



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

How can it be!? Ethnography as magical realism and the discovery of the ordinary

van der Geest, S.

Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Medicine Anthropology Theory

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van der Geest, S. (2015). How can it be!? Ethnography as magical realism and the discovery of the ordinary. *Medicine Anthropology Theory*, 2(2), 79-94.
<http://www.medanthrotheory.org/read/5334/how-can-it-be>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

How can it be!?

Ethnography as magical realism and the discovery of the ordinary

Sjaak van der Geest

Dear colleagues, students, family, friends, I want to speak to you today about the anthropology of everyday life.¹ You probably expected a retrospective on twenty – and more – years of teaching and doing medical anthropology, but I would rather speak about cultural and social anthropology in general. The reason for this is that I want to make a ‘statement’: medical anthropology is anthropology and should remain so.

In accordance with the topic of my lecture, no professors in gowns will parade through the Aula and take possession of the first benches. We are here together as ‘normal’ people in ordinary clothes, without the distinctions of rank and status. I will also try to speak in ordinary language and not hide behind academic jargon. When I was in secondary school, I was taught that you have not understood what you cannot explain in ordinary words.

Everydayness has had my interest throughout my academic life. I consider the description and disentanglement of ordinary life the prime task of anthropology, for culture is what is taken for granted, our ‘second nature’ or ‘habitus’. At the same time, however, I am aware that we almost routinely pass by the ordinary in search of what is dramatic and exotic.

1 Abridged English translation of my valedictory lecture ‘Hoe bestaat het!? Etnografie als magisch realisme en de ontdekking van het alledaagse’. Aula, University of Amsterdam, 2 July 2015.

Why focus on the everyday?

Because it *is* central to our lives, but widely overlooked, as I just said. Gerhard Nijhof (2011) calls the ordinary ‘the basis of our sense of security’. But *because* that security is taken for granted (as long as it is not disturbed), we do not pay attention to it and focus on what is out of the ordinary.

Anthropologists want to be relevant. They want to contribute to better understanding and even solving the grim problems of our time. This desire is clearly expressed in a book with the telling title *Exotic No More: Anthropology on the Front Lines* (MacClancy 2002). Judging from the title (and the contents!) of the book, exoticism implies irrelevance. Anthropologists must be at the forefront of the struggle for a better world. These are the first lines of the book:

For far too long, social anthropology has been seen as an academic discipline dedicated to the study of abstruse customs or out-of-the-way tribes. Extraordinary ceremonies in exotic settings, unusual behaviors in isolated communities – these have been seen by many as anthropologists’ stock in trade. (2002, 1)

Anthropologists at this university have responded to the call for a more relevant anthropology. My colleagues can be found where people are in trouble. They try to inform policymakers, politicians, and the general public about how victims of poverty, violence, and disaster see the nature and source of their problems and misery. The same is true for many of our students doing their master’s or PhD research. They write about domestic violence, war, child soldiers, prisoners, refugees, AIDS patients, and current issues in the public debate such as transgenderism, euthanasia, dementia, and the crisis in care giving. Like the exoticism of the past, however, the dramatization of the present threatens to drown out the attention to everyday life.

What is the everyday?

‘Everyday’² can be something different for different people. For the family in Ghana with whom I lived for more than a year, working on the farm was an everyday activity. Before dawn they walked about four kilometers to their fields and cleared the tall weeds between the crops while the sun grew hotter and hotter. For me, this habitual activity was both thrilling and terrifying. Small flies swarmed around me and entered my nose and ears, to the

2 ‘Everyday’, ‘ordinary’, and ‘common’ will be used as approximate synonyms in this lecture. Some colleagues limit ‘ordinary’ to what is taken for granted, since not everything that is ‘common’ or ‘everyday’ is also taken for granted.

amusement of my workmates who seemed completely untroubled by them. Jokingly, they explained to me that the flies were called something like the ‘tease of slackers’. What they found less funny was that I did not see the difference between weeds and crops. They did not want my help anymore . . . to my great relief. If we study the ordinary life of others, this life may indeed be far from ordinary for ourselves; it could be extremely unusual, exciting, dramatic, bizarre, cruel, incomprehensible, and uncomfortable.

When I look back on my own research in Ghana and Cameroon, I realize that I was indeed mainly interested in ‘ordinary things’, *because* they were not ordinary to me. This does not mean that the common ideas and behavior of the people whom I studied were completely separated from my daily life. As my colleagues will probably agree, there is always an implicit comparison with our own lives when we look at other people’s. Let me cite a few examples from my research on everyday life in Ghana.

- Experiences of aging and care for the elderly. I chose this subject on the basis of my own experiences with aging and elderly care in my own society and family. It taught me a lot about respect and reciprocity in the daily lives of older people, both there and here.
- Sleep and nocturnal life. This theme attracted me because so little was known about it. Anthropologists and other scientists apparently assume that life temporarily stops at night during sleep and that there is nothing to say about it. The opposite is true, I am inclined to say.
- A somewhat controversial topic of everydayness was toilet use. The hilarity with which people responded to this subject showed that this everyday practice was hardly everyday in conversation. My interest started with the frightening experience of visiting a toilet on the first day of my fieldwork, a story that I have described too often already (for example, 1998a) and of which I will spare you now. This research taught me, among other things, how ideas and emotions surrounding dirt and cleanliness dominate our lives, and how dependent they are on cultural and especially social conditions.
- A fourth theme from daily life that fascinated me was greeting. In the Ghanaian community where I did nearly all of my fieldwork, it would be possible to spend the whole day greeting people. Little is more ordinary than greeting one another, but little is also more different there in Ghana from what is common in my own society. What I learned from this exploration is again the importance of respect and reciprocity, but especially both the beauty and tyranny of convention and social performance.

The anthropologist's everyday

But what I really want to talk about is the everyday world of the researcher and their closest cultural relatives. Why does this seem so elusive to anthropologists, or why do they not consider it a research-worthy topic of study?

But as always happens when I dive into the literature looking for a theme that I think has been massively overlooked, I discover numerous 'exceptions'. So let me begin with a brief summary of some prominent exceptions within Dutch anthropology that I came across.

One of the first 'home ethnographies' in the Netherlands was Jojada Verrips's (1979) study of two religious groups in his home area. The book – his doctoral dissertation – drew a lot of attention. Readers were apparently interested in an anthropological description and interpretation of daily life in an average Dutch village, where church and religion had a deep impact. Or was the interest rather the result of the extra-ordinariness of that village with its religious obsessions? Some critics pointed out that the author was mostly interested in conflicts and rivalry. Was this study with the poetic title *En boven de polder de hemel* (And above the polder heaven) less about ordinary life than we had assumed?

This suspicion was confirmed by Rob van Ginkel, one of Verrips's most prominent followers, who has written extensively about endo-ethnography. In his publications on methodological issues in ethnography at home, Van Ginkel (see, for example, 1997, 1998) has frequently emphasized that these authors have been mainly interested in marginal and unusual people and events in their own society. I can only agree.

Another colleague who does focus on the ordinary is Gerhard Nijhof, emeritus professor of medical sociology. Nijhof needs the ordinary to see and describe what is non-ordinary. He writes about ordinary practices that are lost by people with Parkinson's. I already quoted him at the outset of this talk, but want to cite him again since his words capture the main idea of and motivation for this lecture: the ordinary is the basis of our sense of security. Losing that security is one of the pains of sickness. Somewhat paradoxically, Nijhof (2001) has also written a touching reflection on ordinary sick life, based on his own experiences as a cancer patient. Unfortunately, this short autobiographical essay was never translated into a more widely spoken language.

Annemarie Mol and her colleagues and doctoral students come closest to conducting ethnography of their own everyday life. They attempt to dissect common experiences such as eating and tasting by carefully looking at the context and describing how appreciation of food comes into being. The taste experience is a striking example of our neglect of what is overly common. What we are inclined to consider a 'simple' direct physiological relationship

between the food substance and the taste organs is much more complex. The act of tasting is a powerful example of the social and cultural embeddedness of bodily sensation.

Anke Niehof, emeritus professor of the sociology of consumption and households at Wageningen University, looks at households as arenas in which members fight for survival. Concepts like livelihood and resilience are central in her work. In contrast to Nijhof's view, the household is not always the safe haven where people feel secure. Especially in societies characterized by inequality, poverty, and violence, everyday household life can be dramatic and traumatic.

Huub de Jonge, from the Radboud University in Nijmegen, edited a collection of essays about ordinary life under the title *Ons soort mensen* (Our kind of people; 1997). It contains a strong essay by Susanne Reitz about the meaning and use of the diary in the Netherlands, through which the author discovers how people use and experience time. In the same volume, Henk Driessen discusses the typically Dutch concept of *gezelligheid* (coziness) and Alex Strating explores Dutch kinship. Kinship is a topic about which anthropologists worldwide have written extensively, but which they have tended to overlook in their own society as if it did not exist.

This, finally, leads me to Ali de Regt (1993), a 'soft' sociologist from our own department, who has written about economic and emotional relations in Dutch families. There is an economic morality in the routines of everyday family life. Members accept emotional and financial responsibility for each other because that is 'normal' in families. Even when traditions of financial support change – as happened with the introduction of the welfare state – emotional ties and mutual care between family members persist.

Why the preference for the exotic and dramatic?

Despite these exceptions, the ethnography of their own everyday seems a difficult undertaking for anthropologists, as Rob van Ginkel and the club of Annemarie Mol show. Why is this? Why this preference for the un-mundane? Some years ago, I was thinking about this in a contribution to *Romantropologie* Part 2 (Van der Geest 1984), in which I called the anthropologist a dramatist. This idea started during a tiny domestic conversation. My eight-year-old son was watching a TV documentary with me about a 'wild (but peaceful) tribe' in Kalimantan. After a few minutes, he asked, 'Daddy, is it a play?' I do not remember what I answered – probably something like, 'No, son, this is anthropology; this is my work'. But I should perhaps have replied: 'Yes, son, this is a kind of play'. The anthropologist looks indeed like a playwright, a narrator of tall stories.

I distinguish three ways in which anthropologists bring drama and exoticism into their work: a) through the selection of their study population, b) through the selection of topics or events in that population, and c) by raising particular questions.

About the selection of the study population: until the 1970s, anthropologists occupied themselves almost exclusively with distant peoples. There was a large dose of exoticism and adventure in this choice. The more different the society, the more interesting the research, they thought. Hunters and gatherers, secret societies, witchdoctors, and other 'traditional' people and institutions were preferred. A city population or modern elites were – especially at first – much less preferred as study subjects.

When the attention of anthropologists moved to less distant territories and even to groups within their own societies, the desire for exoticism and drama remained. Marginal people with colorful and strange behaviors became the new research field of anthropologists. Van Ginkel (1997) referred to these 'at home' ethnographies as a 'cabinet of curiosities'.

How exoticism works is strikingly expressed in a confession of Isaac Schapera (1938, 27) about his research in South Africa:

I found it difficult, when actually in the field, not to feel disappointed at having to study the religion of the Kgatla by sitting through an ordinary Dutch Reformed Church service instead of watching a heathen sacrifice to the ancestral spirits.

This marks the second type of selection: that of exciting events. Schapera's remark struck me because I recognized myself in it. During my initial research in a Ghanaian community, the Catholic Church was very present, both as building and as institution, both physically and socially. But in my ethnographic account, it remained virtually absent. I checked other African ethnographies and discovered that leaving out Christian (and other Western) phenomena was a common practice among anthropologists (Van der Geest and Kirby 1992).

As the research population becomes more familiar, the selection of dramatic or 'exciting' aspects is likely to grow. The North American sociologist Jack Douglas (1967) who studied people at a nudist beach remarked that a researcher must be a kind of detective. What really matters, he wrote, is what people try to conceal. Truth is often uncomfortable and tends to hide itself.

Again, I recognized myself. In 1980, I studied the distribution and use of pharmaceuticals in Cameroon. It was an important step towards de-exoticization, because the focus was on 'our own' pharmaceuticals and not on herbal medicines, amulets, or spiritual healing. I was

particularly interested in the hidden use and the informal – often illegal – sale of these medicines in small shops and at the market. The illegal distribution included the pilfering of medicines from government stores, hospitals, and health centers. I became a kind of detective engaging in secret conversations and copying confidential reports. By doing so, I myself became a suspect. One day, the police picked me up on the street and took me to the police station for an interrogation. I enjoyed that excitement at the time.

The third kind of selection concerns the type of questions anthropologists ask. Especially where drama is not evident in the group or the subject being investigated, the choice of an exciting question about an ordinary phenomenon does the trick. A revealing discovery about things or people in our immediate environment impresses more than an exotic story from the South Pacific.

Examples of cases where such new light is shed on old familiar things abound. Institutions with a high social standing are favorite targets. An obvious example is medicine, or as some call it, the medical establishment (Illich 1977).

Research into medical practices or developments becomes dramatic when it brings to light unexpected new insights and hidden human intentions. Epidemiological data, for example, lend themselves to dramatic social or political interpretations. Disease is not an arbitrary condition caused by misfortune but rather the outcome of unhealthy work, poverty, exploitation, et cetera. Conspiracy theories present themselves: corrupt authorities, politicians with a double agenda, profit-minded manufacturers, or incapable physicians cause health problems or prevent us from receiving the medical care that we need. Microbes and viruses become political creatures. Nature's blind processes are personified.

A striking example is *De depressie-epidemie* (The depression epidemic) by Trudy Dehue (2008), who does not call herself an anthropologist, but whose research is a model of the anthropological approach. Dehue describes how depression is pushed as a diagnosis because the industry has an attractive antidepressant. The North American anthropologist Andrew Lakoff (2005) describes an opposite strategy in Argentina, where an economic crisis erupted around the turn of the twenty-first century. People panicked and a producer of antidepressants decided to restyle his medicine into an antipanic medicine, which was brought to the market and started a successful second life. Taking medicines – for many a daily routine, taken with breakfast and dinner – thus becomes a dramatic and controversial act.

Why is the everyday overlooked?

Why this preference for drama and exoticism and the lack of attention to ordinary everyday things? I can think of three reasons.

The first is that the ordinary is elusive, and that one only gets hold of it via the extraordinary. What is always there is hard to explain, simply because it is always there. It does not ask for an explanation. It's normal, natural. Only what is different demands an explanation. The idea of questioning the everyday hardly occurs. Only the philosopher, who never stops asking questions, questions what others take for granted: why is there not nothing? That would be much simpler. But that is not a serious question that expects an answer; it is the ultimate question that marks the limit of our thinking.

There is a convenient term in Dutch that excuses us for not thinking about the ordinary: the ordinary is *'vanzelfsprekend'*, speaking for itself. We don't need to speak about the ordinary because it speaks for itself. But what does it say? Nothing. It is present in silence. The Dutch philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven (1968, 7) says: 'Only the things about which we have decided not to think are ordinary'. But we have never *decided* not to think about the ordinary. It simply did not raise any questions; it did not invite us to speak. It is taken for granted . . . till someone wakes us up and convinces us that there is plenty to ask or say about the ordinary. The philosopher is such a person, one who closes their eyes and wonders about the tacit presence of the ordinary: 'Why do we find the ordinary ordinary?'

Anthropologists could arrive at the same conclusion, but by another route: by keeping their eyes wide open. Their travels have taught them that what is common in one place can be strange and extraordinary in another. This awareness raises questions about what is ordinary in their own societies. Meeting others leads to wondering about oneself. Anthropology has often been referred to as the science that shows how things can be different. The 'other' ordinary takes place before the eyes of the anthropologist when they do fieldwork away from home. One might therefore expect that wondering about one's own culture would have started early among anthropologists. But it did not, as we have seen. It became a popular catchphrase that the anthropologist makes the exotic 'normal' and the ordinary 'exotic', but implementation of the second half of this slogan was rarely achieved.

This brings me to my second point, barely different from the first: knowledge of the ordinary is allowed to remain implicit. We know it's there but we cannot grasp the experience of the ordinary in words. We believe that the ordinary can be best described through the detour of the unusual or its absence. You could call it the *via negativa* of knowing. Negative knowing refers to the paradox that things and people are better 'noticed' in their absence than in their presence. The loss of someone or something that we are familiar with

produces more knowledge and insight than taken for granted availability. Proximity impairs our vision, absence makes us perceptive. The significance of phenomena like water, money, warmth, nature, silence, companionship, friendship, and children penetrates only when they are not there. Similarly, providing a definition of health is difficult – it has been debated for decades – but we know what disease is. If one reads how Bangladeshi women express their grief and pain about the fact that they cannot have children, one can distill from this what having a child means, without finding the exact words (Van der Geest and Nahar 2014).

Remember Augustine's over-quoted remark about time, which goes something like this: I know what time is, but if you ask me to explain it, I do not know. Because everyday experience is so ingenious and complicated, we settle for simpler words; we know that they are insufficient, but we also know that our partners have the same problem and will therefore understand. This is the dilemma of the ethnography of the everyday. And behind this dilemma lies a most remarkable paradox: anthropologists write with conviction and in clear terms about the ordinary lives of others, but dare not and cannot write about their own daily lives.

The third – somewhat banal – explanation for the preference for the unusual is that the dramatic and extraordinary fascinates and the ordinary bores. Knowledge and science flourish thanks to curiosity, but curiosity is missing when we think we know it all. The ironic result is that the party best able to describe and interpret a phenomenon, the native or insider, is the least inclined to do so. Motivation and ability work against each other. The insider allows the outsider to write and explain their experiences and feelings since they refuse to do so themselves. Or because they do not know where to start. Too much knowledge paralyzes. This leads to odd situations: hospital patients, for example, must learn from the texts of a healthy anthropologist how they feel. The proverbial 'innocent anthropologist' is almost by definition outside of their own society, because no one is an innocent [ignorant] stranger in their own home.

Unless they are a reflexive person. What I have just said about the taken-for-granted nature of the everyday can lead to wonder: why should I be surprised about the lives of others and not about that of myself? This wonder (how can it be!) raises curiosity (how can it be?). The fruits of this process are to be found in the studies and publications that I mentioned earlier, designated exceptions to a general trend. In their book on ethnography and the personal life of the ethnographer, McLean and Leibing (2007, 20) cite a statement by Schopenhauer that expresses what I think about triviality: 'The task is not so much to see what no one yet has seen, but to think what nobody yet has thought about that which everyone sees'.

The philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven was for me someone who tried to put Schopenhauer's advice into practice. What he writes in his essay on the philosophy of everyday life also applies to anthropology:

[Philosophy is] ... about everyday and simple affairs ... because this is the only important thing for it. ... Philosophy is the art or the deviation of not settling on the first glance but dwelling on what seems simple and obvious. (1989, 91–92; my translation)

Magical realism

This brings me to 'magical realism'. I have always loved these two words, but not the art that is labeled as such. The literature and especially the painted art called 'magical realism' are realistic only in the superficial sense of the word, as are photographs taken with a flash. They show everything clearly. And they are only magical if magic means 'not true', absurd, hallucinatory, if magic is hocus pocus or the trick of a magician: a woman with a fish's head, a body made of buildings, a melting clock, a perspective that cannot be true. Magical realism and surrealism merge into one another. For me, magic is not an added action but an internal extra capacity that every object or activity has in its social situation. And it is the task of anthropology to look for it: to notice symbolism and meaning, and observe what rises above the literal bare technicality of an object or act.

I found one of the most striking examples of such magic in my medical anthropological observations, drawn from the stories that my wife Betty told me about her work at the hospital. The nurse shaking up a pillow for a patient does much more than merely making the physical conditions of the pillow more comfortable for the patient. The effect of the technical action is amplified many times due to the fact that it is much more than its technique. It expresses attention and care, brings comfort, breaks solitude, and reduces anxiety for the night. The act is magical in its technical quality (Van der Geest 1998b, 90).

This magic can be made visible through careful and attentive description of this simple act, by 'thick description' that captures the context of the act and the intentions and emotions of the characters, including the researcher. This is what I mean by ethnography as magical realism. Ethnography that manages to visualize the nuances of minor events provides a realism that is richer and more 'magical' than the magical realism of literary or art history. The chiaroscuro of Rembrandt's Homer or the somewhat awkward painting of Vincent Van Gogh's bedroom tell us much more than an overexposed picture of the magical realist school.

When I visit a museum, I am constantly struck by the fact that visual artists have always felt more attracted to everyday life than anthropologists, while the latter rather claim that culture (or habitus or second nature), the most ordinary of ordinary, is their study area. During a recent visit to the Van Gogh Museum, while I was walking around thinking about what I would say today, I saw a pair of boots, a chair with a pipe, a lonely bed, a frugal meal, peasants working on the land, an orchard, two people sleeping, a café visitor, a few houses, the starry sky, a cornfield, flowers, a flowering peach. How is it possible that painting is so much more inviting to everyday ‘ethnography’ than writing (and film)?

The answer lies in the medium. An interior, a landscape, or a flower lets itself best be caught in a (painted) image; words will always fall short. But words – like the sequence of film images – string together into sentences and lend themselves to the movement of stories. And stories, by definition, are about events that touch the reader or listener due to their dramatic course. One could say that the anthropologist is imprisoned in his own favorite medium.

Also in literature there are, however, exceptions. For me, the novel *De avonden* (The evenings) by Gerard Kornelis van het Reve (1964) is one of the highlights of what I prefer to call ‘magical realism’. This accurate record of the most banal actions and conversations (and hidden thoughts) shows ‘the messy reality of Dutch living rooms’ (Vink 1986) and the numerous irritations that are suppressed and that sometimes erupt. The descriptions of these banal actions and conversations paint the loneliness, boredom, obsessions, and cynicism of the twenty-three-year-old protagonist Frits. The setting of these descriptions are the ordinary activities in an average Dutch household after the Second World War. Frits despises his father and feels disgusted by him. As an ethnographer, I am jealous of the way in which Van het Reve describes daily life and thus captures the deeper dimensions of the everyday. Here is a brief passage. Frits’s father has just finished picking a piece of meat from a bone during the family meal.

His father pulled out his handkerchief. “Oh no,” said Frits to himself. His father wiped his hands, clenched the cloth together again, but did not put it back in his pocket. “What next?” thought Frits. His father opened the handkerchief, blew his nose, carefully looked at the linen and put the handkerchief away. (1986, 171; my translation)

Malinowski (1961) speaks of imponderables: routine insignificant acts that no one comes to know through questions, but which one must observe in everyday life. These may include things such as working on the land, food, and hygiene.

As I said earlier, the meaning and significance of everyday life can be best observed in the absence thereof, in the nostalgia of the immigrant or refugee. Or in sickness. J. H. van den Berg describes this beautifully in his bestseller *The Psychology of the Sickbed* (1966). He wants to get up and start the day as usual but cannot. He feels weak and has a headache. He cannot take breakfast. He returns to bed. Sickness is being cut off from ordinary life. From his bed, he hears the sounds of that ordinary life: children going to school, traffic in the streets, the milkman ringing the bell.

I must stop here. But I had hoped to speak about what I call ‘the solitude of anthropology’: the fact that our work is little read outside of our discipline. In related disciplines such as psychology, biology, philosophical anthropology, and even historical studies one finds few traces of what anthropologists have written about ordinary life. Why is that? And I also intended to speak about the growing illegibility of many anthropological texts. It is ironic to write about everyday life in incomprehensible sentences. Clear writing is an important part of academic craftsmanship.

Conclusion

This was a plea *for* something, for an anthropology of the everyday. It was not a plea *against* something, certainly not against anthropology’s focus on tragic events and people in jeopardy, not even against the exotic, which is indispensable for reflecting on our own culture, our second nature. If we succeed in designating and disentangling the exotic of our own ordinary life, our publications – particularly in medical anthropology – will be even more exciting than before. Moreover, we will be useful and relevant, not only for policymakers, politicians, or action groups, but also for colleagues in other disciplines who are interested in the same everyday experiences.

Medical anthropology

This is the end of the lecture, but you must allow me to say a few words about medical anthropology. I explained at the beginning why I prefer to speak about anthropology in general, but I cannot conclude without returning to the specialization for which I was appointed as a professor twenty years ago. During these twenty years, medical anthropology has grown incredibly, both in terms of quality and quantity, certainly at the University of Amsterdam. This success is not due to me but to the zeitgeist and the enthusiasm and expertise of colleagues who were real colleagues.

Mentioning names is dangerous; where do you stop? But it would be unjust not to mention the first pioneers from the days when we still had a living room model and ate our lunch

together in the secretariat. Klaas van der Veen – unfortunately absent due to his poor health – was my colleague with whom I set up the first course in medical anthropology. That course produced part of the new generation, including Anita Hardon. Anita is doubtless the one who made medical anthropology in Amsterdam big. She possesses three qualities that explain this success: she is a productive scientist, a highly efficient manager, and a smart fundraiser. Three qualities that are indispensable today for becoming a professor, but few have them in such abundance as Anita. Ria Reis is another pioneer who knows how to combine academic work and management and to enjoy both. To her we owe the internationally acclaimed AMMA (Amsterdam Master's of Medical Anthropology) program, which has meant a lot to me personally. The fourth pioneer was Els van Dongen who – unlike Anita and Ria – hated administration and meetings but was loved by students for her riveting lectures. Els unfortunately died much too early, but for what she did in her short life others – definitely I – would need one hundred years.

And here I stop mentioning names, because the number of colleagues who in the last ten to fifteen years have contributed to the success of medical anthropology is far too large to mention. Of course, I have some preferences, but I keep them here [hand on heart]. Anyway, these colleagues know how much I admire and appreciate them.

My thirty-five PhD students have always been a source of happiness and gratitude. That also applies to the few who sometimes drove me mad. Working together over the course of four years on a research project is a privilege and an enormous inspiration. In several cases, this has led to lasting friendships, also with those who returned to their own universities in Africa and Asia. I thank them for a wonderful time and wish them as much luck as I have had in the past years.

Saying goodbye is painful if what you have tried to build up will be thrown into the wastebasket after your departure, as happened to Mr. Schmidt (Jack Nicholson) in the movie *About Schmidt*. The morning after the farewell party, he looks in the mirror and wonders: 'Did I make a difference? Or could I just as well not have existed?' The assurance of continuity on the other hand is a wonderful feeling and makes a farewell party a real feast. I have been lucky. What is happening today in medical anthropology in Amsterdam is more and better than I ever could have imagined.

One example of continuity that has made me particularly happy is the re-launch of the journal *Medische Antropologie*, under a new name and in a new form. For twenty-four years, I was the editor of that journal together with a variety of great colleagues (editors, secretaries,

and a loyal publisher),³ some of whom are present here. I thank them all from the bottom of my heart for the many years of unpaid enthusiasm. I also thank the editors of the new journal *MAT (Medicine Anthropology Theory)* for the re-launch.

Finally, I thank all those who accompanied me on the journey of my life as an anthropologist: my family and friends, colleagues (in the Netherlands and abroad), students (some of whom taught me more than I taught them), my own teachers (in theology, philosophy, and anthropology), co-researchers and research assistants, and the people who were so kind to participate in my research in Ghana, Cameroon, and elsewhere. According to a Ghanaian proverb, 'Everything that comes from a person you love is worthwhile'. To all of you: farewell and best wishes.

References

- Dehue, Trudy. 2008. *De depressie-epidemie*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Augustus.
- De Jonge, Huub, ed. 1997. *Ons soort mensen: Levensstijlen in Nederland*. Nijmegen: SUN.
- De Regt, Ali. 1993. *Geld en gezin: Financiële en emotionele relaties tussen gezinsleden*. Amsterdam: Boom.
- Douglas, Jack D. 1976. *Investigative Social Research: Individual and Team Field Research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Illich, Ivan. 1977. *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemesis, The Expropriation of Health*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Lakoff, Andrew. 2005. *Pharmaceutical Reason: Knowledge and Value in Global Psychiatry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacClancy, Jeremy, ed. 2002. *Exotic No More: Anthropology on the Front Lines*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. (1922) 1961. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea*. New York: Dutton.
- McLean, Athena, and Annette Leibing. 2007. *The Shadow Side of Fieldwork: Exploring the Borders between Ethnography and Life*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

3 More on the history of the journal *Medische Antropologie* in Van der Geest et al. 2012.

- Nijhof, Gerhard. 2001. *Ziekenwerk: Een kleine sociologie van alledaags ziekenleven*. Amsterdam: Aksant.
- Nijhof, Gerhard. 2011. 'Over problemen met het ongewone: De verstarde gezichtsexpressie van mensen met ziekte van Parkinson als voorbeeld'. *Medische Antropologie* 23, no. 2: 325–41.
- Van den Berg, Jan Hendrik. 1966. *The Psychology of the Sickbed*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Van der Geest, Sjaak. 1984. 'De antropoloog als toneelschrijver'. In *Romantropologie*, Part II, edited by Jojada Verrips, Jan van Bremen, and Sjaak van der Geest, 45–87. Amsterdam: Antropologisch Sociologisch Centrum.
- Van der Geest, Sjaak. 1998a. 'Akan Shit: Getting Rid of Dirt in Ghana'. *Anthropology Today* 14, no. 3: 8–12. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2783049>.
- Van der Geest, Sjaak. 1998b. 'Spirituele genezing: Een soort pleonasme'. In *Religie tussen therapie en trauma: Over spirituele genezing*, edited by Bart Voorstuij, 77–96. Zoetermeer: Meinema.
- Van der Geest, Sjaak, René Devisch, Eileen Moyer, and Vinh-Kim Nguyen. 2012. 'Preface/Postface: "Medische Antropologie" 1989–2012'. *Medische Antropologie* 24, no. 2: 257–63.
- Van der Geest, Sjaak, and Jon P. Kirby. 1992. 'The Absence of the Missionary in African Ethnography, 1930–1965'. *African Studies Review* 35, no. 3: 59–103. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/525128>.
- Van der Geest, Sjaak, and Papreen Nahar. 2014. 'Understanding Life through Unwanted Childlessness: Ethnography and Fiction from Ghana, Bangladesh and "Dystopia"'. *Anthropology Today* 29, no. 3: 3–7. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12027>.
- Van Ginkel, Rob. 1997. *Notities over Nederlanders: Antropologische reflecties*. Amsterdam: Boom.
- Van Ginkel, Rob. 1998. 'The Repatriation of Anthropology: Some Observations on Endo-Ethnography'. *Anthropology & Medicine* 5, no. 3: 251–67. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13648470.1998.9964562>.
- Van het Reve, Gerard Kornelis. 1964. *De avonden*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.
- Verhoeven, Cornelis. 1968. *Omzien naar het beden*. Utrecht: Amboboeken.
- Verhoeven, Cornelis. 1989. *Een velijnen blad: Essays over aandacht en achterdocht*. Baarn: Ambo.

Verrips, Jojada. 1977. *En boven de polder de hemel: Een antropologische studie van een Nederlands dorp 1850–1971*. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff.

Vink, A. 1986. 'Het aristokratisch individualisme van Anna Blaman'. *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 1 January.