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de Jong, Willemijn

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Aging and Social (In)Security in Kerala, India: Rethinking Research Topics and Tools

Willemijn de Jong, Anthropologist, University of Zurich

Focus and Research Questions

The anthropological account I present today is already historical, as far as the ethnographic data concerns. I talk about a project entitled *Social Security, Old Age and Gender in Urban Kerala* that I conducted a little more than years ago. It took place between 1997 and 2005, with fieldwork at different sites of almost one year; in particular during three periods of three months in 2000, 2001 and 2002; together with preparing and concluding visits, and a conference in Kerala to exchange the results. This project still fascinates me, and is not really finished yet. The advantage of a time distance of a decade is, that with hindsight it is easier to self-critically reflect on and to rethink the topics and tools of the research project itself, which I also already tried to do in some publications (de Jong 2005, 2012), and which I will continue here, and together with you in the discussion, I hope. The issue of policies (in the sense of policies of research and application, cf. de Jong 2001, Roth and de Jong 2005) I had to cut, but we can also talk about that in the discussion if there is any interest for it.

My main fieldwork sites were in Kalamassery a suburb of Kochi with about 60 smaller and bigger industrial plants producing steel, chemicals, kautschuk and electronics. I was interested to look at people with different degrees of wealth and with different social and cultural backgrounds. That is why I chose interlocutors who are locally categorized as Pulayas, Nayers and Muslims, living in three different so-called ‘colonies’. The Pulayas are Hindus and live in very poor conditions, the Nayar are also Hindus but they are much more wealthy, and the economic condition of the Muslims is in between.

About the Nayers and Pulayas much has been written, also in anthropological publications. In a historical study by a well-known Keralite scholar published in 1980, the Pulayas are classified as a “slave caste”, and the Nayers as a caste of landlords (Saradmoni 1980). Due to land reforms at the end of the 1960s, the Pulayas received small plots of land for a house from the government. The Nayers are famous in anthropology for their matrilineal kinship system,

polyandry, and their duolocal rule of marriage residence in the past (Gough, Fuller, Saradhamoni). Although it is politically not correct to speak about caste anymore, today more often the notion ‘community’ is used, one could observe that rules of purity were still practiced and that hierarchical status boundaries were still cemented. In contrast to the classes of wealthy Muslims and the poorer Muslims in the north of Kerala with a specific political history, the classes of precariously living Muslims in central Kerala have hardly been a topic of research and literature on them hardly exists.

Methodologically, observations were made and with the help of young local social scientists as assistants and translators, in-depth, biographical, and quantitative interviews with local people and experts were conducted. In a first phase, the qualitative data were evaluated together with the local assistants, and the quantitative data were computed by one of the social scientists (SPSS program). My affiliation with the Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Dept. of Social Work, in Kalamassery was of great help to get access to the people and for other practical concerns during fieldwork.

In the West, old age is generally perceived as a life phase with insecurities which need special precautions, in particular state-based and market-based insurances. But how are insecurities related to old age dealt with in India, especially in Kerala? And what exactly are the insecurities and securities in urban Kerala? Based on research about old age in India (cf. overviews in Cohen 1994, 1998), more precise research questions were formulated, which emphasized the agency of the elderly as well as of other actors in processes of social security arrangements. The most important questions that guided the research were:

- What kinds of ideas do people have with regard to family, kinship, community and state to prevent a decline in living standards, and what kinds of practices, or strategies, do they pursue in this respect?
- How supportive are the existing networks of support?
- What are the effects of market and governmental structures as well as of historical processes? (de Jong et al. 2005: 19-20)

As public support in countries of the South is restricted to a small minority of civil servants, a special focus was put on security networks and kinship, in particular on ‘family support’, as in many countries of the South there exist a strong discourse about “the family” as a personalized beneficial provider for the elderly. Moreover, I looked at citizenship in Kerala,

and India, in the sense of relationships of the local people with the state, and also with civil organizations (Yuval-Davis 1997). Initially, issues of material care (food, housing) and of practical or physical care in everyday life were of primary interest. Later on the issue of housing and house ownership became more and more prominent.

Global issues were not an explicit focus of my study, as I was interested to examine local social security and aging from a bottom-up perspective, in contrast to institutional approaches of social security with a top-down perspective. But as global are closely entangled with local issues, as we know at least since Appadurai's study in the mid 1990s on the production of locality in his book *Modernity at Large* (1996), global influences are unquestionable important. This was also recognized at that time in the field of the anthropology of aging and gerontology, for example in the publication by Steven Albert and Maria Cattell in 1994 *Old Age in Global Perspective: Cross-Cultural and Cross-National Views* and many others since then (Cohen 1998, Lamb 2009). In my study, global influences are particularly conspicuous with regard to the economic situation in Kerala, and also with regard to certain concepts – issues that will be taken up later.

I will talk first about the setting, the topics and the conceptual tools of the study. Then I present the initial results on the topic of the myth of family support along with the actual security arrangement, and the later results on the topic of the house as a surprising security resource. Finally, I reflect on global dimensions.

Setting of the Project

My study was part of an international project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and the Swiss Development Cooperation (SCD) with the title *Local Social Security and Gender in India and Burkina Faso* (2000-2003). This project was conducted within a special program called *Research Partnership with Developing Countries*. Our project consisted of four parts: both a rural and an urban study in India and Burkina Faso. Two colleagues originating from these countries, the sociologists Seema Bhagyanath and Fatoumata Badini-Kinda, conducted the case studies in the rural areas. My colleague Claudia Roth carried out the urban case study in Burkina Faso. Claudia Roth and I designed the project, research questions, theoretical framework and methodology, which were the same for each case study. Initially, a comparative stance was important, namely the idea to detect

differences in the four cases with regard to local social security and gender with a focus on aging and the elderly. Thus, the project also suited the criteria of the funding agencies in the best way. Because of the different academic backgrounds of the project participants, we also left scope for the specific kinds of research experience of the scholars with regard to training, familiarity with the field sites, presentation of the findings and academic culture. I could tell much more about the challenges of scientific cooperation and of the institutional framework of this so-called “North-South project” but this issue of research policy is beyond the time frame of this lecture.

Within India, the focus was on the state of Kerala which offered a stark contrast to Burkina Faso. At the time of the study, Burkina Faso’s modernity could be characterized as mainly based on subsistence agriculture, with little public welfare but ample foreign development aid. In Kerala, social reform movements and other factors caused a decline in agriculture and a formation of governmental and civil public welfare that led to improvements in education and health. This was also reflected in Kerala’s quality of life indicators which are comparable with those of developing countries. But interestingly, income per capita in both states did not differ much. And within India, Kerala ranged below the all-India average (Jeffrey 1992), and still (The Economist: www.economist.com/content/indian-summary, 15 April 2014).

The goal of the project as a whole was to generate new insights into the local conditions of social security in Kerala and Burkina Faso with a special focus on gender, which could also serve as a basis for new development efforts. More precisely, we wanted to detect specificities of the support networks, or social arrangements, with regard to security and insecurity in old age. This knowledge, we supposed, could be useful for community development, especially in times in which anxieties about the care of growing numbers of elderly people increased – which was the case in Kerala and India. Thereby, the gendering and possibly degendering of their security networks was of special interest. As a conclusion to our joint book publication we did not formulate “recommendations” as a policy of application of the results, but we proposed a fresh look on the issue of “social security in old age” in community development (de Jong et al 2005: 180-181).

Theoretical Background and Main Concepts

For our theoretical framework, we used a practice theory approach basically informed by the work of Bourdieu (which I make more explicit here as in my earlier articles). In general, we advocated a “unified analysis” of gender, age and kinship (Yanagisako and Collier 1987, Rubinstein 1990). This implies that categorizations and relations of age, generation and gender are considered as co-constructed with categorizations and relations of kinship – and these are projected again, I would add, on civil and governmental relations, and national institutions reflect strongly back on kin relations to the extent that they create “the family” (for a projection of kinship or family on the state see Carsten 2004, and of the state on kinship or family see Bourdieu 1996). For empirical convenience we defined ‘being old’ initially as being a grandparent of fifty-five years and older (the age of retirement in Kerala). In our concrete work, however, we departed from the local perceptions.

A more particular source of inspiration was the work on social security of the anthropologists of law, Keebet and Franz von Benda-Beckmann, who were based at the Max Planck Institute in Halle, Germany. In contrast to the institutional economist approach adopted by most of the social security studies, they developed an inclusive functional (not functionalist) approach that emphasizes the social dimensions much more than other approaches. That means, they basically look for the use of cultural meanings and social practices to prevent a decline of living standards. In their vein, we focused on the social security efforts of local people and experts and on the conditions of social security in their local community (von Benda-Beckmann et al. 1988, F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann 2000 [1994], von Benda-Beckmann and Kirsch 1999, Leutloff-Grandits et al. 2009). We examined how single actors ideally and practically take pains over securing food, housing and care, especially with regard to old age, and how they conceptualize and mobilize social relationships with other persons and with organizations (civil and governmental) to achieve these goals (see definition of social security of von Benda-Beckmanns)¹.

¹ F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann define social security as follows: „Empirically, social security refers to the social phenomena with which the abstract domain of social security is filled: efforts of individuals, groups of individuals and organisations to overcome insecurities related to their existence, that is, concerning food and water, shelter, care and physical and mental health, education and income, to the extent that the contingencies are not considered a purely individual responsibility, as well as the intended and unintended consequenced of these efforts“ (F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann 2000 [1994]: 36).

When social security is achieved, one can infer according to the von Benda-Beckmanns, that the social relationships in question contain a security quality. This is based on ‘security mechanisms’ which enable economic, social and cultural resources, or capital for that matter, to be converted into actual social security provisions (cf. the Bourdieuan proposition of conversion of different kinds of capital). The authors stress that resources alone do not provide social security: “One cannot eat rice land” and “Money does not cook” (F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann 2000 [1994]: 22). The actual security efforts, or practices, form one of six interrelated security levels: 1) cultural and religious ideals and ideologies, 2) institutional provision, 3) perceptions of individuals, 4) social relationships between recipients and providers of social security, 5) social practices in which social security ideals, rights and obligations are met (the mentioned security efforts), and 6) social and economic consequences (ibid. 36-37). When I talk about security in the following, I mean ‘social security’ according this approach. Specifying this approach further in a Bourdieuan way, we put specific emphasis on the uses of kinship and citizenship relations to achieve security (de Jong et al. 2005, de Jong 2005a, de Jong 2005b).

For the micro conceptualization of social security practices we referred to the analytical classification of ‘social support’ in the widely quoted book *Negotiating Family Responsibilities* of the family sociologists Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason (1993), with some modification. We constructed a threefold (instead of their sixfold)² classification of : 1) ‘material support’, including providing money, food, and housing; 2) ‘practical or physical support’ or ‘care’ in the sense of domestic work and physical care for children, elderly and sick persons; and 3) ‘emotional support’, including socializing and giving advice. In a further phase of my study I used the notion of care also in a wider sense, for example when I speak of a social support arrangement as a care arrangement, or of self-care, meaning a comprehensive form of self-support.

With regard to the specific aspects of gender, age and kin support we followed the critical gender approach of the anthropologists Carla Risseuw, Rajni Palriwala and Kamala Ganesh (1996, 1998) which they applied in South Asian contexts. We followed their denaturalized view of the family, and their emphasis on the negotiated and gendered character of support networks of kinship and citizenship. We also examined their suggestion of the duality of family and kinship networks as systems of support on the one hand and systems of sanction,

² Their classification of ‘social support’ comprises financial assistance, providing a home, looking after young children, practical help, caring for someone who is ill or incapacitated, and giving emotional support.

or oppression, on the other hand. And finally, we adopted their classification of security or care systems on three levels: the domestic level, the community or civil level, and the state level.

Characteristics of the State of Kerala (only at the end, or for the discussion)

For a better understanding of the conditions of aging in Kerala during my research, I first present some key data:

- in 2001 Kerala had about 30 million inhabitants: 56 percent Hindus, 25 percent Muslims and 19 percent Christians
- it was one of the poorest Indian states with a yearly income per capita of 442 US \$
- rates of literacy were higher than in other Indian state: women 88 percent, men 94 percent
- a high life expectancy: women 74 years, men 69 years
- proportion of the population of 60 years and older: 11 percent

In the 1970s and 1980s Kerala was “a model” for development scholars and policy-makers because the quality of life with regard to education and health was better than of the people of other Indian states (Jeffrey 1992). The reasons were:

- since the end of the 1950s political life has been determined alternatively by the liberal congress party and the communist party
- early interests for union politics by the population
- openness due to century-old global trade relations
- influence of Christian organizations that founded schools and hospitals
- formerly widespread matrilineal inheritance rights

Kerala’s economic situation about 2000:

- agricultural sector not really profitable, import of rice
- little developed industrial sector
- efforts to develop IT applications in the service sector
- high rate of unemployment and high rates of migration to the Gulf countries, the UK and the US

The Myth of Family Support and the Complexity of Security Arrangements: Three Variations

Pictures of the research area, and pictures of the people

One of the first findings in the cases of India and Burkina Faso was that a family myth was operating in the realm of elderly care that strongly obscures its actual practices (up to abuse in rare cases). In Kerala, this myth reads as: “the family” cares well for the elderly parents, at least the joint or extended family did so in the past, and now due to the wage labor of women, the nuclear family is somewhat less able to do so but in principal it functions well. And in a second instance this family myth reads as: the family, personalized in “the son”, which is in Kerala the youngest one, cares well for the parents. This myth, which is in fact even more complicated, was feeded by the national Indian social policy discourse on the elderly (Government of India 1999), by a scientific discourse of Indian scholars (Cohen 1998), and most probably also by a Western notion about family care in countries of the South (cf. Stivens 1998). It also had legal effects, for example elderly with a son did not receive non-contributory pensions, or elderly parents could make a claim in court to be cared for by a son. On close examination, however, it turned out that this myth was contradicted by the existing social security arrangements in three different variations. I will now summarize the normative imperatives of care in each of these cases and contrast them with the actual care arrangement.

Pulayas: The Importance of the Extended Neighborhood

The Pulayas in the research site were mostly casual workers. They survived on about one US dollar a day by doing cleaning and construction work, men as well as women. Although they have a moral imperative that the son was the responsible care person (weak son-oriented care morality), I found that it was not the extended, or the joint family, nor the son, for that matter, who was the core of the care arrangement. In practice, they had created what I called a flexible ‘patchwork-like care arrangement’ with a multiplicity of relationships. The core of it consisted of an ‘extended neighborhood’, as I coined it, to meet the regular needs of material and physical support. These are kin and kin-like relationships, a network of personal relationships in and around the house, consisting of family members (all the sons and daughters according to their capabilities), relatives (particularly siblings), neighbors, nearby

friends and employers. The reason for creating such a neighborhood-network was that support of sons and daughters often did not satisfy the daily needs of money for food and other small expenses.

Further, relations of citizenship were important. These were significant relationships with non-governmental organizations such as a local Pulaya caste organization which helped them to get housing facilities (in particularly non-refundable house loans of about 700 US \$ since the 1970s), and community development NGOs for some basic provisions of health care and day care. Moreover, citizenship relations implied in this case relationships with governmental organizations who can, for parents without a son, provide small non-contributory pensions of 2 US \$ a month. This kind of pension is rather symbolic. Vallothi, a 85 year old destitute widow, commented on it: “That is not even enough to buy coconut oil for my hair”.

Last but not least, self-support played a role. This consisted of small earnings (e. g. sweeping in the temple or cutting grass), sometimes until the age of 80 or more. It further consisted of contributions to housework. And it implied a “good behaviour”, meaning being friendly. These and other kinds of self-contributions start already much earlier in life, mostly with marriage, such as caring well for the children, cultivating good relationships with neighbors, and constructing a house. These kinds of care for others, which is at the same time also a kind of self-care, are indispensable. In this way, relations of reciprocity with kin and kin-like persons can be maintained, without which the elderly people get socially isolated. This was easily the case with widows and with women without children.

In sum, one can argue that neither “the family” nor “the state” can guarantee the fragile old age security of the Pulayas, especially that of the old widows, but it was mainly based, more or less successful, on the creation of an extended neighborhood, including family members, and on the efforts of the elderly themselves to maintain that network.

Nayars: The Importance of Self-Support

The Nayar men I worked with were often middle and higher employees working in the private or governmental industrial enterprises in Kalamassery. The women were teachers or secretaries, and others were housewives. Their morality of care was twofold in that preferably daughters or otherwise sons are considered as suitable care persons for the parents. The

reason for this is what I call here an ‘imagined matrilineality’. This kind of kinship ideology is still pronounced and has its material effects, although former inheritance rights based on matrilineality have officially been abolished (Fuller, Saradamoni).

In practice, their care arrangement, was not constricted to relationships with their children, but consisted of two or three pillars, or kinds of sources of care. Most importantly was their self-support which in old age consists of savings (of about 5000 US \$, and they paid themselves a rent of about 130 monthly), assets through inheritance and a house. In contrast to the Pulayas, they are materially independent from their children. Practical daily support was provided by male or female family members, but also by domestic workers and, if necessary, by home nurses. Part of them received contributory pensions of about 100 US \$ a month, through their professional status as governmental employees and thus through their specific citizenship relations with the state. For all of them, their kin network included persons that had migrated to other countries, but not necessarily their own children.

Muslims: The Importance of the Extended Family

The Muslim male interlocutors I focused on were permanent workers such as drivers of rickshaws and auto-cars, or they did small-scale trades or unskilled work in the market in Kochi or in one of the nearby factories. Their wives were mostly housewives. These families mostly lived precariously, with an income of about 2 US \$ a day. Their care morality towards elderly parents is more strongly son-oriented than among the Pulayas. Interestingly, their daily care arrangement mostly clearly resemble the extended or joint family model, but again it is not the youngest son only who supports the parents. In fact, all the members of the extended family in the house and around contribute according to their possibilities. Moreover, self-support with regard to house ownership is crucial. As far as citizenship concerns, relationships with the municipality or a political party to get access to repayable house-loans is fundamental as well.

In short, the moral imperatives saying “the son cares” among the Pulayas and the Muslims; and “the son or daughter cares” among the Nayers is a problematic simplification. In each case the actual situation was much more complex. Daily family support among Pulaya casual workers is very limited, among Nayar employees it is supplemented at least by domestic servants. And among the Muslims, regular family support is fulfilled in the most proper sense

because as permanent workers they earn more and have more children than the Pulaya casual workers. Among these regular workers, the sons are the only material support givers, as the daughters hardly contribute to the household earnings.

As far as gender concerns, support-giving among the Pulaya casual workers and the Nayar employees is not strongly gendered because women (daughters and among the Pulayas female neighbours) materially and practically contributed much more than the family myth with the supporting youngest son suggests. Presumably, many lower class Indians show rather ungendered conditions of support-giving, due to poverty. Elderly widows and childless women were easily socially isolated, when they failed to have exchange relationships, and thus bargaining power, due to a lack of assets in interplay with hierarchical gender imagery. In certain cases they had to beg for money, or they starved as in the case of Vallothy. Nayar widows mostly lived well in old age, also when they had a chronic illness as in the case of Amaniamma.

The House as a Resource of Security for Elderly Women

Pictures of houses, different in size and form

In the process of my work on these care arrangements, I realized that the house and ownership of a house played a crucial role as a security resource. Surprisingly, not only for the youngest son, who is officially entitled to inherit the house, but in the first place for the elderly themselves, and in specific cases for the elderly women. This result I will also briefly present. I embarked here from the Bourdieuan house concept of Janet Carsten (2004) and extended it by the assumption that apart from the gender specific living and eating together in a house, as well as creating symbolic meanings by narrating about it, becoming a house owner also produces kinship. And it particularly strengthens social security, or well-being, in old age (de Jong 2011).

The Nayars have a house made from concrete with a plot of land that costs about 20'000 US \$, the Muslims and the Pulayas have houses made of bricks valuing about 3'000 \$ and 1' 500 \$ respectively. The Pulayas and the Muslims got house loans by the government, which the Pulayas, as they are classified as Scheduled Castes, need not necessarily pay back. The Nayars, however, bought their houses without governmental support, but sometimes with

support from their employer. For example many of them lived in a “colony” with houses established by a chemical plant (FACT) in the 1960s.

How is the living arrangement of the elderly? In the case of the Pulayas and the Muslims the elderly people usually lived together with a son and his family. In the case of the elderly Nayers, they lived alone as long as they were able to do so. Their children had left the house to be educated and to get work in other places in India, and sometimes abroad. If they got frail a married daughter, in the first place, or otherwise a married son moved in with them.

Earlier, the Nayers lived in an ancestral house, called *taravad*, together with 30 to 40 persons, mostly sisters and brothers, their children and the children of their daughters, but without the husbands of the sisters. Assets acquired during life were officially inherited in the female line (from mother to daughter, and from a brother to his sisters nephew). This is no longer the case, and only in rare cases married daughters live in their own houses next to the house of the parents. But a matrilineal ethos, or ‘imagined matrilineality’ is still highly important, as I already said. This implied a strong feeling of matrilineal descent and solidarity with matrilineal kin and a strong identification with the natal house as a representation of the *taravad*. This had a positive effect on the material social security of women, especially in old age. Sujith Kumar narrates that there exists an informal contract now (after the abolition of former matrilineal rights), which is also often practiced, that the youngest son or daughter who cares for the elderly gets the largest share of the parental inheritance. And a brother often gives his share to his sister when she does the care work. And indeed, a large part of the elderly Nayar women owned a house, together with their husbands or alone.

Among the Muslim interlocutors about 50 percent of the women were house owners, even more than among the Nayers. This was the most surprising result for me. How come? Let me make just some remarks about this remarkable issue. In contrast to inheritance rules of the Koran (from inheritance of F 2/3 to S, 1/3 to D; from inheritance of M equal share to S and D), in Kerala the inheritance practice is that all the children get an equal share (of F and M), but often a wealthier child gives his or her share, or part of it, to a less wealthy one, which is often a sister.

And how is the process of financing the construction of a house? For example Beevathu (70), who became a widow in the age of 35, got a house through the inheritance of her mother, the

benevolence of her siblings who gave her a part of their inherited share, as she was the poorest, and the efforts of her children. In other cases the husband registers the house in the name of the wife on behalf of her security in old age. For example, part of the women owned the house because they got land as inheritance from their family. Then the house was built with money from their dowry and with additional money earned and or lent by their husbands. Thus for a woman to become a house owner, exchanges of wealth at marriage (dowry) and death (inheritance) are crucial in this case. This result defies a simple explanation and rejection of dowry-giving [which is a rather new phenomenon in South India]" (de Jong 2011: 17). In the end, a kind of imagined matrilineality seems to play here a role again, similarly but not quite the same as in the case of the Nayars, as Muslim law also stipulates a share for women (Agnes 2000).

Houses are also important inheritable assets with which the parents can manipulate their children to care for them. But in each case the situation looks different: among the Pulayas, the men own the houses, as a rule, which is disadvantageous for the widows, and it is the first generation who has such an asset at their command; among the Nayars many women own a house by inheritance which gives them a strong position as widows; among the Muslims women own houses even more often, through their own dowry and or inheritance, which gives them quite some bargaining power in old age, if they have benevolent husbands. In a recent article about the house and the Muslims' well-being I finally argue: "Apart from their self-making with regard to kinship and citizenship, through the mobilization of social and cultural capacities, they [Muslims] are being-made citizens and kin by the political discourses of Kerala's remarkable social reform movements [since the 1950s], subsequent governmental land reforms [since 1969] and housing policies [since the 1970s], and its matrilineal history" (de Jong 2011: 18).

Concluding Reflections: Global Topics and Tools

After the presentation of these results, I would like to make some final conclusions related to global topics and tools. One topic I came across in the process of my research has to do with the flow of people, or out-migration, which is of great significance in Kerala since the 1970s (reference). It was not an issue for the Pulayas I worked with, as they are too poor and did not develop a strong vision to migrate. In the case of the Muslims, I met some families with migrated sons. These sons could therefore materially provide for the parents in a better way, but they planned to return. This is mostly the case with regard to the migration of low-income groups to the Gulf. Only among the Nayars, and other middle-class and higher-class people in Kerala, migration seemed to be more permanent. That means that in certain cases the elderly people will miss the practical help of their children in old age. For example, Radha Menon (60) had three sons, two of them were already married: a first one in the US, a second one in the UK and a third one in Singapore. She was worried that the youngest son will also not return and that she would have to live with servants and a nurse when she became a widow and would get frail. Thus, especially if one would continue the research about the elderly people of middle-classes, the topic of global migration and transnational kin networks certainly would have to be integrated in a more comprehensive way.

Self-critically, I think that in general a stronger focus on topics that are of local concern, such as aging and the importance of the house, would be fruitful. But it could have complicated the initial comparative stance of our project as a whole and our aim of comparing India and Burkina Faso. But here one could ask, how useful are ethnographic comparisons today? Is it not more important to emphasize the connections and disconnections of certain cases? And with regard to 'global aging' are not all the topics chosen already globally informed, in that they are created through the occupation with social science studies in an international field? Is a reflection of global condition necessary for all kinds of studies on aging? How much explicitness do we need with regard to issues of aging, globalization and transnationalism?

Similar questions apply to the analytic concepts as main research tools: concepts related to aging do age themselves and they are traveling, as discussed in an article in 2012. And in fact, all the tools focused on in this study are informed by the global flow of scientific ideas that create transnational knowledge spaces. This is the case with a term such as family (cf. Stivens

1998), but even more so with the term social security, which I would like to take as a last example. In particular the term social security has been traveling widely and has been aging (de Jong 2005).

The term social security in the sense of statutory social insurance originated in the 1880s as a political answer to pressure from industrial workers who struggled for better working conditions in Bismarck Germany in the 1880s. In the course of a century, the term security became increasingly important in the West, so that it came to be considered as a universal anthropological principle (Kaufmann 2003). At the end of the Second World War, it became a transnational concept and a transnational phenomenon, proclaimed by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the oldest organization of the United Nations. Since then the ILO tries to influence national policies of the more than 150 member countries (namely 176) to establish that aim globally. In the UK the first social security provisions for the whole population were institutionalized in the so-called Beverage Plan: employment protection, protections against accidents at the workplace, family provisions etc. Because Switzerland was already engaged to harmonize social policy internationally at the end of the 19th century, the ILO is based in Geneva. In India and other developing countries, national security schemes were implemented since the 1950s, in Kerala since 1960. But it mainly protects only the small part of the population with regular and mostly governmental jobs, apart from smaller individual contributions that are provided by the more than thirty social security schemes. Among these the Kerala Destitute and Widow Pension Scheme and the Agricultural Workers pension Scheme are the most important (Irudaya Rajan et al. 1999).

As I said in the beginning, the perspective on social security in our project was different (cf. also Lamb 2013 on social security in northern India). We avoided the term risk that has mushroomed in academic discourse since the 1970s. This term is even more related to economic issues, in particular to questions of insurance, than social security in the classical sense (Ewald 1991). Statutory social security and risk would be only elements of social security in an approach from below. In the perspective of F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann, that we adopted, security and insecurity are considered the pivot and an axiom of social organization, instead of conflict or disruption. This conceptualization of social security is not only empirically but also epistemologically motivated. Nevertheless, I think that security primarily remains a concept with a Western genealogy. But is this really a problem for anthropological knowledge production?

And also when we lean more towards local concepts of aging, kinship and citizenship, we cannot just use local notions as analytical concepts, as the example of the myth of “the family” impressively shows. We need a theoretical perspective that makes an epistemological break with local uses. This is what Bourdieu explicitly demanded (Bourdieu 1968, Bourdieu 1992, 1993), but in the end this binds us also to the one world of anthropological or social science. This is precisely what the outstanding anthropologist Marilyn Strathern intriguingly cautioned us about some time ago in a noteworthy book about kinship and knowledge production in anthropology: “Whatever one declares about incommensurability or asymmetry, the elements of anthropological narrative will re-arrange themselves in relation to one another. So it will forever translate diverse and multiple worlds into versions of – perspectives on – the same world. We just need to know that” (Strathern 2005: 91).

Each study we conduct on aging is thus globally informed: it takes place in one hierarchical neoliberal world (Povinelli 2005), with one social science. This need not imply, however, that security and other concepts are universal anthropological principles. This we should make explicit, in an ongoing research process.