8</sup> Methodologically, the most significant effort to incorporate the passing of time was of course to visit Thiruvananthapuram three times in 2003, 2005 and 2008. Although this was partly out of convenience, it was also intended to see the older persons over many years and get a clearer idea of the dynamics of their lives.

chapter with most private and painful ethnographic material gives elaborate information on my position, whereas I figure less prominently in other chapters.

### STRUCTURAL ARRANGEMENTS

Several presentations of contents have preceded this final one. The first makeup was inspired by different categories of social relationships. Academic literature on social life is based on such categorisations as it distinguishes between friendship -, kinship -, neighbourly- , public- , private- and care relations. However, to many older persons themselves such categorisations were irrelevant or gross misrepresentations. Care relations for example were seldom just that. Also the analytical division between for instance kinship and other relations is far less clear than has long been assumed (Carsten, 2000). The first chapter division in social categories thus underlined an artificially constructed classification but not the social world as experienced by the older persons of this study.

A later setup was based on theoretical concepts as migration, ageing or care. Although these themes are still present now, I found a clear cut structure around these concepts both boring and problematic. Such a structure may make seem as if social life is indeed organised in such a clear and foreseeable way. It may enhance the above mentioned stereotypical view that older persons' lives were boring and predictable which they were so clearly not. It may also give the reader the impression that everything that happens in social life makes sense and can be logically explained. As Stephen Tyler writes in the famous volume of *Writing Culture*

"[...][An] ethnography is fragmentary because it cannot be otherwise. Life in the field is itself fragmentary, not at all organized around familiar ethnological categories such as kinship, economy, and religion , and except for unusual informants [...], the natives seem to lack communicable visions of a shared, integrated whole; nor do particular experiences present themselves, even to the most hardened sociologist, as conveniently labeled synecdoches, microcosms, or allegories of wholes, cultural or theoretical. At best, we make do with a collection of indexical anecdotes or telling particulars with which to portend that larger unity beyond explicit textualization. It is not just that we cannot see the forest for the trees, but that we have come to feel that there are no forests where the trees are too far apart, just as patches make quilts only if the spaces between them are small enough" (Tyler, 1986: 131).

Unlike Tyler I would not argue that each and every study or ethnography needs to be fragmentary (or post-modern) in this regard. Subject matters can benefit greatly from an imposed structure or classification if it leads to new insights and better ideas. However, sometimes—as is the case with older persons—subjects have been so excessively

categorised and modelled that it has led to problematic distortions. In those cases it may be very beneficial to take an analytical step backwards to see what empirical study actually tells us and start the analysis from there. I believe that the discipline of anthropology is exceptionally well-suited to enable such a step through its grounding in fieldwork. Nevertheless, this thesis does build upon theories and hopes to formulate theoretical contributions. With all the fragmentariness of social life, there were strong shared discourses on what constituted relations and how they were given shape and meaning.

Finally, the narrated and observed experiences and situations of older persons became the starting point for this thesis. Although different chapters still touch on different themes, these themes centre more around the persons who experienced them than on the related academic literature. Also, I have found that different topics need different formats, foci and textual styles. Whereas some subjects need a focus on ethnographic material, others can centre around a theoretical idea and others are best studied in a more fragmentary fashion. Also, different types of ethnographic material are presented in order to offer a multi-scoped view, such as newspaper cuttings; radio interview fragments; films; interviews; observations and short stories. Lawrence Cohen's (1998) *No Aging in India; Alzheimer's, the Bad Family, and Other Modern Things* has been inspirational in this sense. The structure of his text nicely represented the enormous scope, depth and ramifications of the subject he studied. Cohen used style and format as yet another way to convey his main ideas, which is—in a smaller way—what I hope to arrive at as well.<sup>9</sup>

In most of this thesis' chapters one or two persons play a central role and fragments from their interviews are accompanied by smaller quotes from other persons. The academic literature then is presented in service of the empirical data, not the other way around. Since the qualitative data is anyway not statistically representative in quantity, it is most insightful to offer a very thorough analyses of a restricted number of cases and attain representation in that sense. Since “what it loses in broad statistical replicability it gains in the sheer intensity of the ethnographic encounter—as intimacy, as privileged access, as listening to voices silenced on the outside by those who wield greater power” (Herzfeld, 2001:23). The thorough description of a limited number of persons furthermore offers contextualisation and objectification of the material. It permits transparency through keeping a close link between analysis and research methods.

An inspirational example of how a detailed and almost literary description of older persons daily life may lead to illuminating new insights is Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our*

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<sup>9</sup> Cohen writes in his introduction: “This process [of research] has led to a book full of detail. Like the voices of some of the older people I write about here, it may seem to some to be *too* full, too stocked with unsolicited memories, opinions, and stories. For me, both the pleasures and the responsibilities of ethnography lie precisely in such excess, in a mode of writing and of engaging in the world through continual juxtaposition and repetition. Kierkegaard called this kind of engagement *recollecting*, and he suggested that it was frequently utilized by the elderly and others for whom *remembering* had become difficult. Recollection seems an appropriate mode of engagement for a book on senility”.

*Days* (1979) an example of—according to Victor Turner—‘compassionate objectivity’ or ‘realistic humankindness’ (Turner, 1979: xvii).<sup>10</sup> I very much appreciate these qualifications. Whereas novel-like studies may quickly be discarded as unscientific, there are certain characteristics of the literary genre that help convey such compassionate objectivity. That is why I have tried as much as possible to stay away from pseudo-scientific constructions that serve no goal but to leave a false impression of objectivity. That means no use of numbers in titles; no excessive jargon; no unnecessary academic references and resisting the “constant temptation” towards synopticism—by which Fabian meant social scientists “urge to visualize a great multitude of pieces of information as orderly arrangements, systems and tableaux” (Fabian, 1983: 117-118). Instead, the intention was to describe and analyse the social lives of older persons in Thiruvananthapuram with compassionate objectivity.

## CHAPTERS

*Senior Citizens Associated* is the first chapter of this book. It introduces the research population and some of the most basic research questions. To position the research population in the larger society, several social categories such as ‘old’ and ‘middle class’ will be explored. Parts of the chapter will consist of a sociography that informs the reader of the backdrop against which this study is set. To organise these fundamentals in an interesting way and steer away from a sec listing of the basics, I chose to use ethnographic material of meetings of the Senior Citizens Association as a guiding thread. The material consists of observational notes and recorded speeches from different meetings at which I was present in 2003, 2005 and 2008.

Although there were many more social associations at which the research population gathered, and I attended numerous of these meetings,<sup>11</sup> there are several reasons why it is the SCA that figures here so prominently. First of all the Senior Citizens Association had as the only explicit requirement for its members that they qualify according to their definition of ‘senior’. The name of the association plus this explicit selecting criteria therefore provide ample material to discuss different local and academic definitions of ‘old’ and ‘senior’. It also gives insight into the heterogeneity of the category of ‘older persons’ and several of the difficulties and complexities that such an artificially constructed category brings along.

Also, because the association catered so deliberately to the senior, many of its meetings, discussions and purposes directly or indirectly centred around what it meant to be older. These data gave additional insight into the themes that were important to the older persons themselves. Another criterion for membership was payment of a fee. Together with

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<sup>10</sup> “Because Barbara Myerhoff “keeps [her] wits warm to the things that are” in Center life and records them with perceptiveness, fidelity, and compassion, the theoretical structures she discovers have a lambency seldom found in the literature of the social sciences. While her work is always informed by her anthropological training, it goes beyond the usual reports from the field. It can perhaps best be characterized as compassionate objectivity, or better yet, as realistic humankindness” (Turner, 1979: xvii).

<sup>11</sup> For instance: Lion’s Club, YMCA, YWCA, Inner Wheel, Rotary Club, the Nair Association etc.

several more implicit selection methods this made the association exclusive to the financially better off. What this meant exactly and how these members related to other older persons in society can therefore be illustratively explored through observations of the SCA. Interestingly enough, and unlike many other associations, the SCA was a secular association, albeit in the Indian way. This meant that religion played a role in the meetings of the association, but not one religion was considered primary to the others. In this study I chose to select a research population that could be considered as somewhat of a category on the basis of their social interactions. Although I could have chosen to focus on one religious group, social interactions in Thiruvananthapuram were—most often—not limited in that way. I therefore considered it problematic to portray social life as more religiously homogenous or separated than it really was. The world we live in is already so volatile that I wanted to give due respect to those older persons in Thiruvananthapuram who constructed and maintained social relations that crossed this boundary of religion. Nevertheless, this inclusion of members of all large religious groups (Muslims, Christians and Hindus) made research and analysis more complicated. A description of the SCA helps to tackle all these diverse religion-related issues.

Finally, the SCA was also the first association I contacted. The name of the association promised a good starting point and through a combination of luck, help and effort I came to know the association through several of its most helpful members. Chronologically therefore it also makes sense to start with the SCA, since the association formed one of the major starting points of this research.

The next chapter is called *Placing and Appropriating* and centres around the meaning of introductions. The discussion of a textbook row is used to analyse how introductions set the stage for new social relationships. They are crucial moments in which previously unknown contacts are placed and appropriated, made to form part of an already existing social framework. Hierarchies, labels and statuses that may be hidden or downplayed once the relationship is in place can become temporarily more visible and clear to both those involved in the introduction and the onlookers. Therefore (participatory) observations of introductions form important ethnographic material in a study of sociality. The ‘textbook row’ that sparked aggressive political protests in Kerala in 2008 concerned a lesson for primary school students. The lesson pictured the introduction of a young boy and his parents at a new school and several accompanying texts and teachings. Analysis of the textbook lesson and the political row that was caused by it make clear the cultural expectations of introductions and meanwhile gives an idea of the political and socio-religious situation in Kerala.

A methodological note is in place to give the reader a more precise idea of how I entered ‘the field’ through introductions and gathered the different materials for this thesis. In many ways, both intentionally and unintentionally, older persons gave shape and

direction to this research. In the final part of this chapter the theoretical intentions and implications of this approach are discussed. An openness about these research methods should help the reader to understand and evaluate the rest of this study. I question whether the term ‘snowball method’ is really appropriate to describe this research and propose to replace it with the analogy of a cricket ball. The lesson and the protests that were inspired by it as well as other day-to-day introductions and my own introduction thus form the backbone of this chapter on issues of belonging and relatedness and the meaning of introductions.

In *Generations of Change* we hear how many spoke of the changing times they lived in. Deteriorating family relations and the demise of the joint family were sore points in the eyes of many. There was a common discourse that perceived westernisation and modernisation to be the biggest threats to older persons’ wellbeing. A too great emphasis on materialism and an ever-growing individualism was thought to make older people miss out on the care they deserved, with old age homes as the chief symbol of all these contemporary problems in society. This strong discourse merits a close analysis since it prevailed amongst old and young, lay persons and Indian academics.

Although this general discourse was very negative, in individual cases persons often saw these changes differently. ‘Love marriages’ for instance turned out to have many arranged characteristics to them. Many older persons living independently from their offspring preferred their living arrangement and the freedom it brought along. And joint families still lived on in spirit, if not in households. Many individually appreciated certain adventures and new possibilities of this day and age. To communicate with relatives and friends abroad for instance many older persons made use of the internet. Those who could, still travelled and the television helped to fight boredom and remain informed. Many believed that in their families it was up to them to stay positive and prevent the emergence of a generation gap. In this chapter these contradictory discourses are compared and analysed.

The chapter called ‘*Discipline Matters in How Old You Grow*’ recounts how older persons had ideas about good and bad ways to grow old. One very important concept among older persons was discipline. Although discipline was strived for in itself as an attainable character trait, it was also more specifically related to specific areas of daily social life and sociality. Among older persons it was mostly applied to time-management, to the body and to their religious and social life, albeit sometimes in slightly contradictory ways. Although all three major religions had different theoretical frameworks that surrounded the concept of discipline, they all promoted discipline in religious as well as in profane activities. Discipline of the mind was further advocated in times of great distress as it was considered important to always stay in control. Through a control of mind, body and social comportment, middle class older persons positioned themselves against the masses of

‘others’ who because of their disregard for discipline engaged in what they considered unhygienic, chaotic and uncontrollable behaviour.

*“You Should Call, You Have to Call” and Other Expectations and Duties* further explores day to day sociality. It explores the expectations that come with social relations. It is interesting to note that some of these expectations remained implicit whilst others could be formulated explicitly. Duties were mostly explicit and commonly accepted expectations. Older persons regularly spoke of duties to their friends or relatives to emphasise their expectations and stress their relatedness or mutual history. Duties were considered important and were talked about far more often than individual likes and dislikes. Although general expectations were easy conversation material personal relations were very rarely questioned or discussed. This chapter touches upon several important theoretical discussions within Indology, gerontology and anthropology and on ostensible dichotomies such as those on structure versus agency and individualism versus collectivism.

In *Mobility, Distances and a ‘Native Place’* the effects of a history of mobility turn out to be multi-faceted, contradictory and extremely complex. There is a significant elite of older persons in the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram whose entire life has been transnational and transregional. Many have first moved from rural areas to the State’s capital for education, have spent their entire professional lives ‘out’ in other States or other countries and have after retirement ‘returned’ to the capital city. Their children have not migrated from Kerala but have moved from one place to the next or have sometimes simply stayed ‘out’. Through ethnographic example this chapter discusses the social aspects of these complex routes of migration, the adaptability these older persons have demonstrated throughout their lives and the many consequences having children abroad and relatives in the village can have.

The last two chapters form a unity and deal with the subjects of care and dependency. These subjects are purposefully placed at the end of this thesis. As I have explained before, hard-wearing ageism in society and academia results in an overemphasis on the problems that may accompany the process of ageing. The audience may therefore start reading this thesis with the expectation to come across accounts of hardship and sadness only as stereotypical views of older persons are often boring and depressive. In reality however, a large majority of the older persons -as defined by age—is not more or less dependent than persons of middle age. To counteract negative expectations and stress heterogeneity in the older population I therefore started this thesis with the relatively healthy and mobile. Also, older persons only became extremely dependent and in additional need of care in specific moments of their life. Oftentimes this happened towards the end of their life, although of course this varies enormously per individual. It consequently felt fitting to discuss these end-of-life issues at the end of this thesis.

The chapters are a unity in that they belong together. Dependency and care, cannot be studied without a proper investigation of the means by which their information base comes about. Data on these topics is not easily 'extracted' and is to a high degree situational, context dependent, biased and difficult to bring into words. These difficulties need therefore be acknowledged during analysis and not merely before and after. Even more than in conversations with healthy persons on other subjects, these limitations directly affect research outcomes. That is why *Mary auntie & Joseph Uncle* is purely ethnographic. It introduces Mary auntie and Joseph uncle through a description of our meetings, my observations and direct quotes from our conversations. Mary auntie and Joseph uncle were by all means in a difficult position because of their failing health. An insight into their situation may allow some understanding of how social relations can work in times of distress. In more dependent times, care becomes an even more important aspect of social relations with kin, friends, servants and acquaintances.

The conversations I had with Mary auntie and Joseph uncle in 2003, 2005 and 2008 provide an interesting starting point to think about issues of dependency and care relations. This is consequently done in the more theoretical *Dependency, Care and the Many Links between Methodology and Theory*. This chapter holds a collection of paragraphs on topics that are related but different. There are theoretical paragraphs on dependency, care, authority and discourse as well as paragraphs that focus on several more methodological issues such as ethics and communication 'methods' or interview 'techniques'. This is not done to burden the reader. To the contrary, I hope this set up throws light on the important connections that do exist and their ramifications on the ways we can come to an understanding of older persons like Mary auntie and Joseph uncle.