COMMENTARY

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK: A MORAL DILEMMA

I must be the ultimate urbanite. Reared in the centre of Manchester by parents who did not consider country walks good for the soul. Terrified of cows and spiders. No feel for geography - from my concrete jungle how could I imagine what constituted an 'ecological niche'? Even my M.Litt. thesis was on race relations.

By the time I set out to do fieldwork in East Africa, I was imbued with the importance of kinship, age groups, the position of women, and 'cattle ideology'. I had rather vague notions of what constituted ecologically 'marginal zones', and even vaguer ideas of tropical medicine. I stalwartly set out to study a small group of people, the Larim, nestling in the south-eastern corner of the Sudan. At the time I left them in March 1979 they were strong and healthy, with villages full of grain to eat. Large herds of cattle and goats grazed peacefully in pastures on the plains. Naïvely I expected to return to the stable situation.

On the morning of January 6th 1980, full of optimism and anticipation I boarded the flight to Nairobi. In the plane I read, quite by chance, Colin Turnbull's account *The Mountain People*, the story of an anthropologist forced by circumstance to study a group of people last in his list of preferences. When he arrived in their area, he found them starving on the edge of their fertile former hunting grounds which had been annexed by the Ugandan Government, as the Kidepo National Park. For many months Turnbull watched these people starve to death, shedding as they did so the cultural and social bonds tying them to neighbours, freinds, distant kin and, finally, close kin. I noted with passing interest that the Kidepo river flowed through the land of the Larim, the people I was on my way to study; then I put it out of my mind, and wrote a self-righteous list of criticisms of Turnbull's book. Why had he stayed watching those people as they starved? Why had he not done

more to get relief, to alert the government to their plight? How could he sit with his Landrover full of food eating, in the knowledge that his neighbours, however much he might not like them, were starving? Had he not in some strange way become as 'inhuman' as he made out the Ik themselves to be? Why did he not go elsewhere to 'people-watch'? What were the ethics of being in that position?

On that same morning of my flight on January 6th, a large force of Larim men, using guerrilla tactics common to groups surrounded by numerically dominant forces, encircled a large encampment of Toposa men, women and children. The Toposa, neighbours of the Larim, were camped on Larim land, eating borassus palm fruit from trees which they insouciantly felled as the fruit was unripe and did not fall easily. Both Larim and Toposa had been badly hit by drought. They were hungry, their animals were dying of thirst, their granaries empty. The Larim had allowed the Toposa on their land at first - until they saw the destruction of the trees. They were relying on the fruit to feed their own families until the next harvest, and on the trees for future famine years. Both groups had acquired automatic weapons from refugee soldiers loyal to ex-President Amin of Uganda. The Larim attacked, taking the Toposa by surprise. At the end of the day 171 Toposa and 42 Larim were dead. A few days later, two roadside Larim villages were burned to the ground with all their occupants. Small skirmishes became part of the daily expectations of herdsmen and cultivators.

When I arrived in Juba, the capital of the southern Sudan, I was warned by the Director of the province that there were 'troubles' in the south-east. Some fighting had been reported; a lack of water, and cattle dying of thirst or disease had been seen alongside the roads in the Kenya-Sudan border area. I decided to see for myself what was happening in the Larim area.

My first problem was transport in a country where there is no public transport, no hired vehicles, and no petrol on sale. I had hoped to rely on the offices of the Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) organisation, which is the main development group in the south-east region, sending a nurse every three weeks or so into the Larim area. I was lucky to find a nurse from NCA just setting off when I reached their headquarters at Torit. The reason for her journey, however, was not auspicious, as she was going to help her colleague cope with a cholera outbreak in the northern Larim area. By then 34 people were known to have died.

While the two nurses coped with many patients - not requiring my unskilled help - I made contact with my Larim friends of the previous year and learned from them the events of the past six months. The rains should have started in April 1979 and ended in October. The 'little rains' lasted until June, and then after a short dry spell, heavy rains should have fallen in July, August and part of September. In fact the rain stopped early in August just as the main harvest was ripening. It was ruined. Waterholes and the natural hill-spings had dried up, and water was collected by the women from deep holes dug in river-beds four

kilometres away from the villages. Tamarind fruit, borassus palm fruit and edible leaves were the main food, with occasional meat supplements which increased as meat from animals dying in the drought was brought to the villages from the grazing grounds.

The question was: what, as an anthropologist, was I to do? The immediate solution was easy. I had to leave the area because of the cholera. That was a constant reminder of my relatively privileged position during the next six months. Whatever I tried to do, however much I identified with the difficulties, or lived with the people, I could always walk away.

My first priority was to contact the NCA Director to find out what NCA was doing for the people. The drought and its attendant problems were affecting the neighbouring Didinga as well as the Larim and Toposa. I was assured NCA was planning a small relief operation, having bought, and with difficulty transported,grain from the northern Sudan to sell in the stricken areas. There is no market infrastructure in the south-east Sudan. I offered my assistance with the relief programme. NCA was not interested in accepting help from outsiders, which made my position difficult. My difficulties increased when the nurse, while professing willingness, did not in fact offer a lift for the next three months. The fighting made it dangerous to approach the area on foot, and in any case I could not have carried sufficient food. Thrown on my own resources over the next six months, and aided by lifts from sympathetic colleagues and aid workers prepared to drive the 25 bumpy kilometres from the main road to my village area, I spent my time travelling between the Larim and the nearest towns, keeping in touch with, and building relationships with, the NCA nurse, relief wrokers and officials, as a kind of self-appointed liaison officer, keeping them aware of the situation and needs in my area. I also spent a total of three months with a Larim family, experiencing the deprivation at first hand.

It was not nearly as gruelling in the village as I imagined it would be. I even did some 'classical' fieldwork, learning the language and attending rituals. Unlike Turnbull's situation, people were not actually dying of starvation. 'My' family were in a relatively good situation sharing my food, and although I felt guilty about the neighbours, they were extremely hospitable and friendly. Perhaps the presence of a European in their villages was a sufficient novelty so as to be a distraction from their problems. Nevertheless it was hard, we all went hungry, and I entered a food-sharing network in which I also had to fight to conserve my limited food resources in order to stay.

By the time I left the Sudan in July after a bout of illness, the food shortages were acute, although the first harvest was expected in August. I now understand from reports however that the south-east Sudan, in common with other areas of East and Central Africa,has entered its second year of famine. It is feared that the whole of that region, from Somalia through to the Karamoja region of northern Uganda, may be facing a major famine due to the exceptional circumstances facing the region. The fighting in the Ogaden, in Ethiopia and northern Uganda, the increasing pressure

to maintain political borders, and the presence of so many fire-arms in the region, have prevented the peoples in the drought and famine beld from moving to more fertile watered places. In Karamjoa and Somalia large refugee or food camps are growing, dependent on outside relief and with no guarantee of returning to their former habitat if the drought ends.

This has been a necessarily personal account of emotional responses to a given situation, and the ethical problems it made me face. I do not think I am alone in having to face them. All anthropologists have to decide between a moral stance and 'scientific objectivity' at certain times in their lives. I do not claim to have analysed or answered the moral dilemma. Only to have posed it.

Perhaps these can be separated. I am not sure. While I do not think that anthropologists should expect to be part-time relief workers, or doctors, they are representatives of potential help and liaison with officialdom and the outside world. If faced with a situation in which the people one is studying are in danger, be it of starvation, extermination, or even forcible sendentarization, what should one do? And in 'doing' does one cease to be an anthropologist, and become merely a 'concerned person', or maybe an applied anthropologist?

There is a further large area of discourse to be considered, covering the whole ethic of outside interference in traditional societies. This may lead to large-scale enforced sedentariness as a result of increased government control acquired, albeit inadvertently, through development projects - or education in countries where no opportunities exist, or a frustrated alienated urban slum population, or disoriented rural population are created. Pastoral peoples are a classic target for this kind of 'development'; it makes them easier to tax and control. Therefore to what extent was I to try to involve outside agencies? Here was a rich cultural area - not, I hasten to add, just for anthropological study, but for the people themselves. For all I knew the harvest would be good in 1980, while outside interference might produce unforeseen problems.

My own position was anomalous in the situation. The autobiographical details at the beginning of this paper were not given gratuitously. I was particularly faced with my ignorance of factors relating to animal, grain and plant maintenance, of nutritional needs and measurements, of medicine. Sitting as an 'objective observer' in a village, without an interpreter, trying to learn the language from hungry women, who obviously enjoyed having me there, but who had only food on their mind, seemed all wrong. I could walk away, stay, or become a one-woman pressure group on aid organisations and government. There is, I suspect, no right response, and to some extent I tried to fulfill them all.

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[Editor's Note: *Further contributions relating to the experiences of anthropologists in the field would be welcomed for future issues of* JASO.]