



Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

Book Review

Review of Gamburd, Michele Ruth. 2020. *Linked Lives: Elder Care, Migration and Kinship in Sri Lanka*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. pp. 206. Price: \$120 (Hardcover); \$34.95 (Paperback, eBook).

Irina Kretser

Saint Petersburg State University
i.kretser@spbu.ru

Anthropology & Aging, Vol 42, No 2 (2021), pp. 183-185

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2021.372



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

Book Review

Review of Gamburd, Michele Ruth. 2020. *Linked Lives: Elder Care, Migration and Kinship in Sri Lanka*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. pp. 206. Price: \$120 (Hardcover); \$34.95 (Paperback, eBook).

Irina Kretser

Saint Petersburg State University
kretser@spbu.ru

What does it mean to care for elderly parents in a changing world where traditions and new challenges collide? *Linked Lives* by Michele Gamburd provides fascinating insights into elderly care practices in a Sri Lankan Buddhist village, presented in the book under the pseudonym 'Naeagama.' Naeagama has a symbolic meaning and can be translated to 'village of relatives.' This well-chosen pseudonym reflects not only the intertwined lives of people in Naeagama, which are the focus of the book but also reveals Gamburd's affinity with the village where her mother also conducted research and where she herself lived as a child for some time. The connecting thread between Gamburd and her informants and between the past and the present is Siri, a long-time research associate of both Gamburd and her mother. This book about kinship and care is dedicated to her mother, who died in 2014, and Siri, who died in 2018.

The book is divided into nine chapters, each of them—except the first and last chapters—dealing with particular forms of care or issues concerned with it. Chapter 2 discusses norms and practices of family life in Sri Lanka and especially marriage and inheritance patterns, Dravidian kinship terminology, and the principle of reciprocal intergenerational obligations. While the book begins with discussing the widespread issues of transnational care in Chapter 3, the focus then shifts to how care practices are inextricably woven into social, economic, and cultural contexts. Chapters 4 and 5 reveal inheritance patterns and emphasize the meaning of the ancestral home for social reproduction. Chapter 6 sheds light on issues of health, illness, and the aging of bodies in the context of Western discourses of successful aging and its Buddhist interpretations. Nursing homes as examples of institutionalized care and Naeagama attitudes towards them as a "cloud of shame" (121) are further explored in Chapter 7. Finally, Buddhist religious beliefs and their impact on the care for living and deceased relatives is discussed in Chapter 8. The entire book conveys the effects of a particularly interesting methodological approach used by Gamburd in her ethnographic research. Understanding the sensitivity of the topics discussed, Gamburd did not prefer direct questions but rather the method of hypothetical scenarios, which allowed informants to express themselves more freely. The scenarios presented certain stories about caring for the elderly, and the informants were asked how they would act in a situation and why.

The issue of a 'sandwich generation' caught between transnational migration and the persistent cultural expectations concerned with filial duties is raised in Chapter 3. A 'sandwich generation' refers to middle-aged individuals, who care for both their children and their elderly parents. Gamburd

emphasizes that filial obligations are deeply rooted in a generalized reciprocity, which implies that “children are debtors” (4): Parents care for children and then adult children ‘return’ to care for elderly parents. Consequently, members of a sandwich generation often find themselves in a vulnerable situation. When migration—or just working outside the home—does not allow them to provide day-to-day care for their parents, this prevents them from living up to cultural expectations, while money and the financial stability of the family matters just as much. So, negotiation between caring obligation and financial support starts, and extended family comes to the fore. Gamburd observes that “unemployed relatives or poor servants step in to help women in the sandwich generation to fulfill their filial duties. Families distribute responsibilities between able-bodied adults so as to retain financial stability while simultaneously providing the care required for children and elders” (56). The distinction between care by kinsmen and care by market proxies is relevant here. While the former is ascribed, the latter is stigmatized because it reflects ruptures in the family fabric that cannot provide enough relatives to perform the necessary caring duties. As Gamburd mentions in Chapter 7, institutionalized care, such as nursing homes, similarly indicates a violation of traditional care practice, but, paradoxically, it is poverty that can force families to opt for this solution. As one of the informants, housepainter Perera, mentioned:

“If you can’t afford to feed someone, then by putting them in a free facility, you are taking care of them. You are sending them somewhere where they can eat! Sometimes it is like a punishment to put someone in an old folks’ home. But sometimes it’s a necessity” (124).

Gamburd highlights that the space of social reproduction of the family is the family ancestral home or *maha gedera*. When people live in one place for generations, land, home, family, and identity are tightly interwoven: “in other words, ‘Where is your *maha gedera*?’ is another way of asking someone, ‘Who are you?’” (80). The house reflects not only social status and wealth of the family but also displays the quality of relationships among relatives. For example, empty houses indicate a violation of the social reproduction of the family and of regular practices of elderly care. As Chapter 5 clearly demonstrates, the house, care for older adults, the continuity of family life, and migration are closely linked; whereas due to ‘ultimogeniture’—a common pattern of inheritance of property in Naeaegama—the youngest son traditionally inherits the house and takes up the duty of caring for the elderly in it, migration now involves selling the house, migrating to bigger cities or other countries, and outsourcing elderly care to professionals or other family members.

In Chapter 6, Gamburd analyzes aging bodies as objects of care. In Naeaegama, the fear of losing the ability to feed, bathe, and go to the toilet independently, induces talks about the preference of a quick death. The paradox here is that quick death can put chains of care in jeopardy:

“When an elder dies suddenly, the loss leaves survivors feeling that they have not had the opportunity to reciprocate care that they have received in the past. The sudden death of an older relative may leave entrustments unfulfilled and debts unpaid” (106).

Care for aging bodies by relatives can be manifested through social constructions surrounding smell. Therefore, idioms of smell are used to talk about norms and practices of care. Whereas ‘getting/not getting smell’ means providing day-to-day care/evading it, the phrase ‘there was no smell’ indicates appropriate and high quality care work. The ability to take care of someone else also continues to matter for older people themselves. For example, Siri’s aunt, Padma, was very upset about her inability to treat guests with food, because this reflected a rupture in important social rituals due to infirmity of the body.

In contrast to Western discourses of successful aging, Buddhist interpretations of aging well assume the inevitability of aging and death. One of the informants, Dustin, said that “because people are afraid, they die quickly,” so death should not be feared, death should be “owned” (102). The next quote from Chapter 8 illustrates this attitude to dying well poignantly.

From the kitchen, Telsie called Siri to come help, and as he came by me typing at the dining table, he grumbled loudly, “I don’t know why some days I don’t just die like Helga did.” “Don’t be afraid; you will (indeed) die!” Telsie replied tartly from the other room. Instead of assuring him he would be fine, she assured him that he was going to die. (149)

Given that, appropriate end-of-life and after-death care and rituals matter greatly in Naeaegama. After-death care includes regular almsgivings which aim at future rebirth of deceased relative.

This rich, insightful, and very personal ethnography provides an essential guide to issues concerned with Sri Lankan elderly care and social reproduction of the family in the context of transforming society and can be recommended to a diverse audience.