Mayely Müller

Shifting balances – the challenge of anthropological writing

„Ethnography, then, is never just recollection: it is a reflection on, an examination of, and an argument about experience made from a particular standpoint, one that responds to questions which have their roots in the history of anthropological thinking.“ (Gay y Blasco & Wardle 2007, 9)

Writing ethnography or anthropological papers is always a challenge with mysterious encounters. You may find the shift between a solid piece of scientific work and an extraordinary paper which gives you a glimpse of that sparkle that is called “anthropology”. One of the toughest parts I faced during my Bachelor studies was the exploration of the different aspects an anthropologist strives for. How much (self-)reflection should my work include? Who am I to write this paper on this specific topic? How do I find the proper balance between examination, reflection and presenting an argument? Is there a ‘right or wrong’ when it comes to the use of theoretical literature and the interpretation of these theories? How far can I go to improve, disprove or disagree with any of those theoretical approaches?

These questions clarify that writing and thinking in the anthropological world can be quite challenging. Arguments, which are produced within a respective piece of work by a certain author, who is characterized by his former teachers, experiences and knowledge, have to be seen embedded, whereas these circumstances should never unify one’s scientific work. The rejection of objectivity in the context of social sciences can therefore be a perplexing fragment when it comes to the discussion with other anthropologists. In regard to the question of objectivity, being conscious and calm may be a better approach than running in endless circles.

Besides the demand, or at least acceptance, for non-objectivity, I want to argue that

there are (at least) two distinctive aspects to distinguish when it comes to anthropological texts: There is a significant difference between work which is based on data collected through fieldwork and literature-based work. A differentiation between those two approaches is crucial for the writing of a text. Both approaches own their difficulties, and their accesses are gained through a complex web of questions. Simultaneously, there are consistent issues that should be addressed for each case: What is the aim of this research? For whom is it written? What progress can I set up as an anthropologist for the respective topic? The list for these questions is frequently changing and supplementary. Additionally, the value of reading other ethnographies and anthropological papers should never be underestimated. Equally important is the critical questioning of a text. How are cultures, people, issues, contradictions and correlations represented? What is the origin of this text? Despite the process of ongoing questioning and reading, one might stumble over the essence of an argument. Within this framework, the anthropologist should always keep in mind that

"[f]acts are made – the word comes from the Latin *factum*, "made" – and the facts we interpret are made and remade. Therefore, they cannot be collected as if they were rocks, picked up and put into cartons and shipped home to be analyzed in the laboratory" (Rabinow 1977, 150).

Paul Rabinow reminds us to be sensitive with the origin of facts in connection with their production and reproduction. Speaking with James Clifford, associated with the *Writing Culture Debate*, the anthropologist should be aware that "[i]n cultural studies [...] we can no longer know the whole truth, or even claim to approach it" (Clifford 1986, 25). Therefore, one must take this dimension into account. At the same time, it is decisive to situate oneself as a scientist into a specific field and just start with the work of an anthropologist – asking, scrutinizing, reading, writing, vice versa.

As culture is interpretation according to Clifford Geertz, anthropology holds the possibility to look beyond the specific field. This perspective generates an open

space for thinking and interpreting while being aware of the studied field. Consequently, one must see the chances arising from this view: It creates the possibility to scrutinize backgrounds as well as the opportunity to examine issues from another perspective as a political scientist, sociologist or any scientist from another discipline would do. It takes braveness to open up for such a perspective. Nonetheless, the outcome of such an approach will be, for sure, extraordinary useful. Therefore, I want to encourage every person who is writing in the field of anthropology to be brave and courageous, curious and to keep questioning.

References:

Clifford, James. 1986. "Introduction: Partial Truths." in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Ed.: Clifford, James and Marcus, George E. P. 1-26. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gay y Blasco, Paloma and Huon Wardle. 2007. *How to read ethnography*. New York: Routledge.

Rabinow, Paul. 1977. *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mayely Müller is an Undergraduate Student of Anthropology and Public Law at Heidelberg University. Her studies focus on political and economic anthropology as well as conflict studies. In her Bachelor thesis she is writing about shifting gender-relations in the context of the transition of tribal warfare in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Besides this, she is a conflict researcher and board member of the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research. Further, she is currently taking part in contributing to the anthology "Think Tanks und Silicon Valley: Neoliberale Trends aus ethnologischen Perspektiven" (preliminary title) edited by Dr. Ulrich Oberdiek und Andreas Kopietz. Her article examines the neoliberal economic policy under Margaret Thatcher with regard to coal mining in the United Kingdom

out of an anthropological perspective.

Mail: mail@mayely.de