

# ANALOGUE ANALYSIS

## Ethnography as Inventive Conversation

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This article explores ethnographic work as an inventive conversational practice, through which fieldworker and interlocutors continuously process the world. Rather than a summary description, ethnography emerges as an analytical product by which people generate a world to live in, think and write about. Ethnography, then, is not about representation of an empirical setting, but a generative practice of analytically relating some features of the world to others. My ambition is to suggest the notion of analogue analysis to articulate this relational and inventive nature of ethnography, and further to explore the implications of this for revisits to work of founding figures in ethnology. As a way of engaging ethnography in analogue terms, the article combines work of Eilert Sundt with contemporary material from south India.

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### **Fieldwork as Inventive Conversation**

What if ethnographic fieldwork, for long providing the basis of much ethnological work, were seen not primarily as a systematic method of description learned and then applied by the ethnographer with the aim of representing worlds, but as a kind of inventive sociality built on unsettled particulars? What if ethnography were seen first and foremost as a conversational product – brought about by fieldworkers as well as interlocutors – that continuously generates worlds through discussion of concerns and crisscrossing of perspectives? These are the questions that I focus on in this contribution, by engaging and bringing together some of the work of folk-life researcher Eilert Sundt (1817–1875), appearing here primarily as a pioneer of fieldwork-based

ethnology, interested in the lives and knowledge of common people in Norway, and pieces of my own contemporary ethnography among villagers in rural south India.

My point in making the seemingly improbable connection between work by Eilert Sundt and present-day fieldwork from an Indian fishing village and have them both speak to the nature of ethnography is just that: that the connection is seemingly improbable – and thereby enables me to argue that ethnography is always about crafting and articulating different ideas, perspectives and practices in order to craft and articulate more ideas, perspectives and practices. Ethnography, in this sense, is thus not about scholarly representations of empirical settings nor about deciding what belongs in the context, but

can instead be seen as a series of world-making conversations and juxtapositions – between analysts, interlocutors and anyone else who cares to join. Put differently, I suggest that the field of ethnographic fieldwork is not constituted by one or more given empirical sites, say, Norway and/or south India, but is created in an ongoing and principally unending dialogue between different people and perspectives, as they encounter one another across time and space. In the following, I will show how this might play out.

My overall ambition is to propose the notion of *analogue analysis* as a way of articulating the continuous inventive character of ethnographic work and of capturing that ethnography is constituted by selective combinations of different features and experiences rather than summation. I borrow the word analogue from electronics and take it to imply signals or features that occur, are processed and work on one another within one uninterrupted domain, that is, within a non-dualistic register of sustained interrelation. As such the analogue is implicitly contrasted with the digital, the foundational principle of which is based on discrete entities and binary relations. Essentially, what I want to propose is an ethnographic practice undertaken as a deliberately analogue endeavour understood and performed in non-dualistic terms, and to suggest that in ethnography thus conceived dichotomies of here/there, now/then, self/other, observation/analysis and the like no longer hold. This poses a challenge to scholarship that allegedly works by separating entities such as theory and data, empirical and analytical objects, expert knowledge versus local knowledge and other such binaries, including possibly a too clear-cut distinction between classical ethnology and more recent work. In other words, what I am after in suggesting the notion of analogue analysis is a way to qualify the fundamentally unlimited and inventive nature of ethnography – underlining that it emerges as a creative feat in whatever occasional analytical domain the ethnographer (so-called interlocutors included) engages.

To me, the apparently simple proposition of analogue analysis has an important bearing on how we might think about theory and productively explore

the rich fund of already existing work within ethnology and related disciplines. The practice of analogue analysis thus speaks directly to the idea of revisiting previous scholarly work in ethnology. If, indeed, ethnography is not about mapping a place for purposes of representation, but about talking and bringing worlds to life along with others and on the basis of particular perspectives and combinatory interests, why not extend the field to also include long since published ethnological works and let them be part of the always composite, unfinished and non-singular unit of analysis? To thus perceive of prior scholarly work as open to ethnographic inquiry paves the way for a dynamic dialogue with classical ethnological studies and for a revisit to the discipline's history without being burdened by an ambition to represent, however loyally or critically, this or that established school of thought.

To put it differently, as I see it, a revisit to the work of predecessors is interesting to the extent that I can come up with a partial reading (as opposed to a representational one), akin to the kind of analytical choices I would make when talking with people during contemporary fieldwork and writing about it, or indeed the analytical choices they would make as they process their world. The point here is that I revisit Eilert Sundt, not because he is uniquely important to ethnology as a whole, nor because I want to offer a well-resembling portrait by looking back at his work, but because I can bring some of his ideas into the conversation I am presently engaging in about how to generate ethnography as an inventive conversational practice that features unsettled and sometimes contradictory practices and ideas about life. The criterion for revisiting Sundt – and indeed for revisiting rural south India – is not one of objective relevance, because I would not know how to identify any fixed scale against which to assess that, but one of ethnographic (and thus analytical) mileage in the field that matters to me in this particular article – to discuss ethnography as generative and sustained conversation about world-making.

The notion of analogue analysis also suggests that we might do well to consider a deliberate conflation of what academics do and what the people we work

with in the field do, and think of these activities as in a sense equally ethnographic and theoretical, quite simply because they are undertaken in an always current field of concern that cannot be seen as a totality or from the outside, even if it encompasses long gone historical features or facts of life on distant shores. All these heterogeneous features, I suggest, can be seen as analogically connected; because ethnographic fields offer open-endedness rather than settlement it takes theoretical work to even see them and live them, let alone write about them – for all involved. The field implied in ethnographic fieldwork, then, is doubly located as a particular place and time and as a shared and continual analytical domain, features of which are realized to the extent that they happen to concern people, whether fieldworker or host (cf. Strathern 1999; Hastrup 2011b). Importantly, this is not meant as a contribution to discussions about the limits to scholarly authority or about the problems inherent in attempts to represent others in writing. Influential work on these issues has long been available (see e.g. Clifford & Marcus 1986). Instead, and perhaps put somewhat radically, what I mean to suggest here is that in principle in ethnographic writings any feature of the field can be combined with any other feature, provided that some insight or other emerges from this encounter and selective comparison (cf. Brichet & Hastrup in press). Might the non-committal nature of a field observation be what makes it ethnographic?

With these ideas in mind, I want to look first at the work of Eilert Sundt, with special attention to the ways in which he discusses the necessity, problems and indeed pleasure of actively engaging readers and interlocutors primarily in his ethnographic work on house building and house crafts. I then move on to discuss complex and more recent discussions about lives and futures as they appeared during my fieldwork in south India. Finally, in an attempt to perform analogue analysis all the way through, I weave together these strands across time and space to reflect on the implications of seeing ethnography as an inventive conversation that resists fixed scales of living. If ethnography thus produces complexity through the very practice of discussing features of

life with people we meet or with founding mothers and fathers of scholarly disciplines, might we then identify an overall impulse of ethnography – including revisits to previous work – as that of acknowledging and nurturing social life as contingent?

### **Inviting Ethnography: Working with Shared Concerns**

In the epilogue of Sundt's work on building customs in the Norwegian countryside, he explains why he was pleased to have published his work in a series of articles in the popular educational journal *Folkevennen* ("Friend of the People"), of which Sundt was the editor in the years 1857–1866, in addition to presenting it as a scientific thesis that in Sundt's own words is long and elaborate (Sundt 1862: § 50). The continuous publication of portions of his work in a journal reaching readers with a shared concern for the advancement of popular education ("folkeoplysning") seems for Sundt to serve as a kind of invitation. Based on the assumption that people share his opinion that the well-being and potential improvement of conditions of the Norwegians is enfolded into the house building customs, Sundt uses the periodical to ideally summon those interested and capable of contributing to his findings on the matter.

If we look for a minute to the incipient Danish archaeology in the early nineteenth century, for instance as it gradually equipped what was to become the National Museum, farmers from around the country were encouraged to search and hand over (pre-)historic artefacts, as these were gradually uncovered from the lands increasingly put under the plough. In acknowledgement of the importance of engaging the public in the ambition to salvage ancient artefacts, Christian Jürgensen Thomsen, the founder of the museum, took great care to express his gratitude for lay people's vital contributions (Jensen 1992: 50–51). Looking at the meeting minutes of the so-called Antiquities Commission, a precursor of the museum proper, which collected both artefacts and information about these, we learn of a school teacher chipping in the Commission's collection in 1821:

School master Holger Njelsen of Asminderup in Odsherred had sent a beautiful and ornamented metal plate, presumed to have been attached to a shield, found along with many others in a bog near Høiby. The school master is thanked in a letter and asked to be attentive whenever peat is dug out of this bog, and according to circumstances the Commission will bestow an appropriate reward upon the finder, should something remarkable turn up. (Cited in Jakobsen & Adamsen 2007: 268)<sup>1</sup>

What is interesting here is the call for continued attention towards peculiar findings in the peat bogs. Quite obviously, it was perceived as a collective task to recover the nation's past.

Further north, Sundt worked in an equally inviting way and called for assistance in his ethnographic project. Look at this passage from the final sections of his work on house building, which I need to quote at some length here:

To present the country's or the villages' building customs is a matter I view as having no little national significance, and my work could in no way rise to the task; but I thought that if I dared publish it in "Friend of the People", I would be granted assistance to in due course make a new and better attempt. Every lettered man can assist me. A school teacher or a farmer for instance in Vegusdal's parish can send me information as to whether, in his district, I have been right about the presence of the Mandal living room, if it can be found, or if it is recalled to have been in use in the said parish (...) Any herdsman who might know of a firehouse still inhabited or left unchanged as from a time when it was, would bring me much joy by informing me thereof (...) People who can draw, carpenters and others, would make me truly grateful by sending sketches of houses, equipment etc. (Sundt 1862: § 50)<sup>2</sup>

As I see it, what he proposes is a kind of public and distributed ethnographic project, the ambition of which is to present a complete picture of housing customs around the country, but which is only in-

completely realized so far. As I imagine would be the case for any present-day ethnographer, Sundt is pleased to learn from the experts about whose lives he writes. In this regard, Sundt makes an explicit comment about the ingenuity of common rural people and their ability to overcome challenges. In his work on "house crafts" he states the following:

One gathers, then, that my work has come about in opposition to the oppressive opinion and gloomy claim that the peasantry is little capable and industrious. In Søndfjord it would please me to see even a bit of wood chip outside of the house, reminding me of the assiduous work on herring barrels inside. And even if the bulletins from the villages were ever so lengthy, it still amused me line by line to see the multifarious effort and inventiveness reported. The more I explored and stared, the more I saw of victorious industriousness and of external obstacles and challenges that have had to be overcome, and which still remain to be won over. (Sundt 1867–1868: preface)<sup>3</sup>

What I want to highlight here is the acknowledgment of the significance of public engagement and what one might call lay expertise in early archaeology and ethnology. The sense that people near and far can actually be trusted to contribute to projects of apparently great national and educational significance is clearly expressed in Sundt's work. People's customs, as Sundt discovered, might actually make sense when explored locally by those who are the practitioners (cf. Berggreen 1989: 60–64). Even more important, perhaps, is the shared curiosity that must drive a fieldwork of this kind – for both expert ethnographers and others. In addition to whatever insights from previous times that Sundt can find in a range of written sources, knowledge to support or indeed correct his account can surely be found among people inhabiting the very buildings that feature in his writings on housing customs – people who understand the need to dig deeper, as it were:

Many of these are members of the Association to the Advancement of Popular Education, and

so they could both detect and correct omissions in my presentation, and they would not regret if “Friend of the People” takes it upon itself to shed light on issues that are as closely tied to the history of common life and the well-being of people as the building customs across the country. (Sundt 1862: § 50)<sup>4</sup>

What I find particularly interesting in these quotes is the implicit discussion in the way Sundt describes his project. Berggreen describes Sundt as both a statistician searching for definite numbers and percentages, and as a researcher willing to adjust his findings in the course of learning still more about people’s living conditions and views (Berggreen 1989: 61). On the one hand, and perhaps as a result of the inspiration from the natural sciences, Sundt seems to believe that a complete and not least correct account of for instance the Norwegian housing customs is within reach, provided that people around the country join him in his descriptive efforts and that he employs systematic scientific methodology (cf. Stoklund 2003: 51). On the other hand, Sundt highlights the processual and dialogic nature of ethnographic writing and articulates a distinct and perhaps surprising humility, knowing well that his findings are in some sense preliminary and would benefit from further refinement and more discussion. Consider this passage:

Those who have ventured into writing must know how it is: one often uses many words, when one is not really in control of the subject matter. Booklet by booklet, I came to understand this or that differently than I had in the beginning (...) and I was incessantly dealing with matters regarding which I had to waver my way forward by way of my incomplete observations and recollections. (Sundt 1862: § 50)<sup>5</sup>

Overview and closure, it would seem, are rare treats in Sundt’s trade. However, this inadequacy appears to be a motor for new attempts at understanding the customs under investigation and for inviting a wide constituency of readers and potential informants

into the conversation. To me, the periodical “Friend of the People” with its gradual publication of results is in a sense a perfect illustration of the continuous nature of ethnography. Even if Sundt did believe in the ability of (social) science to eventually map and classify the life and customs of the peasantry (“almuen”), what I find striking in these quotes is the way Sundt describes his work as provisional, acknowledging that more things to take into account abound.

The experience of having seen and heard stuff in the field that does not seem to add up and the not uncommon sense that one has missed important insights, I would argue, are in the nature of fieldwork itself where confusion is often the defining sentiment. Much has been written about fieldwork as a method and about the particular positioning of the researcher as enabling or inhibiting particular findings of various kinds. These discussions, important as they are, are not my focus here. Rather, what I want to focus on here is the nature of ethnography as an ongoing inventive practice, in which Sundt combines what he, aided by informants, sees as a series of distinct features that jointly make, say, the Norwegian house building customs. This is to say that Sundt’s keen interest in traditional building methods and designs is what continuously generates ethnography about these. In consequence, for the kind of analogue analysis I envision to be productive and thoughtful, fieldworkers should not work to identify bias or subjective positions in order to try to eliminate these, as if they could be sieved from raw data. Rather the “biases” of all, understood as particular concerns and intersecting analyses emerging out of conversations and encounters in a domain of sustained interrelation (e.g. between houses from different parts of the country, between Sundt and his interlocutors, or between people and buildings, to name but some), are vital in even generating ethnography and as such valuable sources. In all the quotes from Sundt that I have presented so far, I would not be able to sort the features into his personal interests, empirical facts or analytical findings. All of these elements come together to constitute an analogue field of concern – house building and handicraft customs

– generated along the way as a result of that concern.

One way to go about grappling with such analogically related different observations and analyses working one another is to explore the confusion of ten articulated by the people among whom ethnographers work. To further explore and nurture the notion of analogue analysis occurring in the field conceived as a continuous domain that produces ethnography out of encounters and conversation, I will now turn to some of the ways in which villagers I worked with in south India struggle with and debate some often troubling local customs. If Sundt requested the assistance of (other) house building experts from near and far to correct him and ideally make a coherent picture that adds up to a neat whole, villagers in the coastal town of Tharangambadi do their bit of mathematics to make things – and ends – meet.

### **Ethnographic Quantifications: Discussing what Counts**

Numbers abound in my ethnography from the south Indian coastal village of Tharangambadi, where I have worked intermittently since 2005 (see e.g. Hastrup 2011a). Sometimes they serve as at least momentarily convincing and acceptable attempts to describe and order the world, sometimes they register as confusing or colonizing and call for alternative orderings as countermeasures. To move on with my discussion of ethnography as an inventive conversation that generates a world by combining different features and selecting focal points, in this section I look at quantification as a complex local analytical practice of world-making. As I will show, for people of Tharangambadi quantifying practices work to resist fixed scales of living and to articulate a way to engage with contradictions. Numbers and measurements, in this light, are generative and social devices, rather than straightforward representations of that which is quantified; they can serve as materialized relations (Verran 2010). I take a cue from philosopher of science Helen Verran who states that thinking about numbers in this way “takes them as inseparable from the practices in which enumerated material entities come to life, and as semiotically agential”

(Verran 2012: 112). The issue here is to explore the different practices and discussions of quantifying that appear in the social life of Tharangambadi, by which entities – whether persons, government, voters, gold, village, sugar, state, nature, fish, cyclones or what have you – of the coastal world come to be in light of one another. This relational take makes the quantifications, although perhaps seemingly abstract and transparent, appear as thoroughly ethnographic phenomena occurring in a continuous but complex field – in situ (Verran 2010: 172).

Dwindling fish catches and overexploitation of the marine resources are an immediate concern on the coast of Tamil Nadu, the state where the village of Tharangambadi is located. The issue emerged time and again in my talks with the fishermen, who complain that the sea’s yield has decreased drastically in recent years, most of them blaming the introduction of more efficient fishing equipment and lack of government control mechanisms. The Tamil Nadu state government on its part has implemented schemes to encourage people to do other things than inshore fishing, inciting people to educate themselves or at least diversify their fishing to deep ocean activities, of which tuna fishing is launched and subsidized as a viable option. From a policy note from the Tamil Nadu Fisheries Department, I sense a ring of both alarm and optimism in the face of ever more distressing numbers in the fishing trade. The Fisheries Department states that:

The vast fishery resources of both marine and inland waters have not yet been fully brought under production. The fishery resources in the inshore areas have been overexploited, whereas the offshore resources and deep sea resources are yet to be tapped to the optimum level. The prime responsibility of the Department is to judiciously balance enhanced fish production with sustained conservation of resources as well as to improve the socio-economic standards of the fishing community. (Policy note 2011–2012)

The act of judiciously balancing how to make the most of the stock of the sea for both fish and people

is important here. As a policy note the statement is official, self-confident and sober; yet it articulates a necessity of balancing concerns that might pull in opposite directions. The open question is of course how to enhance life for the fishing communities while not overexploiting the marine resources. This problem leads other numbers to emerge as important. Thus, boys and girls from fishing communities such as that of Tharangambadi who complete 10 and 12 years of schooling, respectively, are rewarded with cash grants, provided that they finish school in the “top rank”. Furthermore, subsidies are provided for fishermen who are willing to shift to offshore fishing, where apparently the resources are yet to be tapped, as expressed in the quote above. All of these government schemes, of which the fishermen often talked, use quantifications of marine resources, water depths, exam marks, financial incitements and the like to intervene into the coastal nature and to create it as a sustainable world in which both fishermen and environment survive. The future of both people and nature is at stake, and accordingly the quantifications are launched with prescriptive authority, as well as invested with a much less assertive measure of hope, aided by calls for collaboration.

The idea of Tamil Nadu being a welfare state is recurrent in the government documents from the various departments and is mirrored in the range of protection projects and services that people in and around Tharangambadi clearly expect the authorities to provide. Along with my field assistant Renuga, a native to Tharangambadi with whom I have worked closely since my first stay in the village and whose company has guided my view of Tharangambadi perhaps more than anything and much to my joy, I went to visit the so-called Government Fair Price Shop on Queen’s Street in Tharangambadi. The shop provides household items for 1,250 registered fishing families, and I learn that according to the state-sanctioned subsidy ration system every fishing family is allowed to buy 500 grams of sugar every month per member of the household at a reduced price; specific quantities of rice, dhal, flour and salt are also offered as subsidized goods from the shop. Even though the rice and other of the goods on offer in the

shop are only “third quality”, as the shop manager expresses it, he and Renuga only think it right that the government takes on itself the responsibility for ensuring that even very poor villagers have enough to eat. The shop manager explains to me how he fills in the customers’ state-issued ration cards by noting down the dates and quantities of any purchase. In the ration shop numbers in the guise of measures of foods, dates and costs of purchases are invoked to bring about a world in which the difference between rich and poor is ideally levelled. Different quantifications, it seems, are invoked to bring about equality in a community otherwise haunted by wildly unequal opportunities. When I ask about it, to Renuga and the shop manager this is clearly the obligation of the state, which must ascribe equal worth to all citizens. Standards of living are at stake, as they tell me. In Renuga’s eyes, however, the success of such levelling exercises is threatened by their very practice. The more well-off fishermen, she suspects, will soon turn to what she terms the open market to buy food there at much higher prices, “just because they can. It’s a prestige issue,” as she says, reminding me again that I must remember that Tharangambadi is a very small town. This, she and the shop manager agrees, will humiliate and ultimately discriminate the poor people who will still have to count on the government shops to eat. In Renuga’s and the shopkeeper’s words, for all their interventionist objectives of equating differences, the subsidized quantities of basic foods might further exacerbate inequalities in the (inescapably) interrelated continuous domain of Tharangambadi.

People in the village cannot always rely on the state to intervene to muster hope or to try to ensure equal opportunities and protection of people under its authority. In the state elections in March 2011, formal democratic procedure had proved a threat to Renuga’s family and other households in the village; the clear majority of the fishing families voted for the party that eventually won the election, but after the counting of votes a list was issued by the fisherman village council, naming 32 households including Renuga’s where people had voted for the largest opposition party. For a short while, and obviously

much to their distress, these listed families became fair game around the village, harassed by rowdy young fishermen who threw rocks, intimidated Renuga's daughters, and assaulted her husband. For a time, the list of the 32 named households, compiled on the basis of an alleged count of votes given in the otherwise secret ballot, created a menacing world causing Renuga's twin daughters to miss out on important classes at their college, because they were too frightened to leave the house. At one point there was even talk of excluding the families from the community; a rare sanction seen as appropriate only for the most severe violations of community customs. Little by little the anger and fear subsided, in part I suspect due to Renuga's ability, which I have witnessed many times, to smooth things over and her skilful navigation among her neighbours. Though still a little shaken when we discussed the election, things seem to have returned to normal. Reflecting on the experience, Renuga explained that the right to vote freely had worked as a double-edged sword, as neighbours had all too literally taken election campaigning into their own violent hands instead of engaging in peaceful democratic discussion.

On the whole, at the time of my fieldwork, counting and numbers seemed to play quite a big role in Renuga's life, registering as turbulence as in the case of the election time, or spurring social commentary as in the case of the ration shop. In fact, counting is also what provides part of Renuga's income. Her part-time job at a local school in Tharangambadi consists in overseeing the implementation of a government scheme for nutritious noon meals for all children in primary schools all over the state. Based on the carefully maintained records of the numbers of school days and of children attending, specific quantities of rice and dhal are allotted to the school, registered by Renuga and administered to the school's cook. Several times during my fieldworks, I have joined her at work on the two days a week when the children line up to be given a boiled egg at lunch time to raise the protein count in the diet.

Sometimes, however, people like Renuga are left to their own devices if they want to intervene against perceived unfair or unhealthy numbers and stand-

ards that collide with held values and with ideas about what can even be quantified. Lowering her voice slightly for the daughters not to hear us, Renuga tells me about yet another rise in the world market price of gold. We have often talked about gold during my fieldworks, and I know the metal weighs heavily on many people in Tharangambadi. The cost per gram of gold is announced daily on TV on the Tamil channels, and much to Renuga's worry the day had added to the price, amounting to a staggering 2,200 rupees for one gram. To her, gold is a present and pressing currency; the cost of it often seems a rock solid measure imposing on her world. For as long as I have known her, Renuga has put money aside to place in gold, and several times I have accompanied her to a trusted goldsmith in a nearby town where she keeps a kind of account measured in carats and grams. Her twin daughters were born in 1992 and a younger daughter was born in 2000, and within a foreseeable future she is likely to have to arrange for the marriages of the older girls to be settled. For the time being, the prospect of this looms, and none of the members of the family much like to talk about it.

On the day Renuga tells me about the alarming rise of the price of gold, the twins are in the room next to the hallway where we are, and I can hear the consistent murmur of their memorizing and discussing the homework for the next day's college class in the neighbouring village of Porayar. Disconcerted, Renuga tells me that in spite of widespread opposition to it, as well as of an official ban on the custom of dowry enacted by the Indian Federal Government in 1961, unsaid rules in the fishing villages now prescribe that the parents of the bride procure at least 200 grams of pure gold jewels as a kind of insurance, just as they are expected to provide the groom and his family with various other expensive goods, often a motorcycle and new furnishings for the home, before the marriage can be settled. Giving up on the maths of multiplying the price of gold with grams and number of daughters halfway, Renuga shakes her head and questions how on earth this has become the order of the day. She tells me about the sense that to her it is wildly unfair that such almost insurmountable financial burden should be put on



parents of girls, and that the families of boys are free to make such a business out of their sons. What is worse, Renuga elaborates, is the implicit translation of human worth into economic value. As she tells me, the gold standard as an objective measurement of value ought not to apply to people.

Many of the boys' families, according to Renuga, share her opinion and agree that the custom is unjust and creates inequalities between families. This, too, is talk of the town. If this is so, I ask naïvely, would there be no chance of finding families who are willing to give up the claim of dowry and agree on marriage free of charge, as it were. "No chance, it's a prestige problem," Renuga says. Elaborating she goes on to tell me that before, when fishing families were poorer than they generally are today, dowry was not such a big issue, "but today with more money around, the families will demand and provide the dowry just because they can," Renuga says, again shaking her head at the apparent paradox. The boys' families, she explains, will simply be embarrassed if word gets out that they have relented on the claim for dowry; people will think that something is wrong with the groom. Often, people I talked to during fieldwork would express frustration with being locked into this pervasive order of specifying the value of people, while knowing very well and indeed agreeing that human worth cannot be captured in economic terms; to people like Renuga such gold standard appears as both absolute and oppressive and arbitrary and plainly wrong.

However, all hopes of circumventing the force of noble metal are not gone for Renuga and her daughters. On the day of discussing the most recent rise in the price of gold, the twins are in their final year of college, both completing a degree in mathematics. All three of them now place all possible effort into the course work, putting countless hours of work into their books, the girls getting up long before dawn to study, rehearse and repeat the calculations and results. So far the effort has been recognized, the twins ranking a shared first in their class in most of the tests. This, they hope and explicitly say, might pave their way to scholarships for further studies. Less explicitly, at least in the words of the girls, fur-

ther studies and academic degrees just might postpone or somehow divert them from the concern with finding suitable spouses and sufficient funds. Faced with the overwhelming demand of resources to ensure the daughters' marital futures, Renuga and the girls work hard to generate an alternative world of numbers, entailing math degrees and top exam marks, as a possible way of outwitting the gold standard.

### **Analogue Analysis and Contingent Fields: A Revisit**

In the two previous sections I have addressed how Sundt, the readers of "Friend of the People", amateur archaeologists, Renuga, Tamil shopkeepers and officials among others, attempt to portray, explore, analyse and indeed inhabit a liveable world, even though at face value things do not necessarily add up to a coherent or complete picture, at least not immediately. It may seem odd to combine the nineteenth century encouragement from Sundt to his fellow Norwegians to join in and supplement his analysis of houses and artisanal crafts across the country with, say, the twenty-first century discussions between Renuga and the ration shop manager about whether subsidized food meets its intended purpose in rural Tamil Nadu. There is a conflation of levels, it would seem, the example of Sundt addressing a tension between analysis as both complete and provisional; the Indian material being a discussion of how to balance contradicting features of village life. However, my point here is exactly to collapse what might appear as a theoretical or methodological problem in the first case and as a set of empirical findings in the other case – in order to qualify ethnography as inventive and as a creative juxtaposition of different features within one uninterrupted domain – and thus to perform analogue analysis. If, indeed, ethnography is a collaborative activity that brings non self-identical worlds to life through the analytical interrelating of different elements, it is perfectly possible to suggest that Sundt's ambivalence as to whether he can fully capture or even improve the well-being of the Norwegians by mapping housing customs is in an analogue relation to for instance Renuga's discus-

sion about the widely acknowledged unfairness of the demand for gold as dowry. The continuous domain, if nothing else, that has these features working on one another, is my discussion of ethnography as relational and inventive analyses of unfolding life.

What is important here is that ethnography – the product of all who care to join the conversation about a particular concern – becomes both an empirical and a theoretical pursuit quite simply because of its inherent incompleteness and because it cannot map, count or classify the world from the outside and definitively. This of course has the effect that the distinction between theory and empirical material makes little sense – in any event ethnography comprises both a subject matter (housing, gold, hard-boiled eggs or whatever) and comments on what it means to do so by engaging contradictory scales at once. The reading of Sundt, the selection of the quantifying practices, and my recognition of Renuga's vital analytical contribution to my work in Tharangambadi are obviously conscious and partial choices on my part, not to argue that Eilert Sundt, Renuga and I are basically out to do the same or that we see the world similarly. Rather, by combining these bits and pieces I mean to perform the conflation of theory and empirical matter that I take ethnography to be about, when seen as someone's combination of different features working on one another in an inventive and indefinite conversation. By deliberately making what appears like a far-fetched connection between analytical work from different centuries, from far-apart places, and articulated in different genres, I am highlighting that all ethnography entails such combinatory efforts and ongoing processing, given less by empirical circumstances than by particular analytical perspectives. Fieldwork, accordingly, is just that – a *work* in which the fieldworker must argue for the connections she makes in a world that does not provide settled entities and obvious relations between them.

Consider, for instance, that the local quantifications played out in and around Tharangambadi are not just engaged with as given objective scales of numbers which are then applied to the world with greater or lesser accuracy. The externally given,

and in Renuga's eyes colonizing, nature of the gold standard, is exactly the reason why it appears unacceptable as a definite working measure in social life and has to be challenged. Thus, rather than expressing imported and fixed scales coming from outside, the local quantifications create their own measurements provisionally and by way of encounters with other measurements in the very process of quantifying. This is also how I have attempted to read Sundt – not as measured against any established position as central (or peripheral, for that matter) in ethnology, but as someone who is also discussing what to make of interlocutors' analyses.

In light of this, one might understand the local quantifications that I met in Tharangambadi as practices of consciously shifting between different scales or perspectives to make their contingent nature apparent (cf. Strathern [1994]2004; Holbraad & Pedersen 2009). Let me for a minute look closer at this suggestion through Renuga's discussions of gold prices and marks in mathematics. If, in her world-making by numbers, Renuga can be said to grapple with her daughters' futures she does so through different coexisting scales, seeing her twins' future opportunities in more than one perspective at the same time. Putting her money in gold and encouraging her daughters to pursue further studies are at first glance contradictory strategies, based on two different ways of charting the twins' possibilities. What I want to suggest here is that Renuga's complex practice of scaling, with its inbuilt contradictory logic, is in itself an inventive ethnographic account of a feature of life in Tharangambadi, demonstrating that the here and now can take off in any which direction and does not comply with a settled measure. The numberings she articulates make a local social world appear, in which girls can be valued both as future wives in terms of gold and as potential scholars in terms of college marks, and because of the very coexistence of these two scales, quantification reveals itself as generative of a social world rather than evaluative or representative. The gold does not measure the girls' worth in any objective way, any more than their marks do, but both – and logically many other – scales play a part in Renuga's process-

ing of how to envision a future and tell the visiting fieldworker about it. This is to say that her quantifications (and those of the other counting people I engage with here) articulate empirical description as well as analysis, imposing order and enabling protest, and as such the quantifications produce rather than reduce complexity. In that sense, Renuga's intervention by quantification does not just reside in the fact that she works to shift the balance from the alarming and uncontrollable price of gold to more controllable academic ambition, but equally in the fact that she generates a complex and indefinite local world on the basis of her analytical work. The (more or less achievable) shift from focusing on gold prices to focusing on marks in mathematics is thus not just a matter of finding a more suitable and more representative measure for her daughters' futures, it is equally a refusal to let any scale appear as absolute and as an abstract external yardstick.

As Holbraad and Pedersen have remarked, "for scales to be able to measure things they have to be more abstract than them" (2009: 378), and it is this kind of abstraction that Renuga circumvents by leaving no scale unchallenged exactly because it is, after all, just a scale that must incorporate the existence of other scales and things unaccounted for. What I argue here is that this is a prime instance of a refusal to live by digital standards, where discrete entities have a fixed value. Renuga knows only too well that the contingency and indeed emergencies of social life cannot be kept in check by such settlements.

Now, what does all this mean for the project of revisiting previously published ethnological work? My point here has been to explore the mileage offered by an approach to ethnography that takes seriously Sundt's encouraging others to join in the ongoing analytical work and that foregrounds the continuous nature of Renuga's analytical engagement with complex and even contradictory scales of living. I thus use the notion of ethnography as a product of analogue analysis to argue that, in principle, no one can possibly complete her own analysis. This, of course, has nothing to do with me assessing the analytical skills of Sundt, Renuga, myself or anyone else, but with a general claim about ethnographic

knowledge as inevitably social and continuous. This point is vital for thinking about how a revisit to the work of Sundt and others can be paid and what it might yield. I have purposely not wanted to evaluate Sundt's findings on any subject matter against a present scholarly yardstick or to understand his work in its contemporary context, nor have I in any way attempted to portray Sundt's work as a coherent (or incoherent) oeuvre seen and read from a different domain. This would lead us straight back to the issue of representation and thus reinstall binaries, such as then/now, theory/empirical observation. What I wanted to do is to extend the notion of the field to also include, say, periodicals from nineteenth-century Norway – if, indeed, arguing for ethnography as a conversational inventive practice of addressing how to live and think with others is the main purpose. This implies that the field of any study is always carved out from a here and now and on the basis of a particular partial interest – in this case an inquiry into what ethnography might be. This is not, I would think, a controversial claim, but for thinking about revisits to former works of ethnology it is significant, because a focus on the partiality of fieldwork orchestrates revisits ethnographically, whereby revisits (like ethnography) cannot ever be complete. If inconsistency and unfixed scales feature in the field sites I explore, why would analyses – contemporary or historical – that explore these fields ever be seen as congealed into a uniform and settled fund? If revisits to founding figures in ethnology are productive, it is in my opinion not so much because we can classify earlier work under some heading or other, or read them as context or period pictures, with a view to either endorsing (...Sundt's admiration of Norwegian handicraft) or rejecting (...his evolutionist tendencies). Rather than such evaluation by hindsight or perhaps contextualization, a revisit is interesting because it adds new perspectives and questions to the here and now of any analytical undertaking – whether these emerge from talking with Renuga or from reading Sundt.

In consequence of these thoughts on the inventive nature of ethnography as explored through the analogue relation I have crafted between the very differ-

ent work of Sundt and my discussions with Renuga, ethnographic work becomes what might be called a montage-like practice, adding to rather than depicting a world of complexity. On the notion and effect of montage-like ethnography, Suhr and Willerslev have stated:

[S]trange things happen when two elements are brought together in montage. Never is the result simply the sum of the single components. Something extra, a surplus or an excess is always produced. This “extra” speaks back to the elements and produces a state of generative instability, where each part transforms and takes on new shapes within the wider constellation. (Suhr & Willerslev 2013: 1)

In the case at hand, I would like this surplus to be the idea that ethnography is ever about inventing liveable worlds by way of analogue conversation between different elements, voices and features. Although it may sound strange, I thus think that an interesting revisit is a matter of reading previous works as though they were different from themselves. Just as Renuga employs contradictory scales of measuring and charting her daughters’ success, Sundt is here invoked in a conversation which transcends his time.

I like to think of ethnography as a motor for probing how things have come together in particular settings or fields of interest, and thereby as implicitly showing how things could have been and can be otherwise. Inventions rather than accumulation or meeting minutes, then, are what ethnography provides. Might this also be a way to read the classics? Do we miss out on important findings – such as the fact the researchers inclined to think in terms of cumulative natural scientific classification can still be humble and need assistance in their endeavours – if we relegate classical ethnological studies to a separate domain of, well, classics, each fitting into a school of thought? Would such a labelling not go against the very gist of ethnology, seen as an impulse to explore the contingent nature of social life?

Readers might object, saying, can anything be read as selectively? Does it really make sense to say

that one conducts fieldwork in the texts of predecessor ethnologists? Or that Renuga is performing ethnographic work? And can any experiences and observations across times and places be combined, however disparate? Well, I for one would not want to police what can or cannot be brought into analogue interrelation. If, indeed, ethnology is a project about unsettled world-making processes that sees these as generated socially by people, ethnologists included, one basic ambition must be to keep curiosity alive, meaning that, yes, in principle I see no limit to what can be suggested, compared, juxtaposed, combined for the purposes of generating a field of a particular and occasional concern.

Ways of living with the knowledge that alternative ways are (logically, if not always actually) possible are what ethnography provides; theory, accordingly, must be equally accommodating of what is not already known and mapped, enabling analogue interrelation to do its thing. In fact, Sundt teaches us as much, and I end this article with his modest celebration of the curiosity that ethnographic scholarship might be all about:

I have also come to think that it would amuse the inhabitants of the Norwegian wooden houses at some point to see how the art of building wood houses has developed in Sweden, Russia and Switzerland. (Sundt 1862: § 50)<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The original quotes in Norwegian/Danish are provided in the notes. All translations are by the author. “Skoleholder Holger Njelsen til Asminderup i Odsherred, havde til Biskop Mynter indsendt en smuk og med Zirater forsynet metalskive, som formodes at have været anbragt på et Skiold, der er fundet tillige med mange flere i en Mose ved Høiby. Skoleholderen takkes ved et Brev bedes at være opmærksom naar attes skjeres Tørv i denne Mose og efter Omstændighederne ville Commissionen tilstå Finderen en passende Douceur naar noget mærkværdigt fandtes” (Oldsagskommissionens Mødeprotokol 1807–1848: 268).
- 2 “At få fremstillet landets eller landsbygdernes bygnings-skik, det anser jeg for en sag af ikke så aldeles ringe national betydning, og mit arbejde var ingenlunde opgaven voxent; men jeg tænkte, at om jeg turde lade det trykke i Folkevennen, så kunde jeg få bistand

til med tiden at gøre et nyt og bedre forsøg. Hver skrivkyndig mand kan yde mig bistand. En skolelærer eller bondemand f.ex. i Vegusdals sogn vil kunde sende mig oplysning om, hvorvidt jeg på hans kant har truffet det rette med hensyn til den mandalske stueforms udbredelse, om den nemlig er at se eller mindes at have været i brug i det nævnte sogn (...) Enhver sætersdøl, som måtte vide om et ildhus, der er beboet eller står igjen i uforandret stand fra den tid, det var beboet, vilde høilig glæde mig ved meddelelse derom (...) Folk, som kunde tegne, bygmestere og andre, vilde gjøre mig særdeles forbunden ved at sende mig rids og tegninger af huse, husgeråd osv” (Sundt 1862: § 50).

- 3 Man forstår altså, at mit arbejde er blevet til i modsætning til den trykkende mening og knugende påstand om almuernes ringe begreb og foretagsomhed. I Søndfjord kunde det fornøje mig, bare jeg så en flis udfor husvæggen, som mindede om det flittige arbejde med sildetønder der indenfor. Og om indberetningerne fra bygderne bleve aldrig så lange, så morede det mig dog linie for linie at se den mangeartede flid og opfindsomhed opregnet. Jo mere jeg spejdede og stirrede, des mere så jeg af seirende flid og af udvortes hindringer og vanskeligheder, som man har havt at beseire, og som det endnu står tilbage at vinde bugt med” (Sundt 1867–1868: preface).
- 4 “Mange af disse ere medlemmer af Selskabet for Folkeoplysningens Fremme, så de altså både kunne se og rette manglerne i min fremstilling, og de skulle ikke tage det ilde op, at Folkevennen bestræber sig for at få opklaret ting, der stå i så nær sammenhæng med folkelivets historie og med folkets vel, som bygnings-skikken i landet” (Sundt 1862: § 50).
- 5 “De, som have forsøgt sig i forfatterskab, kjende til, hvorledes det har sig: man kommer gjerne til at bruge så mange ord, når man ikke har rigtig herredømme over stoffet. Hefte for hefte kom jeg til at opfatte et og andet anderledes end fra først af (...) og idelig havde jeg med ting at gjøre, hvor jeg måtte ligesom famle mig frem med mine utilstrækkelige iagttagelser og erindringer” (Sundt 1862: § 50).
- 6 “Det har jeg også tænkt mig, at det skulde more de norske træhuses beboere ved leilighed at få se, hvorledes træbygnings-kunsten har udviklet sig i Sverige, Rusland og Sveits” (Sundt 1862: § 50).

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