Engaged Anthropology

Tightrope Walking between Involvement and Detachment

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Introduction

The practice of anthropological scholarship invariably involves tension between involvement and detachment, which is an inherent part of the methodological strategy of participant observation. When doing field research, anthropologists are confronted with the challenge to strike a balance between participation and observation. We aspire to become involved in social practices to obtain insight into emic perspectives on the world, but at the same time professional distance is required in order to weigh and balance the various views that are shared by our interlocutors. This quandary becomes even more complicated when anthropologists are operating in highly politicized circumstances, characterized by heated discussions about political strategies and goals. In such contexts, the role of anthropologists is often also controversial. They are frequently distrusted as presumed collaborators in the colonial project, while a disbelief in their capacities to make a difference on the ground is also widespread. In these situations, anthropologists might seek to demonstrate their credentials in order to become involved and make a contribution, but in the end they also aspire to be more than mere advocates of political campaigns. Usually, they also seek to present a more contextual analysis of the complexity of politicized circumstances, with consideration for the entire range of political viewpoints and visions. Since such an analysis can only be accomplished from a more detached position, this is obviously rather difficult to explain to our informants who do not have a choice to opt out of their struggles. In this essay, I will reflect on this dilemma on the basis of my own experience of involvement in a Māori community over the past forty years. I will do so with reference to the labels of advocacy, action and/or applied anthropology, and the more recent concept of engaged anthropology. My argument will be that advocacy and action anthropology must be combined with engaged anthropology.

Development in a Māori Community

In October 1982, I was privileged to be invited to a distinguished Māori community in New Zealand to conduct a period of ethnographic field research as part of my master's programme at Radboud University. We had been trained as critical anthropologists, steeped in structuralist and Marxist theory, and eager to contribute to changing inequality between the haves and the have-nots. I was adopted into a Māori community, but mainly on the understanding that I would become an ambassador of Māori development. Needless to say, however, it took some time to become familiar with the ongoing ramifications of the colonial history of dispossession and marginalization of the indigenous population of New Zealand, before it became possible to participate in political campaigns for the return of confiscated lands, the introduction of community development projects, and the revaluation of Māori culture, language and identity.

Four years later, I was fortunate to be able to return for doctoral field research under the auspices of the Australian National University. Shortly after I had settled into the community again, I began operating as a consultant for Māori tribal organizations, mainly in the fields of education, health, economic development and, last but not least, the long-standing battle for the return of their lost lands. The circumstances in the field had become so politicized since the late 1960s that it would have been impossible not to participate in one or more struggles. Since Māori people had become so marginalized in their own country as a consequence of colonization, it was not difficult to make the decision to become involved in political practices.

Becoming a so-called advocate of Māori claims and interests also offered me the opportunity to obtain an insider's perspective on the social and political organization of the local tribe and its royal family. Māori tribes had elected one chief to become King in 1858 in order to set up a united front in opposition to the increasing number of British settlers, but the tribe from which the king was elected was punished for its resistance with the confiscation of its entire territory. My residence in the community of the Māori Queen, the fifth descendant of the first King, offered me a unique opportunity to examine Māori politics from within the center of tribal networks. For the work I was doing as a consultant, as well as a doctoral student of anthropology, I received the necessary support from the adoptive brother of the queen, who also had a degree in anthropology and who was one of the main initiators of the Māori renaissance that gathered momentum in the late 1980s. This person acted, in other words, as the 'sponsor' of my field research (cf. Whyte 1955).

Although my sponsor was aware of all my activities and had had access to all my field reports in which I reflected on my experiences as a development consultant in light of the thesis I was planning to write, a misunderstanding emerged when I finished my doctoral dissertation. My main argument focused on the revaluation of cultural practices and the role they played in the legitimization of demands for political change in New Zealand. This strategy restricted the debate about structural inequality between Māori and non-Māori to a lack of recognition of 'culture', colloquially branded as 'traditional culture', from which large sections of Māori youth growing up in urban environments had been alienated. My frank analysis of different opinions about the revaluation of cultural practices corroborating the demand for change in New Zealand reignited old discussions, but this time also in relation to the question of whether my thesis could be distributed outside the community. Although key members of the local community in which I had conducted my fieldwork supported most of my analysis, the leadership of the tribe was reluctant to grant permission to publish my dissertation as a book. They were genuinely concerned that it might subvert the political goal of the tribe to put up a united front behind their massive land claim.

Interestingly, a discussion also emerged about my various roles in the community, ranging from consultant to researcher, but also as *tangata whenua*, a so-called 'person of the land'. In practice, these positions had sometimes caused a confusion of categories, with some people confiding personal information to me as a 'local', that they did not wish to share with me as an academic researcher. In any case, it was not supposed to be included in writings of any kind so that other people could read it. It raised the question regarding informed consent to conduct anthropological research. Although I had received official permission of the *marae komiti*, the community council, to do my research, most people assumed that the main goal of my residence in the community was to facilitate the development programme of the tribe and to support the preparations of their land claim. Indeed, different understandings of the concept of research were implied in this discussion. Let me unpack the various meanings of 'research' and reflect on the differences, both 'at the flaxroots', as they say in New Zealand, and in the academy.

The Meaning of 'Research' in the Field

During my fieldwork, my most visible role to most community members was the position of 'advocate'. I spent considerable time writing submissions, objections, grant applications and other papers addressing local and regional authorities,

advocating for programmes "to close the gap" between Māori and non-Māori. I was consistently introduced to those authorities, however, as a consultant. Advocacy and consultancy may have different meanings in different contexts, but in Māori communities in New Zealand both concepts are used interchangeably. An important difference between the two is probably that the term advocacy evokes the connotation of political activism (Paine 1985; Hastrup 1993; Hastrup and Elsass 1990 Hastrup 1993; Huizer 1996; Nagengast and Vélez-Ibáñez 2004; Turner 2004; Zilberg 2016), whereas consultants are supposed to be more neutral, partly also because they are usually paid for the work they do. Since the remuneration of consultancies entails all kinds of other problems (Morris and Bastin 2004; Stewart and Strathern 2005), it goes without saying that I consistently refused to be paid for the work I was doing as an advocate/consultant.

In academic circles, a distinction is made between consultancies and action or applied research. At the Centre for Māori Studies and Research (CMSR) to which I was affiliated, the difference between the two, however, was also merely contextual. Projects that were conducted at the request of Māori tribal organisations were often paid for, transforming the researchers into consultants, but the findings were often also disseminated in academic networks where they were described as action or applied research. At the CMSR, research was primarily understood as action research or applied research, with the difference between the two being mainly analytical. Action research is meant to solve immediate problems or issues, whereas applied research is the academic term for research aimed towards generating knowledge to resolve social problems. As such, the concepts of action research and applied research are interchangeable for many (Bennett, 1996). Fundamental research was not included in the centre's repertoire. Its slogan was that no action was to be undertaken without research, but at the same time it was announced that all research should always also lead to action.

The implications of this motto caused confusion about the results of my doctoral research. There was no discussion about my engagement as a researcher through applied practice during my ethnographic fieldwork, but the question was raised regarding the publication of the academic analysis in my doctoral dissertation. The leadership of the tribe withheld its permission to publish it as a book, while many community members failed to understand the motivation behind that stance since in their view it did contain trustworthy and adequate descriptions. Since the latter had had no training in anthropology it may be questioned whether they fully grasped the scope of the theoretical argument and its potential impact, I complied with the request of the leadership not to publish it in the form of a book.

After I completed my doctoral degree, I returned to the Netherlands and was unemployed for a while. I was unable to visit New Zealand, which caused this discussion to linger on for too long, partly also because we communicated by 'snail mail.' In 1994, I was finally able to return, which contributed to talking out this misunderstanding on the spot. It was appreciated that I had come back, something which not all anthropologists seem to do, while the leadership was relieved that I was happy to abide by their request not to proceed with the publication of my thesis in the form of a book. At the same time, it is important to avoid the impression that my anthropological reflections were top priority in the community. On the contrary, the political tide in New Zealand had turned over the years, which enabled Māori tribal organisations to negotiate settlements of their outstanding land claims. Almost 130 years after the confiscations had taken place, the tribe was about to receive justice, at least to some extent…

The Land Settlement

In 1995, the British Queen Elizabeth II visited New Zealand to personally sign the act that passed into law the land settlement with the tribe upholding the Māori monarchy. As part of this act, she also delivered an apology from the British Crown to the Māori Queen and her people, acknowledging the injustices that had been done to the monarchy and its supporters. In addition, the settlement provided for the return of 14,165 ha (about 35,000 acres) of Crown land, amounting to about 3% of the land originally confiscated. The value of the lands restored was estimated at approximately NZ$170 million, while at the time the annual proceeds from the rents and leases of the lands was expected to amount to between NZ$7 and 14 million per annum (Van Meijl 1999).

The settlement of this major land claim was, naturally, a turning point in the history of the tribe and the associated monarchy, but it did not immediately resolve all problems resulting from a colonial history of dispossession and marginalization. Over the years, my research has focused mainly on the impact of the settlement on the living standards of the tribe's 76,000 beneficiaries, especially because their initial enthusiasm has subsided since they have come to realize that it will not significantly contribute to changing their livelihood. The settlement has virtually no impact on the many social problems that are associated with their disadvantaged conditions: too many do not finish school, too many are unemployed, too many are short of money, too many are eating, drinking and smoking too much, too many have mental health problems and the high levels of domestic violence are

simply embarrassing (Ministry of Social Development 2016). The growing awareness that social justice does not immediately seem to result from the compensation agreement raises many important questions about the implementation of the settlement.

In this context, I should also explain that over the years my relationship with the tribe and the people in the community has changed considerably. Since I joined the staff of the Department of Anthropology at Radboud University, I only managed to visit New Zealand once every two years for about a month. As it has become virtually impossible to spend significant periods of time in the field, I have necessarily had to adjust my involvement in short-term projects. Whenever I am in New Zealand, however, community members still call upon me for support of ongoing activities to which I am able to make a contribution, e.g. the promotion of bilingual education, preventative health programmes, and the relationship with the local power station and its impact on the Waikato River, which is considered an ancestor in the Māori worldview (Van Meijl 2015). The environmental consequences of the plant's operations and their implications for Māori relationships with the river were consistently ignored since the construction of the power station some four decades ago (Van Meijl 2019), which explains why I continued to be able to participate in negotiations for compensation during short stints of fieldwork. Thus, advocacy work has always remained an important part of my involvement, while action and applied anthropology became more difficult from a distance. As a corollary, the focus of my work shifted gradually to a form of what I would label engaged anthropology, with a specific focus on the implementation of the land settlement.

Engaged Anthropology

As already indicated, the land settlement did not immediately resolve all problems that are associated with a legacy of colonial marginalization. Instead, it generated a debate about governance, management, traditional hierarchy, distribution, and entitlements. It is beyond the scope of this article to illustrate discussions within the tribe in any detail, but the core of the problem revolves around the decision of the leadership of the tribe to outsource the returned assets to a commercial company in order to maximize commercial revenues through property management and property development, as well as through financial investments. The maximization of profits serves the long-term goal to grow the tribal estate for future generations. The flipside of this decision, however, is that the return of land to the tribe does not

directly lead to the development of a tribal economy that is run by and for Māori people so that it may improve their livelihood. On the contrary, inequality within the tribe has increased and social problems among many community members have exacerbated (Van Meijl, forthcoming). Indeed, it is paradoxical that the leadership of the tribe seems not to be interested in enhancing the well-being of its beneficiaries, for which it delegates the main responsibility to the government.

For more detailed analyses of the implementation of the settlement I refer to a number of previous publications about internal controversies and contestations (see especially Van Meijl, 1999, 2003, and 2013). Here I wish to highlight my position as an anthropologist in this debate, which is fundamentally different from the role in the preparation and submission of the historic land claim. Participation in political campaigns that aim towards terminating colonial dispossession and postcolonial dominance is founded upon different principles than involvement in internal struggles for power and authority, that for scholarly reasons also requires detachment. During the early stages of my research, I attempted to combine advocacy work and action or applied anthropology with the position of a critical anthropologists who also reflected on the implications of tribal political strategies, but over the years this balance has shifted more towards a form of what I would like to describe as a form of engaged anthropology.

Engaged anthropology is a concept that was not yet commonly used during the debate about the publication of my doctoral dissertation, but it has become more popular in recent years (see Low and Merry 2010; Kirsch 2018; Ortner 2019). Low and Merry (ibid.: S204) have defined engaged anthropology as an "anthropological practice that respects the dignity and rights of all humans and has a beneficent effect on the promotion of social justice". As such, it consciously attempts to turn around the classic dictum 'to do no harm' into the goal 'to do good' (see also Borofsky 2011). Indeed, we want our work to make a difference at the flaxroots. Contributing to social justice for the underprivileged may be done in various ways, however, which leads Low and Merry to acknowledge a broad spectrum of practices and approaches under the heading of engaged anthropology, including activism and advocacy, as well as collaboration and social critique. Distinctions between these forms are, of course, fuzzy, while they may also be combined fruitfully in different contexts and situations. As I have argued before (Van Meijl 2005), the position of an anthropologist as advocate does not necessarily preclude a more critical analysis of internal politics. And it is this combination that matches contemporary definitions of engaged anthropology that encompass approaches ranging from advocacy and applied or action anthropology to a form of critical ethnography (cf. Carucci and Dominy 2005; Foley and Valenzuela 2005). Combining the

different approaches of advocacy with critical ethnography, is not an easy way out of the fundamental tension between participation and observation in ethnographic practices. It appeals to the skills of anthropologists to operate as a tightrope walker by negotiating a shifting balance between involvement and detachment.

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