

## **Ethnography as fiction - or the lies we tell one another.**

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Social anthropology is based on fieldwork. Fieldwork is more than a method of uncovering sociological “facts” by means of participant observation. It is the initiation ritual that turns a student into a “real” social anthropologist and it is part of the way in which we distinguish ourselves from our colleagues, the sociologists, who tend to work at a larger scale.

Strangely, the stereotype of fieldwork remains that of the colonial era. This continues to be the case although much fieldwork now takes place at home, down the road, in communities familiar to most of the readers of anthropological journals or monographs. The stereotype consists of participant observation by a single foreigner in a small remote location, relatively isolated from the nation state, preferably in an area where little such research has taken place, in a language which has scarcely been documented. Ideally every PhD student should replicate the experiences of Malinowski and his pupils working on the periphery of the Empire. Nowadays we have learnt to distrust some of their assumptions. We know we can ignore only at our peril history and the wider perspective of nation, empire and the forces of the world market. Whether fieldwork occurs in North London or North Borneo many of the dilemmas for the fieldworker are the same. There are issues of confidentiality, trust, and those posed by enduring relationships with those we work with.

Some recent critics, influenced by post-modernist literary theory, have begun to examine the papers and monographs written by social anthropologists. We produce texts which must seem authoritative in order to persuade. Anthropology can be criticised and deconstructed as an exercise in the production of a particular genre of texts. (The more pressure from funding agencies to maintain a high rate of publications the greater the element of truth in this suggestion.)

Such an approach tends to portray the importance of fieldwork as a mythic element manipulated to claim authority for what one wants to say: “I was there, I saw it, therefore I must be correct.”

The practice of fieldwork is much more complex than this suggests.

I am an old fashioned anthropologist. I have been working in one, relatively remote, village in rural Cameroon since I started my doctoral research in 1985. I return as frequently as I can, and started to write this when I was there early this year.

When I am doing fieldwork in Somié I drink with people I have known on and off for 7 years. We sit, drink and chat. They ask me about my village, I ask them about theirs.

I have found myself describing Guy Fawkes night as a village celebration during which people dance round a fire and shoot guns in the air. Often I have to account for having a pierced ear. Why have I got a pierced ear? It is hard to know what the correct answer should be. I could tell the story of a birthday party which left me hungover in Birmingham sharing a pair of ear studs with my 'wife'. (Wife or 'wife'? We weren't then and we are now. But we were already living together at that point. Is the difference important, or is it irrelevant not only to this story but in general to the villagers in Cameroon?) The shop offered a pair for £5: I had one, she had the other. The hangover is important because previously I had wanted to do it but was scared, to the point of turning away at the door.

In Cameroon people repeatedly notice the ring and say "Wò né ma veh wa?" in Mambila, or "Vous êtes une femme?" in Francophone cities. What I now say is that in my country men pierce one ear, women two. I have to repeat this whenever I travel and still from time to time in the village where I work. I am unhappy about it as an account. It leaves out all the associations with sailors, Gypsies and the gay community, with punk and dissident youth. To pierce or not to pierce? There is a vast ethnography of European body adornment which would form the context within which I could give a good answer to the question. In its absence I simplify to the point of lying. I invent "traditions" which are not, I believe, there. When I am asked about my ear in Somié I am not sure if I am being asked about me as an individual and my biography or about the general way of things where I come from. The questions I ask often have a similar ambiguity. My inability to answer their questions is surely equalled by their inability to answer mine. The people I talk to invent or simplify themselves for the inquisitive stranger. If I succeed in getting some way beyond such misleading simplifications it is more through persistence and endurance than through any

formal methodology. What I have learnt is both through repeated questioning and from seeing the same things happen several times. Usually there are far more important things at stake than confusing or misleading the anthropologist. I have understood what I do understand by letting people get on with it as much as by direct questioning.

I sit drinking beer and we tell each other lies. I am privileged. I can find out their lies easier than they can unpack mine. To date only one person from Somié has had a University training outside Africa. The man in question studied in America and now works in the regional capital. He could tell some of my lies immediately. Theirs, everyone can detect, with me among them. A story is constructed and there are inconsistencies and repairs where none need be. Or, conversely, it is all too fluent. Explanations are performed too freely, too completely. I find these attractive and helpful. Possible worlds are as interesting as the actual one. What Mambila think of as a conceivable way of organising their life helps me understand the way they do go about organising it.

My lies are simplifications or translations which distort their subject to the point of ridicule<sup>1</sup>. They tell lies to entertain and to test me. One can tell the difference- I ask the same question five times in one day. Conspiracy theories may be attractive but most of my interests remain what they have always been: trivial and unimportant to the everyday concerns of the people I work with. It is conceivable that people may conspire and deceive or hide a certain event, e.g. murder and its like or specialist ritual knowledge. But the amount of organisation required for consistent stories to be told about growing beards is beyond credulity.

One morning I was told off by an elder, for having a beard - an ethnographer's beard, an africanist's beard? - since I am a young man. Lebon said when you hold a grand-child in your hands, only then may you grow a beard. Even then you must give a chicken to an elder sibling.

Later the same day during a beer drink he "bearded" me again. I could tell from the reactions of the other people that this was a tease. Till then, admittedly, I did not suspect it and I had solemnly written it down in my notebook - how unedited field notes may mislead! Not only

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<sup>1</sup>Ridicule can work both ways: Nigel Barley's fiction of ethnography includes an account of the absolute disbelief by the Dowayo of his claim that trains ran underground in London.

were there the reactions of the other drinkers, but among them was someone of about my age who also had a beard and knew nothing of any restrictions.

Post modernist criticism has focused on the construction of ethnographic texts. It has concentrated on the fictions of writing rather than of talking. I suspect that like many anglophones my feet remain fixed in the dust and I am sceptical about the tenor of the criticisms. The jiggers that eat my toes are sufficient to remind me of the crude level of my interests. When I write do I construct a fable, an anthropological myth of Mambila as misleading as any fiction? Not so, the jiggers tell me. From Habermas through Thompson I have gained the picture of a conversation between equals in which relations of power, authority and social distance do not obtrude. While no actual conversation may ever be like this its idea serves as a yard stick enabling us to assess actual conversations. I see ethnographies in the same light.

Ethnographies (or only good ethnographies?) stand as reports of conversations and reflections upon them. The conversations occur between anthropologists and those they work with; both the people in the field (the “subjects”) and the people<sup>2</sup> in the seminar rooms or libraries (the “colleagues”). The ideal of conversation between equals may also serve to orientate the way we both read and write ethnographies.

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<sup>2</sup>In practice the two groups may coincide.

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