University of Groningen

Obituary

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Published in:
Contributions to Indian Sociology

DOI:
[10.1177/0069966720976509](https://doi.org/10.1177/0069966720976509)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Berger, P., & Hardenberg, R. (2021). Obituary: Georg Pfeffer (17 January 1943–20 May 2020). *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 55(1), 129-133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0069966720976509>

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Obituary: Georg Pfeffer (17 January 1943–20 May 2020)

Georg Pfeffer next to his erstwhile interlocutor Mangala Sisa (extreme left) and other Gadaba (© Peter Berger / source Frobenius-Institute)

With the death of Georg Pfeffer, we lost an enthusiastic teacher, a great colleague and a friend with ingenious humour, wit and integrity. Moreover, we lost a scholar who was throughout his life deeply committed to the study of kinship, religion, society and culture in South Asia.

Long before Georg Pfeffer became an anthropologist, he already had many years of personal experience in South Asia. Born in Berlin during the World War II as son of a British mother and the German sociologist Karl Heinz Pfeffer, Georg Pfeffer moved to Pakistan in 1959 with his family, as his father resumed the chair of sociology at the University of Punjab. Unusual for a German sociologist at the time, Karl Heinz Pfeffer worked on non-European societies and wrote on Pakistan, Australia and Costa Rica. The three years (until 1962) Georg Pfeffer lived in Lahore as a youth, went to school and graduated at the Forman Christian College were certainly formative. They probably also explain his expert knowledge

of cricket. In 1966, he made two important decisions. He married Monica Großkinsky and began to study ‘ethnology’ at Freiburg University (alongside sociology and history of religions), where he also received his doctorate in 1970. In 1971, he was employed at the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University and from there returned to Pakistan between 1974 and 1976 to help establish the new department of anthropology at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. In 1979, he became a professor with a permanent appointment at the South Asia Institute and subsequently (in 1985) accepted a chair of anthropology at the Free University of Berlin where he was professor and (alternating) head of the department of anthropology until his retirement in 2008.

Surely, holding such academic positions is crucial for any scholarly career, but listing them in this way tends to eclipse what is truly important. Georg Pfeffer was strongly influenced by the work of Louis Dumont, the co-founder of this journal, as is well known. The celebrated and contested *Homo Hierarchicus* and Dumont’s writings on affinity were important for him. But what attracted him most, it was the general ambition of Dumont that goes further back to his teacher Marcel Mauss and his teacher Émile Durkheim, namely the comparative study of worldviews. The ultimate value, so to say, of Georg Pfeffer as an academic was the relentless effort of understanding alternative constructions of the world. In a sense, everything else in his academic life results from this premise: his research interests, his emphasis on long-term ethnographic fieldwork as well as his scholarly criticism.

Probably there are not many anthropologists who have done long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Pakistan *and* India, even fewer who have done research with sweepers, Vedic Brahmins and adivasis. It is also significant to stress, especially for the young generation of anthropologists who will shape the future of the discipline, that Georg Pfeffer was unimpressed by the academic fashions of the time. He conducted ‘urban anthropology’ when village studies were the norm. And while his professor in Freiburg insisted on registering his photographs of the sweepers in the archive under the heading ‘tribe’, Georg Pfeffer turned his attention to ‘tribal studies’ only later, when most non-Indian anthropologists had already turned their backs on these communities.

Georg Pfeffer’s first ethnographic research brought him back to Pakistan. He had decided to conduct research on the poorly studied sweepers of Punjab on both sides of the border. With his wife and their 3-year old daughter, he spent a year in the field in 1968–1969, 11 months in

Lahore and 1 month in Amritsar. The results were submitted as a doctoral thesis and published in German. His next project took him to the other side of South Asia and to the other side of the caste hierarchy.

His second long-term ethnographic research was concerned with the Sasana Brahmans of Puri. This time, he was accompanied by his wife and two daughters. Pfeffer became part of the first German 'Orissa Research Project' (1971–1976) that aimed to explore the various dimensions of the famous Jagannatha temple. For his one-year research project in 1971–1972, he again decided against a typical village study as he wanted to understand the system of Sasana villages surrounding Puri and their social, political and religious role in the administration of the temple. The results were submitted as a habilitation thesis in 1976 and the (unpublished) monograph is available at the library of Heidelberg University.

The late 1970s marked a turning point in Pfeffer's academic life. He had matured into an experienced researcher and teacher and also enjoyed the security of a permanent professorship. While Lorenz Löffler had criticised Pfeffer's lack of theoretical training when reviewing his book on the sweepers from 1970, Pfeffer now had a thorough command of anthropological theory. Moreover, he found a topic, a theoretical approach and a new ethnographic field that would keep him occupied for the rest of his life. The topic was kinship, the theoretical approach was structural anthropology and the ethnographic field was tribal Middle India. In 1980, he spent three months with the Kuttia Kond and since then, he has visited the wider region for two or three months almost every year to continue his ethnographic work.

For the next four decades, his interest would not be so much in any particular tribe, but rather in understanding the unity and diversity of the numerous tribal communities 'between Ganges and Godavari', as he used to say. As such, he demonstrated the distinctive character of the Middle Indian relationship terminologies and identified affinity as a specific tribal value. In contrast to views that regard tribal societies as 'egalitarian', Pfeffer showed that the value of 'seniority' is an omnipresent feature of Middle Indian tribal classifications and their form of hierarchically framing relationships. Like in all his previous ethnographic studies, Pfeffer was concerned with the whole rather than the parts. This also enabled him to conceive the 'clients' of the cultivating tribal communities—known as Pano in Phulbani and as Dombo in Koraput—not as 'immigrant Hindus' but as an integral part of the larger tribal configuration. Despite

these commonalities, which he laid out in his seminal contribution *The Scheduled Tribes of Middle India as a Unit: Problems of Internal and External Comparison* (Pfeffer 1997), Pfeffer also distinguished different ‘complexes’ within tribal Middle India: Sora, Koraput, Gond or Kond.

Pfeffer was bewildered about the fact that very few non-Indian anthropologists seemed to care about the lifeworlds of about 100 million of India’s indigenous people and was convinced that Middle Indian ethnography—like the ethnography of Amazonia or highland Papua New Guinea—could make a substantial contribution to general anthropological debates, not least in the field of kinship. He demonstrated this again in his last book (Pfeffer 2019), in which he analysed terminologies, social structures and worldviews of indigenous societies of the Americas, Australia and Middle India in the comparative tradition of Lewis Henry Morgan. Accordingly, throughout his career, he motivated students to conduct long-term field research in Middle India. A remarkable success in this respect was the second ‘Orissa Research Project’ (1999–2005) in which Pfeffer was significantly involved and in the course of which several in-depth ethnographic studies were conducted.

As mentioned above, Pfeffer’s main academic thrust was the comparative study of worldviews. ‘Anthropos’, he said, is the object of sociocultural anthropology, that is, the study of collective forms of human existence, past and present. He showed a deep commitment to this endeavour and could be uncompromising when he saw that anthropologists and anthropology did not live up to this goal. As such, he had nothing good to say about postmodernism and its narcissistic self-reflexivity or the ‘generalisation of the private’ as he called it, utilitarian approaches and their ‘pensée bourgeoise’ (to borrow Sahlins’ expression) or the powerism of postcolonial anthropology. We should not indulge in our common sense but challenge it. This was also the reason why Pfeffer was highly sceptical about the way European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), which he co-founded in 1989, had developed, away from studying Anthropos to a focus on European issues. This commitment could also make him at times an inconvenient guest, for instance, when he publicly criticised the industrial destruction of tribal livelihoods in a conference generously sponsored by National Aluminium Company Limited (NALCO), a company engaged in bauxite mining in the Odisha highlands.

Georg Pfeffer was also a dedicated teacher who continued to give courses even after his retirement. The Festschrift in his honour contains numerous contributions from former students. Like many others, the

authors of this obituary have experienced his great ability to motivate and encourage students his unending support and generosity. While some professors let students work for them, Pfeffer worked for his students. These efforts have born some fruits. Christopher Gregory (2010: 18) wrote in his contribution to the Festschrift: 'Pfeffer's enduring contribution to Middle Indian studies has not just been in his writings but his mentoring of a cadre of graduate students who will continue his fieldwork-based research tradition into the next generation'.

NOTE

Bibliographical references can be found on the website of the Anthropology Department of the FU Berlin Institute of Anthropology, in the Festschrift in Georg Pfeffer's honour (*The Anthropology of Values*, 2010, Pearson) and in a forthcoming volume edited by Peter Berger, Roland Hardenberg and Almut Schneider that compiles essential writings of Georg Pfeffer.

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