

Introduction

*in which river trips figure prominently, an old woman shakes her head,
and the author reflects upon losing his marbles*

THE MAD OLD WOMAN OF THE MILLENNIUM

She appears but for a moment, the mad old woman of the millennium, her presence noted because of a debate over whether times were hard enough that God would take to writing letters. She appears—offering everything, demanding nothing—“giving up her food for five days and nights, during which period she sat shaking her head about.” We know nothing else about her, save that this head-shaking, food-resisting body of hers could at one point promise redemption, and that this promise seems to have led (times being hard indeed) to bloodshed and misfortune.

Early in 1865 several boatmen returned westward from Calcutta, to their homes along the Ganges River near the city of Varanasi, otherwise known as Banaras, Benares, or Kashi. They bore with them a letter from God. God in this case was the goddess Kali, according to the Varanasi correspondent of the Allahabad *Pioneer*, an English paper.¹ The boatmen in this case were Mallahs, members of a community or caste of families whose hereditary work was boating and fishing. In her letter the goddess called for the Mallahs to stop several low-status practices with which they were identified: eating fish, eating meat, and selling fish for a livelihood. The demand, which would have deprived many in the community of their means of survival, seemed to presage a millennial change in which poor communities like the Mallahs would no longer need to engage in difficult, low-status work. The goddess of the letter demanded that instead of fishing, the Mallahs should devote themselves completely to becoming her *bhagats*, or devotees.

During the following weeks, the letter from God circulated in several of the colonial administrative districts surrounding Varanasi. Mallah community leaders debated its relevance and authenticity. A meeting was organized in order to decide what, if anything, to do about the letter and the rumors circulating. The meeting

was held on April 13, a Saturday, during a religious fair at a local pilgrimage site to the northeast of the city, near the village of Balua.

The particulars of the letter and the debate were recorded in the regional English press because of a subsequent set of events that occurred at the festival and that heightened the millenarian stakes of the goddess' demand. These events, which culminated in several violent deaths and the intervention of the police, are offered by the press as exemplary of the macabre religiosity of Indians, and particularly Hindus, in the absence of British intervention. The week of the Balua fair, marking the beginning of the Hindu solar year and coinciding with festivals throughout the country, was otherwise represented in English papers in terms of the lack of what was termed "incident." The memories of the failed rebellion known as the "Indian Mutiny" and of its aftermath were less than a decade old. Religious festivals were frequently read by colonial authorities as dangerous sites that could incite local passions. Most reports from correspondents to British Indian newspapers that week reported the success of pacification campaigns abolishing what were at the time seen as among the bloodiest and most rabble-rousing of Hindu rituals, the devotional piercings and other mortifications of the flesh that the British grouped under the heading of hook-swinging.²

Amid this litany of successes in curtailing religious license, the Varanasi correspondent to the *Pioneer*, in a letter appearing on April 19, reported on an unexpected failure: an incident of violence among the Mallahs gathered at Balua:

BENARES

April 15th.—A very singular occurrence took place, on the 13th instant, at Bulooa, in this district, which terminated in the violent death of two of the boatman caste of that place. It seems that the *mullas* [Mallahs] of Bulooa, whilst engaged in *sonae poojah* [propitiation of the inauspicious planet Saturn, or Sani, it being Saturday], got it into their heads that if blood were shed, some benefit would accrue to their community, and that the parties slain would rise again and live for ever! Two of the most enthusiastic in the cause accordingly consented to meet death at the hands of the brotherhood. The throats of the wretched men were immediately cut, while their parents stood by and exhorted them to bear the pain, as they would be sure to return and live for ever. The police now interfered, and met with some rough treatment at the hands of these strange creatures, who did not approve of their orgies being interrupted.³

One must wade through the brutal language of the colonial grotesque. No letter is mentioned initially; it appears two days later in a second report along with other new details. One such detail almost escapes notice, scarcely relevant to the correspondent save as a further sign of the irrationality of the Hindu lower orders: allusion is made to local interest in the behavior of an old woman, interest that somehow relates the debate over Kali's letter to the subsequent violence.

The second report begins with a reprisal of the two deaths, depicting the violence as characteristic of such religious assemblies, and goes on to describe the interventions of the police at considerable length. It then turns to the letter:

It appeared that two “seers,” had been down to Calcutta in charge of some boats, and on their return had brought with them a letter addressed to the caste, calling on them to become *Buggutts*, and not to kill or eat fish any more. This letter seems to have been circulated in the Benares, Ghazeeepore, and Azimghur districts; and *the belief in its truth seems to have been strengthened by the fact of an old woman giving up her food for five days and nights, during which period she sat shaking her head about*. On the occasion in question the people of the caste acted a regular play, three of the defendants in the case representing Ram, Mahabeer, and Mahadeo, Junior, and the two deceased, Uttril and Mahadeo, Senior: the latter were slain by the former, Ram having promised to bring them to life again. Among those captured are the three surviving gods, who have confessed their guilt [*italics mine*].⁴

The narrative link between the dangers of popular enthusiasm and the bloody orgies that inevitably follow is “the fact of an old woman.” Not just an old woman, but a woman shaking her head about: the motion a classic sign of the *paglī*, the madwoman, for many in north India. And not just an old *paglī*, but one whose complete and sustained refusal of food takes her entirely out of the transactional frame of being a person, in particular of being an old and dependent person, and places her in that space of power and death from which her shaking silence speaks. In the decade following the failed hopes and repressive sequelae of rebellion, within a colonial text affirming the irrational nature of local violence, the mad old woman of the millennium makes an appearance within a text that does not know quite what to do with her.

I came across the old woman, and the events at Balua, while sitting in the India Office Library in London looking for probate cases in which children attempted to use a changing colonial legal system to prove an old parent was of unsound mind. The brevity of her appearance, despite its critical location in the narrative, sent me in search of further mention of a figure whose refusal to accept food and whose shaking head was offered as a source of valid knowledge. In several variants of Indian epistemology, any such source of valid knowledge would be termed a *pramāṇa*. How did the “fact of an old woman” serve as a *pramāṇa* for the resurrectional moment of the Mallahs?

Despite their “being uncommon and out of the way,” the deaths in Balua were not widely reported. The *Bengal Hurkaru and India Gazette* of May 3 offered a description of the events with no mention of the old woman but with greater detail pertaining to the divine origin and contents of the letter and with a revised list of the five gods involved. However, other figures of old women and descriptions of their relation to religious practice were not foreign to the pages of the *Hurkaru* that month. On April 13, the date of the Balua affair, the paper reported on pilgrims who had journeyed to immerse themselves in the Ganges far upriver at the religious fair at Hardwar. The correspondent is preoccupied with the women as they emerge from the water, dripping:

A large proportion of the bathers were women who journeyed to this distance from the southern and eastern districts of Bengal, the central provinces and central India,

and amongst these thousands, it does not say much for the beauty of the houris of the east, not a single really beautiful woman could be seen. Old and decrepit women seemed to counterbalance the young, and when these, after the immersion arose from the waters “like Venus of the sea” they did not strike the spectator as possessing in any remarkable degree the grace and beauty of the form divine.

Here, as a comic figure of the spiritual and physical decrepitude of the east, the British editors offer the vision of a national body composed of old women. Doddering and even mad old bodies appear in the press of the time as frequent signs of the strangeness of India, as frequently as do dangerous and enthusiastic young men like those of Balua. After casting his eye over the aged Venuses of Hardwar, the *Hurkaru* correspondent notes the pathetic folly of “one old Raja,” who “to pave his way to the regions of bliss everlasting, gave 55,000 Rupees [to Brahman priests officiating], and would have given more but that the unfortunate and crazed creature kicked the bucket before he could finish his almsgivings.”⁵

Against the colonial repetition of the decrepit or crazed old person as a sign of Indianness, the figure of the old woman who in her gestures and refusals proves that Kali’s time is imminent remains apparitional. What she signifies, what she achieves— that which makes the letter from God readable—is not available to the English papers, for which she is but one sign of local irrationality among many. Who is she? I abandoned the archiving of probate cases to search unsuccessfully for her in the local Hindi and English press. Yet the question of the old mad-woman, and of her movement and her silence, remains.

This book is about the representation of old people as mad or otherwise *different* in what they do or say, and about the relation of such difference to other sorts of realities, such as a millenarian moment in the history of Varanasi Mallahs. One of my goals in writing it is to suggest that age, as a way of representing and understanding other sorts of differences between individuals and classes of individuals, is critical to the articulation not only of individual bodies but of collective ones. The Balua affair suggests the importance of old age to the articulation of a specific moment of radical social possibility, to a new vision of culture and community. How and why might the old body serve as a critical site in the constitution of collective meaning and practice?

Current debates on old age in India and elsewhere engage other collective frames, particularly that of the nation. The “nation” has always been an important category in how the subset of social scientists known as gerontologists think about old age, but inevitably in a single and very specific way: there are, or will be, too many old people in our country, or in other people’s countries, and so we—the guardians of the nation, or of the welfare of other nations—must do something about this problem. Thus the connection of old age, understood as a problem, to the category of the nation is central to many of the books on gerontology that have recently appeared in India, a number of which bear the identical title: *Aging in India*. In part I write as a contribution to the ongoing critique of such alarmist arguments and the effects they may have on real people, old and less old, particu-

larly when the arguments extend across national boundaries. Thus, in part, the reason for my own title, *No Aging in India*.

But there are other, and perhaps more interesting, arguments to be made, and many other absences that the *No* of the title is meant to suggest. The old woman of Balua, whose refusal of the dependency normally constitutive of old age seems momentarily to signify a moment of radical transformation for the Mallahs, points to a different intersection of age, gender, and nation. Much recent work in the social sciences and humanities has examined the relationship between gendered and sexual representations and the politics of empire and the postcolonial nation,⁶ but *age* has far less frequently been examined as a form of difference in its own right. How do collectivities and politics articulate themselves through or against such generational and age-specific representations? Can we learn something about the politics and histories of communities, nations, and empires through the study of where, how, and in which bodies age matters? How does the study of the body in time offer a way into the ongoing articulation of something called India?

THE AGE OF ALZHEIMER'S

I approach the body in time through the exploration of what has perhaps been its dominant medicalization during the years of my research, the set of bodily conditions and social practices organized and known as Alzheimer's disease.

When I was a kid we talked about senility as a vague sort of thing, losing your marbles, in old people who weren't getting enough blood to their brains. When I went to college, it was still possible for a professor in psychology to lecture that senility was a cognitive defense against the mindlessness of institutionalized old age. My friends and I knew—from films, journalistic exposés, and visits to old relatives—that nursing homes could make you senile. The etiological dilemma of *King Lear*—is it his old age or his daughters' actions that precipitate Lear's madness?—bespoke something real.

Well over a decade later, I was sitting in a cafeteria writing an early draft of this book and overheard, at the next table, "It must be my Alzheimer's, dear." I rarely hear senility discussed anymore. Friends ask me: "Isn't there a difference? Isn't Alzheimer's a disease but senility the normal process?" *Newsweek* articles I read in Varanasi when I was doing the research for this book proclaimed Alzheimer's "the fourth leading killer of adults," a "bomb," and an "epidemic" requiring "the equivalent of a Manhattan Project."⁷ We are, it seems, ever on the verge of a cure; not a season went by during the writing of this book but some lab claimed to have definitively identified the Alzheimer's gene or to have recombinantly produced an animal model of the disease or to have developed an inexpensive test to identify and label future victims. Whatever the degree of market-driven hype, new knowledges have clearly emerged and further breakthroughs are likely. Something has happened: something learned; perhaps something forgotten.

No Aging in India is written about a different place, different friends, and different memories and lapses of memory, but its earliest roots lie in my coming of age in Canada and the United States, in my witnessing the emergence of the age of Alzheimer's in North America. Michael Agar writes that anthropologists interpret culture through Heideggerian "breakdowns"—through insight gained when events difficult to explain with one's own framework or "schema" for making sense of them force one into the realization of a different schema.⁸ The juxtaposition, in my own life, of the age of senility with that of Alzheimer's constituted the earliest breakdown, the beginning of an insight that to talk about the behavior of old people was to invoke far more than blood flow, brain cells, nursing homes, or marbles.

The genre of contemporary writing about Alzheimer's dementia is often High Gothic, reflecting senility's newer and far more virulent identity as "the brain killer." Any alternative framework to the reductively pathophysiological to frame what's at stake in the lives of demented persons and their families is increasingly delegitimated. Karen Lyman has called this winnowing of what constitutes acceptable discourse the progressive "biomedicalization" of dementia.⁹ I agree but resist the implication that the impetus for the shift lies primarily with a purportedly hegemonic abstraction called biomedicine. Hegemonies are not so easily reduced to institutions. Something far deeper, something more pervasive is at work. The ever more inescapable obviousness of dementia greatly exceeds the sites of its professional management. As at Balua, but in very different ways, there is far more to the representation of the old person than the specificity of the aging body.

I am neither interested in denying the relevance of the brain nor in making light of what families experience. This book will challenge us to think about what some of us understand as Alzheimer's in terms other than or in addition to those of a diagnosis or a disease: as a set of local and contingent practices rooted in culture and political economy. To do so it will draw on data across class, gender, caste, and regional and national boundaries and will focus on what is at stake in the representation, experience, and negotiation of old age in a place increasingly labeled postcolonial India. Yet its argument is as rooted in the materiality of contemporary clinical knowledge and the specifics of my own personal and clinical experience in the United States as it is in the Varanasi, Delhi, Calcutta, and Bombay ethnographies and Indian and European archival work that form the bulk of the research.

Before undertaking the Indian research, I examined geriatric and gerontological practice in the United States at multiple sites: at a school of public health, studying community-based geriatric health care; at governmental and nongovernmental social welfare agencies, designing older worker employment and training programs; at a medical school, being trained as a medical student in evaluating neurobiological research and conducting geriatric assessments and dementia workups; at a minimally funded nursing home in a Boston slum, working as a nursing aide and tying patients to their chairs each day and to their beds each night to protect them from falling; at well-funded nursing homes, working as a

medical student and learning about milieu therapy and behavioral management; at local chapters of the Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, joining support groups for the families of Alzheimer's patients; and at home and in the world, watching as not only relatives but two mentors, whose advice and example were integral to different stages of this project, grew increasingly forgetful and faced the diagnosis of Alzheimer's and the stigma of its label.

Yet exhaustive appeals to experience like these I have just made, frequent in the gerontological literature, may disguise as much as they disclose. Jaber Gubrium has drawn attention to the emergence of an Alzheimer's disease movement among family members and gerontological professionals, and to the nature of its practice: the continual reenactment, through meetings and a prolific literature of articles, books, and videos, of the status of Alzheimer's as a real and a biological disease. He suggests that repetition allows those involved with the movement to deny the inherent ambiguity in maintaining a distinction between normal aging and pathological dementia.¹⁰ In the early chapters of this book, I will suggest that the iterative quality of Alzheimer's discourse further allows its victim to be reconstituted as a nonperson, and I will argue that it is not the biological processes of dementia as much as the social processes of its construction that deprives the demented elder of selfhood. Roland Barthes, in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, frames the problem of repetition more generally, looking through what he terms such "enumerative obsessions" in language and narrative to a set of vacancies that they expose.¹¹ Barthes is a presence throughout this book; central to its method is my interest in cultural representation not only as a structural field but as a set of obsessions and absences. For before one sees through representational surfaces to some notion of underlying architecture, the anthropologist's abstraction of culture, one needs to think about the repetitions of signs and narratives on those surfaces: culture as a kind of semiotic frottage.

At stake both in the voices of the old persons discussed below and in the institutions and narratives through which these voices are heard is a multitude of repetitions. Many enumerative obsessions, not only the elaboration of Alzheimer's, anchor my arguments here. These will become apparent in the first few chapters, as the narrative shifts from Boston to Varanasi via an interlude in Zagreb. Against Alzheimer's, I examine the "decline of the joint family"—the central narrative in Indian gerontology—and its relation to the language and practices defining the behavior of old people. In juxtaposing these two obsessions—rather than, for example, two cultural systems or structures—I try to move beyond an overly essentializing anthropology, mindful of Ronald Inden's and T. N. Madan's critiques of attempts particularly by Europeans and Americans to uncover the essential India.¹² Against the anthropological reification of ethnographic difference as *necessarily* privileged and essential, I struggle to bring together the competing and crosscutting totalizations of the modern body, of local and global economies and practices, and of culture as structure organizing at every turn one's orientation to self and the world.

These latter sorts of questions are of great interest to me as an anthropologist, but they may seem less compelling to readers more interested in Alzheimer's and old age; the relations of mind, body, and memory over time; or the sociology and politics of urban north India. I have tried throughout to strike a balance between the different sorts of interests and degrees of familiarity with medicine, gerontology, anthropology, and South Asia with which different readers may approach this text. Two other balancing acts inform my writing: writing for readers from India and elsewhere; and writing for imagined specialists and imagined general readers.

Balance is of course not a neutral term, as anthropologist Laura Nader would remind us¹³ and as the language of balance framing the old person in middle-class neighborhoods in Varanasi will reveal. Other metaphors of how one can bridge the multiplicity of theories, persons, and politics informing one's writing—Donna Haraway's cat's cradle, the play of approaches held in interlacing and productive tension, and Wendy Doniger's home cooking and tool kit, the celebration of usefully messy bricolage¹⁴—may evoke a sense of the approach used here. Like some of the people about whom I write, I will at points elect a rather unbalanced aesthetic in pushing the reader to make certain connections, a juxtapositional ethnography of sorts. In the chapters that follow, discussions of seventeenth- and nineteenth-century European cultural history will come perilously close to readings of American supermarket tabloids and ethnographic descriptions of American support groups for Alzheimer's disease caregivers; these in turn are inserted into a text that focuses on several neighborhoods in one north Indian city but that includes discussions of an Italian pharmaceutical house in Bombay, a government ministry in New Delhi, an old age home in Calcutta, and geriatric clinics in Madras and Dehradun. Contemporary journalism rubs shoulders with Sanskrit epics and folklore, Hindi films and magazine ads, sociological anthologies, and religious calendar art. The author's two grandmothers make their appearance.

There is method to all this, and some constructive models in social theory. I will not belabor these here—each juxtaposition must stand on its own—save to make a few points relevant to this particular project. Field sites—to use the term anthropologists give to the places about which they write—are plural. Each of the people I will invoke and remember below is located in terms of multiple sites: brain, body, psyche, family, household, neighborhood, religion, caste, ethnicity, class, sex, language, episteme, city, nation, world system, and so forth. These sites articulate with one another in various ways—stable and shifting—in time and space. I juxtapose variant classes of disparate material in different portions of this text to highlight one or another of these articulations and some of the political and interpretative issues at stake in each case. This method leads to a book that is far from Aristotelian in the sorts of unities it offers. Unlike the conventional sociology and anthropology of India, it is not quite “about India.” Nor is it really a comparison, for in at least one strong sense there is no place called “the West” out there with which “India” can be compared. A genealogy of contemporary gerontological practice in India, for example, must draw upon the specifics of a Euro-

pean history of medical practice as opposed to reifying the latter yet again as a sort of black box called “Western medicine.” It must ask what is at stake in the construction of a postcolonial social science around the figure of an old body, and in so doing turn to the governmental, nongovernmental, and commercial sites where such a science takes shape. It must take seriously the multiple and interlocking worlds of meaning and institutions of social regulation within which a body becomes a series of subjects over time. Such a project requires an examination of many sites of cultural production, from changing readings of Brahmanic and anti-Brahmanic Hindu texts to different sorts of emerging urban spaces and the social dramas they frame to images and understandings incited by advertising. It must be a response to a world ever more global and yet trenchantly and often tragically ever more local in the ways poverty, violence, disease, and other viscerally real effects of marginal subjectivity are imported, isolated, and maintained within ever *less* porous borders.

So, the book is about senility, dementia, hot brain, sixtyishness, Alzheimer’s disease, dotage, weakness, enchantment, and other states not named but which might strike one who is familiar with one or another of these formerly used terms as being recognizable. That is, it is about the language of behavioral inappropriateness and the practices of exclusion that come to encompass the lived experience of many old people. It is about the structures—bodies, generations, households, neighborhoods, neurons, classes, and cultures—that mediate and sustain the relationship between experience, significance, and practice. It is ultimately about the differences between bodies that explode efforts to ground an analysis in any of these frames—biological, political, or cultural—without rethinking the relationships between them.

THE VIEW FROM THE RIVER

The river, again. We are in a boat: myself, two other passengers—railway workers from the nearby town of Mughalsarai—and the boatman, who is pulling hard against the current and ferrying us upstream. We are on the Ganges, in Varanasi, and on our left the ghats glide by, flights of stone steps leading up to the lanes of the city. A few men and women, some quite old and stooped, are bathing. The scene—river, ghats, lanes, boats, and bathers—is clichéd. It has come to stand in for the city as a whole in a variety of registers: religious, touristic, sanitary, scholarly. Its meanings—what we four on the boat can make, respectively, of what we see—are overdetermined.

Other boats glide by. I don’t remember their passengers, but they might have held parties of religious pilgrims come to see and bathe in the river at this sacred site, or tourists from larger cities or from abroad doing the prescribed early morning boat ride—cameras poised to catch the houris in dripping saris, the smoldering cremation pyres, the fisherman drawing in their nets glinting against the sunrise, or the suspicious-looking objects floating in the water. Or they might have

been parties of men crossing the river to the wide and empty other bank for an outing, one of the lazy pleasures of *banārsīpan*, the much-elaborated essence of being a Varanasi resident.¹⁵ Or of development workers engaged in an often-publicized multinational effort to fight pollution and “save the Ganges.”

It is 1989. The boatman’s name is Shankar, and I know him because his wife cleans house for Marwari Mataji, the old lady who lives upstairs from me. Mataji and I share a building overlooking the river, owned by a temple trust; the principal trustees are the Peshwas, descendants of the former rulers of much of western India. Mataji was once a wealthy widow who came to Varanasi to live out her days in the religiously meritorious act of being a *kāśīwāsī*, a dweller in Kashi. (Kashi is another, venerable name for this city in the easternmost part of Uttar Pradesh.) Marwari Mataji became a disciple of Karpatri, an ascetic leader of the Hindu political right, who himself used to stay in this house by the river. Karpatriji had long since died (though his ghost would later come to haunt me in the person of Tambe the madman), and Marwari Mataji kept his memory alive.

Shankar is grizzled, wiry, and white-haired. When I first met him I thought he was in his sixties. But he is considerably younger. “Shankar works hard,” I remember Marwari Mataji saying. “He just looks old.” I would rent Shankar’s boat for exercise on occasion, but even without passengers found it difficult to propel its lengthy wooden oars. Amid the traffic of other people’s boats, I would spin in circles while Shankar watched from Mataji’s window.

The two men from Mughalsarai are looking at me and I at them. They ask me if I’m a tourist. I get a little defensive. I tell them I’m a medical student and an anthropologist learning about what some people call the *kamzorī* (weakness) of *dīmāg* (brain) in old age, what others joke about as “going sixtyish,” *sathiyānā*. One of the two men leans forward and asks me to explain, as an expert, why the brains of Muslim old people stay *sahī*, right or correct, and why Muslim elders usually don’t get angry, confused, or obstinate. Why that is, they do not go sixtyish.

The two men are Hindu and working class. It is a time in which political writers—in Varanasi and around the world—are worrying about rising communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims, and I am therefore struck that a poor Hindu man is framing the old brain of the Muslim as somehow more “right.” But I lack a good answer to the railway worker’s question, and I tell him so. I play it safe. I admit that I have never noticed any differences between Hindu and Muslim brains and ask him why he posed the question. He pauses. He says he wonders whether the fact that “we Hindus fight far more with our old parents and are less disciplined in family affairs than Muslims” might have an effect on the behavior of old people. These are not his exact words; as a social anthropologist, my practice was to write down the details of remembered conversations such as this one each evening before retiring.

Rereading what I had written in my notes of this conversation over subsequent weeks, I came to doubt whether I had interpreted the meaning of the man from Mughalsarai correctly. Differences ascribed to Muslim brains were neither a fea-

ture of Indian popular discourse on old age nor were they apparent within the language or practice of most persons I interviewed. Yet over the course of two years in Varanasi studying when and why old people were understood to be behaving differently and with what sorts of social and bodily consequences, I was a dozen or so times asked the same question, about the *sahī* brains of Muslims, and always by working or middle class Hindus.¹⁶ The question came to haunt me. I would ask friends, acquaintances, or interview respondents in the four neighborhoods where I spent most of my time whether there were any differences between Hindus and Muslims in old age, and they would inevitably answer in the negative. Despite the putative advantage the railway worker's question seemed to offer to Muslims, the Varanasi Muslims with whom I spoke were unanimous in rejecting the idea that there could be any difference between Hindu and Muslim bodies and brains, seeing in the observation primarily a threat to their ultimately more strategic assertion that all persons were the same.

Yet each time I was ready to abandon the question, someone else in a different neighborhood and different context would pose some variant of it. I would press each new person for his or her own ideas, and I usually was told something like what the railman had first said: Muslim *families* are different; they are *sahī*, unlike our own, which in contrast are somehow spoiled or excessive or undisciplined or simply bad. And bad families produce weak-brained old people. Yet none of these interlocutors were happy with the sufficiency of this answer: thus their initial posing of Muslim difference as a question for an academic "expert." And so I begin by posing their question here, yet again. For me, it is a variant of the question raised by the old madwoman of the Balua affair. What might be at stake in the act of speaking about old brains and the behavior of old people, such that their being invoked moves us so seamlessly from the old body to the status of families and entire communities, religions, or nations?