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Towards Longue Durée Research Partnerships

In this post I want to take the coronavirus outbreak, which led to the *untimely* termination of my stay in the Zambezi Region of North-Eastern Namibia to conduct research for my PhD, as occasion to reflect about the *conditions for the possibility* of doing ethnography *with* others. Doing ethnography always rests on the help of others. This applies even more so to places where one doesn't speak the local language, has no social ties and where one doesn't know one's way around. What remains an underrepresented topic in anthropologic discourse is the role of research assistants for doing ethnography. *They* initiate *our* entry into a new world, arrange meetings, plan and conduct research and, most importantly, share their lifeworlds with *us* (anthropologists). However, their work often remains un(der)acknowledged in the 'final' anthropological (text-)product. Us anthropologists arrive in 'the field' powerless. But with the help of assistants and others, we will leave 'the field' with pockets full of cultural capital, while assistants oftentimes remain behind with not much more than some pocket money. Apart from the structural imbalance ultimately embedded in global hegemonial power structures that need to be addressed not only concerning research in the Global South, I argue that the temporal seclusion of research partnerships should be broken open to do justice to the processuality of life (in the sense of Abbott 2016). I propose to continue the critique on an anthropology as 'still-image'-representation of the *timeless other* (Fabian 1983) by calling for institutional settings that allow longue durée ethnographic partnerships for diachronic research.

The Arrival of the Coronavirus in the Zambezi Region of Namibia

In similar vein as described in another blogpost in 'Witnessing Corona' about the

arrival of the coronavirus in Lindi, Tanzania, it was not until the end of February that news about corona and COVID-19 started to enter the system of communication (Niklas Luhmann) of the rural areas of North-Eastern Namibia. Then, however, it was *not yet* cause for much concern, as one of my friends announced the following, provoking laughter from me and others:

> "*What is happening there? Here we have HIV. We are used to diseases. We people are safe, but you people must watch out. We Africans are strong. Look at Kangenda. It needs a big sickness to get to him. If there is a nuclear bomb, he will still be walking on one leg. That is why the coronavirus is afraid to come here*" (noted in diary, 25 February 2020).

In mid-March, however, the first positive cases were reported in Windhoek and public sentiment quickly grew more anxious, as this quote by a Game Guard of the Conservancy where I did my research exemplifies: "*Mahwe [Oh my god], if corona arrives here in Zambezi, we are all dead. God is nearby. The world is ending*" (noted in diary, 15 March 2020). The Namibian Government reacted immediately, closing schools and subsequently restricted national and international travel. Many people started adhering to the instructions from the radio, the news online and on television to no longer shake hands and instead use elbows for greetings. Others, however, were still not too afraid and continued shaking hands, only using the new elbow greeting to mock others, accompanied by the now ever-present remark "corona corona".

What was still a very vague and distant reality for me, suddenly became a serious threat to my fieldwork. At least that is how I felt when my supervisor informed me that he and his colleagues came to the conclusion that it was no longer justifiable to continue research in Namibia for reasons both concerning my own safety (in a scenario of a rapid coronavirus spread and a possible breakdown of the health

infrastructure) and the safety of my interlocuters (because I might spread the virus). I already spent eight months in the Zambezi region and as I still planned to stay another four, this came quite as a shock. As I was hardly following the news of the spread of the coronavirus in China and later Europe, I was not prepared for such drastic measures. The same applied for my research assistant who expected to be employed by me for the rest of my expected stay. Effectively, I had to pack up my life of the previous eight months in three days and say goodbye to at least some of my friends. However, it was not possible to meet everybody in this short period of time and some complained that they couldn't say goodbye in an appropriate manner. Above all, some people were aware that the number of positive cases were much higher in Germany compared to Namibia and especially the Zambezi region where, so far, no positive cases were reported. Therefore, they questioned 'my' decision to return *now* to such an apparently coronavirus infected country. Though eventually agreeing with my supervisors' decision, and apart from reasons regarding the safety of my interlocuters, leaving 'the field' for reasons concerning my own safety felt wrong because it reminded me of the structural imbalance. As much as we anthropologists insist on participating in the life of others, whenever *times get rough* (even if this is only a future scenario, as in this case), we are the first to escape to the safe havens of our home countries with our credit cards, European IDs and functioning health care infrastructures. And this is what makes *us* (fundamentally) different from *them* – not in culture, but in our position within the global hegemonial order. Obviously, I am not speaking for all anthropologists here, but for those in the majority, who have such options like me, conducting research among those who mainly don't have them.

There is nothing new about these global hegemonialities and some have found their strategies of coping with these imbalances either by ignoring them or by believing in the greater good of the research outcome or the research situation itself. For example, one might argue, these imbalances won't go away just because we decide not to conduct research in the Global South. Whatever conclusion one might reach

in this fundamental discussion (or whether one rejects that there is a conclusion), I want to argue for one such strategy that, even though certainly not eradicating the *great divide*, can at least bridge over it *at times*.

Entanglement over Time

For the reason of anthropology being an academic discipline, anthropology is subject to the temporal logics and restraints of academia, i.e. typically predefined schedules for the conduct of fieldwork, fixed-term employment contracts (at least for almost all non-professors) and thinking and acting in the logic of time-intervals of research projects, hence typically between around one year and in the best case five years. In larger research projects, such as the collaborative research center that I am currently working in, research schedules need to be designed by those who apply for the project (the professors). Most of those conducting the research (the PhD students) only enter the project at a later stage but nonetheless need to adhere to those schedules because money is already budgeted, and donors expect certain result at given deadlines. Regardless of having to adhere to imposed or self-designed schedules, the logic of schedules implies the need to always keep in mind the *endpoint* of the fieldwork or the whole research project. Therefore, the future is not open. At the beginning of fieldwork/a project, one is busy to come up with good plans but this quickly shifts to a feeling of always running late and running behind schedule; the final date of the research/project hanging like the sword of Damocles over one's head. And before finishing the previous project, one is already nudged towards securing the next project to continue being employed. This temporal logic is of course not specific to academia and it might be called the temporal logic of neoliberal project management from which it is almost impossible to withdraw. Here, I shall quickly compare this with my voluntary social year in Soweto that equally came with an inbuild predefined time-interval (one year), but where I was able to deceive myself (and possibly others) that I might simply not return to

Germany and therefore could make myself believe I was heading towards an open future. In hindsight, I believe that, without a fixed calendar date as endpoint on the horizon, I was much more open to inviting the kind of experiences that are constituting for anthropology – namely being open to actively (re)considering *with others* what life is about (this however might also having had to do with age as I was younger by then). Be that as it may, anthropological fieldwork in Tim Ingold's words is

> "*[…] a practice founded on generosity, on receiving with good grace what is given rather than seeking to obtain, by deceit or subterfuge, what is not. This is what distinguishes the field from the laboratory. In the field you have to wait for things to happen, and accept what is offered when it is offered. That's why fieldwork takes so long.*" (Ingold 2018: 11)

Being "on time everytime" without timetables, photograph by the author.

Hence, following such an understanding of anthropology as waiting, it should be quite clear that a *task-oriented* time-frame[1] is much more appropriate for ethnographic fieldwork, than predefined schedules. Predefined schedules are appropriate for a collection of predefined quantifiable data to be 'extracted' from 'the field', whereas they are not appropriate for an anthropology understood as an open-ended dialogue. I, too, fell in this trap, carefully designing schedules, both before leaving Germany and in Zambezi, that in the end served the mere purpose to remind myself how much I had fallen behind them and that eventually became pointless with the arrival of the coronavirus anyway. Surely, more time, or for that matter, no time-restrictions (in the schedule frame) do no guarantee better anthropology and it must be acknowledged that the possibility of doing anthropology is intrinsically entrenched in the neoliberal world order. However, and this is the point I want to make, anthropologists should attempt as much as possible within those given restraints to organize their work according to a task-oriented frame. This means that even though fieldwork periods end, we should strive for continuation. Hence, we should aim to remain *in dialogue* with those we have spent time in 'the field'. In fact we should move beyond a spatial understanding of 'the field', practice remote fieldwork in cooperation with others, and call for institutional arrangements that value higher the accumulation of different times at the same place than different field sites – in short to strive for being entangled in each other's lives and grow old together in the *longue durée* instead of staying only for a predetermined duration where the anthropologist comes out of nowhere, collects 'data' and vanishes again into the void. This also involves inviting those that were willing to share their lives with us and *empowered* us in the first place, to visit us at our homes. It means to involve research assistants as much as possible in the writing process[2] and share texts in an accessible form. It might also mean to look for new forms of representation that have not the fixed format of a text but that continue to evolve over time. From a methodological point of view, this further allows to acknowledge the processual character of life, both on an individual and on a socio-cultural level.

We, as individuals, go through different stages of life and what we say and do must be set in context to those stages. On the level of society, a *longue durée* perspective allows to see how norms, values, institutions, habitualized practices and so on are both reproduced and changed *over time*.

To be sure, there is nothing new or revolutionary about this and whether or not *longue durée* relationships are acknowledged in books or journal articles, many anthropologists already practice this (at least to some extent), for example, Gerd Spittler who continued to visit 'his field' over a period of more at least 25 years (e.g. Spittler 2016: 240). Further, I draw much from the project of dialogical anthropology here (e.g. Tedlock & Mannheim 1995) and the idea of diachronic research is nothing new either. Also, there might be cases were strategical partnerships with inbuild scheduled time frames are indeed appropriate. There is not always a guarantee for 'fruitful' dialogue, and we cannot assume that the desire to enter a *longue durée* dialogue is shared by research assistants. Nonetheless, *longue durée* partnerships should be the primary goal of anthropology while however contemporary institutional settings support short-term project thinking.

Before I conclude, at least two questions remain open. First, what is the task of anthropology and second, when is it finished? Regarding the first one, I would not presume to answer it on a general level. Therefore, the same applies to the second question as well, though from a perspective of dialogic anthropology, one might say the task is finished once there is nothing to be said anymore. On a practical level, however, we will continue to create textual, visual or any other kinds of representations (or whatever you like to call it), and these can mark at least 'interim-end-points'.

To conclude, from a position of a *longue durée* relationship, the coronavirus cannot end the anthropological project, but is just a bump in the road, a global development to reflect jointly about. It should remind us not to restrict our thinking to the given time intervals of the projects that pay our salaries but aim for longer lasting

relationships based on the notion of care and involving several visits on both sides (once they will be possible again). However, the coronavirus should also remind us that, however we frame the anthropological endeavor, be it 'participative', or 'on eye-level', we will eventually leave 'the field' (at least physically) and while we attempt to capitalize intellectually on the corona crisis, other more vulnerable people that once empowered us are being left behind, some of them having to face existential challenges.

Let me close with the words, one of my friends in Zambezi shared with me before I left 'the field': "*Life is a pleasure. Life is a rolling ball. When it turns, you see a different color.*" (noted in diary 21 March 2020).

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Footnotes

[1] As for example described by Edward Evans-Pritchard in his classic ethnography about 'the Nuer', though in too romanticizing tones (Evans-Pritchard 1939).

[2] Though I already failed this aspiration with this text, that is solely authored by

me.

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