Social Aesthetics of Proximity: The Cultural Dimension of Movement and Space in South India

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Abstract

Social aesthetics of proximity concern the sensual experience of social space. The points of departure for this article are the concepts of Stuart Hall (1968) on proxemics and of David MacDougall (2006) on structured sensual experience. Based on fieldwork conducted among Badaga, a South Indian peasant community, proximity is discussed in various contexts. The concepts of seeing (*dharsan*), worshipping (*puja*), and commensual eating, and the practices of ritual processions, inter-caste relations, and friendship illustrate structured and structuring aspects of perception. Hierarchies are expressed in spacial arrangement, the directionality of movements, and the temporality of events. Two types of proximity are distinguished: firstly, a minimal hierarchy between persons or a person and a god; and secondly, an absence of hierarchy. In various contexts, both forms, that is, symmetrical and asymmetrical proximities, co-exist within a group of persons. Some expressions (the gaze, the touch, and the commensual act) are visible. Others (like the concept of purity) remain unseen.

Introduction

> "People from different cultures inhabit different sensory worlds."[1]

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[1] Edward T. Hall, "Proxemics," *Current Anthropology* 9:2-3 (1968): 84.

A social aesthetics of proximity is about the experience of social space. I shall refer to space in a dynamic sense and will discuss both spatial relationships and movements because the sensual experience depends on the position in space and its temporal dimension. It matters whether a person or an object is in motion or not. If he, she, or it moves, the direction matters too. The dynamic tempo-spatial experience and the potential to see, hear, smell, taste, or touch contribute to a social evaluation of each moment. To begin with, the distance between persons, between objects, and between persons *and* objects can be understood as a social fact. Therefore, my first point of departure is the study of proxemics[2] as an established academic field. The study of social distance will be combined with a rather new concept of social aesthetics. David MacDougall, working as a filmmaker and visual anthropologist on a holistic interpretation of the Doon School (an elite boarding school in North India) developed the foundations of this approach. He investigated the "particular aesthetic design in its informal daily life and its more formal rituals and institutions."[3] The term aesthetics—as used by MacDougall and employed in this context—should not be confused with the notion of beauty, but rather be understood as structured sensual experiences. It constitutes a "complex, whose interrelations as a totality (as in gastronomy) are as important as their individual effects."[4] Like *habitus*, social aesthetics is both structured and structuring at the same time.

I agree with MacDougall's premise that these aesthetic dimensions have an enormous impact on daily life. I shall use the concept of social aesthetics to inquire into social concepts expressed in the spatial practices—especially in proximity, separation, and movement—of a South Indian community. What I aim to show is, firstly, how status and proximity relate to ideas about seeing and vision (*dharshan*), purity, hierarchy, gender, space, and movement. This implies that the social measurement of distance is embedded in cultural codes. The second point I aim to demonstrate is how everyday experience and ritual practice are intertwined. The concepts surrounding proximity exist in both spheres, and are transformed from the one to the other. In this way, spatial routines in day-to-day life are included in ritual performances on temple grounds and are inscribed into an ontological foundation.

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[2] Edward T. Hall's article "Proxemics" was the beginning of these studies, which have in common the examination of spatial aspects in the human sensorium. Both identify codes that are unwritten and unknown but commonly understood. An overview is given in Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zungia, eds, *The Anthropology of Place and Space* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).

[3] David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 97.

[4] MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*, 98.

In Indian society, the creation of proximity constitutes an important—but usually overlooked—aspect. The popular and scholarly focus is on hierarchy, exploitation and unbalanced social relationships, and resistance. The following discussion runs against this mainstream approach and emphasises subtle codes that may minimise or reject social hierarchies.[5] Nevertheless, strategies of proximity have the double effect of creating closeness among some and difference among many. My case study draws from fieldwork among a peasant community in South India—the Badagas of the Nilgiri region—among whom I have conducted fieldwork for the last twenty-five years.[6] At the beginning of my fieldwork, I invited persons from my peer group to my small house in Kotagiri to listen to their life history or to perform open-ended interviews. In the course of the day we were always in groups, and I thought it could be useful to work with individuals that had more privacy and where the answers to my questions seemed much less like public statements. My friends never came along. Later I learned that these young men never wanted to walk alone. T.K. Mathan – my friend, translator, and field assistant explained:

> In India, we never like to walk alone. If a person walks alone or stands alone, we consider him a pity figure [sic], a man without friends. We have to show friendship. When I go to the bazaar, usually a friend comes along. I should not walk alone, if friends are around.

There were many instances when friends in South India insisted on joining me – sometimes against my wish. Often I rejected the idea because I thought they were busy with other things and I did not want to take up their time. On several occasions, I realised (in retrospect) that a person had joined me, pretending to be going in the same direction, but returning after I reached my destination. In many conversations, my interlocutors took pity on me because I was staying alone in a house and eating by myself. As a result, they announced a visit for the next day. When Mathan came to my house in Göttingen he was surprised (and not pleased) to see that my children have their own individual bedrooms in which they sleep. In his South Indian context, the physical proximity of the family and proximities amongst friends are a social practice and a shared experience, for the satisfaction of psychological needs and the development of social norms. Proximity, however, is closely linked to the practice of seeing and touching, which—for obvious reasons—works better over short rather than over long distances.

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[5] Academic debates arose after the publication by Louis Dumont of *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980). Dumont argued that the form of hierarchy in India differs from the form in the West, and considered the opposition of pure and impure as the focal point of the Indian civilisation. Nicholas Dirks claimed that the present hierarchies were created in colonial times. See: Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[6] My fieldwork among the Badagas began with a one-year stay in 1988, and annual visits followed. I stayed usually for a few weeks or a maximum of two to three months in the eastern part of the Nilgiri plateau in the Kotagiri region. See: Frank Heidemann, *Akka Bakka* (Muenster: LIT, 2006), 5-10. Badagas are peasants and live in more than 300 villages in the Nilgiris District. See: Paul Hockings, *Ancient Hindu Refugees* (Delhi: Vikas, 1980); Paul Hockings, ed., *Blue Mountains: The Ethnography and Biogeography of a South Indian Region* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Seeing, Touching, Eating

Dharshan[7] is a pan-Indian concept of 'seeing' in a ritualised context. It implies more than visual perception, and can also denote thoughts and wishes. It has a two-directional impact: for the person who sees and the object, or the person who is seen. For Badagas, *dharshan* concerns the act of seeing as it touches the object, and how the transformed object has an impact on the seer. There is no clear distinction between ritualised and non-ritualised vision. Envy may be transmitted by the gaze and is, therefore, caught by demon-like ugly faces fixed to desirable objects like factories or impressive bungalows. Elders, respectable members of the community, or office-holders should be visited, especially when they are not well, and be seen. This social norm is a clear analogy to pilgrimages, where devotees have to give *dharshan* to a god or goddess. In both cases there should be eye contact, and the corresponding eyes must reflect the gaze. Specific rituals are held to open eyes on a statue for particular goddesses - fixing a kind of eye-glass to the statue. After this process there is no doubt that the goddess looks back at you. On the other side, the eyesight of gods must be protected if pollution is around. Badagas close a curtain at the *sanctum sanctorum* when a goat is decapitated in front of the temple. In quotidian life, certain things should be not seen in public. Alcohol is sold in brown bags and consumed at places invisible to the public. Politeness demands a short visit to a house of a relative. A person who visits a village distant from his own should not leave without touching the doorstep of relatives' houses, even if time does not allow conversation beyond a short greeting.

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[7] Diana Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 3; Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (Oxford: Reaktion Books, 2004), 9.

Touching implies even greater closeness than seeing. This sensual mode is of high importance in both the world of ritual and in everyday life. The act of greeting friends is usually accompanied by handshakes, but there are certain restrictions, or at least some reluctance, if the interacting partners belong to different sexes and if the woman is of reproductive age. Often friends hold hands for a moment or touch each other's shoulders. Especially when posing for a photograph, men will lay an arm around a friend's shoulder. In ritual context, the junior may touch the feet of the senior with his fingertips. The bridegroom touches the feet of elders when he makes a formal invitation for his wedding, and on the wedding day itself when he receives their blessings. The same ritualised form can be used to ask for an apology. At a temple visit, devotees bow down and the palms touch the ground in a similar way, but do not touch the idol of the god or goddess. They do, however, touch the *puja* plate that the priest takes out of the *sanctorum* to show to the temple visitors. Touch, however, may carry impure substances and is therefore not without the danger of pollution.

A third dimension of proximity is commensality. Commensality implies greater social nearness than touching. In Hinduism there are complex rules governing cooking, diet, and consumption because pure food must be prepared and eaten in a non-polluted context. In short, ritually pure (vegetarian) food can be consumed by all, but persons of higher status cannot take food that is prepared or served by persons of a lower status. A shared meal with a person from a lower status might carry polluting aspects. Therefore, a common meal indicates a more or less equal status of all participants. Badagas, like most peasant communities, know these concepts well but display a more relaxed attitude towards the ritualised social practice. To drink a tea or coffee with a day-labourer in the field or at a roadside shop indicates a social bond, but they would not invite such a person to a common meal in their private houses. To consume neutral food, like biscuits or bananas from a shop, indicates less proximity than home-cooked rice with beans. Social proximity at a dining table, therefore, indicates an almost equal status within the commensural group. Food cooked at the temple, *prasaad,*[8] is first offered to god and then taken by the devotees, who—by doing so—share the food with god and all those around the temple. To take *prasaad* home for family members is a common practice.

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[8] Christopher J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 74-79.

Besides the social practice of seeing, touching, and eating, the spatial aspect of the village layout gains much attention among most Badagas. On several occasions I was told that Badagas like to live close to each other in their villages. They explain the structure of the village with houses built in rows as an expression of proximity and cooperation. The aspect of a common veranda in front of the houses is important. Formerly—and to some extent today—fruits and cereals were dried on the veranda, and elderly people spent their days there when weather permitted. More often, on contemporary houses, the veranda is a playground for children and a good place to dry the laundry. Usually, the youngest sons inherit the house of the parents and look after them, and the elder brothers build another house in the same line. The kitchens in the back of the houses used to have small openings to their neighbour's house to pass fire from one house to another. Such cooperation received a lot of emphasis. The neighbourhood of a line of houses is still appreciated and taken as sign of closeness, mutual dependency, and interrelatedness. When villages are described, photographed, or painted by Badaga artists, these lines of houses receive prominence over the many individual houses of more recent origin

The Proxemics of Friendship and Public Gatherings

The social aesthetics of friendship are embedded in the knowledge of proximity, *dharshan*, and commensal rules. The way of perceiving friendship rests on sensual patterns and always attaches meaning. Drinking coffee from the same cup is usually noted as a rather intimate act because lips touch the same material. Taking cold drinks from a bottle or a tumbler is done without touching. It makes a ritually significant difference if food is taken with fingers or with a spoon from the common plate, whereby the spoon should not touch the mouth. Sharing food, drinks, and cigarettes are qualifiers for proximity beyond the spatial aspect. Friends, however, like to sit together in rather small backrooms of shops or in private cars and experience bodily contact as a matter of closeness, or display their sociality by standing and walking in small groups.

The highest degree of physical closeness is experienced at religious festivals, funerals, and political gatherings. At such occasions, Badagas men and women come in white[9] dresses, which are considered traditional apparel.[10] Men wear a white turban and women a white head cloth. They enjoy the large white field of cloth that enfolds them. It is considered as a particular moment of beauty when this homogenous collective of white-clad people reflects the sunlight and appears to be glaring white. If this monochromic field is framed by green grass or tea fields, the human bodies appear as a single unit. This, I was told, illustrates the unity of the Badagas; it shows that there are no status distinctions separating the community. The biggest Badaga festival is dedicated to the Goddess Hette[11] and the devotees pay attention to the fact that thousands of pilgrims eat a rice meal on a banana leaf whilst on the same patch of grass at the same time. During funerals,[12] the relatives of the deceased form one line and walk toward the corpse. The line is ordered according to generations counted from the first village founder. This order does not signify difference, but rather a form of belonging to each other. All men of this line carry grains to leave on the dead body. They give this food (which may be a substitute for a last commensal meal) and touch the body before it is buried. Close relatives share a meal when the ritual is over.

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[9] For the meaning of "white" in the Indian context see: David MacDougall, "The Experience of Color," *Senses and Society* 2:1 (2007): 5-26.

[10] Paul Hockings, "Badaga Apparel: Protection and Symbol," in *The Fabrics of Culture*, eds Justine M. Cordwell and Roland A. Schwarz (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 143-174.

Among the biggest gatherings in Badaga society are the *manavale*, when a whole generation received a kind of secondary funeral.[13] The last event of this kind took place at the beginning of the twentieth century. One generation later, a huge gathering took place before Independence at the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's visit. I had the opportunity to participate in the biggest Badaga gathering in history on May 15, 1989, when the overwhelming majority of Badagas came to Ootacamund to express their political and economic demands. Hundreds of lorries and busses travelled to more than three hundred villages and brought crowds of people in white dresses to the Ooty lake. They formed a huge procession and walked through the main bazaar to the collector's office. An estimated 150,000 people passed this office, and most of them joined at a final gathering in the stadium. On that day, several people told me about a Badaga desire to gather at least once in generation so that they might clearly see and experience the entire community.

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[11] Paul Hockings and Christiane Pilot-Raichoor, *A Badaga-English Dictionary* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), 607. For the first account, see Henry Harkness, *A Description of a Singular Aboriginal Race inhabiting the Summit of the Neilgherry Hills, or Blue Mountains of Coimbatore in the Southern Peninsula of India* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1832), 107.

[12] Hockings, *Badaga Apparel,* 165-168.

[13] This funeral includes also those who whose bodies were not cremated or buried to allow their souls find peace. See: Edgar Thurston, *Omens and Superstitions of Southern India* (London: Fisher and Unwin, 1912), 14; Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* vol. 1 (Madras: Government Press, 1909) 121-123.

Delegations and Processions

In most social contexts, distance is more a matter of sensation than precise measurement. You feel closer to a subject if your perception tells you that it is reachable. This is what Badagas told me when I joined them on a pilgrimage to Siriyur, one of the temples for the Seven Mariamman at the northern slopes of the Nilgiri plateau. Once a year, Badagas of Ebbanadu walk down to the plains in the Moyar Ditch and worship the Goddess Mariamman.[14] They form a group, walk in a procession, live segregated groups, observe ritual restrictions, and gain purity whilst establishing relationships between places through physical movement. Places become closer if they are linked by procession. Such a movement is much more than an excursion of a group of villagers. A procession must be considered as a collaborative aesthetic performance, a public demonstration of a unified will; it is accompanied by *pujas*, music, and dance, and, most importantly, it declares a claim. The men in the procession express their perceived proximity and establish a special kind of relationship between the locations they link physically. The closeness of physical locations must be read as a reduplication of the closeness of the men's bodies. One devotee told me:

> If you talk to someone and you touch his shoulder with your fingertips, you feel more close to him and—therefore—you are closer. In the same way, we visit Siriyur, we touch it once a year, and are more close to Mariamman.

The procession is a visual manifestation of spatial relation and creates an invisible ritual link.

Processions link up villages and form constitutive elements of all *rites des passage*. Such events have to be planned, and their details are objects of negotiation. Therefore, 'villages' visit other 'villages' to communicate with each other. Being on such a mission, a representative of a family, a representative of a village, or a representative of the Badaga community should never be on his own. When preliminary talks about a marriage alliance reach a consensus, a group of elders visit the village of the bride. After coming to a formal agreement, they pay the bride a dowry in one-Rupee coins and are served in turn with a rice meal. On the wedding day, the bride is taken to the bridegroom's village in a procession. It is a matter of pride to gather a big crowd who chant "*a hau hau, a hau hau*, ... " when nearing the village. Such processions are common at festivals and at funerals. Often extended families come by various modes of transport and gather close to their destination, form a procession, chant, and move towards the village. The voices make the arrival public and the hosts find enough time to send a delegation to receive them when they enter the village. The hosts take the walking sticks and the umbrellas of the senior members of the delegation and guide them to their house.

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[14] Frank Heidemann, "Der Kult der Sieben Mariamman am Nordrand der Nilgiri Südindiens: Ritual als Konstitution von Gesellschaft," *Mitteilungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie*, *Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* 18 (1997): 57-68.

This procedure for receiving guests is an obligatory part of a reception and is explained by the conjunction of movement and status. In Badaga understanding, as in most contexts in South India, the lower status moves towards the higher status (moreover, the site of higher status is at an elevated point, like a village temple or the Collector's office). The directionality of the movement indicates status. If the Collector visits a village, he pays respect by moving to a particular destination. Invitations for formal functions like weddings should not be mailed, but rather handed over at the residence of the invitee. Even if a bridegroom meets a potential guest at a bus stop, he cannot pass the invitation. He should go to the invitee's village and leave it with a family member or a neighbour. His physical movement towards the invitee's house is understood as a matter of respect. If the invited party comes to his wedding as a delegation, the ritual logic manifests a contradiction in terms. The guest has a higher status than the host, but moves towards the wedding. Therefore, the reception takes place at the village boundary or at least at some distance from the host's house.

The aesthetics of proximity and movement appears as a play with status evaluation. Those who are close share an equal status, those who move towards a destination honour (or elevate) the status holder whom they visit.[15] It is an imperative for Badagas to see relatives from time to time, and to visit elders if they are not well. If an ill person feels that his or her end is near, she or he expresses the wish to see all relatives again. Agnates and affines from neighbouring villages hurry to see the ill person. Patients admitted to hospitals in the hills or in Coimbatore need to be visited, too. Such trips are never made by individuals but always by groups, either families with members of both sexes or by a group of women or men only. When the delegation comes to a village to see a patient, there is no calling of "*a hau hau* ... ," nor a reception at the village boundary. The stay in the village may require only a little time in the patient's house, but does require a number of further visits to other relatives' houses. The delegation might split and each individual go to the house of his nearest relative. After seeing the elders of the household and taking at least a sip of tea or coffee, the individuals join again and move home.

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[15] A further dimension of movement is the tempo. Generally, a slower movement indicates a higher degree of respect. When a procession approaches a holy area the pace is reduced. Walking slowly towards a VIP indicates a high degree of respect.

The obligation to see relatives or family friends is an embodied duty and is a matter of discussion among relatives and friends. If an urgent matter arises, Badagas might not take the shortest way from one place to another if it requires visits on the way. Rather, they take a longer route to reach their destination faster. Once I asked a friend why he took a motorised rickshaw for just a short distance of 200 yards. He replied that he could not pass his father-in-law's house whilst walking without knocking at his door, but with a rickshaw there was no need to stop. As an outsider I learned about these social norms and had to spend much time seeing acquaintances, elders, office holders, and friends. Once, after returning to Germany after a longer stay in the Nilgiris, I had a strange experience. A friend of mine was appointed to staff at the University of Goettingen and he came to our house to see me after a long time apart. We went on a walk, and when returning I pointed out the house of his predecessor in a small road near to my home. He suggested passing this house to have a closer look, but I refused and was not able to offer an explanation. I wondered about my behaviour and realised only hours later that I confused two cultural contexts. In Germany, no social norm would be violated if we had done so.

On festival days, the visiting of relatives is a common phenomenon. Families follow the invitations of their agnates or affines and receive a welcome, usually at the doorstep. Local politicians or respectable persons like judges or bank managers who join the festival are received by small delegations. Village headmen and priests from other villages are also welcomed by a delegation of the hosts before they reach the temple ground. Paying respect by touching (or pouring water on, that is, washing) feet is followed by the elder's blessing. If one of the honourable persons has a special relationship to the host village, a house-to-house visit is the appropriate way of honouring the hosts. If the daughter of a man has married someone from the host village, or if his mother or his wife belongs to that lineage, he will pass by the houses of his in-laws. Accompanied by his friends or supporters, he will stop at each door, ask for the health of the family members, take a sip of tea or coffee and move on to the next door. Several festivals—and weddings alike—take place on the same day, and leading Badaga personalities often visit half a dozen or even a dozen villages on a single day. Villagers take notice of such movements and consider the visits as a confirmation of existing social relationships. A village crowded by many relatives who come and stay for the day indicates good social relationships and a positive status evaluation of a village community.

In most Badaga villages, there is at least one major annual temple festival. Such events imply physical movements and specific forms of proximity. People gather in front of the temple, line up in a row and wait for their turn to enter the temple, see the idol of the god, and share food with the god and other devotees. The priest (*pujari*) holds a plate that is symbolically touched by the devotees and the blessing is completed after receiving holy ash or coloured powder on the forehead. A different movement precedes the visit of the temple or the procession of the God through the village. In a procession, the statues of a god from the Hindu pantheon such as Ganesha or Mariamma are taken through the village to mark a visit of the God at each individual's house. In the ritual logic, the first step is undertaken by the villagers. They clean their houses and verandas and provide a place of purity where they invite the God. Then the God visits each house, and finally all households send at least one person to the temple. Each interaction requires purity, proximity, and vision. The meeting with the God results in a unification of the entire village since all are pure, all receive the same guest, and all go to the temple, stand in line and share the food with the God.

Rituals and Festivals

The cohesion of proximity, movement, *dharshan*, touching, and commensality becomes most obvious in the case of the major annual festival in the village of Jackanarai. From a sociological point of view, it is important to mention that the festival is celebrated both by affines and agnates, that is, the "village founder" descending from a mythical forefather, and the descendants of those men who married into the patrilineal village. In most other places the village founder, Hireodeya, receives the highest attention and his festival unites the member of his patrilineage. In Jackanarai, however, the God Jedayasamy is worshipped by all who are settled in the village and its associated hamlets. Jedayasamy means "matted hair" and he is today explained as an incarnation of Shiva. His mythical story recounts his journey to the hills in the appearance of a beggar, the hospitality he received from Badaga forefathers, and his promise to visit the village every year. His festival should be celebrated each February, but was cancelled several times for economic reasons. In the years without a festival, a smaller ritual took place since the God visits the village irrespective of the economic condition of the village.[16]

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[16] For Jedayasamy in Jackanarai, see Heidemann, *Akka Bakka,* 381-446.

The *kasaikaran* or 'fire-walkers' – a group of men recruited from all parts of the village - constitute the centre of the festival. At the first day of the festival they gather at the Hireodeya temple and walk through a ritual gate, the *akka bakka*, and then move to the Jedayasamy temple in the eastern valley. For one week they should not return to their private homes and must observe rules of purity. This obliges them to eat just one vegetarian meal a day, drink no alcohol, and abstain from sexual contact. They take ritual baths, wear neat, new clothes, make prayers, have common meals, and spend all their time within the group of devotees. On behalf of the entire village, they will perform the fire-walking on the final day of the festival. By doing so, they welcome the God Jedayasamy. Their performance serves as a metaphor for the unity of the village. Their physical proximity symbolises the nearness of all lineages and social categories settled within the village boundary. According to the ritual logic, a state of purity can only be achieved if each individual in the group behaves according to the rules. To make the fire-walking successful, all households in the village must observe rules of purity. Before the festival, they clean and white-wash their houses and resolve all social problems. Like the *kasaikaran,* they should restrict themselves to a vegetarian diet, and thus be prepared to receive the God on the last festival day in an appropriate manner.

The *kasaikaran* form a procession, visit all hamlets, stop and pray at hero-stones, demarcate the village boundaries, and make *pujas* at each individual household. At the boundary of the village territory, they perform a *puja* and cross the border to invite the affines from the neighbouring territory. At the hero-stones—usually larger, naturally-carved 'river-stones'—they halt for a commemoration and a ritualised 'calling of God'. These ritual acts are performed by either the 'head of *kasaikaran*', the 'first among equals', or by the village elders, the headman, or the *pujari*. The number of dignitaries should be either five or seven and include the village headman, the village *pujari*, an external *pujari* from the Badaga Lingayat, a representative of the in-laws, and a representative of the Torreya – a subgroup of Badaga with a lower status who settled in the southern part of Jackanarai. Together, these dignitaries and the *kasaikaran* represent the entire village. At each halting point, their arrival is marked by signs of respect.

The movement of the procession is a visible linkage of all settlements belonging to Jackanarai. The physical distance between the hamlets in the valley is a few hundred metres, and not more than two kilometres to the head village on the back of a mountain. Many places offer a good view of the valley and of the hill slope. The men wearing white cloths are thus clearly visible when they walk through the green tea fields. It is a matter of public interest to know where the procession is and how long they stayed in each place. Every year an individual or the community of a hamlet acts as a host for the procession. It is well-remembered where the procession stopped in previous years, and there are always more invitations than time permits. Therefore, it is a matter of pride to serve the dignities and the *kasaikaran*. The presence of the procession at a particular site, the dance of the *kasaikaran*, the calling of God, and the collective meal indicate social proximity of the hosting hamlet and the village as a whole. A visit of the *kasaikaran* to a hamlet is considered a confirmation of belonging. If conflicts cannot be resolved before the festival starts, the procession may avoid a hamlet, which is a clear signal of ritual non-cooperation. In such a case, the rest of the village should not attend weddings or funerals of the respective group.

Kurumbas—a neighbouring group classified as hunters and gatherers and often associated with witchcraft—are hired as musicians for the festival week. In a way they belong to the procession as they walk ahead and play the ritual tunes, but there are clear signs of social difference. During the common meals the musicians sit down at a separate place and form their own line, but their presence could be still considered as an act of commensality. They do not wear white dresses, but on the last day, just before the God Jedayasamy arrives, they receive new white clothes. Formerly, they were not allowed to walk on fire, but more recently they have enforced their claim to walk upon the fire as well. Today they participate, but they walk on the fire after the *kasaikaran*. There are several ambivalent signs of proximity and distance. The strongest metaphor indicating the Badaga-Kurumba relationship is the dance of *kasaikaran*. The relationship between higher and lower castes was coined by Louis Dumont as the encompassment of the contrary.[17] Just as the term ‘man’ stands for ‘mankind’, and, at the same time, for its opposite ‘woman’, the politically dominant group of Badaga, the ‘Gowder’, refer to themselves as ‘Badaga’ and thus include their opposites, for example, the ‘Torreya’. They integrate a social category, which expresses its difference, but which is also a part of the group. This relationship is translated into a spatial concept when Badagas form a circle and dance around the Kurumba musicians. In short, the physical proximity of Badagas and Kurumbas is transformed into an ambivalent relationship by rules of commensality and a particular dance formation.

The proximity of the *kasaikaran*, however, is undisputed. Their position in the procession does not reflect any social order and is an individual choice. The procession forms each time in a new configuration after the men have rested. If a person requires more time to fix his turban he will be at the end of the line. The positioning of the bodies in one row, all facing toward the direction of movement, avoids face-to-face interaction. No question of seniority or respect needs to be (or can be) expressed. The men sleep on thin mats in one of the local temples and cannot avoid bodily contact. Their state of purity depends on the purity of others. They need the assistance of their fellows to fix their turbans. When they rest, all turbans are kept on the same place and touch each other. The locus of highest purity is the end of the turban cloth, which hangs like a tail on the neck of the devotees. This piece of cotton is cautiously taken care of and all forms of pollution must be avoided. The physical proximity of the *kasaikaran* is elevated into a ritual proximity and finally in a communal experience of meeting the God.

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[17] Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus,* appendix.

The relationship of *kasaikaran* and dignities is based on two principles, which must not be considered a contradiction. On the one hand, all form one group; they walk, dance, pray, and eat together and sleep in the same place. There are hardly any signs of social difference. At certain points the elders receive more respect or a small privilege, say, a better seat in the shadow of a tree or the first sip of water after a walk in the hot sun. While eating, however, the dignities may form their own row and are served first. In one ritual moment, not known to most participants, we see this difference. The head *pujari* receives the same food, but cooked by a vegetarian, and shares it with the other dignities. A second example is the beginning of the fire-walking when the dignities walk first, followed by all *kasaikaran*, and finally the Kurumbas. According to my impression and to most voices I could hear in this regard, the ritual performance is intended (and interpreted) as a way of creating unity by proximity and blurring status differences.

There is one aspect which caught my interest, but which is not discussed among the Badagas. It refers to the relationship of headman and priest. Both of them display the highest degree of proximity in the whole festival week. They walk in the centre of the procession shoulder-to-shoulder. They stop in front of each household and give their blessing simultaneously. In spite of an almost permanent proximity they avoid face-to-face interaction, which usually includes obligatory signs of respect. Both men are aware of representing a particular office and they treat their counterpart always as a kind of complimentary office holder. In private talks they tend to describe their own part as the more important aspect in the village, but by maintaining the shoulder-to-shoulder configuration they demonstrate closeness and avoid a status evaluation. They create a conundrum of its own kind, since they act as one but refuse to relate to the other.[18]

On the final festival day, two occasions must be considered as an expression of proximity of agnates and affines (or village founder and their in-laws). The first scene takes part in a rather secret moment before sunrise in the exclusive presence of the fire-walkers and musicians. In front of the Jedayasamy temple, a Kurumba lights a fire. When the sticks are burnt in the middle, agnates and affines take each one end, move the sticks to the fire pit, and light the embers at each end. After a few hours the fire will meet in the middle. This is the first time that a distinction between the two groups is made, but it unites both in a powerful scene. The second occasion takes place in the afternoon. Each group heats one pot with milk in a competition. The pot that boils over first guarantees prosperity for the region, in other words: for agnates and affines together. Then rice is boiled in two pots and later made into a single dish of sweet rice to be offered to the God. After the god Jedayasamy has taken his share as an offering in the *sanctum*, all others eat. This godly food, the *prasaad*, unites the god and devotees, agnates and affines, Badagas and Kurumbas.

The final part of the festival is the fire walking. Following the dignitaries, the *kasaikaran* walk as a group, not in any particular order, over the fire. The last in line are the Kurumbas, walking with their musical instruments. The proximity of the *kasaikaran*, who stayed for five or seven days in seclusion, ate and danced together, is manifested in the joint action of fire walking, which confirms the status equality of all *kasaikaran*. Even years after the festival, the men in Jackanarai remember the group in which they walked on fire. The physical and ritual proximity makes more than a casual friendship. The relationship between the dignities and the Kurumbas, on the other hand, implies less closeness according to the sequential arrangement of the fire walking.

The Aesthetics of Proximity

Physical closeness is a precondition for social proximity. Badagas need to see each other, at least once in a while, to reconfirm their social link. If they stay apart they use modern communication technology to talk and (until now in very rare cases) to "see" each other, at least on a screen. From the little information I have about the latter case, I suspect that *dharshan* does not work if the vision is transmitted electronically. Commensality is more difficult to achieve. Occasionally food items are sent by parcel mail, and Badagas overseas use a homemade grinded mixture of spices for cooking. Nevertheless, to share food in the here and now cannot be fully substituted for by any other means than physical proximity. As discussed above, major differences in degree of proximity depend on the kind of food and the context. The same applies to the consumption of beverages, alcoholic drinks, and cigarettes. These three categories require and constitute specific contexts of proximity.

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[18] Frank Heidemann, "The Priest and the Village Headman: Dual Souvereignty in the Nilgiri Hills," in *The Anthropology of Values*, eds Peter Berger, Roland Hardenberg, Ellen Kattner, and Michael Prager (Delhi: Pearson, 2010) 104-119.

To smoke in a group minimises social distance. In Badaga society, smoking is regarded as a bad habit and it is thought that it should be banned in public. In practice, however, smoking is common among men but not among women. Older ladies and young college students constitute exceptions. The former may smoke alone or in small groups, even visible to the public, usually in front of their own house; the latter must meet clandestinely. Men usually smoke in peer groups but extinguish the cigarettes if an elder person comes by. Smoking may create closeness if practiced jointly in a group, but indicates social distance if a senior person smokes alone in front of juniors. To offer a cigarette is an invitation to minimise the social distance, and to reject the offer indicates respect towards the other. Most Badagas consider smoking in front of elders, women, and minors to be inappropriate. Therefore, smokers stand behind teashops, meet in backrooms of shops, or sit/squeeze into private cars. This kind of proximity includes gestures of sharing cigarettes and inhaling the same polluted air.

To consume alcoholic drinks is considered a major vice. Liquor must be protected from the public gaze. Alcohol consumption is—like smoking—embedded in a ritualised context. Unlike smoking, alcoholic drinks are not an appropriate medium to create social difference within the micro-group. A senior may smoke in front of a junior, but may not drink alcohol. In this sense, drinking is a symmetrical act of interaction, while smoking can be both an expression of asymmetrical or symmetrical encounter. Compared to these two morally questionable forms of consumption, an invitation for a cup of tea or coffee implies less proximity. The physical distance, however, turns out to be irrespectively of the object of consumption. The dimension of a meeting place, a vehicle, a small office, or a few square meters under a porch determines the positions of the human bodies and their closeness.

Reflecting on the aesthetics of proximity, I would argue that two types of proximity should be distinguished. The first form expresses a minimal hierarchy. Two persons are close to each other if they share the same social space and the same food, and see or touch each other. The one with a lower status eats after the counterpart has eaten or bows down and touches his feet.

The priest and the headman come to each house and give their blessings. The devotees walk to the temple and are close to the God, share the *prasaad*, bow down, and experience the proximity of the deity. In all these cases a symbolically loaded interaction takes place within a demarcated space. Proximity is reached by approving a hierarchical relationship, mutual respect or blessings, *dharshan*, and a commensual act.

The second form is expressed as the absence of hierarchy. People join for political rallies and merge into a big crowd. They become one. Individual distinction is minimised, ignored, or considered as meaningless. Visually they form a homogenous field. In a similar way, pilgrims find their unity in front of a temple or as witnesses of major processions. They walk and eat at the same time in the same place, but they do not face each other. Devotees walking in a procession can see the focus point, but not one another. They act shoulder-to-shoulder and face the same person, god, or object. In this case, face-to-face interaction is minimal or even absent. Direct or frontal interaction is synchronised or an act of balanced reciprocity. In this case, they are not close to each other, but close with each other.

I would argue that this structural difference can be applied to many South Asian contexts. While writing this paper, Manohar Aich, came to the attention of the international press. As a bodybuilder, he became Mr. Universe in 1952 and celebrated his 100th birthday on March 21, 2012. A video of his birthday celebrations documents his good health. In one scene, his well-wishers feed him – most likely with sweets.[19] They are close to him, and the feeding is an expression of proximity and respect. In the past I have witnessed other occasions, also manifested in private photo albums, when young people feed each other by holding a spoon towards the other's mouth. Hierarchies of caste and wealth are ignored. Like devotees in a procession, they form an undifferentiated mass and experience the utmost proximity.

In social practice, symmetrical and asymmetrical proximities coexist and must be considered as complementary forms of unification. In a council meeting, all villagers sit on the lawn, shoulder-to-shoulder; they are close with each other. They face the headman and the priest who preside over the function. The two dignities sit on a platform under a tree, also shoulder-to-shoulder, and express proximity *with* each other. Dignities and villagers are close *to* each other. The two forms of proximity constitute structured wholes. All belong to a social unit, experienced by all participants in terms of proximity. The distinction of symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships unites and shapes the entity. The same mechanism is at work when a procession is formed. People unite, form a unit, and melt into a single category; but others obtain distinct positions or act on behalf of their own groups, and appear as identifiers of the procession. As we have seen, in Jackanarai the dignities, *kasaikaran*, and Kurumbas can be identified, but jointly they constitute the procession.

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[19] Zoomin.TV, "Indien: Mr. Universe von 1952 feiert 100. Geburtstag," YouTube Video, March 18, 2012, accessed May 28, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdbhHBSksB0.

In daily life there are other contexts where the different forms of proximity cannot be distinguished as clearly. The meal within a family implies signs of symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, brother and sister, older and younger siblings. The seating order appears as an obvious fact, but the order of speech is more complex and governed by subtle rules: who may talk when, on which topic, and with what kind of voice. There are other moments when they are either close to, or close with, each other. Two moments shall illustrate the difference. When the family poses for a formal photograph, their bodies are positioned in relation to each other. The spatial display should be read as an enactment of a sociogramme. On a festival day, a different configuration is likely. When the family steps in front of their house to receive a procession of elders, all will bow down or prostrate, and they will jointly receive blessings. In this very moment they are an unstructured unit.

Positioning human bodies always implies the negotiation of status. It is a process involving movement, directionality, and it includes statements about the self and about the other. The play with space is usually about hierarchy, or about its absence. The implicit knowledge of proximity is complex and linked to other forms of cognition. The gaze, the touch, and the commensal act are visible forms, but purity as a fundamental quality and hierarchy as a model of structuring remains invisible. The experience of space is a social fact in each communicative act. The presence or absence of persons matters. Manipulations of social space are intentional statements. The social aesthetics of proximity is a constant companion of experience – in the world of the Badagas and beyond.

In 1968, when Edward T. Hall proclaimed that we live in "different sensory worlds,"[20] the anthropology of the senses was not yet invented. We have had very few studies that have considered human senses as a coordinated system, and their working as structured and structuring processes of detection. The reason is not a lack of interest, but we miss a particular methodological orientation. One way to investigate the sensory world has been demonstrated by David MacDougall. As a filmmaker he transgresses the technical limits of audio-visual documentations and discloses further sensual dimensions. The sound may evocate a feeling of space; movement and materiality of things convey an idea of touch. Beyond filming, any focused documentation of sensual experience and—I would argue—any long term research as a participating anthropologist makes clear the construction of a complex field around an actor and her or his position and movement within this space. For the study of this dynamic field, the concept of social aesthetics opens a most promising avenue.

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[20] Hall, "Proxemics," 84.