David Meschede

The Internet, not the rainforest

Challenges of reorienting environmental anthropological research into the online realm

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Germany in force in March 2020, sent the country into lockdown and paralyzed public life, so, too, did it put my imminent departure to fieldwork on ice. Until then I had prepared to soon be doing research on the utilization of forest resources and Future-Making practices among the Dayak of East Kalimantan, Indonesia. Having started as a PhD candidate at the University of Cologne in September 2019, I was set to conduct year-long case study in a rural village in the Mahakam Ulu district of East Kalimantan, a region that still has a significant rainforest coverage (Verstegen et al. 2019: 564). I was looking forward to staying in the equatorial rainforest for many months and experiencing the challenges that this would bring about. The research methods that I had prepared myself for were anthropological “classics” such as participant observation (Bernard 2006: 342), household surveying (De Munck 2009: 97-124) and go-alongs (Kusenbach 2003). I hoped that I would soon be able to observe and study the expression of futural orientations such as anticipation, expectation, or speculation in everyday Dayak life, or how people’s aspirations and imaginations shaped their present-day activities (Appadurai 2013: 286-87, Bryant & Knight 2019: 1-3).

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Image: The rainforest of Borneo. Research subject, and out of reach for the time being. © CC BY 2.0 Ruanda Agung Sugardiman, 2005. https://www.flickr.com/photos/dfataustralianaid/10712654875/

I had spent the first few months of my assignment with eager preparations both on the topic and planned research methodology, as well as conducting the necessary administrative processes. Obtaining a research permit. Getting medical clearance. Organizing how my apartment was to be taken care of while I was out in the field. The acquisition of the research permits from the Indonesian science ministry was a lengthy bureaucratic process that took much longer than I or my project leader had expected, and had already postponed my plans from the initially planned departure in February to one in late March or early April. Even these came to a screeching halt when the pandemic hit in full force, both globally and locally in Germany. Admittedly being a bit in denial, I was initially still eyeing for a quick departure whenever a window of opportunity would open, clinging to my hope that I would be able to sneak through the tightening net of global lockdown measures if only I was given the chance. Yet within a week or two of lockdown, even the most optimistic/stubborn part of me had to admit that my plans had silently died, and I was, for the time being,

stuck in Germany.

Methodological challenges

Since then, the research project had to be reoriented completely. With Plan A having failed, my project leader and I recuperated and decided to wait out the initial development of the pandemic. I'd spent the upcoming months with additional readings, and a few humble attempts to tie initial contacts to the research region via the internet, while in a permanent state of readiness, continuously waiting for an opportunity to pack up and leave. Given the topic of our research, we still considered it essential to conduct the fieldwork on site. Maybe my departure would be possible in autumn? Or with a year-long delay in early 2021?

Yet, as time progressed, it became clear that these hopes, too, were not realistic. At any step, very little optimism could be gained from assessing the situation in Indonesia. As recently as mid-September the local government saw it necessary to reinstate lockdown measures in the capital Jakarta after SARS-CoV-2 infection numbers had slowly started to spiral out of control ever since the initial social restrictions had been lifted (Andriyanto 2020). While my intended research locale, the Mahakam Ulu district, has so far luckily been all but spared by the coronavirus (DinKes Mahakam Ulu 2020), the national situation still precludes my entry into the field for an indeterminate amount of time into the future (Botschaft der Republik Indonesien 2020).

Reorientations towards the online realm

After much deliberation, we dropped the plan to conduct field research, until then considered to be the most essential and necessary part of the entire project,

altogether. The plan now was – and is – to get into contact with interlocutors from the region through online methods. One distinctive feature of the research locale, its remoteness, is now posing an additional challenge as access to the internet is not a given in many of its villages (Susilo 2019). By readjusting the aim and scope of the research project, it was decided that rather than doing a highly localized case study in one village of the Mahakam Ulu district, I would broaden the subject of my thesis towards a more general treatment of rainforest utilization on the island of Kalimantan, and attempt to get into contact with actors beyond the locale, such as environmental activists and NGO representatives. This reorientation, however, entails a number of new problems. Can the original research goals be satisfyingly achieved through online methods? Can a more general treatment of the topic that is based on remote research yield the same academic value as a hands-on case study? Will a shift towards the internet and social media silence the voices of those that don't have access to it, which in my case may hold true for a significant part of the originally intended community?

Adapting my research to the transformed circumstances of current life is an ongoing process of both internal and external renegotiation, balancing what I want to do both academically and personally with "what needs to be done" to successfully finish my PhD thesis and drive the research project towards a fruitful conclusion. While a preliminary roadmap has been laid out, my adapted and re-oriented research design is far from finished.

Written on 5 October 2020

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