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

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CONCLUSION

Throughout this project, the question I was most often asked both during fieldwork and back at home was: “So who are better off, the old in the Netherlands or in India?” It was in many ways an impossible question to answer. Some expected I would say India, because they said family ties were stronger there, which they presumed led to having more people around in older age. Some expected I would say the Netherlands, thinking of greater levels of comfort, welfare and economic well-being. In replying I would usually say something about the great many variations that existed and the problems with this question and would meanwhile feel highly inadequate. Of course, this research only focussed on a very specific population group and yes, I have never really extensively studied older persons in the Netherlands. Also—and not unimportantly—this research was not about persons’ overall well-being but considered a much more particular part of older persons’ social lives. Finally, the question is very subjective, which I tried hard not to be during research and which required a way of thinking that I did not often pursue. In short, scientifically speaking, I thus had every reason not to answer this often-posed question. But still, having studied older persons for more than seven years now and convinced of the many effects sociality does have on overall wellbeing, I have felt obliged to tackle this question here and will use it to structure this conclusion. I will however not focus on older persons’ wellbeing directly but on the various ways in which sociality influenced their wellbeing. Findings from my research will be used—not summarised—to paint a more general picture that can be contrasted with hypotheses about older persons in the Netherlands.

Before answering the question though, I have to reiterate some of the difficulties in speaking of ‘the old’, whether it is in India or elsewhere. As this thesis hopefully illustrates, a category of ‘the old’ is extremely problematic. If a group of persons is defined on the basis of chronological age alone they may have very little in common. Their health situation, their family context, their religion, their life trajectories, all can be different. They may have some commonalities in their experiences of world history but since the age differences among the category of sixty or sixty-five plus can still span several decennia, even this does not unite them much. Also, there may be some shared concerns or interests that are linked with their particular life phases but some have become grandparents, some have not; some think about a nearing death, some do not; some have retired, some have not. In other words, analytically speaking, ‘the old’ are a dubious category. However, in the minds of many policy makers, academics and older persons themselves, the old do exist. They have to be counted, budgeted, understood or emancipated. Motivations for such a focus and attention are often financial and political and are gaining in importance which, in turn, leads to a further identification with the category by the defined members themselves. If special associations

are constituted in order to bring older persons together they have become a social category to reckon with.

In this thesis I chose to focus on a very particular category within this age group, namely the highly educated (upper-) middle class residents of Thiruvananthapuram. This selection came about partly through my entrance in the 'field', partly because of my language capabilities and partly because of my specific interests. It was supported by the overwhelming differences I observed within the artificial category of older persons. The immense gap between the richest and the poorest of older persons made it in my eyes impossible to study this collection of individuals as one group—another indication of the variations that exist among 'the old'. Among those studied there was no consensus either on whether they were old and what this meant. Relative age or seniority plus accomplishments and status changes like being retired or having grandchildren were far more important to older persons in Thiruvananthapuram than their chronological age.

In order to learn more about the commonalities and variations within the limited category of highly educated (upper-) middle class older persons, I chose to investigate cultural aspects to their social lives, or their sociality. Sociality is a small and vaguely discernable aspect of what anthropologists call—or called—culture. Older persons in Thiruvananthapuram did not have their own separate sociality from other age groups, as sociality in general is shared between groups of persons who interact with each other. Therefore, even though specific aspects of sociality were different among a group of sixteen year old friends who were hanging out in a fast-food venue and among the members of the Senior Citizens' Association, when the sixteen year old and the SCA member would meet at a marriage function or at home they referred to the same larger sociality. This sociality included directions for proper social conduct: expectations in relationships and duties that were tied to an individual's social position. Sociality formed part of the common sense in everyday lives and was rarely put into words which made its directions therefore multi-interpretable. This allowed individuals to reconstruct, bend or even manipulate the social pressures which came about from their power-infested sociality. Sociality therefore consisted of a constant dialogue between cultural coherency and individual agency.

Two major concepts that informed older persons' sociality were duty and discipline. Throughout this thesis examples figure of how decisions were made, explained and made sense of through a logic that was based on these two central notions. Striving for discipline was in many ways linked to a desire by older persons to stay in control in despite of all the turbulent changes in and around them. They desired control of their surroundings, of their body and of their mind. It turned out that in discourse all older persons shared a strong longing to live disciplined lives and therewith obtain some peace of mind. In practice however there were different ways in which this peace of mind was to be achieved. My analysis of the importance of discipline made very clear how the different spheres of body,

mind and social environment were seen to interact. Waking up early was considered as constitutive of a disciplined life as refraining from self-indulgence or talking nicely. They were elements of what older persons called growing old gracefully, which they saw as one of their most important duties. Older persons used this professed discipline as a way to stand off from those who were younger or less educated or from a different socio-economic background. Their advertised capability at leading a disciplined life was often used to increase their social weight. Although in practice not all acts of discipline were followed through, it was through a discourse in discipline and duties that even undisciplined acts were legitimised or excused. Having a party, organising a Christmas play at the Senior Citizens' Association, buying fancy clothes and drinking alcohol were socially possible but only in a well-controlled way that emphasised the rationality and intentionality of these actions and linked it to duties.

The duties of older persons were manifold and related to their many relationships and positions. Although some duties were nearly incontestable—as marrying off one's children—there were many more smaller day-to-day duties that varied and sometimes conflicted with one another. As no person had a unitary position, positions and duties had to be decided upon and made explicit at many instances. This plurality of positions gave room for flexibility and negotiation in the otherwise rigid concept of duty. It was therefore possible to pursue one duty at the cost of another, as for instance adult children could decline to visit their older parents because they needed to supervise their younger children's studies. Because of the explicit character of many duties however and the socially acceptable remarks about other persons' duties they did come with a great force and were not always easy to deflect. Neighbours, kin relations and friends regularly reminded each other of their duties and could publicly voice their annoyance if these were not lived up to. Also, important gender and age related duties were so commonly understood and expected that they gave individuals strong guidelines for correct behaviour.

Now let me come back to the difficult question concerning which older persons are better off. Although the described sociality was not directly part of persons' wellbeing it did affect it in many ways. Culturally influenced ideas about what was expected and considered normal or common sense in social relationships coloured persons' experiences. When Mary auntie expected many regular visitors because she was older and bedridden, she was disappointed when these expectations were not met and said: “nobody is visiting me anymore” even though this was numerically not true. On the other hand, the social possibility Mary auntie used of reminding others of their duties towards her resulted in near-daily visits of her neighbour for many years. Similarly, discipline helped older persons to a certain degree to make sense and stay in control over their surroundings, their minds and their bodies. However, on a regular and sometimes increasing base these minds, bodies or environments made it impossible to remain disciplined, with difficult social and moral

repercussions. There was thus a definite link between sociality and well-being but its precise form was complicated and ambiguous. Still, an understanding of sociality could help to interpret the degree of choice and agency within the cultural context as well as give an idea of the more subjective appreciations of experiences. Let me make this more clear by focussing on mobility first, then on daily interactions and finally on preparations for older age.

In Kerala all were affected by the many shapes of mobility. Older persons were themselves mobile, had been mobile and had mobile children and grandchildren. All this resulted in many of them living separate from their children and grandchildren. Compared to older persons in the Netherlands for example, their children were often living at great distance. The strong discourse on duty however made it possible for family members and friends to reunite at important moments or in cases of emergency. Adult children went out of their way to travel to India within hours of hearing about their parents' illnesses or falls. When older persons addressed their children's duties directly, it was difficult for children to ignore these calls. Not only because they felt a pressure to do so, but also because it was in most cases their strong wish to fulfil such primal duties towards their parents. The duty-discourse helped older persons in Kerala to make clear their wishes and expectations, contrary to what I believe is the case in the Netherlands, where expectations and hopes may be equally strong but are seldom as explicitly voiced. Although the force of duty thus had its advantages to older persons, I would not be able to speculate on the number of occasions where mobility was conveniently used as a way to escape such duties. As ignoring or contesting one's duty was socially not-done, mobility offers one of the few possible ways to escape daily forms of social pressure. This was never explicitly admitted, but did come to the fore in gossips and more inexplicitly in interviews. The discourse on duty therefore affected individual experiences of mobility in several ways but had as its main result that contacts were not necessarily dependent on close physical proximity and could survive long periods apart. A phenomenon quite contrary to the Dutch setting in which proximity and contact strongly influences relationships, and a popular saying tells us that a good neighbour is better than a far friend (van der Veen, 1991: 25; de Boer, 2007).

Appreciations of daily interactions were in many ways influenced by sociality and specifically by the notions of duty and discipline. Older persons were great maintainers of social contacts and valued greatly the value of having a large network. Because of the explicitness of certain social expectations in the form of duties and the collective attempt at being disciplined in social relations very few persons were openly in conflict with others. Sure, there were personal preferences in contacts and not all contacts were intimate or enjoyed but the notions of duty and discipline helped older persons manage to interact with a great number of others. Middle class older persons from different religious backgrounds—Hindus, Muslims and Christians—also managed to interact. Whereas there were certainly

strong stereotypes that governed their ideas and even though talks about persons from other religious denominations were not always harmonious, discipline prevented older persons from acting out their conflicts or disagreements. Perhaps these disagreements were slumbering and perhaps they could become more prominent at another point in time. But at this point those who felt inter-religious relations were problematic avoided them and those who could not or did not want to avoid them acted according to societal requirements of good neighbourly behaviour. Their sociality thus enabled older persons in Thiruvananthapuram to have large networks of useful contacts which in times of trouble proved very beneficial. This is different from the Netherlands where relations seem more dependent on the intensity of the contacts and on mutual appreciation and are therefore more likely to break down in the case of few or unpleasant meetings or distance (de Boer, 2007). Older persons in Kerala did not have to fear such a diminishing of contacts, that is, as long as they were able to behave in a disciplined way. For those who were not willing or not able to behave as such, the strong discourse on discipline was potentially detrimental. It is important that future research focuses more specifically on the experiences of such socially marginalised older persons in the Netherlands and Kerala to learn more about their fates.

The way in which older persons in Kerala prepared for their futures also had a lot to do with their sociality. The notion of discipline offered a positive discourse about seniority as older persons were commonly seen as more disciplined than younger generations. Also, older persons were generally respected for having finished their most important duties as they had retired from work and often had become grandparents. The duties that remained for older persons included for instance their special positions during important ceremonies and functions. These two positive facets associated with older persons and the process of ageing influenced the way ageing was culturally approached. What I have found in the Netherlands—but this is a hypothesis that I would love to further work on in the future—is that ageing and older persons are primarily associated with negative characteristics which in turn make the socially constructed category of older persons and the process of ageing seen as negative and best avoided until unavoidable. Younger persons in the Netherlands seem not too keen to think about older persons or their own future older selves. Many older persons too are keen to demonstrate their youthful characters and prefer not to think about their own futures. In all, I therefore believe that the Dutch discourse on ageing—which is practically solely negative—prevents most persons from making good plans for their own ageing futures. The discourse on ageing in Kerala was in that sense more balanced—with positive as well as negative features attributed to older age—and consequently less inhibiting. Older persons in Thiruvananthapuram had clearly thought carefully about where, how and with whom to spend their later years. Thiruvananthapuram had for most of these persons formed the best available option because of various social, economic, practical and climatic reasons which they had seriously deliberated upon. In this respect older persons in

Thiruvananthapuram were, because of their specific sociality, relatively well prepared and to the degree possible adjusted to what they were facing in their later years. This was consequently yet another sociality related factor that greatly influenced their wellbeing.

Now to conclude, I really cannot answer the question about older persons being better off in the Netherlands or in India. Instead I can propose a thousand new research questions that would first need to be explored in order to find out what older persons' wellbeing really constitutes—to themselves—and the varieties that will most surely exist therein. Nevertheless, through the detailed focus on certain aspects of sociality in this study I hope to have demonstrated the usefulness of this approach and its bearings on older persons' wellbeing. Although direct applicability is not necessarily an important criterion for a good academic study I am so grateful for all the information, time, confidence and relatedness that I received from the older persons who figure in this book that I cannot help but hope that some of the findings in this book find future resonance in academics or in practices.