

Anthropology at Home: Perspectives and Ethical Dilemmas

Washington Onyango-Ouma
Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi

ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the different perspectives of anthropology at home and the ethical dilemmas associated with it. The dichotomy between anthropologists working at home and those working abroad on the basis of who is an insider or an outsider is examined. I argue that in fieldwork situations anthropologists, working at home or abroad, are likely to have different strands of identification which makes it difficult to determine whether one is an insider or an outsider. Some ethical issues which apply to all anthropologists but more demanding when working at home are highlighted. It is concluded that in view of multiple identities emergent ethics based on moral negotiation is ideal for all fieldwork settings.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the different perspectives of anthropology at home and the ethical dilemmas that arise while doing anthropological research at home. I begin by questioning the existence of the dichotomy between an insider (one working at home) and an outsider (one working abroad or in another society) as stable categories in the face of multiple identities that we as anthropologists often have to come to terms with in our field of engagement. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) code of ethics (AAA 1998) while recognising that anthropology is a multidisciplinary field of science and scholarship does not give separate frameworks for anthropology at home and working

abroad. Yet the discourse on anthropology at home has been essentialized with others being branded 'real anthropologists' because they study abroad while others are 'native anthropologists' because they study at home.

In the discussion I reflect on my own fieldwork experience in Kenya among informants with whom I share an ethnic identity. Between 1995 and 2002 I conducted different research studies - anthropological and non-anthropological - among the Luo people in Bondo District in the western part of Kenya. Most of these studies were centred on children and childhood. This kind of fieldwork has been termed as auto-ethnography - that is "the anthropological study of a

social cultural system by a member of the society concerned" (Seymour-Smith 1986:19). Strathern refers to a somewhat similar venture as auto-anthropology – "anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it" (1987:17).

ANTHROPOLOGY AT HOME: A COLONIAL LEGACY

Perhaps I should start with a provoking statement asking how one knows when one is at home. Am I at home among my professional peers, among those I speak the same language within my country, or where? If as human beings we have several identities how do we define home or even ourselves at any point in time? Or could home be a metaphor for the intimate relationships between that part of the world a person calls "self" and the part of the world called "other" as Jackson (1995) suggests.

Why then anthropology at home? Our discipline of anthropology has a rich colonial history which it is yet to free itself from (see Asad 1973). During that period, anthropologists prized themselves as those qualified to study natives in colonised states. They provided vital information to the colonial administration that could be used to assimilate the natives or rule them indirectly through their own established structures. Anthropologists of the colonial period took it upon themselves, as were missionaries of that time, to provide first hand descriptions of "other" peoples. Evans-Pritchard writing on the subject matter of social anthropology argued that the social anthropologist "studies primitive societies directly, living among them for months or years..." (1951:11). Asad was even more

emphatic on the relationship between anthropology and colonialism in his argument that "it is not a matter of dispute that social anthropology emerged as a discipline at the beginning of the colonial era" (1971:15).

The paradigm that polarises "native" and "real" anthropologists (Narayan 1993) and by extension, anthropology at home stems from this colonial setting. Real anthropologists went out to get the native's point of view through total immersion into other cultures by way of participant observation.

Anthropology's association with colonialism accounts for the way the discipline was received in the postcolonial period in independent states. Scholars who were championing nationalist interests denounced the colonial connections of anthropology and began to recover an indigenous history challenging the functional anthropologist's dogma that only written records could provide a reliable basis for reconstructing history (Asad 1973). In universities, anthropology received a raw deal probably because it was perceived to promote ethnicity through its single site studies, which would threaten the unity of the multiethnic nascent states. To imagine that the first courses in anthropology were just introduced in Kenya in 1986-87, yet the first president of Kenya was an anthropologist and a former student of Malinowski, is a good case in point. "Real" anthropologists from the west, however, continued studying the 'other' and reporting mainly to their audiences of students and colleagues through journal articles and monographs.

The post-modern discourse on reflexivity with its emphasis on the need for achieving distance between the anthropologist and those being studied has further essentialized the dichotomy between the insider and outsider. Those studying at home have been considered insiders and hence incapable of maintaining distance or their ability to maintain distance is compromised. It is assumed that everything appears authentic to them as practitioners of that culture they are studying. One therefore needs to maintain distance by studying others because it is by juxtaposing other cultures alongside another that you can learn about them.

At this historical moment in time the main concern for anthropologists should not be whether one is studying at home or abroad but how we relate to our informants during fieldwork and when we write the material into monographs and articles. Anthropology is increasingly getting involved in current issues (e.g. social change) at home and abroad and it would be futile to engage in polarising who is an insider and outsider. Rather, as Narayan points out,

...we might more profitably view each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations. The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those we study are multiple and in flux (1993:671).

Anthropology is changing and is currently practiced by "natives" in the previously colonised states although the west continues to dominate the terms for anthropological discourse. It is also

interesting to note that in the west where people were preoccupied with the study of "others" anthropology has returned home probably after discovery of their ignorance of their own societies. Furthermore in countries such as Denmark the field has been brought home - through refugees, migrant workers etc. For instance, one no longer needs to go to Somalia to study Somali people; they can be studied right in Denmark where they are currently living as refugees. In such a study how would one talk of studying the "other" when the "otherness" is constantly under threat by your own culture and worldview.

The field is therefore increasingly becoming a flexible concept and can be among refugees in Denmark or schoolchildren in Kenya. The danger that an insider might not achieve distance and hence depend too much on his own background and sentiments can be mitigated with relative ease once one is aware of his role as an anthropologist. Furthermore even if one was an insider he can only know about a society from particular locations within it for cultures are not homogeneous while society is differentiated. The very nature of researching what for others is taken-for-granted reality creates an uneasy distance.

Narayan (1993) has observed that even distance is a stance in itself and a cognitive-emotional orientation. We should therefore not assume that outsiders will automatically provide objective forms of representation of the societies they study. On the same note Pels further argues that "the anthropological habit of presenting the

facts of alternative cultural variations can be said to constitute a moral stance" (1999:109). This can sometimes lead to prejudiced forms of representation.

ON BEING THE "OTHER" AT HOME

Our main task as anthropologists should not be who is an insider or an outsider but to examine the ways in which each one of us is situated in relation to the people we study. In typical field situations we are often confronted with the reality that the grounds of familiarity and distance are shifting ones. As Narayan (1993) has suggested, a focus on the quality of relations with the people we study rather than a fixity of the distinction between who is an insider and an outsider would be valuable to our anthropological enterprise. Relationships are complex and shifting in different settings to the extent that an insider may as well be an outsider depending on where he is. Even in one locale a person may have many strands of identification. During my fieldwork, for example, I realised that we can experience a multiplex of identity depending on how we position ourselves and how the people we study position us.

My fieldwork among the Luo in Bondo district was done in schools and communities with both adults and schoolchildren. I spoke the same language as my informants and shared many cultural attributes. But while in many respects I could be said to be doing anthropology at home, I realised I had multiple identities which simply stripped me off my local identification and lumped me instead with the category "other" at different times (Onyango-

Ouma 2000). Some of these identities included:

- In-law identity - I was from a different sub-group which is exogamous with the group where I was doing fieldwork and that automatically gave me an in-law identity in various ways in which people dealt with me. During home visits my informants addressed me using the term *ora* (in-law) which was a status position with certain role expectations.
- Urban/elite identity - though I tried to go "native" people still made the difference and associated me with the educated urban class. Throughout my fieldwork I used a bicycle which was the common means of transport in the study area. But even with that I was still considered an urbanite who was just trying to identify with the people.
- Educated identity - teachers could easily tell that I was more educated than them in as much as I tried to down play that. In our daily conversations they asked questions that were basically meant to find out how much I knew about national and global issues.
- Adult identity - in relation to schoolchildren whom I worked with and in understanding the field of childhood, I was positioned as an adult. Being an adult meant that I could only understand my informants from that particular position. Children also treated me as an adult in their response to my questions.

Although I spoke the local language, my informants used the above identities to designate me as the "other". This made me to reconsider my original idea that I

was at "home" or rather doing fieldwork at home.

DOING ANTHROPOLOGY AT HOME: ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Having deconstructed the idea of anthropology at home I would argue that similar ethical principles as laid down by the AAA, for example, apply to both studying at home and studying "others". However, it occurred to me during my fieldwork that there are some ethical issues which though apply to all anthropologists (at home and abroad) are more demanding when working among "your own people". Mascarenhas-Keyes, a native anthropologist, has pointed out that anthropology at home requires a "professionally induced schizophrenia between the 'native self' and 'professional self'" (1987:181). This is in reference to the contradictory nature of certain things or dilemmas that one is likely to encounter which requires one to adopt "a multi-native strategy with a chameleon-like virtuosity" (Mascarenhas-Keyes 1987: 182). The dilemmas encountered actually translate into ethical questions.

When you study your own society you are torn between the obligations to the discipline and to the people you study. Especially in the third world countries one is likely to have a different engagement with western-based theories and books which dominate the discipline. One is torn between mystification based on these theories and the desire for empiricism - to show extraordinariness and uniqueness of the ordinary rather than exoticism of the situation (Mascarenhas-Keyes 1987).

Very often one is forced to speak to the discipline rather than to the people who are "merely viewed as fodder for professionally self-serving statements about a generalised "Other" (Narayan 1993:672). There is the ever-present demand to contribute to the discipline through technologies of the written production in which disciplinary demands are prioritised over the voice of the people.

Our obligations to informants with regard to reciprocity of relations given are more demanding when you are working at home. As opposed to foreign anthropologists who can easily engage in a "quick-fix" anthropology, local anthropologists are bound to have a life-long engagement with their field informants. For the outsider, the demand for the balanced reciprocity of relationships and information may be limited to the fieldwork period or may only continue through sporadic correspondence with a few natives in the post fieldwork period. Conversely, the local anthropologist is expected by the informants to continue with those reciprocal relations long after fieldwork. The post fieldwork period appears to be payback time for local anthropologists who are often confronted with past informants' demands for gifts, favours and recognition in public places. Such demands are difficult to ignore when doing anthropology in your own community.

Claims of exploitation or rather personal gain are commonly experienced when studying at home which contradict the ethical requirement that we should not exploit our informants. When working among your own people,

informants find it difficult to understand why you are studying things that you are supposed to know in the first place. Anthropologists working in "other" societies can easily get away with an explanation that they are interested in learning the local culture. For the local anthropologist, people take it that it is a form of employment of which you are paid irrespective of the explanation given.

During my fieldwork I always had to grapple with the feeling that I was benefiting out of talking to my informants. According to them I had no reason not to contribute to funeral expenses, school development projects and even individual projects since I also benefited from them. This creates a dilemma regarding the extent to which you can go in disclosing your source of funding and use of the research material (e.g., academic qualifications) when people are consciously aware that you use their lives and experiences for your own personal gain. In this scenario the local anthropologist is accused of turning events or situations to ends of one's own, through extracting raw materials for social and economic use. As Strathern has argued "the question is not one of extraction, but who has the power to convert a relation into a personal prestige [and economic gain]" (1987:22).

The ethical dilemmas that arise from claims of informants' exploitation are not limited to anthropology alone but relate to research in general. Issues of exploitation and reciprocity remain contentious, for example, in biomedical research where the study population has to part with blood or stool samples. In such studies the study population often

see themselves as being exploited by researchers who according to them use their samples for economic gain. Claims of exploitation are usually voiced even if the study population receives benefits such as free treatment from the research project.

Another kind of dilemma has to do with third party politics that are always masked in ethical claims between the researcher and the population being studied. Here I am referring to local authorities and institutions like schools to which our informants are subjects. While doing research one is bound to such institutions and authorities (powers that be) in some way or another not only as means of creating rapport but it is also essential to be seen to conform to local authorities as your informants do. In a school setting, daily visits to the headteacher's office and participation in the school activities (e.g., parades/assemblies) serve as a way of conforming to the hierarchy of authority where the headteacher is at the apex.

However, even though the researcher may successfully conform to the local powers, a problem may arise when informants' participation in the research is seen as a threat by the local authority. The informants are then placed at risk of being victimised because of their involvement in research activities. An example at hand is when teachers in one of my study schools singled out research pupils for corporal punishment claiming that they were rude. This action put me in a dilemma. On the one hand, I was aware that corporal punishment was not permitted in Kenyan schools and I felt tempted to intervene but then I risked being kicked out of the school. On the

other hand, the research was not supposed to cause harm in any way to the pupils. I kept on wondering whether or not I should intervene if children were at risk, because I risked losing access to and trust of children if I did not intervene. This was further compounded by the fact that as a local anthropologist I knew that teachers' action was illegal.

In the face of multiplex identities, anthropology at home demands a kind of ethics that is based on "moral negotiation" as suggested by Pels (1999). Negotiations over what is right to do will involve relations with powers that be and informants. I see more of "emergent ethics" (Pels 1999) than following a code of ethics. In Pels' usage, emergent ethics refers to "a set of moral agreements composed contingently perhaps inconsistent, but at least appropriate for the situation at hand" (1999:114). For instance, when I intervened in the teachers' decision to punish research pupils, I interfered with the running of the school which I owed responsibility to behave well but I found it right to do so.

To a large extent "emergent ethics" are no exceptions to working abroad or in another society. Anthropologists working in other societies are also confronted with issues that they have to deal with on the basis of the situation rather than following a code of ethics. However, the issues are more demanding and difficult to wish away while working at home than while working abroad.

CONCLUSION

Anthropologists (whether working at home or abroad) should be conscious of their "multiple planes of identification" (Narayan

1993) at any point in time during their fieldwork. Our multiplex identities make emergent ethics ideal for most fieldwork settings where negotiation is often the way things work out. While the establishment of a code of ethics is necessary to guide the anthropological enterprise (teaching, research and practice), it appears that ethical issues in anthropology (home or abroad) are subject to moral negotiation at all times.

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