



Autoethnographic Explorations

Privileged Access to the Social or Idiosyncratic Journalism?

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July 2022

Impressum

ISSN: 977-1664-66810-0

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Front cover: Women watching photos of everyday life in the 1980s.
Tyelikaha 2022

Back cover: Men looking at pictures of relatives attending a funeral in the 1980s.
Tyelikaha 2022
Photos: Till Förster



During the rainy season, clouds are part of the landscape. It is important to know when and where it will rain or not. *Water colour, Till Förster 1982*

Introduction: Reflection and Expression

Till Förster

Many ethnographers know the feeling of being immersed in the lives of others, of not being able to study their life-worlds as an object of research, of learning by adopting the routines of new and foreign social worlds, of becoming part of another societal milieu and eventually a culture that had been extraneous to the anthropologist's own life but increasingly becomes part of it. Eventually, ethnographers may morph into sensitive partners whose feelings and experiences mirror their collaboration and interactions with the people around them. Autoethnography succeeds when all actors, anthropologists, and their research partners, encounter each other as equals and in mutual respect for their social and cultural difference. These encounters with individuals of different cultural backgrounds, their life trajectories and sedimented knowledge and experience instigate reflexive descriptions of other life-worlds and the epistemologies that are related to them. The portraits of others and their societal milieus thus overlap with transformations of the ethnographer's self. Being an ethnographer means to become part of the lives of others as well as having their lives becoming part of the anthropologist's life. Autoethnography in this sense is as much a reflexive as a collaborative research practice (Ellis and Bochner 2000). It is a way of acknowledging the ethnographer's own role as central to the understanding of other societal milieus. Ethnographers as the primary participants in the process of understanding and writing about the social will have to acknowledge the need to reflect about what they see, hear, smell, taste, and touch – whenever applicable. Among these senses, the ethnographer should consider reflecting more carefully about smell, touch, taste, as well as seeing and hearing as basic non-predicative experience, given the historic privileging of propositional sight and sound in the ethnographic literature; “part *auto* or self and part *ethno* or culture” (Ellis 2004, 31). Autoethnography is not necessarily about one's own culture, but always about the sensory, experiential, mental interaction with the milieu an ethnographer studies.¹ The distinction between researcher and researched, between subject and object blurs the longer they both participate in the same milieu (Ellingson and Ellis 2008, 458f.). Their perspectives increasingly overlap, making ethnography an intersubjective project.

Such an ideal depiction of autoethnography often seems to be far from the realities of conducting research in societal milieus other than one's own. Constraints may surface on all sides. On the one side, ethnographers may inhibit their research for many reasons: They may misbehave in the eyes of local people, unwillingly or not. They may follow the agendas of their academic institutions or their supervisors whose ideas may be far off feasible research designs in the respective settings. Ethnographers may also have to face personal limits of what they can physically or mentally do. The literature on participation as method provides countless examples (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). On the other side, local people may expect researchers to become activists on their behalf, they may want to advance their position in a political network, making the researcher a political instrument, they may also recognise the mere imbalance of global power relations when the researcher comes from a wealthier country. There are countless aspects

1 “The contributions to this issue thus adopt recent understandings of autoethnography, which emphasise the interplay of personal perspectives and social practices and culture.

of ethnographic research, which may affect the relationship between anthropologists and their research partners.

At worst, research partners will rightly feel vilified if they experience their role in a research project as subordinate, making them an *object* of research instead of acknowledging their agency and allowing them to be *subjects* as they are in their daily lives. Such forms of structural violence, which are often built in projects when they adopt and follow a positivist research design, are not only an issue of academic debates but experienced by the actors on the ground. Autoethnography does not escape such epistemological discrepancies and often has to navigate between the Scylla of positivist expectations of the academy and the Charybdis of idiosyncratic ambiguity. At best, autoethnography was conceived and practiced as a method to overcome such tensions. But whether it achieves its goals is still an open question – and whether it can overcome at all the inherent contradictions of conducting research in other societal milieus is also debatable.

A contested method

As a research methodology, autoethnography has been contested long before it was labelled as such. It was once despised as ‘going native’, which meant ‘uncritical’ and hence ‘unscientific’ participation in the lives of others. Only in the 1970s, when positivist approaches were increasingly criticised in the humanities, unmediated participation in social life was recognised as essential for any understanding of how social actors make sense of their lifeworlds. Social practice in all its kinds would remain opaque

A path is the dry
forest.

Zanga, 2018

Photo: Till Förster



when the actors' intentions are unknown (Duranti 2015) or when they are only deduced from summative accounts of their outcomes (Gilbert 1992). Although positivist scholars would still reject autoethnography because of its denial that hypotheses and hypothesis testing can capture lifeworldly realities, the real challenge comes from elsewhere, namely from interpretive approaches, which built on the same foundations as autoethnography.

The trenchant critique of an article published in the *African Studies Review* by two white ethnographers, Kathryn Mara and Katrina Daly Thompson (2022), speaks volumes. The two ethnographers claim that autoethnography had generated insights in the private lives of their research partners that no other 'method' would have been able to offer. In a petition, published as an open letter and signed by a list of seven scholars of African heritage, the editors of the review are urged to retract the article. The petitioners argue that autoethnography as method and writing had been misused to make confidential information by African research partners accessible to a global audience. The critique relates to advice one of the two authors had received about private marital life when she married a man of Swahili origin and converted to Islam. The article "‘exposed’", the petitioners argue, "information ... usually kept private ... for intellectual voyeurism".² After first having declined the request, the editors of the *African Studies Review* published a second statement that they were not fully understanding the substantive issues raised by the critique. They invited the signatories and other scholars to contribute to an open forum discussing autoethnography in their journal.³

Of course, autoethnography is neither a substitute for informed consent, nor does it legitimate the misuse of trust nor a stealthy way of getting access to things that would remain hidden under other circumstances. Thinking of autoethnography in such terms would undercut its main achievement, namely its attempt to overcome the "impersonal, passionless, abstract claims of truth" (Ellingson and Ellis 2008, 450) raised by positivist methods. However, claims that autoethnography is *per se* a decolonial project are largely misleading as well. Unfortunately, the critics' request to retract the article conceals a bigger problem, namely the inherent epistemological problems linked to autoethnography.

Autoethnography has met serious critiques (e.g. Sparkes 2000, 2020, Walford 2004), which go beyond the usual positivist rejection of anything that does not fulfil its basic ideas of falsifiability and truth (Adams et al. 2015, 99–115). First, autoethnography was suspected of privileging idiosyncratic views of the lifeworlds of others without taking the many different perspectives into account that may coexist in a social setting and that would eventually instigate a discursive formation. It would rather reduce the complexity of the social to the view of only one ethnographer and the contingency of her or his experience. Autoethnography, it was argued, is but a cheap excuse for not conducting thorough research according to established standards of the qualitative social sciences (Buzard 2003, Delamont 2009). Sometimes, this point merges with older, positivist claims to cover societies at large – the *ethno* in ethnography. This point had been raised before with regard to participatory anthropological methods, in particular about participant observation. It is, its critics claim, deeply flawed because it delivers no falsifiable results. If anything, it is a better sort of journalism, but hardly a methodology of the social sciences: Two anthropologists may work in the same societal milieu and still come up with very different accounts of what is usually framed as one social reality. Of course, ethnographers would reply that one needs to take the researchers'

2 <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdKo9OgNuU0DcYMBRbuTvv2wu-sJE3StYllaFuclGJiDevx8g/viewform>, July 1, 2022.

3 The various statements are accessible online: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/05/24/black-scholars-demand-retraction-autoethnography-article>, July 1, 2022.

positionality into account. Speaking in general, autoethnography does not make sense when it is judged according to the same standards as positivist methods, for instance, quantitative research. One should rather weigh its reflexivity and its capacity to address the subtleties of social interactions, which usually escape standard methodologies of the social sciences.

Second, scholars from the Global South and those who embrace decolonial approaches to the study of the social lives of others argue that autoethnography is often a strategy to protect hidden Western epistemological agendas, which are eventually underpinned by hegemonic strategies of the academy in the Global North.⁴ Instead of making its hegemonic agendas explicit, these critics claim that autoethnography is but a language game, which eventually does not recognise the authorship of the those who are depicted as actors of other lifeworldly settings (Madison 2006). Instead of dissolving the subject-object divide – for instance by developing new styles of writing or other communicative genres –, autoethnography still privileges the authorship of the ethnographer. Other than the first argument, this critique raises the question to what degree autoethnography is or will be able to bring new forms of *ethnography* into being, putting the accent on γράφειν, the act of “writing” and more largely communicating. The academy as an institution with its own rules and conventions inhibits to some extent the formation of new communicative genres. Young scholars who will want to engage in an academic career may run a risk when writing messy autoethnographic texts. Older, tenured scholars are in a better position and can afford to experiment with various genres and styles, eventually inventing new ones. Giving young scholars a chance to create their own ways of writing ethnographic texts was one of the motivations to publish this issue of the Basel Papers.

The readers are invited to judge the results, but even positive assessments will not solve the underlying epistemological problems. If ethnographers publish in a language as English, they may be able to reach out to a big audience, in particular in the Global North, but their research partners may be unable to read and communicate in such a language and hence will have only a minor say in how the final text will look like. Putting the signatures of local partners under such a text and attributing co-authorship to them comes close to a fake. Anthropologists would be more honest to say that they are the first and ultimately the only responsible authors of an autoethnography. Hence, any autoethnography must make its own reflections explicit. It must show how the authors experienced the encounters with others and how they were writing their texts or, if that does not apply, how they developed their communicative genres. Only when readers or spectators are able to relate to how the respective authors’ experience sedimented as ethnography, how the encounters with others affected the ethnographers’ own understanding, will it be ethnography. In other words: Only when the reader can also learn something about the others will autoethnography be able to hold its promise (Smith 2021).

Three conclusions can be drawn from this discussion: First, anthropologists should be more courageous and experiment more with different styles and genres when writing ethnographic texts. And they should not hesitate to combine ethnographic texts with other media, in particular visual and oral ones. Second, they should pay more attention to the *mode mineur* (Piette 1992, 2020, Rémy and Denizeau 2017), to the many little, subtle things that stir the ethnographers’ attention, constitute their experience and eventually sediment as other lifeworldly realities. Third, they should discuss their own experience with their research partners and friends and, when possible, juxtapose it to theirs to weigh their experience and writing in the wider political context (Denzin 2018). At best, autoethnography is “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self

4 The critique of Mara and Thompson’s article belongs to this category.

with others in social contexts” (Spry 2001, 710, in general Adams et al. 2017, Holman Jones et al. 2016, Spry 2011).

Sensory dislocations

Social life is created by people as actors in myriads of everyday situations. The performativity of the social is the basis of all societal formations and informs autoethnography as much as any other sphere of social life (Sughrua 2020). Encounters between ethnographers and their partners are the core of autoethnography – no matter whether the latter are framed as research partners or not. Paying attention to the subtleties of encounters means to examine the sensory dimensions of social life (Chau 2008). German phenomenology captures the essence of such encounters better than English. It asks how *Erleben* as sensory, bodily engagement with one’s lifeworld turns into *Erfahrung*, that is, sedimented, propositional experience, which the actors can communicate by language or other means.

As all social actors, ethnographers perform sociality in ways they acquired over many years, if not since their early childhood. They have become sensory bodily routines, which inform how ethnographers relate to others. If such routines are shared by other actors’, they remain under the surface of everyday consciousness. They are performed and taken for granted as long as they do not meet some sort of resistance. It is the everyday of belonging to one social milieu and sharing the same cultural background. However, such shared sensory and bodily practices may become problematic when, for whatever reason, they do not work sufficiently well to perform a shared



A small bar at the roadside. Encounters are not only the essence of everyday life but also of autoethnography.
Korhogo 2018
Photo: Till Förster

culture and understanding of it. When social actors cannot engage as usual with their shared, social lifeworld, they will experience such moments as dislocation. The bigger the gap, the more their daily routines of social interactions fail to generate a shared lifeworld, the more they will question the self-evident character of their encounters with others. Such dislocations are based on sensory experience when we as human actors engage with others (Kesselring 2015). They can happen at any time, although the degree, duration, and social significance vary enormously. By contrast, the relative continuity of a shared lifeworld, created and reproduced by social actors in their daily lives, is – although taken for granted – more a wonder than an easy achievement (Grathoff 1995).

The difference between ethnographers and other actors is that the former as anthropologists are exposing themselves to such moments of dislocation when they are conducting empirical research. Doing so, alienating oneself from one's routines and habits, has become a *déformation professionnelle* for anthropologists because it opens a window on the specificities of the respective routines of performing the social and more generally on cultural habits. Becoming aware of such differences, of recognising the other as other, is only possible when one also recognises the specificities of one's familiar lifeworld.⁵ Such moments of dislocation emerge from sensory experience, as subtle as they may be. Propositional knowledge may be a secondary element, but it is not the root of recognising difference.⁶ Anthropologically speaking, we need difference to become aware of others and our selves. Hence, moments of dislocating sociality are moments when intersubjectivity emerges (Grathoff and Waldenfels 1983). As a discipline, anthropology is founded on how social actors experience cultural difference and how intersubjectivity originates in social interactions.

From another point of view, participation as the basis of autoethnography avoids another problem of ethnographic research: It does not build on language and the assumption that other actors will always be willing and able to cast their experience and intentions in words or even narratives that the ethnographer can easily jot down and later use for an anthropological account of the lives of others. As predicative acts only cover a small part of life-worldly realities – namely those that the actors need or want to communicate beyond the respective context – participation is often, if not always, one of the few means to bring non-predicative but meaningful life-worldly realities to the mind of ethnographers (Förster 2001, 2022). Unsurprisingly, autoethnography is recognised by some strands of anthropological thinking as a method – as a decolonial method – to build the researcher's reflections on intersubjective experience that recognises the perspectives of others and the anthropologists' perspectives as equal (Diversi and Moreira 2009, 2018). Because of its decolonial promise, it is used in many social sciences from sociology to cultural studies – and it is criticised from their respective disciplinary perspectives.

Over the past two decades, anthropologists have increasingly conducted and published autoethnographic accounts of their fieldwork to comply with decolonial requirements. Today, core presumptions of autoethnography are widely recognised as standards of all good ethnography, for instance, reflecting on anthropologists' positionality and those of their research partners. However, autoethnography is much more than a reflection on methods and the anthropologists' personal relationship to their partners and their societal milieu, as the above-mentioned debates have shown. While some critics claim that autoethnography "...does not take the positionality of researchers seriously enough" (Moors 2017, 387), others suspect it to come close to navel-gazing.

5 Defying the other thus means to become blind to both sides, self and other.

6 Pejorative othering is most often based on propositional discursive formations and rarely on experience. Xenophobia and racism are more widespread in places where very few people of colour or with different cultural backgrounds live.

At its best, autoethnography looks at the existential consequences of life-worldly experience for *both* anthropologists and their research partners, taking sensory bodily experience as a starting point to trace and understand the encounter between anthropologists and their others (Spry 2001, 2016). Hence, the senses – seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, and the bodily senses more generally – are seen as primary gateways to other human beings as contemporary actors who ethnographers want to meet and exchange with. As sensory experience of social life is recognised as the most basic dimension of ethnographic fieldwork, autoethnography asks how that existential experience is reflected and turns into a source of ethnographic writing (Bochner 2000).

Autoethnography thus takes the anthropologist as a medium between self and other, turning ethnographers into mirrors of how others have acted and act on them.⁷ As ethnographers experience the lives of others by situating themselves in other social contexts and making themselves the object of social interactions, they expose themselves to the messy, uncertain, and emotional dimensions of social life and eventually to possible existential changes that affect them as much as the people among whom they live. They can no longer remain distanced observers and hence must leave the position that positivism has had for them as scholars. They rather become participants in social milieus that were not but increasingly become theirs.

This existential transformation is often a slow process, which ethnographers may not be aware of when it happens (Bochner 2016). They may, however, realise it when – for instance, after years of being far away from home – they look back at how their everyday lifeworldly practices have changed. Oftentimes, these changes are subtle and concern everyday routines, which the ethnographers have adapted to the societal milieu where they lived. They may only become visible when those who had known the anthropologists before perceive them as ‘different’ in the face of their own everyday routines and how they had known the ethnographer years ago. Walking is such a practice. It is, as Margaret Gilbert had written, a “paradigmatic social phenomenon” (Gilbert 1990) – and not simply a bodily performance without social and cultural background.

Walking as intersubjective practice

Walking is a mundane practice. Almost all able people – men and women, children, and adults – walk in all societies and social milieus. The few exceptions are negligible. However, there are different ways of walking. Intentionally getting from A to B is possibly the most obvious reason to walk, e.g. from the living room to the kitchen and back, from home to the inn around the corner, from the parking to the gate of supermarket, from the entrance to the shelves and to the checkout desk. Of course, it can also mean to follow cattle through the savannah in search of greener pastures or to walk to the fields. Besides the obvious, there are many more subtle but comparably important differences. Walking alone is, most of the time, a solitary experience, while walking together can be and often is a deeply social practice. When we as human actors engage in walking as social practice, we feel and know that we are walking together. Bodily movements are coordinated to some extent, and so are the senses of those who are walking together (Förster 2019). Such bodily co-presence is also visible to outsiders. When watching peo-

7 I thus deviate somewhat from the widespread understanding of autoethnography “... as a qualitative research method that uses the researcher’s personal experiences as primary data in order to describe, analyse and interpret the sociocultural meaning of such experiences” (Zempi and Awan 2017, 367). See Moors 2017 for a critique.

Senufo women with creels coming back from the river. Senufo men and women usually walk in a line and at the same pace. Their ways of walking create a specific form of sociality. Nafoun 2019
Photo: Till Förster



ple crossing a square, we will soon recognise who is walking together with whom and who may just accidentally walk in the same direction. We know so because we have engaged in the same practice and share the same bodily knowledge with those, we watch walking. We would not know if we needed to learn about a sort of cognitive agreement between the actors (Gilbert 1990), we deduce it from their bodily movements in time and space.

Besides these general features of walking, which could be examined further, individual as well as cultural differences play an enormous role. Couples in some Middle Eastern societies may walk one after the other, keeping a distance of a few meters. It reflects, some say, the mutual respect between men and women. Peasants in the West African savannah also tend to walk in a line, but they are usually closer to each other, and the distance is not related to gender. So do the Senufo in northern Côte d'Ivoire, south-western Burkina Faso, and south-eastern Mali. Walking to the fields, which are often ten kilometres or even farther from their homes, is done in groups, which usually include men, women, and children.⁸ As the pathways are narrow, they usually walk one after the other. However, walking in a line is also practiced where there would be enough space. It is so habitual that it has become proverbial: *kolocoloo kperɛ wo nã* means, literally translated, “May God queue together with us!”, and in colloquial English, it is best translated as “May God help us!”

Walking together is a paradigmatic example of how autoethnographic research works (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2016, Chawla 2016). By coordinating bodies, it coordinates the senses. Walking together means that seeing one's environment builds on almost the

8 Those who own bicycles or motorcycles may leave before or after the others if the pathways to the fields allow them to drive.

same standpoint. It is also directed towards the same objects and sceneries. When walking with peasants through the bushland around their villages, they adopt their habitual ways of walking: they circumvent areas where dangerous animals may live, for instance sandy places where snakes may warm up during the chilly mornings at the end of the rainy season. They would then hesitate for a second and deviate from the path to avoid such spots. In other cases, they may stop in front of a little stream or a rock, which may mark the end of the territory of their land or that of the village. Sometimes, they may also become slower when they are approaching a tree where certain rites are performed. In such moments, I, as ethnographer, often stumbled or I ran into them because I did not expect them to stop or to slow down at a particular spot. Walking together with owners of shrines, with farmers who had their gardens close by, with teenagers who did not care whether they were ignoring the advice of their elders taught me how to move between the many sites where events and activities had taken place, where the descendants of first settlers raised claims to land, where collective memories were ingrained, where ephemeral things had been dumped and where their traces irritated the people I walked with, where carcasses of dead pigs rotted, filling the air with the heavy, sweet smells of caducity. I stumbled over the sudden moves of those who led me through the thickets of their landscapes which combined sight, remembrance and imagination.

With time, however, I was more and more able to walk as they did, and the accidental dislocations happened less often and eventually faded out. After my first year, my ways of walking had adapted largely to theirs. I began to look at the savannah in a different way, recognising places and spaces that had or could have a special significance. The perspectives of my contemporaries in Nafoun increasingly became mine while they were still wondering why my movements and my pace of walking had not matched theirs when I arrived long ago. My neighbour and his family had been my companions throughout the first rainy season. After more than a year, his wife and children told me that I now saw fruits on the ground – things, that I had not noticed before. I would neither fall over pebbles and stones of which there were so many on the trails to their fields nor would my steps interfere with theirs on the narrow paths. Eventually, my neighbours were glad that I did no longer trespass into land that was not theirs or that of their relatives. They had never told me about their worries, but they said: “Now, you know!” The few words my neighbours used were summative descriptions and normative judgments whether I walked as they expected it or not. Walking together is a shared practice, which ethnographers coming from afar must learn if they want to belong to the village.

As agrarian people, the villagers weigh landscapes and their appearance as part of their interdependence with other actors – other farmers, herders, extension workers, state officials – as well as the sedimented life-worldly pragmatics that they acquire over their lifetime. For those who are living and dwelling in the countryside, landscapes are spaces where interactions between bodies and their surroundings take place, where they as actors encounter each other, where places of sensory experience become part of a figuration that transforms sheer terrain into existential space. As such, landscapes become visible and are remembered as figurations of their own. No wonder that they often bear names pointing at individual and collective identities and their histories.

My ways of walking together with the villagers were neither completely theirs nor were they mine. To some extent, my footsteps were dislocating for those who walked with me – because of my ignorance and my incompetence to walk as they were doing day in and day out. There was nothing secret about walking, and when walking together, we were visible to everybody who would walk past. Everybody living in a savannah village will learn how to walk when sharing everyday life with the locals. Yet, as a bodily practice, ways of walking also depend on how one has learned to move as a child. It still informs bodily movements after decades, and it has an idiosyncratic dimension as well. Apparently, my bodily movements showed that I had not been brought up in the savannah.

I noticed a couple of people grinning at us – only a little, never in a smirky way. I thought, they were looking at the colour of my skin. I had been the first white man “to sleep” in their village. The term was idiomatic and meant that I had spent a night there and that I did not leave after that night. I must have been an exotic human being, I assumed. However, my neighbour later told me that they knew very well about the colour of my skin. It was immediately visible, and everybody had an idea of white people. Even if they had never “slept” in the village, local people shared a concrete image of how whites were behaving. What puzzled them was much more the fact that a white person had slept in the village. It attracted their interest. The news spread the very next morning from courtyard to courtyard, and by the end of the day, said my neighbour, there was no man, no woman, not even a child that did not know about me as “the stranger” of their village.⁹ Their grinning was more about the fact that I was “queuing with them”, and that I was walking as they did. “White people don’t do this,” commented my neighbour. “Our inside was dark,” he added, which meant, they did not know that I would walk together with them.

Then, an incident made me aware of how important it was to walk the land. It made me aware of how I began to see land as landscape. Pélésongou, my landlord, told me to find a better place for the shrine of his *tugubele*, his “bush spirits” that had to be relocated because the place where their rites had been performed before would be demolished by Caterpillars when the new road would be constructed. He had told me that I, as other whites, were able to see the beings of the wilderness – beings that black people would not see. I should be very careful and tell him where they were and which places they would like so that he could perform the sacrifices there. He turned down my objection that I would not see the *tugubele* either, claiming that I would simply refuse to help. So, I began to look for a new place for Pélésongou’s shrine. It was not easy, there were so many things that played a role: water, trees (but not any tree – only trees of a few species), accessibility, rocks, visibility and invisibility, the fauna and not least the presence or absence of other shrines and their owners. I became aware of the many layers of intentional ways of seeing the landscape that surrounded the village. When I inquired, some told me about how to find such places. But I learned much more from walking with others who did not say a word. Where they hesitated to walk, I soon did as well – long before I learned that, for instance, this place already belonged to another pair of *tugubele*.

Walking together sediments as experience and it produces shared knowledge. Coordinating our bodily movements makes us a “we”. We did not need to talk about it – we know it because we practice it. It is not a question of contract and consciousness, as Margaret Gilbert seems to believe; it is embodied knowledge. In fact, shared bodily knowledge is independent of thoughts and believes that we, as members of a group, may eventually articulate. This knowledge is non-predative or non-propositional but so deeply part of us that it constitutes our belonging to a landscape as a social space. If autoethnography were an art, it would be about making such processes intelligible to others.

9 Strangers have an ambivalent reputation among rural people in northern Côte d’Ivoire. They can be ‘nice’ or ‘sweet’ and enrich village life, but they can also be a burden if they do not integrate well, ask for unusual favours, or cannot feed themselves if they stay longer. The stranger is a standing term in Senari and Julia, the two dominant local languages, and a social role, which is well conceived in the peasants’ culture. Strangers are not homeless people; they rather belong to a village where they have a tutor who takes care of them and guides them in all daily affairs. But they do not have relatives where they live, and they are not integrated in the networks of reciprocal exchange as villagers are. When their relations to other villagers change because they are increasingly becoming part of such networks, they will lose the status of a stranger.

Intersubjective ethnography

Besides all epistemological considerations, autoethnography is rightly seen as an already existing genre of ethnographic writing, which looks back at a history of roughly half a century. Its core are personal, often biographical accounts of the researchers' experience, which mingle with descriptions of others, their intentions, motives, acts, and eventually the more general societal practices to which their individual acts relate. As a literary genre, autoethnography sometimes lingers between different styles. Extended portraits of people and their life trajectories are as much part of autoethnography as detailed descriptions of collective practices which are or have been relevant for the actors and the researcher. Perhaps, autoethnography is best characterised by this tension – the tension between the individual and the collective. If intersubjectivity is tentatively conceived as the overlapping of perspectives, participation as method and autoethnography as its reflection and expression, it points to the core of all social life: how individual and collective intentions merge and how researchers as well as their partners make sense of them when they encounter each other and interact.

Autoethnography must prove its usefulness by showing what it can achieve and what conventional ethnographic accounts cannot provide: Insights that go beyond the usual descriptions of social order and its scaffolds. The autoethnographic reports of this issue are all written by students of a research seminar held at the Chair of Anthropology in Basel in 2021. They address distinct themes and topics, adopting different approaches for that purpose, but they all engage in reflections about the ethnographer's self and experience on the one side and the others and their lifeworlds on the other. Dennis Hajime Hatsushikano writes about how he encountered the history of his relatives of Japanese origins in Brazil. Priska Handayani Rüegg depicts how a friendship between her and an unaccompanied minor refugee from Afghanistan unfolded in Switzerland. Bessy Purayampillil looks at how her parents who settled in Switzerland when she had been a small child maintain bonds of belonging to their former home in South India. Ana-Maria Leonte writes on a friend she made in Zanzibar, and how his life affected her understanding of the multicultural society of the East African island. Raphael Wälterlin examines how his understanding of Islam and of religion more generally changed when he lived in Bobo Dioulasso, a West African city.

The five autoethnographic vignettes are all written from a personal point of view but capture social and cultural backgrounds as they became visible to the students as ethnographers. They show that how successful autoethnography can be practiced by students who have had no ethnographic experience until they began their respective projects within the framework of their studies.



A bridge that leads
to a hidden village.
Zangakaha 2020
Photo: Till Förster

A university student
and her employee in
her hairdresser's
shop.

Korhogo 2017
Photo: Till Förster



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'Cool' enka music CD and DVD collection 2020. Photo: Dennis Hajime Hatsushikano

Wrapping musically

Enka music within the Japanese diaspora in Brazil

Dennis Hajime Hatsushikano

Before Japanese culture went ‘cool’ in the 1990s through the globalisation of products such as PlayStation, manga, anime, J-pop, and sushi, the national popular scene was inhabited by the ubiquitous presence of a music genre called *enka*.¹ Enjoying its heyday from the end of World War II to the 1980s, enka once was not only a strong artistic influence but also the likely most popular music over generations both in homeland Japan and abroad in the Japanese diasporas throughout the world, notably in the United States, Brazil, Hawaii, and Peru. Enka left its marks on the daily popular and cultural lives of the Japanese. Its popularity skyrocketed in the latter half of the twentieth century along with its reputation as *nihonjin no kokoro*, “the soul of Japan”, and its domestic image as ‘Japan for the Japanese’ (e.g. Yano 2002, 1-11; Condry 2011, 241). For instance, families in Japan and the diasporas would eagerly gather around the TV screen on New Year’s Eve to watch the *NHK Kōhaku Uta Gassen* – the most popular Japanese TV show throughout the twentieth century – to enjoy enka performances that dominated the program. Feeding into the national ‘introspection boom’ and search for collective identity of the 1960s and 1970s, enka offered a set of answers for the construction of Japaneseness to the point of building its facade as *nihon no uta*, “the song of Japan” and even as *dentō no oto*, “the sounds of Japanese tradition” (e.g., Yano 2002, 13–27; Condry 2011, 241–244).

Enka was ‘cool’ long before the nation became ‘cool Japan’. Yet today, enka remains popular among the oldest generations in Japan and the diasporas. However, compared to anthropological investigations on the cultural impacts of contemporary forms of music and art – notably manga, anime, and J-pop – little has been explored on enka’s influence within Japanese culture. Why have we gotten so unsensible about ‘pre-cool Japan’ enka music and so much fascinated about other popular cultural aspects of Japan after it went ‘cool’? My field research wished to address this gap in the literature.

What are the meanings the largest Japanese diaspora in the world make of enka music today? My fieldwork in Brazil from November 2020 to January 2021 attempted to explore answers to this question. Brazil’s Japanese diasporic population amounts to over two million people today, a tenfold increase from the population of 200,000 who crossed the world by ship mostly between 1917 and 1950, usually fleeing poor countryside living conditions and carrying the dream of making a better financial life abroad to one day return to homeland. I stayed in three important cities over two states with high densities of diasporic population: São Paulo (state of São Paulo), Londrina and Uraí (both in the state of Paraná). São Paulo city is home to the largest Japanese descent population in the country. Londrina holds one of the largest populations outside of national capitals. Countryside Uraí holds historic importance in the development of the diaspora. Those who appreciate enka music the most today typically are the oldest, first- and second-generation Japanese Brazilians roughly aged 60 and more. Being born and schooled in Japan between the 1930s and 1950s, first-generation members typically are native Japanese speakers with varying proficiency in Japanese-Brazilian dialect (“*koroniago*”, see, e.g., Mori 2006). Being born and schooled in Brazil after the 1950s,

1 For a discussion on “cool Japan” and exporting Japanese culture, see, e.g., Stalker 2018..

second-generations members are native Brazilian Portuguese and Japanese-Brazilian dialect speakers with varying knowledge of spoken and written Japanese.

Sharing similar backgrounds to many members of the diaspora in Brazil, I have likewise spent years of my life in and out of both Japan and Brazil, resulting in the acquisition of proficiency in Japanese, Brazilian Portuguese, and Japanese-Brazilian dialect. Although sharing similar backgrounds to many of my research partners, I was far from being granted a free and automatic entry into their enka world. It required a genuinely deep intersubjective engagement to earn my entry and find ways to make 'their' world become also 'mine' and 'ours'. As I learned it, more than going personal, we went autoethnographic.

Wrapping enka: from unwrapping to wrapping life experiences

My first contact with enka music was at home as an overhearer throughout my childhood and adolescence in the 1990s and 2000s. My Japanese mother, grandparents and older relatives have often enjoyed enka in the privacy of home both as fans and amateur, at-home singers. Sharing a notion many people of Japanese background of my generation have on enka, I tended to perceive it as 'older Japanese people's music'. As my 75-year-old research partner Mrs. Kazuko Kunni interestingly put it, "In grandma's house, we only listen to Itsuki Hiroshi [one of the most famous enka singers] and not to Roberto Carlos [one of the most famous Brazilian popular music singers]." My initial approach to the genre thus was that of a rather distanced observer attempting to make sense of 'the other's enka world'. One of my main concerns when listening to songs and first interacting with research partners was to find a supposedly underlying essence in the genre that would explain its popularity.

In my first interactions with research partners, I attempted to create 'a sort of forum for collective nostalgia' with research partners by talking about enka and playing songs. I was influenced by Yano's argument that "the enticement of enka is that it suggests a forum for collective nostalgia which actively appropriates and shapes the past, thereby binding the group together" (2002, 15). So, I used to ask my first partners "What do you think of enka?" or "Shall we listen to some enka song?" in our first encounters as I assumed it to be an easy way to approach the music in our conversations. To my surprise, however, I collected embarrassing failures as partners often demonstrated a range of disinterest when I directly approached it: from hesitancy, anxiety, reluctance, avoidance to apathy. Some partners went as far as declaring their distaste for the genre. "Oh, maybe enka is a little bit sad, isn't it? Maybe it's only for us. Young people [like you] maybe like to listen to something else?", one partner put it similarly as many others did. Yet, they enjoyed enka, as it was later revealed. What explained this seemingly uncertain and ambiguous relation with the genre? I discovered that accessing their truthful feelings for enka songs entailed intersubjective exchanges of lifeworldly experiences similarly related to theirs – and which were also mirrored in song lyrics. Notably, as my partners cultivated a deep nostalgic engagement with home, hometown, and homeland – all three notions captured by the concept of '*furusato*' in Japanese – they tacitly expected me to likewise share my similar nostalgic engagements with home to thus be granted access into the collective enjoyment of enka as 'one of them'. "Oh, you seem to miss Japan too. Japan is good, isn't it? So, it seems you would like to go back to Japan too?", one partner enthusiastically asked me as she learned of my wish to return to Japan. It was by exchanging these kinds of experiences that I was allowed



Selling enka at the street market.
2020
Photo: Dennis Hajime
Hatsushikano

to enter ‘their’ enka world. As the contents of our exchanges became deeply personal, ‘their world’ became increasingly ‘mine’ and eventually ‘ours’ in many senses. The exchange of these experiences with partners, however, strongly followed patterns of indirect communication. The most salient way of engaging in indirect communication with my partners, as I learned it, was through *wrapping*.

Wrapping in Japan, as Hendry puts it, forms a veritable “cultural template”, a “cultural design”, or an “organising principle” (1993, 1996) – a “structuring structure”, in Bourdieu’s terms (1991, 165), or a “simultaneous model of and a model for social reality”, in Geertzian terms (1975, 93). Hendry observed many manifestations of this organising principle both materially and symbolically: in the wrapping of gifts (e.g., layers of material wrapping), in the wrapping of body (e.g., layers making up a kimono on someone’s body), in language as a form of wrapping (e.g., layers of politeness and formality), wrapping of people (e.g., hierarchical layers in family, at work, and in politics), in the wrapping of space (e.g., architectural layers of a traditional typical Japanese countryside house), and in the wrapping of time (e.g., how many events have temporal beginnings and endings clearly marked by rituals). According to her, one of the powers of wrapping lies in the sacredness of secluding the wrapped throughout the wrapping process (1996).

Would enka music likewise be an expression of wrapping? If so, what would be wrapped and secluded about enka? Would enka thus be a musical form of Japanese social wrapping to transmit messages in seclusion? And if so, would discovering indigenous meanings to enka within the Japanese diaspora in Brazil entail unwrapping or wrapping processes? As I started suspecting that enka would be a form of culturally inscribed wrapping, my interactions with partners took on a decisive turn. More than perceiving enka as wrapping, I realised my initial concerns in attempting to discover an underlying essence in the genre was, indeed, a form of direct communication and an act of unwrapping which my partners did not practice or identify with. As I painfully learned, unwrapping enka would run the risk of finding void because the powers of enka would seem to lie in the very act of wrapping – much more than in what is wrapped, following Hendry’s reasoning (1996). I started suspecting thus that what is secluded through enka would seem to be much more pervasive in the wrapping process rather

than condensed in an underlying essence at a supposed wrapped core. As I dropped my unwrapping anxieties and started exchanging lifeworldly experiences with my research partners, my being in the field was recognised much more receptively. Serendipitously, by exchanging many lifeworldly experiences on the themes of missing Japan and life hardships, I discovered that we had started wrapping our enjoyment of enka.

Exchanging experiences: wrapping as a *rite de passage* into the world of enka?

As I learned in the field, my research partners tended to cultivate three typical Japanese cultural habits in interpersonal relations: a vigorous yet discreet pursuit of similarities and common interests; a genuine avoidance of differences, disagreements, and conflicts; and a strong tendency to communicate messages in unverballed and indirect ways. Whenever our differences seemed too salient and formidable, immersions into enka eluded. It would seem our mutual engagements with enka necessitated two hands wrapping our life experiences as if they formed one single thread into the music. This wrapping thread would, at once, set a sort of rite de passage into the enjoyment of enka songs as well as define the substance mirroring the messages of song lyrics.

At home with enka
2020
Photo: Dennis Hajime
Hatsushikano





Mrs. and Mr.
Hisamura welcoming
me.
2020
Photo: Dennis Hajime
Hatsushikano

Enka before enka: wrapping life experiences

13 December 2020. Uraí. Mrs. and Mr. Hisamura open the door to their home and welcome me. Their lovely hospitality is impeccably wrapped in all politeness. Bodily, they wrap their politeness with smiling lips and kind gaze. Verbally, by greeting me at the top of their polite Japanese-Brazilian dialect: *Irasshaimasse. Ogenki desu ka? Obrigado pela visita. Desculpa trabalho de vir aqui.* “My respectful welcome to you. How are you? Thank you for your visit. I am so sorry for the trouble of coming.” I offer my wrapping replies likewise – verbally and bodily. Ojyama shimasu, com licenca. “My apologies for disturbing you, excuse me.” I answer back to them bowing my head and upper body while I step into the house.

Without realising it, without realising it, I came by foot
Through this narrow and long road”

“Like the flow of the river” *Kawa no nagare no youni.* (1989)

Singer: Misora Hibari

Without realising it, I walk into a surprising encounter. After an afternoon of pleasant conversations and sharing of experiences, Mr. Hisamura takes me on a tour of the region. We reach a small farm some 20 minutes away from his house. “Can you see this road over here? It narrows down but we can walk along. Your ancestors’ house lies somewhere over there. Let’s go. I’ll take you there”, says Mr. Hisamura announcing our journey into the ruins of my ancestors’ former house still sitting on the premises of the small farm.

Looking back, far away
I can see home(town)
There are some winding paths and some other bumpy ones
That do not even exist in our maps
Just like it happens in our lives

“Like the flow of the river” *Kawa no nagare no youni.* (1989)

Singer: Misora Hibari

A dirt path leading
to my ancestors'
former house.

2020

Photo: Dennis Hajime
Hatsushikano



Winding and bumpy pathways uncharted on Google maps: Mr. Hisamura guides me down into the vestiges of my ancestors' settlement in Brazil. Suddenly, my fieldwork fades out of certainty. Despite barely realising it, I lose my identity as a researcher along the road – to Mr. Hisamura, myself, and both of us. My own self erupts onto the field along with uncertainty, messiness, and overloaded in emotions. As we move along, seeing the vegetation generates a feeling of strangeness as trees and foliage look different and even alien from what I had previously seen in countryside Brazil. Rain starts to pour down on us, wetting our clothes and amplifying the sounds of the gravel under our shoes. The smell of petrichor rises and fill out our distracted noses. “My ancestors used to walk over here?” I whisper to myself. Mr. Hisamura discreetly smiles. We don’t let our emotions to proliferate. We reach the ruins of the house.

As I stare at the house, little things seemed certain to me. How objectively could I perceive this house, if ever? Was I seeing a mundane house in ruins or some sort of sacred building that once housed my very past? Were my shoes walking over ordinary dirt somewhere in the countryside of Brazil or was I stepping onto sacred ground that once floored my family? How could a supposedly distanced observation of enka music in Brazil become such a deep emotional engagement at a personal level? How messy did it get to enmesh my experiences with those of my research partners? What was my positionality in the field? What had I become? From a researcher to a non-researcher? An ordinary individual inside what once was the site of my fieldwork? Little did I know that my lifeworldly experiences were getting wrapped together with the experiences my research partners had throughout their own lives. These experiences of ours would find a mirroring home in enka songs. “Excuse me, Mr. Hisamura, but did my grandparents live in this place, walk around this place? Is it true?” I questioned in disbelief. “I can see it”, I continued, “I can see home. I can see hometown. Right here and far away.” Mr. Hisamura’s lips twitched. We did not need to express anything else. We would find ways of expressing these sentiments through enka songs. “I knew you were going to like it. Coming here. It is necessary to feel it. I once visited my past too. There is a song that I always remember when I think of my parents.”, said Mr. Hisamura. “Did you visit your past too? What song is that?”, I replied. Mr. Hisamura and I would talk for hours about his experiences and this song.

Living is like travelling
 Through an endless road
 Taking your beloved by your side
 Even if the road gets muddy from the rain
 One day, the sunlight will come back again
 Oh, just like the flow of a river
 “Like the flow of the river” *Kawa no nagare no youni*. (1989)
 Singer: Misora Hibari

16 December 2020. Londrina. It is the fourth day I am in the company of Mr. Tan. We have exchanged a range of layers of wrapping in formalities, politeness, good wishes, and gifts. Gifting Mr. Tan with well wrapped Swiss chocolate earned me in return the tasting of the finest wrapped rice (or sushi) I had during my stay in Brazil. Sitting in the living room with the sound of Misora Hibari’s song “Like the flow of a river” in the background, Mr. Tan tells me “I can’t forget that feeling. I remember it: when I land in Japan, it feels like home. It is hometown, isn’t it?” I reply with a smile, “I know the feeling, Mr. Tan”.

Handing a picture of a building on the small farm where my ancestors once lived in nearby Uraí, I tell 92-year-old Mr. Tan: “When we go to Japan, we feel at home, isn’t it? But I look at this picture. My grandparents lived there. It gets muddy when it rains. They suffered a lot. They never made it back to Japan. I wonder what is it like to be away from home for a lifetime.” For a couple of minutes, Mr. Tan contemplates the picture. He smiles and says: “We all wanted to go back. I remember when we used to get together and dream of going back with our families. We travelled to Brazil dreaming of going back, but many never returned. Life is a constant journey, isn’t it?” I feel an opening to seek for his advice: “Switzerland is the fifth country I live in. Maybe I am getting tired, am not I? In my heart, I want to return to Japan. I have been preparing my family for this day. But our life is good in Switzerland, though. What would you advise me to do?” Mr. Tan gently replies: “If your sun rises in Japan, follow it like a river (...). Perhaps you want to listen to my story? About how I ended up here in this town?” Mr. Tan went on for hours telling me his life journey.

Year 1989: A passing of eras

Oh, like the flow of a river
 Gently
 So many eras have passed
 Oh, like the flow of a river
 “Like the flow of the river” *Kawa no nagare no youni*. (1989)
 Singer: Misora Hibari

December 30, 2020. São Paulo City. Meeting Mrs. Kunii again offers us the opportunity to share more profound life experiences. We are sitting on the sofa in the living room. “The year 1989 brought great change, didn’t it?” I tell Mrs. Kunii. “The Heisei era ended. [The Japanese] Emperor Hirohito passed away”, I continued. Mrs. Kunii replies back with an attentive face: “Yes, yes, it was that. I remember that, yes.” Showing her a CD album of Misora Hibari, I kept talking: “Then, well, Misora Hibari passed away, didn’t she? It is said that a part of music died too, isn’t it?” Mrs. Kunii stood pensive in silence. After some brief seconds, she added: “Yes, it is that. Misora Hibari, it is said she was the queen of enka, isn’t it? Everyone got sad. It was so unexpected, wasn’t it?” We

exchanged smiles. We knew the cultural weight that carried for us, for the Japanese in Brazil, and for homeland Japan. Among the older diasporic generations in Brazil, there is a shared notion that ‘the good and old enka music’ died together with the queen of enka. It marked the end of a cultural era.

My trembling hands held the picture of my grandparents. “Then, in our family, there was the loss of grandpa. His death was the end of an era in the family”, I confided. Mrs. Kunii comforted me: “Please accept my condolences from the bottom of my heart. Life has many surprises. Sometimes you have to follow the flow. Music is good sometimes. It makes me think of my husband and my sons.” Mrs. Kunii would spend the rest of the day confiding me some of the most painful lifeworldly experiences she had had throughout her life. The next day, we enjoyed enka songs.

Wrapping it up

Misora’s Hibari song “Like the flow of a river” became almost like an anthem among enka fans and ubiquitous even among overhearers. When she sang it in 1989, she talked about unexpected life events, travelling through narrow, winding, bumpy and long roads, rain and mud, love, far away hometown, and life following its course like a river. I grew up overhearing the song at a rather objective distance from my own life-worldly experiences – as I generally did with other enka songs as well. I preserved this distance when I designed this research and during my first weeks in Brazil. From this distance, never was I able to understand enka or convince my research partners to invite me into their enka world.

Serendipitously, I experienced travelling through the roads, mud, rain, back to my own past, and in and out of homeland just like the flow of Misora Hibari’s river in the Japanese diaspora in Brazil. I shared with my research partners these experiences along with those referring to life hardships and missing Japan. Naively, my sharing inspired my research partners to not only reciprocate with their own experiences but also to invite me into their enka world.

Our interactions often followed patterns of indirect communication and, above all, patterns of wrapping. Interactions with research partners convinced me that understanding enka – the same ways they do – entailed needing to learn how to wrap something into the wrappings of enka. My partners were my wrapping teachers. To learn how to wrap, I first needed to learn how to exchange my own life-worldly experiences with those of my research partners, and then, learn how to reflect on these existential exchanges as well as on the reconstitution of our subjectivities. I learned enka music wraps, secludes, and transmit material and symbolic messages in well-wrapped forms. Wrapping might take the form of references to a mythical, pristine, and ‘natural’ Japan (e.g. cherry blossoms, a bamboo, a crane, a peach, the snow, the rain, the wood); of temporalities (e.g. openings, stops, and endings; opening Western melodies followed by Japanese melodies followed by singing followed by Japanese melodies followed by Western melodies); of Western melodies (e.g. sounds of Western instruments such as guitar, violin, and saxophone); of Japanese melodies (e.g. sounds of Japanese instruments such as *shakuhachi*², *koto*³, *shamisen*⁴, and taiko drums); of words and vocal techniques

2 End-blown flute that is made by bamboo.

3 Plucked half-tube zither instrument.

4 Plucked three-stringed instrument.

(e.g. lyrics and *kobushi*⁵); of musical rhythms (e.g. duple meter with a slow to medium tempo); of linguistics (e.g. very polite, polite, deferential or casual language); of visuals in the case of performances (e.g. the scenario, clothing, and acting); and of singers (e.g. who interprets and sings a particular song).

My understanding of enka changed through existential exchanges with my research partners and the reflections upon these exchanges. I became able to understand ‘the flow of a river’ similarly as my partners do not only for the first time in my life, but also, I suspect, in a perpetual way. Echoing the often non-predicative understandings my research partners cultivate about enka music, I was gradually taught by them that some of the truths held by enka are not impersonal, passionless, and abstract. On the very contrary, my research partners walked me through the deeply personal, the passionate, and the concrete. We went on an autoethnographic journey.



Ruins of the former house inhabited by my ancestors in Brazil
2020
Photo: Dennis Hajime Hatsushikano

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5 A melismatic warble.



Ali learning for his vocational training. 2021. Photo: Priska Handayani Rüegg

The unknown in a familiar field

Priska Handayani Rüegg

“Auch wenn du Schweizer Pass hast, bist du Ausländer, weil du so aussiehst, wie du aussiehst! – Even if you have the Swiss passport, you will be considered a foreigner, just because of your appearance!” Ali exclaims. I nod in response thinking by myself of the moments when I was teasingly called Chinese as a kid growing up here in Switzerland. (Informal Conversation, Ali 01.02.2021)

Autoethnography looks at the triggers and thoughts that may appear through shared experiences and thoughts in a common lifeworld with our research participants. It considers the process of transformation of the ethnographer as well as those of the research participants. As such autoethnographic research is inherently reciprocal, reflexive, and circular, as it is in a lively interplay between research participants and ethnographer (Ellis 2004, Ellingson and Ellis 2008).

My research participant Ali is a young Afghan man who arrived in Switzerland in 2015 as an unaccompanied minor refugee. The way he perceives his position in the dominant culture was like a kick-start for me to reflect extensively about my own background and my upbringing in Switzerland. Based on fieldwork in Switzerland, this paper seeks to contribute to methodological reflections both in autobiographic ethnography and anthropology at home. How do researchers reflect their ways of knowing in a familiar field opposed to an unfamiliar field?

In the early modern history of the discipline, anthropologists traditionally had to travel to remote areas to study a group of people seemingly isolated from the Western world. They went to explore places they were unfamiliar with. However, the paradigm to go to an all unfamiliar place has started to shift as early as after World War II (van Ginkel 1994, 6). The discipline's field has widened and today its researchers, the sites and foci are as multiple and various as human societies (Kottak 2008, 4). Hence, nowadays countless anthropologists do home-based fieldwork apart from going abroad (see e.g. Okely 1984). What this entails, is the question about crucial differences between doing fieldwork in a place unknown to the anthropologist compared to the rather familiar “home”. It bears mention that the category of home and the concept of native anthropology are not uncontested. Who is at home or when one is at home are questions whose answers depend on the specific researcher and situation (Strathern 1987, 16).

But what difference does the researcher's familiarity or unfamiliarity with a field make? In an unfamiliar field the anthropologist interprets social action in terms of cultural categories. Thus, in the interpretive process there is an explicit use of cultural categories, as the latter are a normative frame for the values, rules and beliefs that people inhabit. Paying attention to the cultural information is, in John Aguilar's words, “essential to avoid ethnocentric projection, the imposition of categories from one's own culture onto those who do not share them. At home [...] [there is] the danger of egocentric projection, the imposition of personal sentiments and understandings onto individuals who do not share them” (Aguilar 1994, 103).

Personally, I feel that the dangers one encounters in research at home may also occur in a relation to individuals abroad, once there is enough closeness between the researcher and the community members. There are even further problems an anthropologist at home can encounter, as Keletso Gaone Setlhabi illustrates in her study in

Botswana. She points out that those from within a culture can become outsiders because of their positioning as researchers (Setlhabi 2014, 319). Choong Soon Kim gives us another example of a hindrance in his fieldwork at home in South Korea. He was expected to conform to the norms and hence, he was not allowed to talk privately to a young woman (Kim 1990, 197).

What is the underlying premise of the distinction between research conducted abroad versus studies at home? Being native, semi-native or part of community raises questions at the level of anthropological analysis and becomes quite complicated. For example, one can be part of the dominant culture in Switzerland and still feel as an outsider in certain situations (e.g. my childhood experiences). In relation to my research participant from Afghanistan whose culture I am not familiar with, I could feel like an outsider while spending time with Ali and his best friend.

There is a way out, as Tsuda and Carrier (2015) argue. Because the question about conducting research abroad versus at home is linked to the difference between native and non-native people, which is essentially based on the dichotomy of insider versus outsider (see also Narayan 1993). In addition, this dichotomy ignores the increasing number of ‘semi-native’ anthropologists¹ (Tsuda and Carrier 2015, 14). Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) coined the term “halfies” for people with mixed identities.

This holds true for me, as my mother is Javanese with a partly Chinese background, whereas my father is Swiss with some of his ancestors being from Belarus. I grew up in Switzerland, but our family would repeatedly spend several months in Indonesia before I entered school. I would not fit in a simple essentialised category. Therefore, ways of belonging can become quite complex (Davies 2008, 42). I experienced ambiguities because I was seen as exotic in both cultures. Let me illustrate this by the example of a simple physical trait: My hair is dark brown, almost black, and it is curly, especially in conditions of high humidity (as is the case in the tropics). Swiss people perceive my hair as black, Asian-like. For Indonesian people however, the curly hair looks European. In both contexts people saw the “exotic” in me. Thus, I experienced practices of othering in Switzerland as well as in Indonesia by the local people.

This is something Ali knows as well: “Auch wenn du Schweizer Pass hast, bist du Ausländer, weil du so aussiehst, wie du aussiehst! – Even if you have the Swiss passport, you will be considered a foreigner, just because of your appearance!” (Informal Conversation, Ali 01.02.2021) It is this cultural awareness, I would say, that Ali and I could probably develop by spending time in two different cultures.

Anthropologists need a trained awareness. We need our subjective experience and reflection on it for our research, and we need to consider our own sociocultural context as a contributory factor of our research (Davies 2008, 5). Simply being a native anthropologist – however blurry this term might be (see Kuwayama 2003, 9) – does not make an anthropologist’s ethnographic writing more “authentic” or of greater insight. A lifeworld in one’s home country can be radically different, and anthropologists need to negotiate their positionality in the field whether they are native or not. We have to accept that anthropological knowledge is “inherently partial and never complete because it is always contextually situated, i.e. dependent on how we are socially positioned in relation to our research participants, which continuously shifts in productive or less productive ways” (Tsuda and Carrier 2015, 15).

Strathern (1987, 17) claims that “a general implication of anthropology at home, [is] greater reflexivity”. Given that we compare one anthropologist’s work in a familiar

1 Another dimension is the shared outsider role in the dominant ‘white’ society that Kenyan anthropologist Samuel Muchoki encountered upon his research among immigrants in Australia (Muchoki 2014, 277). I could relate to this feeling, as my physical appearance is Asian, like that of Ali. However, I would argue there are further considerations to be made, as a shared outsider role might also be achievable in different ways.

place with his or her work in an unfamiliar place, this might hold true. But overall, as I will argue in a minute, it depends on the researcher's capacity for reflexivity.

Let me return to the question about home to further think about Strathern's (1987) argument. I consider Switzerland as (a) home, but the city of Basel, as a site of research is not an all-familiar place to me. Neither is my research participant Ali a person I have known for a long time. Also, I am not familiar with (any) Afghan culture. Admittedly, I had not even heard of the Hazara people before I got to know Ali. Hence, there are quite some points rather unfamiliar to me in a place I would call home. Yet, there are many familiarities and commonalities such as a shared language Ali and I could speak, our love for sports and the educational goals each of us pursues. Familiarity within a field is therefore gradual and processual.

Of course, during research there is a process going on of reflection about the relation between the researcher and the research participant and it is also a cutting out of a "particular time and place" (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996, 171). Ali and I both lived in Basel at the time of my research. In that process I grew more familiar with the city, and we would both call Basel a 'home'. Ending the discussion about degrees of familiarity at this point, I would like to draw the attention once again to the 'common field' Ali and I inhabit. The implication of a fieldwork in a familiar environment affects the nature of the research:

But if one starts off as relatively close to, or part of, a particular lifeworld, and already has acquired forms of experiential, embodied knowledge, one has a different point of departure. Then one moves from participating to reflecting upon



Ali takes a picture of the Alps.
2020
Photo: Priska Handayani Rüegg

one's experiences. The latter is what I would consider autoethnography. (Moors 2017, 387-388)

Although reflecting one's experience is an essential part of anthropological fieldwork (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 35), no matter where the researcher is located, I agree with Moors' argument in so far as I understand the process towards a greater degree of reflection as a gradual shift. If thinking about the ability to reflect on experiences as limited by the capacity to process them, it makes sense to assert a reflection on one's own experiences in a familiar field over an unfamiliar one – earlier in the process, and to a greater extent because we are not caught up in finding our way in an unknown environment.

However, what does reflect one's experiencing in this sense mean? I would argue it means, we can turn to our inner feelings, observe our emotions, feelings and thoughts in the research process. Our attention is to a greater extent directed inwards, instead of outwards. Again, I believe, this is something an anthropologist does in any field when growing familiar with it. It is simply a process that we can start earlier on in a setting that is already familiar to us.

During the research process I repeatedly reflected upon my experiences and the ones Ali has made, as well as the lived experiences I made together with Ali throughout our interactions. I do not write deliberately about my own story, but I weave it into the ethnographic text, whenever it comes up and proves relevant for an understanding of the shared time together with Ali. Would this be considered autoethnography?

Ali climbing a rock.
2021
Photo: Priska Handayani
Rüegg



Not exactly: Autoethnography begins but does not end with a personal story, and depending on the autoethnographer's emphasis, it focuses on the self, the sociocultural connection, or the application of the research method (Wall 2008, 39). Researchers who write autoethnographies seek to produce aesthetic and evocative texts with thick descriptions of interpersonal and personal experiences. They look for patterns of cultural experience, which are evidenced through field notes and interviews. In describing the patterns they use facets of storytelling and alterations of authorial voice (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 277).

Although I include facets of storytelling as well as different authorial voices in ethnography, the autoethnographic dimensions have their place in the background and only come to the fore when necessary. They serve to understand how I made sense of Ali's experiences. By autoethnographic descriptions, I seek to emphasise what set in motion within me my engagement in the research process: The interpersonal experiences with Ali forged my inner experiencing. Through fieldwork I learned about Ali, but through him I also learned more about me and reflected upon myself. This is part of a practice termed autobiography (Davies 2008, 218). As might be the case for other anthropologists too, I feel uneasy to engage in a writing that may be "self-indulgent and narcissistic" (Davies 2008, 217). But there is a good reason to include autobiographical elements as Judith Okely rightly points out:

A popular put down is that reflexivity or autobiography is 'mere navel gazing', as if anthropology could ever involve only the practitioner. The concern for an autobiographical element in anthropology is to work through the specificity of the anthropologist's self in order to contextualise and transcend it. (Okely 1992, 2)

Hence, by including relevant information about me I can address issues about my own positionality in relation to Ali. Whenever I manage to create an awareness for my inner experiences, this happens through writing and through paying attention to "the sensual aspects of the field" (Stoller 1989, 9). I therefore seek to draw on the totality of the senses. This includes literally all the senses², not only hearing and seeing, but also the feeling of the body and the mental³ (Spittler 2001, 19). I conceive of ethnography as a holistic endeavour. It is "a reflexive and experiential process through [sic] which understanding, knowing and (academic) knowledge are produced" (Pink 2009, 4).

When friendship evolves

"*Dayani*⁴, *die Stadt ist nicht[s] für dich*. – Dayani, the city is not for you," Ali says in response to my obvious distress. I feel overwhelmed by the impressions of usual city life as we are walking through the busy part of *Kleinbasel*. We are on the way to do some shopping, before we will sit at a calm place at the Rhine to have dinner and play table tennis. Indeed, it means an extra effort for me to be surrounded by so many people at once, especially after a long period of isolation due to lockdowns and my only small network of friends in Basel I can turn to during the weekdays. Adding to that, I spend

2 For a critique on the anthropology of the senses see (Ingold 2002, 282-83).

3 Original citation: „[...] körperliches und seelisches Fühlen“ (Spittler 2001, 19).

4 Ali started calling me by my Indonesian name after about three months.

most weekends with my partner outdoors on the rock – often in remote areas with few or no other people around. Clearly, I am not used to crowds of people anymore. Ali, although he grew up in a rural place, navigates easily through the city. Oftentimes, I ride my bike behind Ali through winding streets and hidden corners of the old town. He knows Basel well enough to find special places, like the one, where we once spotted a shooting star on a night walk, despite the city's incessant lights. "*Komm. – Come,*" Ali says in a friendly, yet determined tone. He guides me through the streets at a brisk pace, so that my discomfort will only last as short as possible. I still feel uneasy, but the prospect of playing table tennis by the Rhine lifts my spirits (Informal Conversation Ali, 09.06.2021).

This is one example, how I became aware of how Ali sees me. While Ali and I engaged in a process of sharing parts of everyday life, intersubjectivity could emerge. This means that it "is not about predicative meaning, it is about overlapping perspectives on the lifeworld. As such it needs empathy and the will to take the other as subject rather than as object" (Förster 2022, 11).

What helped in this process was that the personal relationship between Ali and I grew quite quickly towards a friendship. The way I feel towards friends is, that I naturally see them as inspiring and trustworthy subjects. I share with them my personal thoughts and I open up as soon as I feel connected. Ali shared his story with me every time we met. Thus, I felt he should somehow have the same opportunity as I have to gain insights about me, and my story. At his request, I told him about the way I grew up. In narrating my story, I reflected a lot about my past – especially the difficult times – together with Ali. This became a personal process for me I had not anticipated. Herein lay a practice from which I developed a greater self-awareness (Ochs 2004, 285), and hence, a greater self-understanding. The research process transformed the way I saw myself and how I looked at the practice of research (see Stoller 2010). Ali might have experienced the same while narrating parts of his stories to me.

Looking at some of the circumstances of the evolving friendship, there is something noticeable within each time Ali and I met. Our conversations started off in an everyday manner, shifting gradually to personal stories. Those personal stories became more prominent with time, and he would start telling them sooner, the longer we knew each other and the more we trusted each other. These stories became a resource for building an interpersonal relationship (Keating and Egbert 2004, 176). Thus, whenever people turn to friends to piece together past experiences, they engage in conversational story-telling moments. Elinor Ochs further describes those moments as follows: "These narratives are central to weaving the fabric of social life in that they forge and sustain social relationships and build shared lifeworlds" (Ochs 2004, 269).

"*Wie viele Sätz[e] haben wir getauscht auf dem Heimweg von Engadin? Zehn?* – How many sentences did we swap on the way back from Engadin? Ten?" Ali asked that rhetorical question with amusement. We just stepped out of the house of his best friend Milad¹, a young Afghan who lives with a host family. Milad is an amiable character, jovial and talkative. While Ali has the stamina in exercising, Milad has the same stamina in chatting. "*Er ist gut.* – He is a good person," Ali said. "Yes, he has a good heart," I agreed. Ali explained, "*Mir ist gleich, wenn er viel redet. Ich höre viel zu.* – I don't care if he talks so much. I often listen to him" (Informal Conversation Ali, 26.02.2021). I caught myself with the thought, that I very often take the same role, as Ali does with his best friend. It is the role of the listener. This might have made me project a feeling of sameness that might not be there (Field Notes 27.03.2021). With the field being a familiar place, and given the feeling of sameness with Ali, it became more and more difficult for me to realise what had already become habitual and non-predicative knowledge. Ali's rhetorical question was a chance to realise the habitual in our interactions – it was a moment of dislocation (Kesselring 2015). The way Ali asked me how much we chatted on our way back showed amusement and fellow-feeling. At the same time, I realised

how often we spent time together in silence. Ali has a calm nature. For people who do not know Ali, he seems to be quiet and shy. Rather does he keep quiet than saying something. Sometimes I would ask him gently to share his thoughts with me; sometimes he asks me to share my thoughts with him. And quite often, as is the case on the four-hour drive back from Engadin, we would just be together in silence. It is a relaxed



Modern disguise in
the Alps.

2021

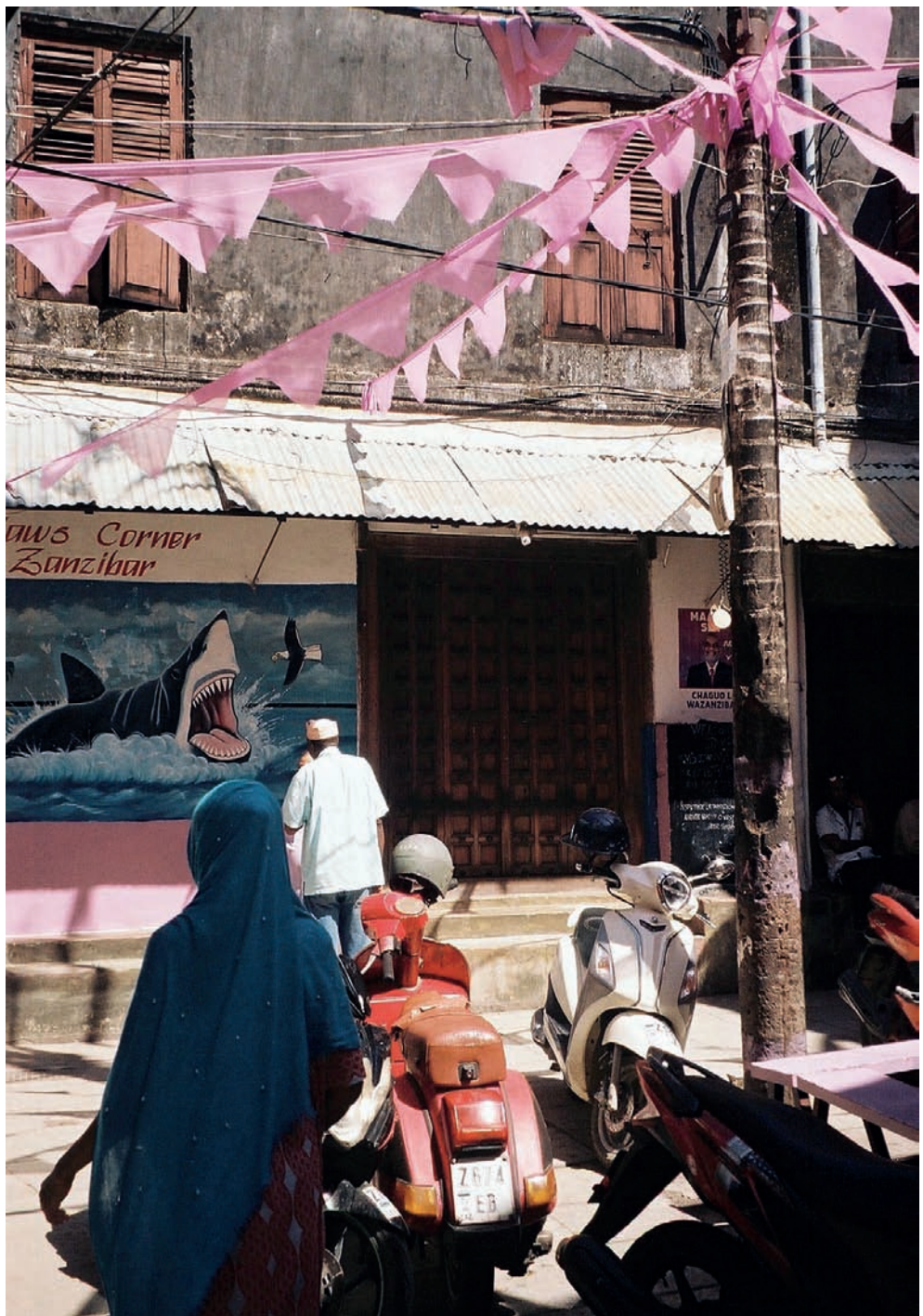
Photo: Priska Handayani
Rüegg

way of being together; none of us feels urged to speak. We simply are. We share the preference for stillness (Field Notes 27.03.2021). These places of outer stillness we would find them in the mountains, in the woods or at night in the city. Our habitual silence allowed me to be present in the moment and aware of my outer and inner experience.

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Zanzibaris at Jaw's Corner, Stone Town. 2021. Photo: Ana-Maria Leonte

Zanzibar between African and Arab Worlds

Transitioning from a tourist to an anthropologist

Ana-Maria Leonte

Introduction

Finding a research question that fits both one's interests and the requirements of a course is usually a tough task. More often than not, inspiration does not come when us students need it the most, so whenever you find yourself intrigued by something you learned in a class, it could be helpful to write it down and keep it in the back of your mind. In my case, a course titled "Introduction into the Ethnography of East Africa" was the source of my inspiration for the ethnographic fieldwork I was about to do. The name 'Zanzibar' always rang a bell, but I was never quite sure of where it exactly was and what its history had to offer. In the introductory course I found out that it had been part of the Omani Empire which stretched from the south-eastern point of the Arabian Peninsula and had reached the East African coast during its peak. As my knowledge of the Omani Empire was very limited, I decided to dive into the subject more and had come to know that Stone Town, the capital city of Zanzibar, had once been the capital of the Omani Empire too. This spoke for the economic, geographical, and social importance of the island.

The rather small islands of the Zanzibar archipelago lie some 50km off the Tanzanian eastern coast. The biggest island is Unguja, and it is arguably the most important one due to its economic power. So, it has taken the name of Zanzibar in everyday language. I conducted fieldwork on Unguja for seven weeks and spent almost the entire time in the capital, Zanzibar City. Stone Town is the old town of Zanzibar City and is recognised as an UNESCO World Heritage Site. The old city offers a variety of architectural designs, of which the oldest date back to the 13th century. The inhabitants are of different, sometimes diverging origins, but all call themselves Zanzibaris. What I attempted to do with my fieldwork was to define how central elements of the Zanzibari culture were defined and where their origins can be drawn from. The research was conducted in English and used multiple anthropological methods such as observation, participation, and informal interviews.

As a beginner anthropologist, I stumbled upon several issues that come with the first experience in the field, such as tourism, cultural differences and finding my own place in the space of the locals. Even during the pandemic, the Old Town of Zanzibar was a very populous and touristic place, even during the pandemic. Therefore, one of the main challenges I faced was to distinguish myself from the tourists that pass through Stone Town on their way to their beach resorts on the other side of the island. Of course, this task took some time, but it proved to be somewhat successful. On my quest to lose the *mzungu*¹ tag that everyone who does not look like a local automatically receives upon arrival on the island, I learned a couple of important lessons, which could prove useful on the next fieldtrip. Through the analysis of my notes, memories, and the experience in general, I came to several conclusions. Firstly, becoming a local

1 *Mzungu*, literally 'wandered', is the term used to describe non-locals, usually tourists, in Swahili. Not a derogatory term.

takes time and can be achieved by acquiring contacts and becoming comfortable with the environment. Secondly, people will perceive you differently, no matter what, due to their previous experience with foreigners. Lastly, personal space and time away from the field is just as important as establishing a connection with the field.

After a couple of weeks, I had finally found myself knowing where I am going and who I am meeting – I was walking with purpose. In this moment, I realised that I was more than a tourist transitioning from the Safari trip on the mainland to the eastern beaches of Zanzibar. The locals were noticing it too. At this point, the vendors stopped inviting me in their shop every time I passed by, and tour guides were not offering me their best prices for a boat ride to Prison Island. I had become a familiar face in the not so large Stone Town. Instead of “Welcome to Zanzibar”, “Where are you from?”, “Welcome to my shop” “Don’t buy, just look”, I was getting “Good morning sister”, “Where are you going today?”, “Are you going to be at Jaw’s corner later?” This break-through moment offered a new perspective into Zanzibari life and led to new approaches.

Establishing contacts and maintaining relationships

Having no personal connection to, or history with the place and the locals is an additional challenge to the ethnographer. It takes longer to adapt to the new environment, customs, and people, and it takes longer for them to get used to you. This means that the first weeks offer the chance to learn about the cultural setting and to establish the first contacts. During this time, the anthropologist will meet many people in the first weeks, but few will become long-term research partners who offer insightful information to answer the research question. This does not mean that one-time contacts have less valuable information, but their role is a different one in the general experience on the field. The importance of these one-time contacts can be seen while analyzing the notes taken during the fieldwork. While the main ideas and conversations are taken from the long-termed friendships, the shorter encounters can help support certain claims and arguments. They can also represent a very contrasting view to the one we are trying to portray in our reports. Short encounters can also add to the diversity of our research participants, be it diversity of age, gender, religion, etc. It can also be representative of a group that anthropologists do not have large or continuous access to. In my experience, such a group would be women. While I was able to form friendships with the men from Zanzibar, it was much harder to create long-term relationships with the women. This can be explained by their relative absence from the main public areas and their role in Zanzibari society, which is often relates to family and home-activities. My encounters with women were rarer and our conversations were much shorter, but they helped me understand the Zanzibari society through a different lens, namely that of a group that is hard to access and sometimes absent from the environment I was moving around.

Most of the information I gathered that was directly concerning my research question came rather late in the fieldwork and from the people who had become my friends and acquaintances. An example for such a relationship would be Abuu Shani, a Zanzibari whom I first met at Jaw’s corner, one of the busiest places in Stone Town. He had studied in the United States and recognised that I was more than a tourist because he saw me jotting down notes in my journal. Abuu was curious about my interest in his home, and he gladly shared his experience of living there with me. He knew Stone Town intimately as this was the place where Abuu was born and where he had spent most of his life. Our first conversation revolved around our experiences in the United States and



The beach close to
the harbour of Stone
Town
Stone Town 2021
Photo: Ana-Maria Leonte

our interests in other cultures and foreign places. During my stay in Stone Town, we had many conversations both about my research but also about other personal things, as we were getting to know each other, creating a bond and becoming friends. The more time we spent together, the easier it became to ask questions that were important to my fieldwork. With time, he was the one to start conversations about subjects that were relevant, yet I was unaware of.

Abuu became a key research partner and a good friend. Through him, I became more comfortable at Jaw's corner, a place that is male dominated, as I had become his protegee. He also opened access to other people and places as he wanted to share his culture and life with me. I was able to ask him direct questions about 'traditional' clothing, about Zanzibar's relationship with Oman and generally about the culture on the island. He gladly took me around the city, alluding to details in the architecture that would not be easy to spot otherwise. These walks were part of my leisure time, and they were often the best opportunity to learn something new. One example was a carving detail of a typical Zanzibari door that was copied from the House of Wonder's main door, showing symbols from the Omani past, which are still used to this day in the architecture of Stone Town.

Another example would be Salim, who was studying the Arabic language next to his travel agency shop when I passed by. One of the sub-questions for my research concerned the use of the Arab language and the locals' relationship to it. I seized the opportunity and stopped to talk to Salim. He was very welcoming from the beginning. Salim told me about his exercise book, and we began talking about languages, about their importance and how different they were. His relationship to the Arabic language offered me insightful information for my research question as he told me: "Arabic

brings me closer to the Qur'an and besides that, books written in Arabic have more information than English ones" (field notes, February 5, 2021). From previous talks with locals, I had learned that Zanzibari children must attend a *madrasa*² from a very young age. During their school attendance, they learn how to read and write Arabic so that they can recite prayers correctly. Salim furthermore explained that people learn very little Arabic in Zanzibar because all the business is done in English or Swahili. The only time they must speak or read it is when they are visiting the mosque or praying at home, but they do not master conversational Arabic.

Salim's shop was not far from where I was staying in Stone Town and therefore, I saw him quite often. Our proximity led to frequent talks and exchanges of ideas, some of them longer than others. Not all of them concerned my research question, we also shared personal stories about our families and lives. In one of his stories about his five children, through the way he spoke about his family members, he subconsciously highlighted that there is no segregation between the ethnicities that make up the Zanzibari population. He himself was married to a woman with origins in Oman, and his daughters had married men of Indian origins. Interestingly, his wife and four of his children had names that started with the letter 'S', the fifth one being named Mohammed, after the Prophet, again showing how important Islamic faith was to him.

Both research partners offered valuable insights by sharing glimpses of their lives with me. Through stories, anecdotes, or simple information about their families, both Abuu and Salim helped me understand how they perceive their own world in the city of Stone Town. Conversations with them began and unfolded in different ways and the relationships between them and me built on other bases but always began through shared interests.

My field experience combined with the analysis of the conversations done after leaving Zanzibar offer understanding of how social relations emerge in the field. Most importantly, how central the relations with the research partners are for the research. When building these relationships, I had to take many aspects into account: Who do I approach? How do I respond to people approaching me? What kind of conversation am I looking for in this person? How can I adapt my questions to this specific person's

View of Stone Town
from a rooftop.
2021
Photo: Ana-Maria Leonte



2 Islamic school. Arabic: مدرسة



Man selling corn on
a street in Stone
Town.
2021
Photo: Ana-Maria Leonte

interests? What are some common grounds where intersubjective understanding can emerge? By asking these questions I became aware of how I could and should behave and how to present myself in different situations, as people always require a specific approach according to their interests and personality. It goes without saying that these factors did not solely depend on me, but the research partners played a major role in deciding the subjects in the conversations and the dynamics of our friendships.

Becoming a local and thinking like a local

Seeing and being seen is part of ethnographic fieldwork. In Stone Town, besides drawing attention due to the different skin tone, clothing also plays a big role. Most Muslim women cover up with a headscarf and long dresses, and Indian women wear their traditional Indian cloth. There are women who dress modernly in jeans and t-shirts, but their knees and shoulders are usually covered. Men also have a variety of clothing and

headwear that ranges from long traditional *kameezes* to jeans. I also observed that men often dress for the occasion. When they are visiting the mosque, they are wearing traditional Islamic cloth, but besides, most of them chose to dress in T-shirts and ordinary trousers.

While it is easy to spot local attire, it is even easier to recognise the westerners. They often are not aware of the cultural rules and boundaries regarding clothing. Tourists often wear their swimwear in the city, drawing the attention of local people. At Jaw's Corner, which is also a busy intersection in the heart of the old city, the locals like to discuss the newest fashion trends displayed by the tourists but also criticise their choices. The most common public opinion is that tourists should know more about Zanzibari traditions and respect them as well. One conversation I listened to while sitting at Jaw's corner one evening was concerning the way the city should let tourists know about how to dress in decent ways. There is information on the internet about appropriate attire and almost every blog mentions that local culture should be respected and protected as much as possible³. And yet, tourists are still seen without T-shirts or in their swimwear.

The men at Jaw's decided together that they need to do something about the growing number of tourists that visit and are not well informed about this specific matter. They commissioned a signboard, which they hung on the pole that stands right in the middle of Jaw's Corner Plaza. It was written in Russian only, as the locals were aware that at that point in time, most people visiting were coming from Russia. Another sign can also be seen at Jaw's corner which states the following in three languages: "Welcome to Zanzibar. You're in the heart of Stone Town World Heritage Site. Kindly observe cultural norms by dressing modestly. It's offensive walking in town clad only in swimwear. Think global respect local." (ill. 4) The conversation about inappropriate clothing worn by tourists and how Zanzibar culture should be preserved and respected, mirrored how the local populace perceived the visitors and their impact on their lives. Moreover, listening to this conversation made me aware that clothing was an important component of integrating into Zanzibari culture or more importantly, distinguishing yourself from a tourist.

Appearance is the first thing one notices about the other. Making a good impression is vital to gain the locals' respect, most importantly by behaving and dressing modestly. Their signboard demonstrated the importance of their culture to them and their dedication to preserving it. While tourism helps Zanzibar economically, the Zanzibaris become more and more concerned about the impact of tourism on their culture. Tradition and beliefs proved to be very important to the locals and they expressed their fears of losing their identity, as their culture slowly merged with global events. They often spoke about their children seeing the tourists and being tempted to adopt their clothing, beliefs and conduct, rather than preserving the Zanzibari one. Through this experience, I became more aware of how I dress and what I can do to respect the local culture and its traditions.

I believe that every anthropologist is aware of the cultural differences between the culture they know and the one they are about to encounter. Yet it is almost impossible to avoid situations in the field where differences in the world outlook, the use of language and social practices, become visible either in the conversation or in the physical environment. Stone Town is a rather metropolitan city with cafes, restaurants, nightlife and has had contact with the Global North through their colonial and pre-colonial past, but also through the influx of tourists. Due to this fact, I assumed that cultural differences, besides religious differences, would not be extreme. Most of the time this was the case.

3 <https://zanzibarinsiderbuzz.wordpress.com/to-do-and-not-to-do/>, June 20, 2022.

However, there were moments when I recognized that ideas, beliefs, and concepts are different in this place of the world compared to what I knew. A prevalent example of this would be the questions I had prepared before arriving in Zanzibar. For instance, I had planned to find out more about the relationship between the people of Omani origin and the ones of African origin. I had prepared questions such as “Do you have friends of Omani origin?”, “Are people of Omani origin treated differently than the ethnically local people?” or “Is marriage allowed between Omanis and Zanzibaris?”. When I got the chance to pose these questions to the people, I received many confused facial expressions. “Of course, I have Omani friends”, “We are all Zanzibaris” and “I am married to an Omani woman” were some of the answers I got from my research partners. I had noticed that my ideas of ethnicity, race and belonging in general were different from the ones the local Zanzibaris had.

To the Zanzibaris, it did not matter where your parents or grandparents were born. To them, Omanis, Indian, Shirazi and whoever else lived on the island, shared cultural customs, and spoke the language, was a Zanzibari. Through conversations with people of different cultural backgrounds I found out that they indeed did not have a hierarchical society based on their race or ethnicity. From previous experiences in foreign countries, I was convinced that societies are culturally diverse, showing social and cultural disparities. These disparities unfortunately often lead to unequal rights and treatment, and the resulting distress caused by the disparities often translates into conflict. From my time on the field, I concluded that this was not the case in Zanzibar.



People going for a swim at sunset.
Stone Town 2021
Photo: Ana-Maria Leonte

There are Christian churches, Hindu temples and Muslim mosques and the respective believers, all cradled in the small old city of Stone Town. Through the conversations I had with my research partners, it became clear that some of my perceptions of the world are not applicable everywhere and that I should approach the field with less preconceived assumptions. Yet it is important to mention that my experience in the field cannot be considered representative for the whole population, since I had a limited, and quite short time on the island. There are still traces of the colonial past, when the Zanzibaris were ruled by a foreign majority, but also of the slave trade that took place through Zanzibar city. Slave origins are still experienced as a handicap in society. Many of my research participants would proudly talk about their Arab descent, which was once the ruling elite, and still represents the wealthy, merchant class in Zanzibar, leading me to believe that there are still stigmas around the place of origin and the racial descent. But they would also not neglect their African history and cultural heritage, which is still prevailing alongside the Arab element.

My decision to travel during a pandemic was not an easy one. Considering that many people around the world have been affected by the outbreak of the Covid19 virus, either by their health or economic possibilities, I faced an ethical dilemma. Zanzibar, however, was open for tourism after a long three-month lock-down, which affected the economy of the island deeply since most of the locals rely on tourism to survive. People were happy to receive a new influx of tourists from countries which now allowed their citizens to travel. Yet in this situation, I again encountered a cultural difference that I believe defines the whole experience of traveling during a pandemic. Arriving in Zanzibar after a 16-hour flight where wearing a mask was mandatory, I was surprised to see no one wearing a mask, neither at the airport nor in the city. While this felt refreshing at

Sign at Jaw's
Corner.
Stone Town 2021
Photo: Ana-Maria Leonte



the beginning, the subject of wearing masks and the virus itself became something that I was preoccupied with. I had been bringing up the corona situation to many locals, but the subject was quickly shut down after a couple of minutes and it seems like it was not something people were interested in discussing. Later I found out that the President of Tanzania had declared the whole country, including the archipelago, to be corona-free and announced that wearing masks is not mandatory. Spotting groups of tourists wearing masks became a rare sighting in Stone Town. One of the locals offered me information about how Zanzibaris and Tanzanians see the situation. He told me that wearing a mask would mean that they are defying the president's advice and decision and that is not acceptable. I learned that Zanzibaris are loyal to their President and their government and respect their decisions. This became clear when the vice-president of Zanzibar had passed, and bars, events and other free-time activities were canceled or closed for one week to pay respect to the deceased. Shortly after the news appeared, social media posts from people mourning their vice-president also surfaced. It seemed like they all had an emotional connection to the vice-president and had a duty to show how much he meant to them and to their islands. As someone who grew up in Europe, I was a little baffled with the reaction from the people. It was rather strange to me how many people took their president's word so seriously regarding the absence of Corona and how dedicated they were to show their respects for their deceased vice-president. To this day I am not sure if they were denying the presence of the virus to stop spreading panic and to be able to go back to their normal lives and jobs which they depended on, or if it was out of loyalty and respect for the president. I was faced with a situation I could not wrap my head around, but I decided not to try to solve it. It became very clear that these were cultural differences that are embedded in one's character and cannot be acquired during such a short stay. This situation taught me that it is alright to have different beliefs and ideas, yet still be able to connect and communicate with the locals through common grounds. The important thing is to acknowledge the differences and accept them.

While I was not able to share every belief and idea that the locals had, I believe that throughout the stay, I became more familiar with their customs and culture. Not being able to share them is not crucial during the field trip, nevertheless it is very important to acknowledge them and take them into consideration when establishing contacts and having conversations. It is essential to listen to the locals speak and watch their behavior, as these offer a great insight into their mindset. Because Zanzibar and Stone Town are such multicultural places, having been part of different empires throughout history, they accept differences and even welcome them. It is important to remark that such differences in political beliefs and general outlook in the world can often draw a dagger in friendships, yet in Zanzibar and during my fieldwork there, this was not the case. I learned how to accept beliefs and people accepted mine, leading to mutual understanding and respect, which often lays grounds to a deeper connection with an acquaintance.

Conclusion

Having no previous experience in a specific region can account for the mistakes committed while preparing for fieldwork. Preparing the wrong questions, focusing on the inappropriate subjects, and time-mismanagement, are just a few to name. However, entering the field with a certain neutrality and distance can help focus on the research question. While this might be wishful thinking, the least one can do is to consider our own experience in other countries and with different cultures, in order to avoid some of the biases that could affect the work. It is certainly impossible to erase our own memory

and life history and approach a new subject without having a natural preconception of the place or the people. Nonetheless, what anthropologists can try to do is to recognise their biases and prejudices to the best of their power and take them into the calculation when entering certain situations. Not only is the anthropologist biased, but so are the locals we meet. In places far away, already the name of the country you originate from triggers a preconceived notion of how a person should be or how they are supposed to act, unless there is no previous knowledge of that place. Saying that I come from Switzerland and that I am conducting research for a university prompted the people I met to think highly of me. Many were impressed. Not only were they impressed; they also felt honored and proud that their island, its people, and they as persons were the subject of a research project in Switzerland.



The collapsed house
of wonders.
Stone Town 2021
Photo: Ana-Maria Leonte



Homeland in southern India 2018. Photo: Bessy Purayampillil

The Meaning of നാട്

Ethnographic fieldwork within the family

Bessy Purayampillil

My field research

As part of the Guided Field Course “Borders and Frontiers”, organised by the Institute of Anthropology in the fall and spring terms of 2020/2021, I conducted research from mid-January until the end of February 2021. For six weeks my home became my field. My parents and relatives became my research partners. Due to the pandemic, the participants of the course were free to conduct research abroad or in Switzerland. Both of my parents belong to the higher risk group because of their age and other health related reasons. Therefore, I thought it best to conduct my research in Switzerland and with my family to reduce the number of outside contacts. I was sure that I would live with my parents during the entire research phase anyway, so choosing them as research partners would allow me to avoid meeting extra people and effectively decrease the risk of infection. While searching for an interesting and feasible project, I remembered how my parents used to say that they wanted to ‘go back’ or ‘return’ to നാട്, their homeland, after retirement. They have lived in Switzerland for almost 30 years and are also Swiss citizens, but they still associate India, in particular Kerala¹, with the concept of നാട്. When spoken about, Kerala is never mentioned by its name but referred to as നാട്.² When my parents are in Kerala, they use sentences such as “back there, where we come from” or even the term നാട് to refer to Switzerland. Because my parents use the term to relate to Kerala and Switzerland, I assumed that the meaning of നാട് changed depending on the situation – at least for them. It made me curious to find out how my parents and other family members think about നാട്. In particular, I wanted to know to which extent their image of നാട് was reflected in their everyday activities.

Having my parents and other relatives as research partners meant that I conducted my research at home. Traditionally, the field of an anthropologist would be an unfamiliar environment. In my case it was the opposite, as my field was the social space that I was most familiar with. It made me curious about the challenges I would have to face while conducting my research. Moreover, I was interested to find out how having my relatives as my research partners would influence me as researcher.

For my research I had two focuses:

What does നാട് mean to my parents? Why do they wish to “return to their നാട്”

What kind of challenges exist when research is conducted within a close familiar context?

1 Kerala is a federal state in southern India formed in 1966. Government of Kerala, “The Movement for a United (Aikya) Kerala”, <https://kerala.gov.in/web/guest/united-kerala> accessed September 27, 2021.

2 നാട് translates as “one’s native country” into English. It is pronounced as nadu with the u being soundless.

My plan was to interview my parents and my relatives, engaging in casual conversations as well as participating in and observing their everyday life to understand how the concept *moṣ* was reflected in their homemaking. Focusing on my two identities as daughter and researcher, I tried to make the familiar unfamiliar. I thought that I had to maintain a distanced researcher perspective without sticking to my role as their daughter. The idea was to distance myself mentally and physically from what had become a routine to me. Moreover, I felt obliged to question everything that had become self-evident to me by having lived with my parents until now.

Every field research is unique because the anthropologist and their research partners grow during the research process. Even repeated research conducted at the same field site will produce different findings. In my case, the process of my research did not only help me understand what *moṣ* meant but it also pushed my parents and family to explore their own understanding of the concept. For reasons of confidentiality, I will not disclose the names of my family members, as publications are accessible to the public. Therefore, I will address my research partners by their relation to myself, for instance as uncle or mother. The language spoken during the research was Malayalam.³

Making the familiar unfamiliar

At the very beginning of my project, I tried to morph the familiar into the unfamiliar by distancing myself mentally and physically from home. Home is a place filled with habits and routines, which I had always accepted as they were. Now, I planned to question everything that I was used to in order to adopt the perspective of a researcher. As I was living with my parents throughout the research, mentally distancing myself proved to be more difficult than expected. I was always with my parents and simultaneously in the field. The only place where I could distance myself from the usual routines of home was my room. However, its effect was limited as we rarely use the doors. Only in certain situations – for instance when we are cooking – do we shut the doors to keep the smell out of other rooms.

Such habits made it difficult for me to stay alone in my room and use it as a private place. Instead, I tried to detach myself physically from the field, for example by going for walks in our neighbourhood. Unfortunately, these methods failed as well. Even though I was physically away, I could not distance myself emotionally. As soon as I was back home, I felt the same closeness as before and felt pulled back into my role as their daughter. By the second week of my research, I noticed that my strategies were not working. I also noticed that sticking to this approach had taken a toll on me and my research partners. I focused so heavily on not falling back into my role as a daughter that it made me irritable and sensitive. I was unable to participate in my parents' everyday routines the way I wanted. Instead, I argued a lot with my parents during this time. My aim to distance myself was not only unsuccessful, it also caused stress and problems. It disrupted our peaceful everyday life. For these reasons, I decided to stop trying to make the familiar unfamiliar.

3 Malayalam is the language spoken in the federal state of Kerala. The language is a South Dravidian language. Its script is a Brahmic script and consists of 53 letters (37 consonants and 20 long and short vowels). Department of Cultural Affairs, Government of Kerala. "Malayalam Language." <http://www.keralaculture.org/malayalam-language/547>, accessed September 28, 2021. See also Ramachandran, Hem P. "The Script." <https://www.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs/usr/vipin/www/mal.html>, accessed September 29, 2021.

I began to question the way I was conducting my research. Eventually, I concluded that I had to embrace my role as the daughter instead of trying to distance myself from it. Trying to divide myself into two social identities was wrong because the researcher and the daughter were one and the same person. My role as daughter was a crucial factor for my project. Had I not been their daughter, my project could not have taken place. I gained access to my family members and my home because of my role as the daughter and for the same reason I was granted insight into my parents' everyday life and their private thoughts. Therefore, I started to participate as much as I could in the everyday activities of my parents – as their daughter. This change of attitude showed positive effects on our relationship as well as in my research. Without the conflicting roles, many more informal conversations took place. I was less stressed because I did not have to think of taking on a specific role anymore. By embracing my role as the daughter, I was more open to listening to what my parents had to say. We also argued less than when I was trying to make the familiar unfamiliar.

Ultimately, my efforts were successful. I was able to conduct my research as both daughter and researcher and engage in many fruitful conversations, which I will detail below.

Interviews with family members: Worries and assumptions

Before I began to ask my relatives for interviews, I was worried and assumed that they would be upset. I expected unpleasant and uncomfortable reactions because of their previous experiences. I know my family members well, and based on that knowledge, I feared that they would not talk openly about themselves. In past conversations, I had always felt that I was not yet considered an adult; it seemed to me that they were taking me as a child. This could be due to the tendency in Malayalee society to start treating people as adults only after they are married. Another worry was my project. The educational background of my family is reflected in the general tendency of Malayalee society, which orients itself more natural sciences than social sciences. Therefore, I expected to be met with questions about anthropology, why I studied it, what it was and what I could do professionally with an MA in Anthropology.

Interviews

I conducted five interviews in total: one with each of my parents and three interviews with other relatives. All the interviews were audio-recorded and held in Malayalam. The interviews with my relatives were conducted via WhatsApp voice calls because of our bad internet connection. The ones with my parents took place face-to-face. My first interview had the biggest impact on me. I had contacted my relatives via WhatsApp message to request an interview with them. The message led to an interview with one of my uncles. He did not understand what I wanted and called me out of the blue to ask me about the purpose of my message. As the call came unexpectedly, I was not prepared for this interview. I felt caught off guard and intimidated because of the way I perceived his way of talking. At that moment, I decided to interview him right then and there instead of scheduling it for another day. The interview became an uncomfortable experience for

me because he seemed to be very stubborn and firm in his answers. When I tried to ask follow-up questions, he mostly repeated the answer he had given me already. What was very frustrating to me was that his thoughts and opinions went into surprising directions. Listening to the recording afterwards I realised that my uncle was not as stubborn and absolute in his way of talking as I remembered him to have been. He had been kind, but his voice had intimidated me. I realised that the circumstances of my first interview had left me with a slightly distorted memory of it. I did not feel competent because I was not prepared. At that moment, I only had the first draft of my set of questions. This suddenness had a profound effect on my feelings in the moment and memories of the interview. However, one particularly good thing came out of this initial interaction: I learned that I needed to rephrase my questions. My first set of questions were difficult to answer if the interviewees were not familiar with my research.

The interviews with my parents went better than I had expected. I interviewed my parents separately because I did not want them to be influenced by the answers of the other. For both interviews we sat at the dining table with my phone placed in between us as a recording device. I sat on one side with my notepad and my revised set of interview questions. They sat across from me, which became a crucial aspect of the interview. Usually, we sit together on the same side of the table, with one parent on either side of me. For the interview, however, we faced each other. The break in our routine seemed to make my parents more conscious of the interview. They sat straighter than they usually did during our informal conversations. They also seemed nervous. The physical distance also allowed me to adopt a distanced perspective. In that moment I was not only their daughter but also the researcher. Because the interview determined our roles, an implicit hierarchy emerged between my parents and me. The right to ask and the duty to answer were allocated to different persons. Our roles were thus defined in advance and no longer by other relations, e.g., kin relationships.

The interview setting also enhanced these dynamics. I chose to interview my parents at our dinner table in order to strengthen my role as the researcher. Our dinner table is rarely used. We only use it on special occasions because it is made of glass and thus gets dirty very fast. Interviewing my parents at the dinner table made it an extraordinary situation. My parents looked like they did not know what to expect. I began the interview by telling them that our conversation would be recorded. I then told them that they did not have to share anything they did not want to. If they wished to skip something, they were free to do so. These explanations affected my parents' body language and the way they talked throughout the interview. During our conversation they took their time to think about my questions before answering them carefully. The answers were well thought through. At times my parents answered inquiries about their lives in chronological order, which is significant because it differs from our typical, unstructured conversations. Usually, they jump around in time, and I am left to organise their statements chronologically for myself. This demonstrates again that they had a different attitude towards the interview. Besides the temporal order, there were also things they left out. I knew enough about their lives to recognise such gaps.

During the interviews with my parents, I observed that we shared a lot of eye-contact. Typically, eye-contact is not frequent during our informal everyday conversations because we are often busy doing something. In the interviews, eye-contact seemed to be their way of seeking confirmation from me and assurance that what they were saying was "correct". In my field diary, I had jotted down my observations from that day as follows: "During the interview, my father seemed nervous. My father sat straighter and when he answered my questions he spoke in a more careful voice. He spoke slowly and paused after each sentence before he continued talking" (field note from 22.02.2021).

"My mother seemed nervous as well when I interviewed her. She took time before she answered a question, and when she did, she answered with caution. She spoke slower than usual and interrup-



My field site: The house of my parents in Switzerland.
2021
Photo: Bessy Purayampillil

ted herself after each sentence. It seemed as if she was dictating her answers to me instead of talking to me” (field note from 23.02.2021).

The hierarchy of the interview affected the dynamics between my parents as research partners and me in many ways. I began to reflect on the dynamics of the interviews with my other relatives in comparison. They felt different than the interviews with my parents. During the interviews with my other relatives, the hierarchy seemed to be flatter than those with my parents. We could not see each other and thus, the effect on our body language was weaker than in my interview with my parents. During our interviews my relatives conversed with me as if it was just like any other phone call. They did not sound as if the interview had any significant influence on how they answered my questions. My parents, however, were heavily affected by the hierarchy of the interview based on the way they acted during our formal conversations. Their careful manner of answering my questions and the change in their body language had helped me to distance myself from my role as their daughter. These changes subconsciously allowed to take in a distanced perspective and encouraged me to ask more follow-up questions as a researcher.

The *moṣṣ* of my research partners

Through the interviews I started to understand what *moṣṣ* meant for my parents and my relatives. My initial assumption had been that Switzerland could also become *moṣṣ* to them – but, as the analysis of my interviews showed, this was not the case. For my parents and most of my relatives, *moṣṣ* is the place where their identity is rooted, and which made them who they are today. It is the place which holds precious and happy childhood memories. For them, *moṣṣ* remains present in their memories. It will always stay with them, even when they are away from Kerala.

For them, *moṣṣ* is the place where they were brought up and where they experienced the world for the first time. Central to this experience are social ties, which according to Zimmermann (2013, 77) are experienced through family. The people my research partners spent their childhood with will remain part of their concept of *moṣṣ*. Even if someone passes away or moves to a distant place, they continue to be connected and live in the memories of my family members. They are all emotionally tied to their *moṣṣ*. Because the first contact between my relatives and my parents took place in *moṣṣ*, they are bound by shared memories. For my relatives living in India, neither changes in citizenship, nor the place of residence will influence how they see my parents: they will always be seen as people from *moṣṣ*.

My parents' feelings of belonging and familiarity to Kerala also prevent Switzerland or any other place of residence from being considered *moṣṣ*. First and foremost, language strengthens their identity as Malayalees. Even though they speak and

Path towards my
Heimat.
2018
Photo: Bessy Purayampillil



understand German, they are not fluent in Swiss German. Not being able to express themselves as much as they want in the language of their place of residence hinders them from feeling like an integral part of the Swiss society. Second, social events make them aware of their Malayalee identity. My parents cannot enjoy social events and gatherings here in Switzerland as much as other people do. For them, their participation remains rudimentary, which enhances their feeling of still being strangers to their country of citizenship. Switzerland is their place of residence – but it can never become ເມືອງ. The only reason why my parents have not returned to their ເມືອງ yet is because they have become accustomed to their life in Switzerland. During their time in Switzerland, my parents surely experienced disappointments, but there were also good moments. This is especially true for my mother, because being in Switzerland allowed her to work. She was seen and treated as an equal to other people in her workplace and not discriminated because of her gender.

Their experiences outside of ເມືອງ made them feel nostalgic because they could not live in their Heimat, their home country anymore. They were no longer part of their ເມືອງ. Just as Törcke (2015, 26) has noted ເມືອງ could only be understood once my research partners could not return to it anymore. They appreciated ເມືອງ after losing it. My parents and my relatives could only visit ເມືອງ in their memories, which morphed it into an image of loss and longing.

The notion of *Heimat*

Based on my readings and field research I came to understand the concept of ເມືອງ to be very similar to the German understanding of *Heimat*.⁴ Eventually, my research made me aware of my own ເມືອງ, my *Heimat*, on which I will shortly elaborate. According to Bonner (2012, 141) *Heimat* is defined by the place(s), where a person spent an important part of his or her life. Together with time, the intensity of the experience characterises the significance of such places. *Heimat* thus is a socio-spatial space (Gebhard, Geisler and Schröter 2007, 9), which is connected to a formative time in the life of an individual. The space of *Heimat* can be an important factor of personal identification and thus shapes the identity of the individual (Bonner 2012, 141). A sense of belonging or familiarity to a limited territory needs to be present when the term *Heimat* is used (Gebhard, Geisler and Schröter 2007, 10). Otherwise, it cannot be *Heimat*. Huber argues that *Heimat* can only be recognised once the individual is no longer ‘living’ it (1999, 26). If an individual does not experience anything other than *Heimat*, the individual will never understand what *Heimat* means (Huber 1999, 27). It can only be appreciated after having lost it.

My ເມືອງ and my *Heimat*

“So, you were born and brought up in Switzerland. Your ເມືອງ is Switzerland and not Kerala or India. Do you understand?” This is what my uncle told me in my first inter-

23 *Heimat* translates badly into English and French. Neither the English terms ‘home, homeland, home country’ nor the French *patrie*, *Pays d’origine* capture the affective dimension of the German word *Heimat* appropriately.

view. I disagreed but kept it to myself to avoid discussions and disagreements about why I did so. His definition of moš and his comment made me think about what this term means to me. Looking at how my parents and relatives understand this notion, I began to reflect on what my own moš was. I did not feel able to figure it out. After reading Andreas Huber's book I realised why: I had not left my Heimat or my moš yet. Perhaps I would be able to recognise it when no longer be surrounded by it. I have lived with my parents until now and never spent more than a few weeks abroad. I'm still surrounded by my moš and thus by my Heimat. This is the only understanding that I found acceptable. The more I thought about what both notions, moš and Heimat, meant for me, the more confused I became because I could not find an answer to the existential question I was asking. I feel unable to define what Heimat or moš mean to me because I have not lost it yet. Perhaps, one day, I will.

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A healer selling
'traditional' medicine
in the streets of
Korhogo.
Côte d'Ivoire, 2020
Photo: Till Förster



The ink for the holy scripture. 2021. Raphael Wälterlin

"A true marabout doesn't ask for money. Does he?"

Raphael Wälterlin

A promising outlook

In January and February 2021, I conducted ethnographic research in Burkina Faso. My work was situated in the broader context of religious pluralism with the aim to explore how marabouts draw from both Islamic and local religious knowledge.

Le vrai marabout ne prend pas d'argent. "The real marabout does not accept money". Hearing this statement on my first day in the city of Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso's second largest city, made me feel confident, if not excited. Could it be, I asked myself, that I had somehow unlocked a door? That I had immediately found a great field research opportunity? I had been following Liliane Kuczynski's research about her encounters with marabouts in the streets of Paris (Kuczynski 2002). I had consulted Tobias Kuhn's project on becoming a marabout himself in Senegal (Kuhn 2016) and had even talked to him prior to my trip. I had visited websites and followed Facebook announcements by people identifying themselves as *marabout*, posting their WhatsApp numbers and offering help and assistance for nearly any issue, for example love, finances, work and health. However, the fact that these individuals made themselves so conspicuous made me suspicious. It reminded me of the many self-acclaimed clairvoyants offering their apparent knowledge for high amounts of money in television and elsewhere. Even though the financial dimensions of marabouts' work were not the focus of my research, they accompanied my hopes and doubts from the very beginning of my stay in Bobo-Dioulasso. I struggled with the idea that I might meet people who would have certain characteristics of religious entrepreneurs, namely marabouts that charged money consciously and maybe aggressively – marabouts that turned religious practice in nothing more than a plain business.

The reader might counter that financial claims or some material compensation for religious tenets could be an interesting field of research. Some may consider it even an important aspect of *le maraboutage* that ethnographers should not neglect. And the reader is right. My strongly normative view depicted above had a reason, and this reason was not an academic one. The reason was linked to my personality and my biography. Being an idealist, I rarely make decisions for materialist or financial reasons. At the same time, over the past 15 years I have had to face material and financial problems day in and day out. I married a Filipina woman; I became a father, and I joined the management team of a company. From budget talks with upset clients to financial expectations from my wife's family that have led to fraught conversations, it feels as if my aversion to financial topics has triggered even more money-centric situations to appear in my life.

"Le vrai marabout ne prend pas d'argent". When Tidiane Traoré told me this, he offered to take me to "true" marabouts that he would know as fervent Muslims. I was confident that two things would happen: First, he would facilitate my entry into the field and my access to the kind of persons who were the focus of my research: marabouts. Second, he would introduce me to what he considered 'real ones': marabouts who would not charge any money.

More friend than research partner

During the first three weeks of my stay, I met five different marabouts. I conducted interviews with them and partially participated in their religious practices and consultations. The pace of my research and the quantity of the data gathered kept me in a euphoric mood. Doubly because none of the marabouts I had met so far had been asking for money. Yet, ironically, I regularly compensated their efforts at the end of an appointment with a small amount of money. In the field, I did what I had criticised before: I resolved situations with money and thus reduced their complexity to a purely financial dimension. I concluded later that I might have acted this way because I have become accustomed to settling certain problems with money, for example with my wife's family in the Philippines. In their social milieu, money is understood as both a financial transaction and a social obligation. Money can and often does solve social problems, such as determining who covers the costs of a medical treatment. Hence, I reproduced this kind of logic in my field site in Burkina Faso – however much I would reject such practices on a conscious level.

My relationship with marabout Fofana Moussa was the most intense of my contacts during the six weeks of my stay. He was the first marabout I met, and we got along very well right from the beginning. Fofana was interested in helping me in my research and would try to answer each of my questions seriously and thoroughly. But the principal reason for our emerging friendship was more due to his character: Fofana was bright and interested in many topics. During our conversations, we would not only talk about his life and work as a marabout, but also about me, the place where I lived or my family. With every appointment, our conversations became less structured and more personal. After having met twice, he told me to stop giving him financial compensations as it was his role as marabout to be there for the people and their needs. When he uttered these words in a self-conscious way, I was even more convinced that I was exchanging ideas with a true marabout. Fofana surely behaved like one. Reflecting on what he had said, I realised that I had been submitting fully to the normative and subjective tendencies addressed above.

Fofana, Tidiane and
Raphael
2021
Photo: Raphael Wälterlin





Moussa Fofana with
a bottle of medicine.
2021
Photo: Raphael Wälterlin

At some point, Fofana became more friend than research partner, at least for me. We did not only meet regularly, but also exchanged messages via WhatsApp throughout the six weeks. This course of things affected our positionality. It also triggered a situation that turned into both an emotional and methodological challenge. Because of the rapport that we had built, I thought that it might be revealing to become his client and hence participate in his occupation. I looked for a subject that would be personal but not too intimate. I asked him if he could help me quit smoking. It seemed to him to be a rather unusual request, but he approved and said that we would “*faire le programme*”. The programme consisted of him preparing a medicine and instructing me to drink it every day, which I did in the last week of my research. However, it is not the medicine itself that is the concern here so much as his request for payment. He confirmed to me that he had started the preparation of the medicine and that I was supposed to pay him 24,000 CFA for his efforts, approximately 36 Swiss francs. He wrote it in a very self-evident style, short and discrete. No explanation, no justification, despite him not having talked about money when suggesting *le programme*.

24,000 CFA! It was less the amount, which could be considered rather high according to local standards, but the request itself that shook me deeply. Fofana, the ‘true’ marabout in whom I had trusted so much, asked for money! Even though I remained outwardly calm and promised to pay the money, I was struggling internally. Tidiane, who had assured me that he knew ‘true’ marabouts – those that would not ask for money – seemed to be worried himself, when I called him and asked him to explain this unexpected request. He suggested that I ask Fofana and said he would call back in a few minutes to follow up. When Tidiane called me back, he explained again that marabouts effectively did not charge anything for their consultations. But in the case of a concoction such as this one, a marabout faced expenses, which would surely explain Fofana’s request. He offered to tell Fofana to stop, which I declined: from an academic perspective, I was very interested in participating in this kind of practice and saw no reason to end it prematurely. At that moment, I was also doubting [the authenticity of?] Tidiane himself. His uneasiness did not seem to be related to Fofana’s financial request but rather to my obvious emotional reaction. Fofana was a good friend of his. Tidiane seemed more concerned with safeguarding the marabout’s status from any contamination. In the end, Tidiane was protecting his own interests, just like I was in my role as both researcher and friend to Fofana. Fofana, the marabout, was too. Talking to

colleagues and reflecting on this situation, I began to realise how my own position as white researcher and my personal history had a decisive influence on how I reacted and how the situation had unfolded. As autoethnographic approaches suggest, my personal background, the expectations related to it and the position I occupy as a researcher are closely intertwined and shall here be treated briefly:

Biography: Or why some things can't be shaken off

As already shown, my biography and my personal attitude towards financial matters made me sensitive to the topic of money in my field research with marabouts. In the field, I had felt confident that money 'for once' would not play an important role. My confidence was based on two observations:

1. Tidiane's confirmation that he would take me to a 'true' marabout who would not focus on financial demands, and
2. the fact that, none of the marabouts had charged anything, at least initially.

My hope that I would not have to become financially involved with the persons of interest is strongly related to my biography. It can be understood in contrast to my private travels to the Philippines where money always played a role to varying degrees when interacting with locals. In West Africa, with no family obligations and relationships, I unconsciously assumed I would be able to fully delve into a lifeworld where neither my counterparts nor I had any financial interests or expectations. While someone else might also react emotionally to Fofana's request for compensation, my reaction had an almost existential quality. My argument is that the depth of my feelings must be understood in the context of my biography. Elaborating on this thought and generalising it, I conclude that a lot of our decisions prior, during and after research are strongly linked to subjective, biographical, and unconscious issues. Researchers must become aware of these issues and acknowledge and reflect on them in the context of our interpretations and actions.

The self-evident consequence of the biographical and personal frame that I have addressed thus far brings me to the topic of 'projection'. I do not understand it to mean unconscious impressions or even traumata projected onto others in psychoanalytical parlance. Instead, I understand the term to denote general conscious expectations and hopes that we project onto others. Money should not play a role when it comes to friendship or religious issues, right? The marabouts, including Fofana, seemed to move in a milieu where money did not play a role. All the better, in my opinion. Even more decisive than these presumptions were my understanding of the religious function of a marabout. My understanding was that the marabout as a 'religious specialist' dedicates his life to an activity, eventually for the benefit of mankind. He must be the epitome of altruism. I did not think this consciously. In a similar vein, I admit that conducting comparative religious studies (my second academic discipline next to anthropology) has been informed by another idealism of mine: I tended to project human values such as trust or honesty on persons having a religious specialisation. Consequently, this paper is not about a religious person demanding money. It is about me projecting my understanding that a religious person should have no material interests and not ask for any payment.

Positionality: Or how field work differs from sightseeing

The jump from my personal realizations to issues of positionality is short. Who am I, I asked myself shortly after having digested Fofana's request, to think that only I as a white researcher had vested interests? Why would Fofana or Tidiane not have their own – just as I do, including financial ones? I realised (and I also wrote it into my field diary) that I had gone sightseeing in the first three weeks. I had met people and obviously thought that they had been waiting there all the time, waiting for the white researcher with his enormously important questions. As if Bobo-Dioulasso had been a museum and me its main or even sole guest, talking to people as if they were static paintings that would not act, but only mirror the gaze of the spectator. This kind of romanticisation was the creation of an asymmetry that is so often and rightly addressed in anthropological and postcolonial literature. I had committed a mistake: I positioned myself in an uneven relationship with others by not acknowledging their own interests and expectations. I had been wearing the "I of imperialism" as Rosaldo called it (Rosaldo 1989, 41). I had "denied coevalness" as Johannes Fabian had suggested decades ago, keeping "the Other" in another time and place from where they could not intrude my seemingly sacred space of anthropology (Fabian 1983).

All this might sound radical in a positivist perspective. I should add that I had never consciously acted in a way that did not acknowledge and respect my counterparts. In my view, exactly this highlights the complexity of positionality in ethnographic research so accurately: No matter how much literature we read, how well-founded postcolonial claims might appear to us – issues of positionality surface sooner than expected and may remain below the horizon of the researchers' consciousness. They will not become apparent in our engagements with texts, nor in the classroom, but instead in the field, while walking on unknown terrain, while having to cope with new, irritating impressions and altering frames of reference, enhanced but also burdened by personal notions and memories that have made us who we are.

Reciprocity: Or why friendship differs from friendship

Another important theme could be added to my thoughts on positionality, namely reciprocity as social practice and its cultural specificity. It was my wife who first tried to appease me when hearing about my difficulties with Fofana's request. "Now don't you play his request off against your friendship with him", she said. Note how biographical aspects again provoked such a statement. Her suggestion not to sacrifice the friendship I had with Fofana 'only because of some financial matters' also related to our common biographical past, in particular because of the regular financial aid that her family in the Philippines had been demanding. Looking back on 15 years of sometimes less, sometimes more intense disputes as to why and how we had to fulfil such obligations, my wife knew my position very well. Intuitively, she realised how my idealist world view could be messed up when pervaded with material matters or financial requests for which I had no space in my ideal notions of love and friendship. It was as if she was saying: "Ok, fine, we already had such arguments regarding my relatives in the Philippines. Keep your idealism at bay and please do not burden yourself anymore by taking such issues

Bottles filled with
medicine.
2021
Photo: Raphael Wälterlin



to West Africa.” In our talks after the field trip, Till Förster reflected on this matter not only with respect to my specific situation, but our Swiss or even “Western” mentality in general: In the West, it seems rather impolite or even disturbing to link financial issues to friendship, whereas it could be considered a sign of ‘true friendship’ in West African societies. One would not ask a good friend for financial support here, trying to not risk friendship – but in Burkina Faso, your friend would be the first to ask because he is a good friend of yours. Presuming that the amount mirrors the depth of a friendship, Fofana has indeed recognised a true friendship with me and hence did not hesitate to ask for a significant amount.

Reciprocity seems to be a decisive part of relational ethics and unavoidably draws the researcher from the “gaze of the distanced and detached observer to the intimate involvement and engagement of ‘coactivity’ or co-performance”, as Conquergood put it (Conquergood 1991, 188). Reciprocity is an essential part of fieldwork as collaborative performance. 24,000 CFA! What a close friend marabout Fofana is.

Instead of a conclusion

Earlier today, I received a WhatsApp message from Fofana, wishing me a *bon jeudi*, a “nice Thursday”. He often sends such messages, and sometimes I ask him how he is doing. We both write to each other regularly as *amis*, “friends”, and I would definitely say that Fofana is a friend of mine. Hence, I can confirm that “‘autoethnographers’ often maintain and value interpersonal ties with their participants”, as Ellis and colleagues write in their summary (Ellis 2011, 281). As a person, but also as a researcher, I continue to live in a world of relationships in which my research is embedded. I am trying to maintain ties with Fofana, and I feel like I hold our friendship in high esteem, maybe because of the situation I have written about here. Fofana is also trying to sustain our personal ties. He values our friendship very much. So it seems as if I have turned from a person of interest into a friend.

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