PACIFIC STUDIES

SPECIAL ISSUE
BACK IN THE FIELD AGAIN
LONG-TERM FIELDWORK IN OCEANIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Vol. 27, No. 3/4 Sept./Dec. 2004

INTRODUCTION

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ANTHROPOLOGISTS HAVE OFTEN BEEN ACCUSED of exploiting the people they study—of entering a field site, staying for a year or so, then leaving to pursue their own career self-interests armed with knowledge expropriated from the community that had hosted them, never to return. A corollary criticism of one-shot fieldwork is that it too often freezes ethnography in an unrealistic "ethnographic present," depriving the culture studied of meaningful history. None of the contributors to this volume can be accused of such shortcomings; all have returned to their communities multiple times and have documented changes over time.

Long-term fieldwork is not new to the discipline of anthropology. Franz Boas, for example, made repeated visits to the Northwest Coast of North America, and to the Kwakiutl in particular. However, his brand of fieldwork, based mostly on interrogating a few key informants, was generally replaced by a paradigm of intensive participant observation initiated by Bronislaw Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands. Although Malinowski spent nearly three years in the Trobriands, between 1915 and 1918 (albeit as the fortuitous result of his being interned there during World War I), for some reason the rule of thumb for dissertation research in social and cultural anthropology became a one-year expedition. Perhaps this was to suit the academic calendar, on the one hand, allowing students to return to their home institutions at an appropriate time to begin writing a thesis. Longer field trips were often discouraged on the grounds that they would delay the graduate's

professional career. On the other hand, a year was thought to be minimally necessary to observe an annual cycle of events, an idea derivative no doubt from temperate-zone agricultural and transhuman practices in the northern hemisphere.

In any case, many ethnographers have spent a year or so doing dissertation research on a one-time basis, more or less establishing their reputations on publications derived from that time-limited point of view. Some have gone on to conduct research with other people in a similar vein, thus gaining a comparative, though still time-restricted perspective. To be fair, one must acknowledge that, not so long ago, traveling to many of the sites in which ethnographers worked was not easy. Transportation to and from the more remote locations was problematic at best, and communication channels were so restricted that keeping in touch was not practical. Conditions favoring returns to original field sites in Oceania began to improve from the 1970s onwards. The rapid and vast expansion of tenured academic positions in anthropology in Western countries, coupled with the establishment of new regional universities and research centers in the Pacific Islands, made it easier for researchers to justify and fund innovative projects that required return visits. The costs of travel dropped dramatically, even to the most remote areas, not only enabling anthropologists to return to their field sites for regular short visits but also making it possible for members of these communities to visit them. Finally, and not least, communications improved in much of the region, allowing instantaneous contact between researchers and members of host communities by satellite phone or e-mail. These trends are not evenly distributed—there are parts of Melanesia that are today more inaccessible than even a decade ago because of the breakdown of state services and outbreaks of local violence—but in general it has become easier for anthropologists to return to the communities they study on a regular basis, and this has had a significant effect on the practice of the discipline.

Unfortunately, the stereotype of one-shot research persists, perhaps because so little has been written to tell the story of long-term projects. It was this deficiency in the literature that led John Barker and Ann Chowning to organize an informal session on back-to-the-field experiences at the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania meetings held in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 2000. In truth, we found listening to one another's accounts exhilarating, and decided to continue through the ASAO process of developing and refining our papers at working sessions in 2001 and 2002 and a symposium in 2003. The articles included here were presented at that symposium.

There are two basic modes of longitudinal research. One type involves research conducted by a team of ethnographers, sometimes by several gen-

erations of graduate students. Among the better-known projects of this type are the Harvard Chiapas Project (begun by Evon Vogt in 1957), research among the Ju/'hoansi-!Kung (begun in 1963 by Richard Lee), and work done in Tzintzuntzan, Mexico (begun in 1944 by George Foster); for detailed accounts of these and other long-term projects see Foster et al. (1979) and Kemper and Royce (2002). The other type involves return visits to a field site by the same one or two researchers over a span of years. This is a more common occurrence in the profession and is exemplified by the contributors to this volume. Research in this vein may bring ethnographers back to their field sites only after long absences (for example, Raymond Firth's visits to Tikopia in 1928–1929, 1952, and 1966), or they may make repeated visits after relatively short intervals over a span of years. The length of visits may also vary from a week or two to a few years, but it is clear from all accounts that going back to the field repeatedly results in a very different kind of ethnography.

Raymond Firth, in a paper describing his encounters with Tikopia over sixty years, summed up the situation facing long-term researchers succinctly: "anthropology has changed, I have changed and the Tikopia have changed" (1990:241). His observation suggests a template for thinking about the implications of longitudinal research.

Anthropology over Time

During the mid-twentieth century, the dominant paradigms in social and cultural anthropology were synchronic in nature: functionalism, structuralism, culture and personality, and so forth. This is not to say that history and change were totally ignored. As Firth pointed out in his article, he and some of his colleagues, such as Isaac Schapera and Monica Hunter, were very much aware of the significance of historical factors in the interpretation of the state of a society (1990:244). Likewise, American anthropologists, following in the Boasian tradition, included historical analysis in their accounts and introduced the concept of "acculturation" to deal with change. But for the most part, the history involved was either inferred or derived from earlier writings. As long as anthropologists were basing their accounts on short-term, one-visit field trips, they lacked a sense of the dynamics of historical process. As Thayer Scudder and Elizabeth Colson wrote, reflecting on their long-term study of the Gwembe of Zambia, anthropology's proper subject matter

> is people making decisions through time in contexts which change both because of their own action and because external conditions change in ways which neither they nor we are able to anticipate. Much of anthropology is still tied to system concepts derived from

> biology and the physical sciences, even though we chaff against them and criticize them. A major reason for this problem is that the most common type of fieldwork still centers on a single slice of time. This predisposes the use of terms and concepts that emphasize static as opposed to dynamic relationships and stresses integration as opposed to flux. (2002:214)

One consequence of taking a synchronic view, as Mervyn Meggitt has pointed out, is that "stability is taken to be the norm and change the problem to be explained, whereas, if anything, the assertion should be the other way around" (1979:122).

Repeated visits to a field site change projects by significantly altering the nature of the researcher's database. A time-restricted body of data, no matter how rich, gleaned from a single field trip, tends toward a finalized "ethnographic present," whereas repeated visits render research a work in process. This changes the way ethnographers write and publish; instead of authoritative accounts of how things are, our publications become progress reports. We are well aware that the next time we return things are likely to be quite different, that the notion of a typical year is as much a myth as the notions of stable structures and bounded communities. As a result, we are inevitably cast in the role of historians, whether we conceive of ourselves that way or not. Enhanced attention to context is a natural result of increasing familiarity with a community, Howard and Rensel point out in their article, and propels the ethnographer toward historicism and away from generalizations. At the same time, as vividly illustrated in Kjellgren's discussion of changing styles in Aboriginal art of the East Kimberley, return visits make it possible to separate historical contingencies from persistent cultural patterns.

In many ways, as our understandings deepen, we are better able to anticipate people's behavior, but inevitably anomalies appear, our expectations of how key events will unfold prove incorrect, and people surprise us. Such occurrences tend to produce a more humble fieldworker and more humble ethnography (see, e.g., DeVita 1990). That humility manifests itself in scholarly works that are more nuanced—sensitive to ambiguity and historic conditions. It also manifests itself in works deliberately produced for the use and benefit of the communities researched. Most contributors to this issue have produced such work, ranging from shared copies of rough field notes and photographs, through self-published collections of local narratives and histories, to community Web pages, grant applications, and action plans. Such involvement does little to advance one's academic career, but it is the most important thing an anthropologist can do. And there is nothing more rewarding.

Ethnographers through Time

Anne and Keith Chambers tell in their article of being declared "of the island" as soon as the Nanumea people recognized they were not merely transient visitors but planned to live and work in the community. This is a common, near-unavoidable experience in ethnographic fieldwork. Presented with strangers who intend to reside among them, members of a local community have little choice but to place the newcomers into social categories that will guide appropriate relationships and allow the local people some control. Anthropologists are keenly aware of this and have engaged in much discussion over the years on the research implications of personal factors like gender, age, marital status, and ethnicity upon one's reception in a host community and access to various types of ethnographic information. Time and the opportunity for repeated visits both deepen and widen the fieldworker's social status. As researchers age, marry, and have children, the types of people they can comfortably associate with changes. A young unmarried fieldworker might be classified as a "boy" or "girl" who can interact easily with youths, less comfortably with elders. With time, the possibilities may reverse themselves as the roles of both ethnographer and people in the community change. Indeed, as Gibbs shows in his contribution, given the opportunity, an ethnographer may come to assume a wide range of roles. This provides an opportunity for the anthropologist to gain a more balanced understanding of social life.

Returns, however, typically signal much more profound transformations in the relationship between researchers and host communities than simple shifts in status. In the small Oceanic communities described in the following pages, relationships cannot be taken for granted; they are worked on and validated through a constant process of give and take, an ongoing exchange of advice, labor, and material gifts. Separations threaten social relationships. In the Maisin communities described by Barker in this volume, parents sometimes regard children who have not kept in touch or sent gifts after taking jobs in distant towns as "dead." Given such assumptions, it is not surprising that islanders often treat researchers returning from a great distance and after a long time as relatives feared to have been deceased or as prodigal sons. The return, especially the first return, signals an enduring commitment by the researcher to the community. With repeated visits that commitment grows. People in the community recognize this, which significantly reduces the social distance that characterizes initial fieldwork. Virtually all ethnographers who have engaged in long-term projects report the same thing—that over time they feel more and more "at home" in the community they have been studying. In some cases, their commitment to the study community supersedes allegiance to their original homeland or to the academic community. The transformation

is from (more or less) scientific observer to active participant in community affairs, and in many cases, to ready advocate for community causes.

Involvement in a community over time inevitably deepens and complicates relationships. Certain families are likely to become "our" families as we spend increasing amounts of time with them, share meals, exchange gifts, contribute to the education of children, and foot the bill for medical expenses. As Flinn's account of her fieldwork experience indicates, increasing familiarity with the culture facilitates a comfortable, unself-conscious pattern of interaction, which often has the effect of encouraging people in the community to talk more freely about previously guarded topics. At the same time, people feel freer in making demands of "their" anthropologist and become more open in their criticisms. It becomes much more difficult for anthropologists to avoid being drawn in to local political contests. As relationships deepen and intensify—as one comes to know and be known in ever more personal terms—any sense of the people being studied as "the other" is likely to completely disintegrate. For some fieldworkers, the very core of their values and beliefs may come to mirror those of their adopted community as much as or more than the ones from which they came.

Long-term research poses serious challenges to an ethnographic project. The sheer size of an ever-increasing database, filled with decidedly nuanced, highly contextualized, and often contradictory information, may make writing anything in an anthropological vein difficult. Questions may also arise: about maintaining objectivity as one becomes more actively drawn into social life, about losing the capacity to see the forest for the trees, about developing tunnel vision. A variety of factors can influence the degree to which such problems emerge and affect research outcomes, but in most instances the trade-offs clearly favor deeper involvement. As all of us who have done long-term research can attest, the data we acquire are far richer, deeper, and more representative of life as lived. We have become aware that our original attempts at objectivity were more illusion than actuality, that a limited perspective no matter how objective can lead to serious misunderstandings we only come to recognize later on. Another potential cost can be the loss of a sense of excitement, of the freshness that motivates us during our initial field experience. Perhaps; but explaining the changes we witness with each return continues to challenge intellectually. Our excitement might diminish a bit as we shift from being graduate students to established professionals to professors emeriti, but the ever-changing communities continue to stimulate our intellectual juices.

Deeper involvement also raises ethical issues. How do we deal with inevitable conflicts, with factional disputes involving our close friends and adopted families? As active members of a community we not only take on

additional responsibilities, we are drawn into the web of interpersonal alliances, schisms, and power-wielding dynamics that are part and parcel of every community's social life. There are no simple answers. All we can do is draw on our own ethical principles, informed by an understanding of what is considered right and proper in the community at large.

Does this kind of deep involvement in a community render the ethnographer "one of them," so to speak? Obviously not, if membership qualifications include bloodlines or childhood socialization *in situ*. But if we make the distinction between ethnicity as genealogically derived and ethnic communities as networks of committed individuals who are actively involved in the group, it is quite clear that ethnographers can indeed gain membership (just as spouses from elsewhere can gain membership after marrying in). To be relevant, membership requires a personal history of involvement—a temporal span that frames an extensive record of material exchanges; information sharing; active participation in various activities, including disputes; and a general engagement with the immediate concerns of the community's members.

Communities in Time

The contributors to this special issue deal with much more than the implications of fieldwork over the long term for anthropological understandings and personal relationships; they also detail the ways in which the communities they've studied have changed. Those of us who began fieldwork decades ago have seen phenomenal changes take place. To begin with, the political and economic changes over the past few decades have been dramatic. Many of us have witnessed communities governed by colonial powers become parts of nation-states with entirely different political structures. In some of the new nations, coups have taken place; in others, revised constitutions have resulted in shifting political institutions. As a result, structures that once seemed quite stable now appear much less so; in some instances once-familiar institutions have all but disappeared.

Access to modern medicine has allowed populations to grow; access to education has provided opportunities to enter modern occupations and professions; and access to transportation has facilitated dispersion, with people regularly moving in and out. This increased fluidity has rendered the very concept of "community" problematic, a point that Carucci emphasizes in his reflections on fieldwork with the exiled community from Enewetak Atoll. As Robert Kemper, reflecting on changes in Tzintzuntzan, put it:

> Our continuing long-term fieldwork among the people of Tzintzuntzan suggests that we need to rethink our notion of community.

> . . . I am struck particularly by how hard it has become to define who is and who is not a resident of Tzintzuntzan. . . .
>
> What once was treated—by villagers and anthropologists alike—as if it were a "closed" system has become a spatially and temporally extended community whose changing characteristics cannot be ignored. . . . Through our long-term field research, we have seen how the concept of "community" involves not only the sense of physical place *(pueblo)* but also the commitment to common identity and values *(communidad indígena)* regardless of whether the people of Tzintzuntzan are physically resident in the town or living elsewhere. (2002:303, 306)

In the Pacific we have seen islanders become increasingly cosmopolitan and increasingly aware of themselves and their cultural heritage. They are dispersed around the world, trying to cope with the same problems that confront the ethnographers who study them. Our common humanity is now more in evidence than ever, but this very fact poses challenges to our methods and theories. We need "to develop research designs and methods flexible enough to cope with the fluidity of people who move geographically, seize or reject new opportunities (or try to cope with the nonavailability of opportunities), use and avoid new national and international agencies, rethink and cling to old ideologies, and are becoming something else while trying to remain themselves" (Scudder and Colson 2002:204).

The "field," in other words, is changing and will continue to change. As it has changed, anthropologists have become more conscious that earlier identifications of the field with a specific place were also inadequate and misleading. At the same time we resist the notion that the field has become every place, which, in effect, means that it is no place special. This may well be true for many people, but clearly not for the indigenous groups who are the subject of these essays. The Rotumans and Pollapese may be dispersed—indeed, most members of the Enewetak community can only imagine their home island—yet still they all take their identity from a physical place. Most Gija, Maisin, Nanumeans, and Engla continue to live in their ancestral homes. Modern ethnographic fieldwork may well occur in a variety of locations, but to the extent that the researcher identifies with and, indeed, becomes part of a community, his or her reseach will be oriented to a place. This place will certainly be one the anthropologist wants to experience personally and return to. And on that return, she or he likely will be accompanied by one or more members making their own journey home.

The Future

Rumors of the impending demise of anthropology have been greatly exaggerated. The academic discipline is firmly established in universities, museums, and research institutions around the globe. An ever-growing number of graduates make use of anthropological knowledge and methods in a bewildering variety of occupations, most outside the academy. But there can be no doubt that the discipline is changing rapidly or that one of the casualties of change may be Malinowski-style intensive fieldwork and the opportunity for a continuing relationship between a researcher and a "field." Old-fashioned long-term ethnographic research has come under attack within and without the discipline for many alleged sins—for the "theft" of indigenous culture; for arrogantly "silencing" indigenous voices; for lending scientific credence to notions of "otherness" that serve to hide, even abet, oppression; and so forth. For all of the criticism, however, most professional anthropologists still appear to embrace the ideal of intensive fieldwork. A far-greater threat comes from more mundane causes that have reduced opportunities, especially for new students: declining funding, ratcheting pressure from universities for four-year doctoral degrees, and the increasing dangers from disease and violence in many quarters of the nonindustrialized world.

The criticisms and the obstacles must all be acknowledged. Yet we remain cautiously optimistic. For a twenty-year period at most, anthropologists enjoyed relatively generous financial support and a tolerance for "slow" research. That time has passed. Nonetheless, determined individuals before and after this time have been able to undertake intensive, sustained fieldwork. In one of the most significant and hopeful trends, an ever-increasing number of Pacific Islander scholars are taking and remaking ethnographic practices through sustained research in their home communities and diasporas. Some ninety years after Malinowski first set foot in the Trobriands, we have an extraordinarily rich record that demonstrates the utility of the method for gathering sound ethnographic knowledge. It can also be an effective tool for achieving both practical and political ends in ways that are ethical and responsible to the subjects of anthropology research. Our aim in this collection is to add to the scholarly appreciation of ethnography by providing accounts of its use over the long term, a facet that has not been adequately studied or appreciated.

The authors in this volume describe, in quite personal terms, the ways in which the people they have studied (and the "field") have changed, the ways they themselves have changed, and the ways the nature of their fieldwork has changed. We hope that our stories will encourage others, anthropologists and members of the communities they study and work with, to publish their own. Above all, we hope that the accounts are compelling enough to encourage stu-

dents about to embark on research projects in the Pacific to commit to long-term involvement with the communities they study, no matter how defined.

NOTES

The editors take pleasure in acknowledging the many contributions of scholars who contributed their own stories and participated in the four ASAO sessions leading up to this special issue. The articles here are far better for the ideas and enthusiasm of all of the participants in these sessions. We would like to thank in particular Jane Goodale, Jeanette Dickerson-Putman, Joseph Finney, Judith Huntsman, Suzanne Falgout, Adrienne Kaeppler, Jill Nash, and Mark Mosko. Bob Tonkinson proved a kind and wise discussant during the Auckland meetings. We are especially grateful to Ann Chowning who, along with John Barker, initiated and chaired the sessions.

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