Cocoon Communities

Cocoon Communities: Togetherness in the 21st Century

Edited by

Mari Korpela and Fred Dervin

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING

Cocoon Communities: Togetherness in the 21st Century,
Edited by Mari Korpela and Fred Dervin

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4242-7, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4242-6

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

FRED DERVIN AND MARI KORPELA

The Cacophony around Community

Community still seems to be a fashionable and meaningful word today although an increasing number of scholars claim that communities are threatened by globalisation and hypermodernity (see e.g. Dyck 2002: 106). A few examples:

The national Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, organized in 2011 a competition to determine the best housing organization in Finland. The reason for such a competition was the common concern that people do not know their neighbours in modern urban environments as a consequence of which, they are alienated from each other. The winners lived in a block of flats where the residents had created their own "community" around fun social events, recycling together and helping each other out in the practical issues of everyday life.

Public discourses in the same context are also very concerned about the problems of the alienated youth and the lonely elderly and it is often stated that if there were communal care for each other, these problems would vanish.

Vered Amit, an anthropologist who has written extensively on contemporary communities, also starts her 2012 book by mentioning that a single issue of her daily newspaper in Montreal contains dozens of references to "community".

Moreover, those who have chosen downshifting and/or lifestyle migration often claim that an important characteristic for the better life that they have found, is the meaningful, intimate and caring communal relations in opposition to the alienated and instrumental relations of the life they have left behind.

The above-mentioned discourses and images of community are often conveyed by the media and people's everyday talk as solutions to various social problems in our contemporary societies. In addition, people seem to find communal belonging personally significant – for example, people gather together in neighbourhood organisations and they form communities

around shared interests or hobbies. They also seem to find these communal belongings emotionally rewarding and many invest much time and energy in them.

In research, community is still very much present too. When we launched a call for articles for this book proposing the expression *Cocoon Communities* as its main emphasis, we received dozens of proposals. This could be an indication that, in addition to media-talk about communities and many individuals considering communal belonging important in their lives, many scholars are (still) working with the concept. Yet publishing a book that contains the word "community" in its title may sound somewhat surprising today. There are several reasons for that.

The concept has been dealt with in, amongst others, sociology, anthropology, social psychology and psychology, in the last decades and attempts to work with it often appear quite discouraging (Anderson 1983; Cohen 1985; Maffesoli 1996; Putnam 2000; Bauman 2001; Amit 2002a; Brubaker 2007; Augé 2010). Community is often described as a particularly vague term. As Cohen puts it: "Community has never been a term of lexical precision, though much tedious work has been dedicated to the fruitless effort to so render it" (Cohen 2002: 165). For Gerd Baumann (1996: 14), community has had "a decidedly bad press" among academics. In the collected volume *Realizing Community* Vered Amit, the editor, seems to share these doubts about the "cacophony" around this "ostensibly hackneyed" concept (2002a: 1). She writes (ibid.: 1): "it is difficult to discern much in the way of coherence among the multitude of definitions, descriptions and claims of community which occur in quotidian conversation as well as within a variety of scholarly work". Nigel Rapport sees the concept as an un-scientific folk notion; according to him, it is too ubiquitous and too presumptive (Rapport 2012: 211).

Other concepts which are often used interchangeably with community in daily or research discourses are also being questioned. This is the case, amongst others, of "group". Rogers Brubaker, in a book called *Ethnicity Without Groups* (2007: 7), argues that "group" functions as a seemingly unproblematic, taken-for-granted concept, apparently in no need of particular scrutiny or explication. As a result, we tend to take for granted not only the concept "group," but also "groups". In a similar manner, the concept of community is often taken as unproblematic and for granted.

So why insist on talking about communities and propose the notion of Cocoon Communities if the term "has never been a term of lexical precision" (Cohen supra) and appears in a sense to be worn-out?

Do We Need a New Term?

Both the conceptualisations and the empirical forms of communities have changed during the decades. The current understandings of communities have moved far from the old sociological theories of ideal types, that is, Tönnies's (1887) concept of *Gemeinschaft*/community and *Gesellschaft*/society or Durkheim's (1893) terms of *mechanical* and *organic solidarity.* In 1983, Benedict Anderson wrote about "imagined communities" and in 1985, Anthony Cohen introduced the term "symbolic community". Both concepts are widely used but also criticised.

Many scholars have offered substitutes to decipher today's "togetherness", which have guided our understanding and definition of Cocoon Community: amongst others, *tribes* and *être-ensemble* (Maffesoli 1996) and peg-communities (Bauman 2004). Maffesoli's or Bauman's analyses of our times reveal that new types of communities are becoming discernible. Bauman defines peg-communities as (2004: 31) communities "formed by hanging individual concerns on a common 'peg' for a short period of time". This neologism represents an attempt to grasp and express many of the metaphors used in research to refer to "groups of people".

For Maffesoli (1996: 75) the "efflorescence and effervescence of neo-tribalism" is related to the fact that these groups of people, "refuse to identify with any political projects whatsoever, to subscribe to any sort of finality" (ibid.). He adds that the group members' "sole *raison d'être* is a preoccupation with the collective present" (ibid.). The sociologist (1993: 13-14) gives the following examples of what he calls "affectual tribes" (ibid.), i.e. an organized or unintentional grouping of individuals based on (short-term) emotional attachments: religious, linguistic and "ethnic" groups that are attempting to "revive" their "heritage"; sport, musical and festive events (Live Aid; Live Earth); certain forms of public solidarity and generosity (Telethon); sports clubs, office friends, fans and hobbyists. Even though Maffesoli first conceptualized his neo-tribes as non-political, in his book *La crise est dans nos têtes (The crisis is in our heads,* 2011), he talks about the "Occupy" anti-capitalism protests of the early 2010s (Occupy Wall Street in New York or the "Indignants" in Spain or Hong Kong). Sociodigital technologies such as Facebook and Twitter also represent examples of such "affectual tribes" as their users navigate from one site to another, identifying with others in the process (Coutant and Stenger 2011).

At first sight, such entities do not seem to have much in common with everyday understandings of communal characteristics where individuals support and care for each other; for Maffesoli, they represent a "mix of

indifference and momentary energy" (1996: 29). Yet a closer look might reveal some substantial similarities with our usual understanding and representation of 'canonical' forms of community.

In this book, we introduce the term Cocoon Community to add to these discussions and apply it to various empirical realities. Our aim is to develop conceptualisations of and discussion on communities based on contemporary empirical phenomena. About a decade ago, Anthony Cohen contended that "'community' had become a way of designating that *some*thing is shared among a group of people at a time when we no longer assume that *any*thing is necessarily shared" (Cohen 2002: 168-9, italics in original). This is the starting point also for our understanding of communities but we want to develop it further.

A First Attempt at Defining Cocoon Communities

By Cocoon Communities we refer to communities that are somewhat more concrete than Maffesoli's neo-tribes or Bauman's peg-communities and at the same time not strict ideal-types like those described by early sociologists. We are trying to grasp empirical realities that are not merely momentary and passing but, at the same time, not binding and ever-lasting either.

We claim that Cocoon Communities gather around a specific purpose, around imaginaries or for contextual reasons, predominantly on a short-term basis, be it within national boundaries, abroad, transnationally or online. It is, however, important to note that members of Cocoon Communities may experience also long-term togetherness; Cocoon Communities are not necessarily short-lived although they are not viewed as "eternal" either.

Furthermore, members usually view communal belonging as emotionally rewarding. Cocoon Communities are often highly significant for the members: they may have shared – even very strong – discourses and practices. Yet, they are not binding: members may leave the community if they so wish. A significant characteristic of Cocoon Communities is thus their voluntary and informal nature.

International students, seasonal workers, expatriates, individuals online, amongst others, represent examples of the Cocoon Communities that are described in this volume. The various empirical examples show that people search for communal belonging in very diverse contexts. We hope the concept of Cocoon Communities captures the nature of many contemporary communities that are significant for the members but often remain invisible or insignificant for outsiders. In this volume, our goal is

not to "patent" a nice-looking and appealing phrase[1] but to try to grasp a phenomenon which seems to be quite widespread and manifold. By using a phrase that is also used by some research participants, we hope to start from "real-life" experiences rather than imposing our own views on a phenomenon. Besides, by using the metaphor of a cocoon, we agree with Michel Maffesoli (1985: 82) that these "soft pieces of information" should be taken seriously by us researchers and not just discarded as "unscientific". The various empirical examples in this book provide us with a base on which to elaborate on the theoretical aspects of the concept of "community". If in the media and in the everyday discourse, communities are seen as solutions to many contemporary social problems and many individuals long for communal belonging, we want to carefully investigate what kind of communities are actually formed and 'alive' in our contemporary worlds. We feel that the current parlance on communities does not seem to lead very far and leaves us somewhat dissatisfied with what is actually happening and talked about in research.

Demarcating Cocoon Communities

A few words about the term *cocoon* are needed here. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, the origin of the word is from the French word *cocon* which means an eggshell or a cocoon. The dictionary mentions two main meanings: "a. a silky case spun by the larvae of many insects for protection as pupae" (but figuratively "also something that envelops someone in a protective or comforting way"); "b. a covering that prevents the corrosion of metal equipment". The metaphor is interesting as it corresponds to many analyses of "sentiments of community" (how people feel about their "group(s)"): protection and comfort. The image of the cocoon relates thus also to Amit's idea of the visceral nature of community or the "emotional feeling of relatedness" (2002a: 16).

The phrase *Cocoon Community* is an oxymoron as it assembles two terms that are in a sense very much contradictory: cocoons are usually individual matters (one insect per cocoon in most cases; yet, there are a few instances of insects' collective cocooning such as the African processionary moth) while a community is composed of more than two people. Yet we feel that such an oxymoron symbolizes well the sort of ambivalence that is contained in the concept of community today.

[1] A search on Google returned several references to the term Cocoon Community, which referred to digital technological artefacts and groups of people working on/with technology.

Although, on the one hand, communities are called for as solutions to several social problems, on the other hand many researchers, analysts or public figures – but also in a sense people on the streets – argue that we have become individualists and that we do not need communities anymore. In his analyses of "postmodern tribes" Maffesoli (1996) questions this argument, asserting that the idea of community has never mattered as much as in our postmodern times. As such the argument of increased individualism in the postmodern times is quite surprising as it has actually now become a truism in research to say that a social being cannot live, exist or have an identity without an other. As such community has a strong link with other central concepts used to talk about sociality: identity/difference, social affiliations, self and other, etc. (Jovchelovitch 2007: 73) and even though it is imprecise and "hackneyed" (to borrow Amit's word) we feel that it can still help to tackle these issues, especially if we make a conscious effort to move away from essentialising understandings of togetherness.

By carefully investigating several empirical examples in this volume, we want to avoid the essentialising uses of the concept. This is why we agree with Rita Dhamoon (2009: 5) who underlines the importance of working on communities as both products and sites of meaning-making. Following her advice, we want to suggest that Cocoon Communities be considered as proper "contributors to the politics of identity/difference" (ibid.) as they are central in making identification occur: again, it is with and through the Other that people construct who they are. Communities are, however, much more than merely points of identification with which people are able to distinguish themselves from others.

Demarcating Cocoon Communities also means that we need to move beyond two stereotypical ideas on communities that are quite prevalent in both research and media discourses.

Some scholars like Gerd Baumann (1996) have argued that the word community tends to be used to refer to the "Other", the "non-Western", especially in the over-recycled but flawed dichotomy of holism ("non-Western", traditional) and individualism (modern, "Western"). Such a dichotomy is highly problematic. Several examples have been given on such misuses of the word. For example, in his examination of Japanese history, Emmanuel Lozerand (2010) shows how biased this idea is and that individualism has been as frequent in Japan as in e.g. Europe. Adrian Holliday (2010) in his critical review of ideology in intercultural communication makes evident that this dichotomy and the "communitization" of the others – while we say "society" about ourselves – is immensely biased and associated to a lack of autonomy, progress and

modernity. In this volume, we emphasize the idea that people everywhere, also in "the West" (we take this geographical element to be ideological in this volume) live in "communities", and especially increasingly in Cocoon Communities. Moreover, although on the one hand it may sometimes seem that "the others" are "communitized", on the other hand, there is also a strong discourse where "we" are living in communities or at least are longing for them.

In fact, in his work on community, Zygmunt Bauman highlights a certain longing for communities in our postmodern societies. According to him, "community, we feel, is always a good thing" (2001: 3). He adds that it is understood as a 'warm', cosy and comfortable place where we can relax and feel safe, and where all the members understand and trust each other (Bauman 2001: 1-3). Such a view of community portrays a *lost paradise* that we hope to repossess. Rural communities are often understood in such romantic terms. In them, social networks are understood to be based on geographical proximity and a community consists of people who interact face-to-face. Such communities are often viewed in nostalgic terms, and defined as small and stable: relationships are understood to be all-embracing, broadly inclusive, enduring and tied to particular locations where social control is tight. In such communities, people are believed to share similar experiences and values, as a consequence of which they understand each other well and are emotionally attached to each other. Moreover, people are understood to be happy and to have comprehensive personal knowledge of each other. (see, e.g. Cohen 1985: 21-28; Kennedy and Roudometof 2002: 6-7) As we mentioned in the beginning of this introduction, a similar romanticised idea of community appears often in today's media where it is implied that several social problems would be solved if individuals had communal support. Also lifestyle migrants and those who have chosen downshifting might embrace such ideas. Instead of romanticising communities a priori, we, however, want to look at empirical examples in this volume.

The Social, the Imaginary and the Practical in Researching Cocoon Communities

In dealing with Cocoon Communities, we are also taking into account several crucial points that have been put forward by some researchers especially in terms of methodology. The first one is related to Amit's 2002 proposal to *reinsert the social* back into community. In her introduction to *Realizing Community*, she suggests a move from an entire "imaginary, identity-based" conceptualization of communities to a more balanced,

interactive approach based on sociality (2002a: 1). We believe that Cocoon Communities should be approached from both what they represent to people ('within' and 'outside', in relation to other communities) and the types of interaction that are taking place in them, and between them. All in all, the point of the exercise does not consist in trying to define the community but to see how it is 'done' and 'used' (Cohen 2002: 165). Communities do not merely exist but are actively made. Even though the authors of the following chapters are not working on the 'intercultural' or on ethnicity, it is also important to take into account what Gerd Baumann (1996: 15) had to say about researching communities: "the question remains whether the word is chosen to describe a collectivity one willingly participates in oneself, or a stereotype of uniform commonality projected upon others on the sole basis of their ascribed ethnic identity". It is thus important for the researcher to interrogate her/his own perceptions of the Cocoon Community s/he is studying. Besides, the way(s) those being studied share views and discourses on the nature of the community they are members of should be carefully examined. There are several empirical examples of this, especially in regard to mobile people. Dervin (2008) has looked into Erasmus exchange students' daily lives in Europe and many times he was presented with various metaphors by the students to describe what they experienced in their host countries: "cocoon", "sphere", "parenthesis", "a cruise ship", etc. All these terms refer to togetherness in a specific place, at a specific time, for a specific duration. In a similar way, the expatriate wives whom Anne-Meike Fechter (2007) studied in Indonesia described themselves as living in a "bubble", "bunker", "ghetto", or "golden cage".

Empirical realities are important also in order to avoid potentially vague and generalising statements. A common term in contemporary research dealing with people's togetherness is *imagined communities*. The term originates from Benedict Anderson (1983) who theorised national communities. Anderson argues that nations are "*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members", yet, they do imagine communion (Anderson 1983: 6, italics in original). Although Anderson wrote about nationalism, community scholars were quick to adopt his ideas, especially since they fit well the 'interpretative turn' in anthropology (Amit 2002b: 6-9). Anderson's contribution to community studies was to put the focus on the aspect of imagination, away from face-to-face interaction. The idea of imagined communities provided a framework for abandoning the view that saw communities as small, tangible, face-to-face entities situated in a particular location (Hannerz 1996: 92). The emphasis was put on community as an

idea of collective identity, a categorical referent, instead of the actual social forms it takes (Amit 2002a: 4; Amit and Rapport 2002: 4). In other words, the emphasis was on how people imagine community, that is, on their collective consciousness, instead of on actual communal practices and interactions between the members.

The term imagined community is often misunderstood by ignoring practices and consequences although Anderson himself did not define imagined communities in merely abstract terms but also emphasised actual practices. Anderson's imagined communities are formed and maintained through concrete practices and their consequences are often very real – ultimately wars defending the "national us". However, instead of carefully investigating how communities are formed and maintained, either in practices or in discourses, it has become common to refer vaguely to "imagined communities", which is a somewhat indolent solution.

To us, and in relation to Cocoon Communities, imagination refers to the emotional, the interactional but also identity aspects, which are often very significant, and usually, although not always, these feelings of belonging are felt to be rewarding. According to Amit (2002b), there can be indeed strong emotions attributed to collective attachments even in today's world where many things seem short-lived and futile. Yet, she claims that imagining is not enough: without actual social relations, it is difficult to account for the emotive valence which is attributed to the community (Amit 2002b: 17). This is why, in our understanding, instead of being mutually exclusive, the imagined and concrete aspects of communities are both significant in the construction of a community. When writing about Cocoon Communities, the authors in this volume want to emphasise the actual empirically observed and analysed characteristics and consequences of these communities, in addition to / without forgetting the imagined aspects. The authors of this book also agree with Vered Amit (2012: 14) on the importance of the mundane and the quotidian, and although not all the authors of this volume are anthropologists, we are following a long-standing anthropological preoccupation: How, when and why do people come together? (Amit 2012: 13).

Amit's (2002) edited volume on communities is widely referred to when scholars write about communities. The world is, however, different now from the 1990s when the studies of her volume were conducted, and the purpose of this book is to see what kinds of communal forms and outcomes there are now and how they can be analysed. The aim of this book is thus to offer updated views and to stimulate discussion on how to research communities. Vered Amit (2012) has in fact herself continued the discussion together with Nigel Rapport ten years later but their new book

is not empirical to the extent of our volume.

In addition to the difficulty of defining Cocoon Communities, there are challenges in how to study them. One aim in this book is also to reflect on research methodology: how can one study (Cocoon) Communities? The authors in this volume discuss their methodological choices and the various studies described in this book show how one can approach Cocoon Communities with different kinds of methods that reveal different aspects of the communities and look at them from different perspectives.

One important aspect is reflexivity. Quoting Dhamoon (2009: 5), it is important to bear in mind that "Signifiers that define a community shift and have varying intensities. In particular, the values, norms, and beliefs of subjects within a community can and do change according to spatial cohesion, consensus, shared knowledge, levels of familiarity, interest, commitment levels, space and time, ideology, and the function a community plays in one's life" (2009: 56). All these aspects should be taken into account when considering a specific Cocoon Community as it is co-constructed by research participants (and us researchers!).

Amit (2012) finds "community" a good concept to think with. We are now proposing an exercise to carefully and patiently think with the concept of Cocoon Community in various empirical contexts.

Book Outline

The authors of the following chapters come from various disciplinary backgrounds (anthropology, education, engineering, journalism, social psychology and sociology). Our aim is to look at how such an eclectic group of scholars approach contemporary communities in their empirical research by using the concept of Cocoon Community. What similarities and differences can be identified in the way they examine such communities?

The book contains six chapters and is divided into three sections: Cocoon Communities of "Westerners" in India (Giguère; Korpela), Online Cocoon Communities (Singh, Harreveld and Danaher; Paton) and Cocoon Communities of expatriates and migrant workers (Henderson and Gouwens; Nagy, Maclean and O'Sullivan).

In the two first chapters, Cocoon Communities of "Westerners" are explored in the same context: India.

In her chapter, **Nadia Giguère** concentrates on a community of spiritual seekers in the town of Rishikesh in Northern India. She illustrates with vivid empirical examples how these Westerners construct a discursive Cocoon Community with others who share their spiritual ideas as well as

their criticism of the "Western life" that they have escaped from. This community becomes visible in particular in the interviews: it is a discursive community with clear practical consequences.

In a similar vein, **Mari Korpela** analyses a community of Westerners in India. Her study was conducted in the city of Varanasi, and she emphasises in her analysis how the Cocoon Community becomes constructed above all in practices rather than in discourses. Korpela argues that the community is simultaneously temporary and permanent; temporality and reconstruction being significant characteristics of the particular community.

Giguère's and Korpela's articles provide an interesting comparison of how Cocoon Communities can be defined differently and in particular, how they can be approached with an emphasis on somewhat different research methodology – thus highlighting different aspects of the communities.

The two next chapters discuss online communities.

Michael Singh, **Bobby Harreveld** and **P. A. Danaher** explore the use of videoconferencing technology to establish inter-institutional links among three Australian universities involving local and international masters and doctoral students and their supervisors. The authors identify ways in which the participants exhibit the characteristics of transnational intellectual engagement and establish networks of association of varying duration. In doing so, they problematise the notion of Cocoon Communities by subjecting it to inductive analysis and highlighting its technically mediated dimension. They argue that the concept has analytical value that needs to be researched further.

In **Nathalie Paton**'s chapter, research subjects gather together online from various locations and backgrounds. The uniting factor is the Virginia tech school shooting (2007). Paton analyses online forums where people joined together to mourn the tragic event, and found much emotional support from the online Cocoon Community.

The two articles dealing with online communities illustrate well the various possibilities that online environments offer for people's communal needs.

The two next chapters discuss migrant and expatriate communities.

In the next chapter, **Robyn Henderson** and **Judith Gouwens** look at mobile farmworkers in the USA and in Australia. They argue that the mobile lifestyle and the hard physical labour cause farmworker families to easily become isolated in regard to the local communities of permanent residents in the locations where the farmworkers reside. The two case studies illustrate how the farmworker families are able to construct and participate in Cocoon Communities with other farmworkers, and how

these communities offer them highly appreciated emotional support as well as practical help.

In their chapter entitled "More than Just a Football Club, in the Heart of Brussels", **Raluca Nagy**, **Neil Maclean** and **Denis O'Sullivan,** examine an Irish football club in Brussels through the lens of Cocoon Community. They illustrate how a sports club actually comes to mean much more than sports for the participants, offering them a point of identification and a "national" and "international" Cocoon Community in a foreign city.

The last two chapters exemplify well how being an "expatriate" or a "migrant worker" can result in the formation of very significant yet very different Cocoon Communities.

In the afterword, **Alex Gillespie** evaluates the proposed notion of Cocoon Community. He recommends bearing in mind the individual when working on communities, even on Cocoon Communities.

References

Amit, V. and Rapport, N. 2002, *The Trouble with Community. Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity*, London: Pluto Press.

—. 2002a, "An Anthropology without Community?" in V. Amit and N. Rapport (eds.) *The Trouble with Community. Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity,* London: Pluto Press.

—. (ed.) 2002b, *Realizing Community. Concepts, Social Relationships and Sentiments,* London: Routledge.

—. 2012, "Community and Disjuncture: The Creativity and Uncertainty of Everyday Engagement", pp. 3-73 in V. Amit and N. Rapport (eds.), *Community, Cosmopolitanism and the Problem of Human Commonality*, London: Pluto Press.

Anderson, B. 1983, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.

Augé, M. 2010, *La communauté illusoire,* Paris: Payot.

Bauman, Z. 2004, *Identity*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

—. 2001, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World,* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Baumann, G. 1996, *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-ethnic London*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brubaker, R. 2007, *Ethnicity Without Groups*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Cohen, A. 1985, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Great Britain: Ellis Horwood Ltd.

—. 2002, "Epilogue," pp. 165-170 in V. Amit (ed.), *Realizing Community. Concepts, Social Relationships and Sentiments*, London: Routledge.

Coutant, A. and Stenger T. (eds) 2011, "Ces réseaux numériques dits sociaux." *Hermès* 59.

Dervin, F. 2008, *Métamorphoses identitaires,* Turku: Humanoria.

Dhamoon, R. 2009, *Identity/Difference Politics: how difference is produced and why it matters,* Vancouver: UBC Press.

Durkheim, E. 1893 [1933], *The Division of Labor in Society,* New York: The Free Press.

Dyck, N. 2002, "'Have you been to Hayward Field?': Children's Sport and the Construction of Community in Suburban Canada," pp. 105-123 in V. Amit (ed.), *Realizing Community. Concepts, Social Relationships and Sentiments*, London: Routledge.

Fechter, A-M. 2007, *Transnational Lives. Expatriates in Indonesia,* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Hannerz, U. 1996, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places,* London & NY: Routledge.

Holliday, A. 2010, *Intercultural Communication and Ideology,* London: Sage.

Jovchelovitch, S. 2007, *Knowledge in Context: Representation, community and culture,* London: Routledge.

Kennedy, P. and Roudometof, V. (eds.). 2002, *Communities Across Borders: New Immigrants and Transnational Cultures,* London: Routledge.

Lozerand, E. 2010, "La question de l'individu au Japon," pp. 139-150 in Ph. Corcuff, C. Le Bart and F. de Singly (eds), *L'individu aujourd'hui, Débats sociologiques et contrepoints philosophiques*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

Maffesoli, M. 1985, *La connaissance ordinaire: précis de sociologie comprehensive,* Paris: Librairie des Méridiens.

—. 1996, *The Time of the Tribes. The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, London: Sage publications.

Putnam, R. D. 2000, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rapport, N. 2012, "Dialogue: Nigel Rapport responds to Vered Amit," pp. 205-213 in V. Amit and N. Rapport, *Community, Cosmopolitanism and the Problem of Human Commonality*, London: Pluto Press.

Tönnies, F. 1887 [2001], *Community and Civil Society. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought,* J. Harris (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

CHAPTER ONE

FEELING AT HOME IN A LIMINAL SPACE IN INDIA: SELF-FULFILLMENT THROUGH SOCIATION IN RISHIKESH'S SPIRITUAL EXPATRIATE COMMUNITY

NADIA GIGUÈRE

While backpacking in India for the first time in 2000, one of my first stops was Rishikesh, a town that is located in Uttarakhand, in the foothills of the Himalayas and on the banks of the Ganga River. The town had been recommended to me by other travellers as a good stopover for "getting acclimatized to India" because of its reputation for being peaceful, largely pedestrian-based and thus not stressful, and a good place to plan a trek in the Himalayas, to meet pilgrims or to get involved in yoga. Indeed, Rishikesh is known as the home of the heroes of the *Mahabharata* as well as of many great spiritual masters, and is visited each year by millions of Hindu pilgrims. The activities of the internationally known Sivananda Ashram [1] further contribute to the popularity of the town, as many followers come from all over the world to visit its headquarters. The Indian government has even officially designated Rishikesh as *the* place to go to practice yoga. The resultant focus on the marketing of the yogic discipline has contributed to the touristic development of the area, with yoga and meditation classes attracting thousands of Westerners every year (Strauss 2005: 24-25).

I turned out to greatly like Rishikesh. In the pedestrian part of the town where most travelers alight – and where most of the guest houses and *ashrams* are located – two bridges cross over the Ganga River, allowing

[1] *Ashram*: A spiritual center.

people to circulate from one *ashram* to the other, from family restaurants serving vegetarian meals to the German Bakery packed with travellers craving homemade croissants.[2] At first sight, it was just like many other spots where travellers congregate in India. More particularly, it was what could be characterized as a borderzone, a sort of "empty stage" upon which a dialogic interaction between travellers and their Indian hosts takes place, and where subjects play a momentary role before returning to their "real life" (Bruner 2005: 17-19). This part of the town in which many facilities for visitors are located is also a place where Hindu pilgrims, foreign tourists and Indian business owners interact for a short moment, with the local Indians living mostly outside this borderzone.

Years later when I was developing a research project on experiences of Western expatriation to India[3], I realized that Rishikesh would be a good place to do part of the ethnographic fieldwork since it was highly likely that I would be able to find at least some Westerners there who had been living in India for a couple of years. When I arrived in the town in 2006 to begin my fieldwork, I was trying to look "behind the scenes" by focusing upon interviewing and sharing in the daily activities of long-term expatriates rather than short-term tourists. It only took a few days of roaming in this borderzone to meet a number of expatriates willing to take part in the research process, as well as to show me around and to introduce me to other expatriates.

Yet while the expatriates living in this borderzone that I met with all shared a narrative about the prime importance of spirituality in their lives, a key question was whether or not they constitute a community. The question is important, since the fact of sharing space and cultural referents does not necessarily mean that individuals are socially linked. According to Amit, rather than looking at what is held in common by a group of people, we should instead focus on analyzing the actualization of sociation (for example by looking at different forms of association or belonging) in order to shed light on the ambiguities lying behind the concept of community (Amit 2010: 358-359). From an interpretive perspective, Cohen (1985) argues in favor of highlighting the importance of community in peoples' experiences. With community conceptualized as a symbolic construct variously understood by the constitutive members, we should thus look at the boundaries of community to better understand how

[2] Rishikesh is mainly Hindu. It has been legally declared a vegetarian town; it is also alcohol-free.

[3] Note that I use the term Western expatriate as an emic category, as they themselves did not make any national distinctions among Westerners and identified with Western culture in a broader sense during the interviews.

these symbolic frontiers are used to give meaning to identities.

With these various perspectives in mind, I decided to focus upon several questions: What were the spiritual expatriates *sharing* together? How were they *interacting* together? How important was the community to the expatriates' experiences in and of India? Who was considered part of the community, who was definitely an outsider and who had a rather ambiguous status? And most particularly, what type of identity was brought forward in the process of creating a shared community?

The answers to these questions are elaborated in this chapter by drawing upon two different sets of data collected among the expatriates through ethnographic work and through an interview process. The chapter will illustrate the formation of a "Cocoon" spiritual Community in Rishikesh, as well as the particular modalities of sociation and identity formation at work in that particular community. Within an academic context in which an increasing number of scholars are thinking in terms of networks and virtual communities or else in terms of practices of consumption based upon a variety of identities and related communities or lifestyles (Blackshaw 2010), it seems to me to be essential, from an empirical point of view, to document and to reflect upon the type of community that I encountered in Rishikesh, i.e. one that is geographically bounded and, I argue, *chosen* specifically because it offers a new and fully encompassing frame of reference for its members. As we will see, this new frame of reference has allowed spiritual expatriates to redefine their identity in a transcendent manner, i.e. it has given meaning to all other aspects of their sociability, be it in India or in the West.

Methodological Concerns about the Spiritual Community

Very early on in the intersubjective encounter that took place in the course of my fieldwork, I had to present myself to the interviewees. I introduced myself as a doctoral student in anthropology, which prompted one interviewee to counter "your thesis is only an excuse. You are here, in Rishikesh, because you have a spiritual appeal. It's the shadow of your *karma*[4], your *samskara*[5]." According to the philosophy taught by the gurus and that undergirds the lifestyle choices and narratives of the expatriates, nobody is in Rishikesh by pure chance, and certainly not an anthropologist already interested in spiritual lifestyles. It was their reinterpretation of this

[4] *Karma*: Actions and reactions governing the life cycle.
[5] *Samskara*: Imprints left on the subconscious mind by experiences from previous lives.

philosophy as their new frame of reference that they were holding up to me like a mirror for me to make sense of my own academic project. Thanks to the ethnographic method and to time spent in numerous *ashrams* listening to various *satsangs,*[6] I could make sense of the reflection. And as it turns out, I was in fact rapidly dragged further into this spiritual world, for instance by having to learn Sanskrit terminology in order to communicate with the expatriates whose lifestyle I was seeking to understand. Retrospectively, I was able to see that this ethnographic process helped to shed light on my understanding of the importance of "being there" for spiritual expatriates, in the presence of renowned spiritual masters and spiritual peers, in order to progress spiritually.

Along with these insights that arose from my ethnographic work – which will be further detailed hereinafter – I collected eleven life stories from expatriates living in Rishikesh and coming from Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Switzerland and Spain.[7] The expatriates that I interviewed, and on whom I chose not to provide any biographical details that would enable an informed reader to identify them, were evenly split between men and women, were between thirty and seventy years of age, and were mostly single without children. They said that they had been living in India for an average of ten years and in some cases for thirty years, and were not planning – at least at the time I met with them – to return to their country of origin. Only one informant expressed some doubts about her belonging to the spiritual community. Subsequent correspondence with her revealed that she had since my last visit decided to move back to her home country, going back in India once in a while to guide yoga tours. During the time I was there, most of the informants were subsisting in India by drawing upon private incomes, i.e. real estate incomes, interest on invested capital, old-age pensions, familial financial support, or some other sort of donations. Only one informant had to go back to his country of origin a few months a year in order to work to financially support himself in India the rest of the year, while another informant had to work in India to support himself, by giving spiritual advice to foreign visitors.

It bears underlining that the expatriates I interviewed usually did not arrive expecting to settle permanently in Rishikesh. Rather, they first went to the town to improve their yoga abilities, to have a brief spiritual experience, or sometimes in order to find their personal guru, with all of

[6] *Satsangs*: Spiritual gathering, usually in the presence of a master who passes on his knowledge.

[7] Expatriates were chosen by convenience sampling.

them already being familiar with the spiritual marketplace in the West before they arrived in India.[8] All of them had been drawn to Rishikesh in particular because of the existing infrastructures located in this borderzone. Yet they decided to stay there to invest themselves full time in learning a philosophy and approach to life. The decision to move to Rishikesh was sometimes sudden, part of a sort of personal awakening, while in other instances it was the result of a slow and deliberate decision-making process and a lot of travelling. Yet for all, the heart of the expatriation project was defined by the place that spirituality had come to assume in their lives.

Although the recent literature focusing on expatriates is mostly concerned with professionals having an international assignment for a designated period (Fechter 2007), the term expatriate was chosen in this chapter because it is how informants designated themselves. As for the term lifestyle migrants, while increasingly popular, it must be used with caution in this case as the ascetic lifestyle and spiritual ideal of informants stand in stark contrast to the quality of life often sought by lifestyle migrants, which is typically focused upon recreation, rural idyll and a lower cost of living (O'Reilly and Benson 2009)[9]. Furthermore, although most of my informants were living in India on a renewable tourist or foreign student visa[10], I soon discovered in the course of discussions that they vehemently rejected the label of "tourist", perceiving the latter as ephemeral and superficial. Instead, they preferred to designate themselves as "Western expatriates", sharing their foreignness in India but without distinguishing between one another based upon nationality. Yet at the same time, their sense of belonging to a community was about something more than their shared foreignness. During the course of in-depth interviews, expatriates highlighted to me the importance that they accorded to their peers in this geographical but also spiritual journey, as well as their strong links to the spiritual community.

The interviews were analyzed with a focus on the intercultural relations with the local Indians in the specific borderzone, on the relationships with other Westerners in India (expatriates or not), and on the relationships with acquaintances and relatives in the home country. The interviews thus

[8] For further details on the spiritual marketplace or culture of well-being in the West, see Van Hove 1999; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Strauss 2005.

[9] On the blurring boundaries between tourists and migrants, see also Williams and Hall 2000.

[10] At the time I was there, some *ashrams* had the institutional status to provide the visitors with student identification cards, thus allowing them to get a student visa for five years.

provided a narrative structure from which I could gain a sense of the community boundaries, although insights about these moving frontiers were also gained from the ethnographic work and from participant observation. The three months of ethnographic work conducted in Rishikesh's touristic borderzone consisted of following the informants as well as other expatriates and shorter-term travellers involved in spirituality during their daily activities. This rather short period of fieldwork was complemented by two other rounds of fieldwork, in Calcutta with humanitarian expatriates and in Goa with hedonist-expressive expatriates. These three places were chosen for their association with three typical Western representations of India (spiritual, poor and idyllic), and thus made it possible to emphasize relationships between representations of India and experiences in different borderzones. I have chosen this particular type of multi-sited fieldwork as the most appropriate for my main research focus while remaining conscious of its limitations. Also of note, the fieldwork in Rishikesh was conducted in the winter of 2006 to avoid being there during the peak tourist season. The season chosen for the fieldwork thus allowed me to quickly get in touch with expatriates living there year-round, as most shorter-term travellers head south during winter. Further research would be required to fully understand the community boundaries during the peak tourist season.

During the time I was there, I thus took part in daily life in the *ashrams*, doing yoga and meditating, as well as attending *satsangs, aarti*[11] and other spiritual events such as *darsan*[12]. I also shared meals and walked with them on the banks of the Ganga during the few hours every day that were set aside for activities other than spiritual practices. This ethnographic work allowed me to consider discourses within their context of enunciation (Bibeau and Corin 1995: 42), and thus to superimpose two prominent levels of findings: narratives of experiences and daily practices. Or, to use Dervin and Korpela's formulation of this issue (see introduction), it allowed me to take into account what the community represented to the informants, as well as consider how it was concretely created. This method made it possible to uncover some paradoxes between text and subtext, which proved to be significant in attempting to grasp the context of emergence of this particular modality of sociation, and more

[11] *Aarti*: Hindu religious ritual in which light is being offered to a deity, in this case to Mother Ganga. During this form of worship, songs are also sung in praise of the deity. This ritual takes place daily at sunset.

[12] *Darsan* literally means "visions of the divine". One could receive *darsan* from a deity in the temple or from being in the presence of a highly revered person. In this case, *darsan* was received from a renowned guru.

particularly the community's symbolic boundaries and their use in defining identities, conceptualized here as always being relational and in a process of construction.

Contrasting Places

The expatriates that I met were for the most part living in *ashrams* and attended daily English *satsangs* given by a few leading gurus in Rishikesh. Among the leading gurus of the three *ashrams* to which most informants at the time I was there belonged, only one was of Indian origin. The other two, who, it is worth noting, were most popular among the devotees, were American and Canadian. During these *satsangs* often intended for a Western audience (for example including advices on how to keep up with the spiritual practice when travelling West), the Vedanta was also widely taught. Very briefly, the Vedanta is a branch of Hindu philosophy that teaches devotees to transcend the ego in order to realize the unity of the individual or the human self (*Atman*) with the universal self or God (*Brahman*). According to this tradition, the ego is both an illusion and the origin of all human pain. The path to liberation thus lies in the realization that "All is One" (Anonymous 1996). In some cases, the adoption of this philosophy leads spiritual seekers to become *sanyasin*[13], or renunciants.

Realizing such liberation is a life-long challenge, and for the spiritual journey to be fruitful, expatriates explained that it had become necessary for them to live in Rishikesh. Indeed, Rishikesh was considered to be the most auspicious place for their spiritual quest, as the town had come to represent for them a symbol and a locale of spirituality *par excellence*. The combination of a setting in which mantras have been recited for thousands of years, the "high spiritual vibration" of the place, the proximity to the holy Ganga, and the easy availability of daily *satsang* and meetings with great masters were the factors most often mentioned by informants to explain why Rishikesh offered what they needed in order to immerse themselves fully in spirituality.

Importantly, the spiritual atmosphere that was seen as being ambient in Rishikesh was often juxtaposed with the challenges of practicing spirituality in the West, as is made clear in the following quote:

> What I noticed was that I become very focused in India. The insight would start to come. The goal here is to realize the Self, to realize that you are no one different from anyone else. There is only One thing. You can find yourself becoming on the edge of it, and you would go back to England,

[13] *Sanyasin*: Renouncer who dedicates his or her life to spirituality.

> and it would all start to fall away. [...] [When I was in England] the practices were dropping off a little bit. You can almost get to the point and say you can't even remember why you were doing them. It's very interesting. The whole atmosphere kind of caught you there.

Because spiritual expatriates attached great importance to the fulfilling atmosphere in Rishikesh, they also emphasized the ambience of the place that they chose to leave. Indeed, many other informants also said that undertaking spiritual practices in the "spiritual desert" of the West (as they characterized it) was challenging. Informants specifically mentioned not being able to find cultural support in the West for sustaining intense practice of spirituality, admitting that they were not able to avoid going to various non-spiritual social spaces (as opposed to Rishikesh, where they were able to mostly frequent their spiritual social space by staying in a specific borderzone).[14]

For most of the informants, Rishikesh thus came to represent the place where they could invest themselves fully into spirituality. It was there that the spiritual component of their life had been enhanced, and it appeared to be difficult for them to experience the same spiritual engagement in the West, even though they could in theory join a spiritual community if they lived there. According to one informant:

> [In England at the time] there was not even a meditation group around or any spiritual community. If I was to live in England permanently again, that's probably where I would move, close to some community. It is possible, of course. But because of the whole tradition there [in the West], it's just so easy to be in the atmosphere of the emotional things. That's there.

Although some informants might acknowledge that "the West is changing", the West that they referred to was essentially the West that they had left behind, one loaded with personal histories and experiences from before their spiritual turn. It was also associated with their more recent transnational experiences, since when expatriates' tourist or student visas expired and thus they needed to leave India so as to be able to renew them, they would usually visit their family in the home country. The West thus came to be associated with family gatherings and settling of administrative

[14] A similar assessment was made about a spiritual community in Hawaii. In this context too, the self-transformation arose because the place allowed spiritual seekers to "step out of normal life" (Rodman 2007: 150).

matters, which likely contributed to sharpening the division between a spiritual India and the West as a spiritual desert.[15]

Self-Help on the Spiritual Journey

In addition to emphasizing these representations of India and the West as reasons for their attachment to Rishikesh, spiritual expatriates also stressed the importance of *sharing* the intensity of their spiritual practice. Thus although they could occasionally meet people who practiced yoga or who were involved in a spiritual community in other parts of the world, "being there" in Rishikesh with spiritual peers appeared to be highly important, as expressed by this informant:

> My life has a lot of introspection or inward time. And I share that with most of the people in the yoga hall [in Rishikesh]. [...] But you know, in the West, people that are interested in yoga or meditation they have what? Three hours a week to put into it? Even sometimes just one hour… (Laughing).

For this expatriate, doing yoga for one hour a week sounded ridiculous. From his point of view, his personal *sadhana*, or spiritual practice, had nothing to do with yoga done as a weekly physical exercise. He explained that part of the reason why *sadhana* was easier in Rishikesh was because of the availability of a community of interest, or of a pool of people with whom one can *talk* about spirituality. Participant observation further made clear that most conversations between expatriates centered around spirituality in one way or another: they chitchatted about their guru, discussed the meaning of a particular Sanskrit term, reflected on the deeper meaning of the day before *satsang*, or discussed the rituals practiced. And as spirituality came to increasingly infuse their daily life in

[15] It is nevertheless worth mentioning that the main representation of the West was different according to the borderzone in which I conducted fieldwork. If the modern atheism of the West was prominent in spiritual expatriates' narratives, it was the materialistic West that was central in the humanitarian expatriates' discourses, and the lack of individual liberty that was the main critique of the West articulated by hedonist-expressive expatriates. These three representations of Western culture are in contradistinction to the lifestyles expatriates had chosen in India, and highlight how the discourse construction about the West is made up retrospectively and with reference to the current lifestyle in India. These critical discourses about the West that are so abundant in the expatriates' narratives can be directly linked to what Charles Taylor described as malaises of modernity, and are in line with the Romantic expressivism trend of thought (Taylor 1994, 1998).

Rishikesh, explicitly sharing this fundamental part of their existence with others became very significant.[16]

As a consequence, it is not enough to say that there was just a shared interest in spirituality among expatriates in Rishikesh. For them, it was very important that spirituality not be confined to the private sphere and that peers were available to discuss it and to share experiences with as the spiritual journey progressed. This finding in fact echoes Amit's call to bring the "social" back into the notion of community, or in other words, to give importance to the relational aspect through which community is realized rather than only to its "imagined" aspect (Anderson 1991). As Amit puts it, people "use these interpersonal relations to interpret their relationships to more extended social categories" (Amit 2002: 18).

The emphasis placed on social interactions might explain why it was so important for the expatriates that I encountered in Rishikesh to territorialize their spiritual community. Indeed, it appeared that expatriates' transnational practices were not centered solely on spirituality, in fact quite the opposite. While they still had to travel to their country of origin once in a while, they were usually apprehensive about these short stays in the West. The pressure of what informants called the "atheistic environment" tended to keep them from achieving their goal of maintaining their spiritual practices there; indeed, these practices tended to falter in the absence of similarly spiritually-committed individuals. Their brief returns to their country of origin thus only confirmed that leading a spiritual life in the West, without a supportive spiritual atmosphere and without (or at a distance from) a community with which to share spiritual experiences, would be difficult if not impossible. By contrast, life in Rishikesh was supportive of expatriates' spiritual aspirations, not only because of the atmosphere but also because they were surrounded by people with whom they could share their spiritual experiences.

To return to Amit's conceptualization, one could suggest that these social processes that were at work both in the home country and in a specific borderzone in Rishikesh had important implications for expatriates' sense of belonging and for their *relationships to more extended social categories*. Indeed, respondents expressed a sense of belonging to a spiritual community localized in Rishikesh rather than to an "imagined" transnational yogic community, even though people around the world may have shared their interest in spirituality.

[16] In some cases, silent spiritual practices were privileged. Yet knowing that other people who were around both understood and knew the reasons for this choice was highly important.