

Emancipation and Encroachment

THOMAS WIDLÖK

Introduction

Engaged scholarship seeks proximity to the subjects of one's research, and sometimes even does so competitively. The Nijmegen Department for Anthropology and Development Studies is no exception in this. The socio-cultural anthropologists often pride themselves on their close rapport with "local people" – attained through long-term participant observation – which others lack who engage in survey or short-term applied work. Conversely, anthropological work has sometimes been criticized from the development world for being too aloof, ignoring the pressing needs of people while trying to stay clear of interference. What is ultimately at stake here is the appropriate relationship between distance and proximity. The method of participatory observation is a perpetual oscillation between reducing distance through participation and creating distance through observation (see Breidenstein et al. 2015). But over the last 75 years the subjects of research are increasingly influencing this proximity by keeping (others) at a distance. Indigenous Australians frequently resist when researchers seek to be close, for instance when they seek temporary residence in an Aboriginal community. In recent decades several PhD students from Nijmegen had to abandon their planned research in Australia for this reason and other researchers, like myself, have shifted their main region of research elsewhere. But there is no escaping the underlying tensions. Over the last decades I had many opportunities for applied anthropology while doing research in Africa (see Widlok 2022 for more details). At the same time, this work became an opportunity to reflect on the dilemmas of distance and proximity on which I focus in this contribution.

Working in the Field During Fieldwork

When in the field we spend much of our day-to-day ethnographic field research in seeking closeness through participation trying to understand the relevancies and motivations that make our counterparts do what they do. At the same time, usually in the evenings, we bend over our notes. This writing at the end of the day creates the necessary distance that allows us to reflect on what we have experienced in order to plan the next step in our research. In the course of this daily research routine, there are always “diagnostic events” (Moore 1987) in which the relationship of anthropology to practice and engagement is revealed in all its sharpness, i.e. individual situations that, like a burning glass, bring the complex relationship of anthropology to engaged practice to the point.

If you trace /Gomais, my first fieldwork site in northern Namibia, on current satellite photographs and maps you will be able to distinguish the settlements of the ≠Akhoe Hai//om San and their neighbours. You will see a characteristic large open space in the middle of the Mangetti forest that provides the staple food of the San in this region. As a legacy of apartheid, this open field marks a zone of separation between the comparatively luxurious houses of the white farm managers, the “single quarters” (simple brick communal dwellings) of seasonal labourers from the communal areas in the north, and an area where the San build their dwellings of grass, wood and corrugated iron among the trees. The field in the middle is now mainly used as a football pitch for the primary school that was built nearby 15 years ago. Originally, however, the field was cleared of trees and bushes to create a field for commercial farming. Similar fields exist in just about all places where San have been “concentrated” into settlements. This is true in Ekoka and Okongo, where first Finnish missionaries and then local church pastors of the neighbouring Owambo ethnic group wanted to create arable land for the San, as well as on the farms Ondera and “Ombili”, which were run by German settlers as development projects, and last but not least for the many government “resettlement farms” (see Widlok 1999).

However, it is also characteristic that after the withdrawal of development aid, the fields were no longer used for agriculture. What we often find instead is a discourse among the San, who on the one hand point out how much they have profited from these fields in the past, but who on the other hand were now waiting for food to be distributed by the state and by NGOs, because these local fields were no longer cultivated. Although most of the San continued to work in agriculture from time to time, they always did so as day labourers in the fields of neighbouring ethnic groups. Despite the fact that they had quite good knowledge of the neces-

sary procedures of field cultivation, and sometimes worked very hard, they did this as dependent labourers and not as independent farmers. In my field research, I collected countless statements in which San explained this situation and provided reasons why the fields that had originally been set up for them were no longer under cultivation: The tractors had become inoperable, for instance, and there were no spare parts or money for maintenance. Then there was a lack of seeds and other tools. These statements underline how unsustainable these development projects had been from the start.

What they did not explain was why there was so little initiative on the part of the San to resume cultivation. In this situation, I benefitted from the proximity to an NGO for which my wife had started working. It allowed me insights into the largely unsuccessful gardening projects in the region. It also offered the opportunity for what turned out to be a field experiment as part of my field research. Through our NGO contacts, we received first-class new seeds for millet from the Mahenene research station which was freely distributed to the San. Through good contacts with the farmers, there was also the possibility of being provided with a tractor. It seemed that thereby the “excuses” that the San of /Gomais had used against farming the large field were thereby no longer valid. Much like other expatriates that Ferguson (2013) talks about in his article “Declaration of Dependence”, we were initially of the opinion that here the San could emancipate themselves by producing food in accordance with aspirations for autarchy and independence, instead of waiting for support from the state or serving as dependent labourers receiving meagre wages in other people’s fields.

The “field experiment” that developed from this constellation was one of the important eye-openers of my field research. The San, who had previously lamented the lack of seeds, tractor and other tools, got what they needed from the NGO (through us) and – nothing happened, at least initially. In hindsight it became clear that there was obviously a lack of the necessary social infrastructure to work this rather large field collectively. There was no “foreman” and no authority who could have given the go-ahead, who had the power to divide up and organise the necessary work and even oblige the others to work or to give orders. The men who were able to drive the tractor did not see why they should work for a vague communal whole. Similarly, all others, who would have had to do the sowing and later the hoeing and weeding in the large field, doubted whether they would ever get a return for this work, and they certainly had other things to do, such as cultivating their own small garden, collecting nuts and crops and hoping for wage labour. The widespread notion that hunter-gatherers (together with other subsistence communities) were practising a kind of “primitive communism”, a primitive

communality of property and of earned goods, as if they were an agricultural production cooperative of game-keepers, was shattered. Evidently, their social life lacked the very social institutions that constitute communist or socialist systems, namely a centralised authority, a set of sanctioned rules that compels individuals to participate in public works, and a strong sense of community effort. Far from the ideas and practices of a corporate commune, their individual autonomy was very pronounced and mutual support was organised quite differently, not through communal work but through decentralised waves of sharing (see Widlok 2017).

In the end, the field in /Gomais was in fact cultivated, but only for exactly one season. This was only possible because the farm managers intervened by assigning a worker to plough and by putting a lot of pressure on all participants to sow and hoe from time to time. Despite the exceptionally good seeds, there was no collective harvesting and distribution in the end. Rather, the large field was worked in the same way as the small individual gardens were kept: People spent a few hours harvesting decentrally and individually, literally cob by cob and plant by plant. In my account (see Widlok 1999), this was like “gathering” domesticated plants, just as they would gather wild plants. Being confronted with a field that was ready for cultivation but with people reluctant to work in it, it would have been easy for me as an outsider to take the position of foreman, and to organise the work in the field, and perhaps some had even expected me to do so. I decided against this option and the remainder of this contribution is why I still think that keeping a distance was an appropriate response to the situation.

Getting as Close as Possible?

When it comes to unwanted or forced proximity, many people today think of the abuses that can occur in many contexts due to very unequal distribution of power. Of course, such cases also exist in Namibia. There are particularly frequent reports of teachers taking advantage of their position and leaving pregnant students behind, who are then often expelled from school (while the teacher usually goes unchallenged). But there are also other forms of unwanted proximity, many of which I recorded in my field notes, that make the ambivalence of closeness clear. What is remarkable is that they are often related to what we commonly call “applied engagement”. I think of the Owambo evangelist who virtually dragged an elderly, frail San man out of his hut to wash him in full view of everyone and who asked to be photographed performing this “merciful” act. The surrounding neighbours were visibly embarrassed. I also think of visits by government officials

and tourists who took advantage of the San's weak resistance by inspecting their huts and possessions without being asked. The state-empowered distributors of "drought relief food" arbitrarily determined how the San would have to build their houses in the future so that they would qualify for receiving this food. Finally, the many neighbouring Owambo who used their dominant economic and political position as teachers, foremen or church representatives to sit at San hearths and fireplaces without being asked, and who readily interfered in their family affairs, child rearing practices, marriages, economic practices, and even in ritual acts such as the medicine dance. In other words, many acts of interference that were aimed at emancipation constituted rather blunt acts of encroachment.

When approaching a foreign dwelling place, it is customary among the dominant neighbours of the San, African and European agropastoralists alike, to call attention to themselves with loud shouts, to take a seat at the central place of welcome for guests, and to demand hospitality or at least attention from those who are being visited. Among the San, by contrast, greetings are quite different (see also Widlok 1999). The newly arrived sit down quietly somewhere in the shade and wait patiently to be greeted by the inhabitants individually and in a quiet voice. A sometimes long greeting ceremony evolves until everyone has greeted everyone else individually. Even relatives who have not seen each other for a very long time act with restrained tact. Intensive physical contact also does not take place openly (except with very young children). Although conflicts can also lead to loud shouting and violence, the "normal" way of dealing with each other is rather reserved, almost awkward to the outside observer, or positively speaking "tactful". It is at least partly due to these "gentle" manners that the image of the San as "harmless people" (Marshall Thomas 1959) has been consolidated. It therefore maybe not surprising that field researchers who have spent long periods of time with San decide, for good reasons, against taking on the role of "foreman" or "engaged organiser". Accepting such an "emancipating" function in the context of established development cooperation would inevitably necessitate to violate local norms.

However, there is more to it. To decide against such a kind of proximity is not necessarily an expression of being distant and of not caring, but it can be seen as a "commitment that does not bind", as Helmuth Plessner (1980: 106, 107) has put it. In my view, it is no coincidence that a social order like that of the San, in which there are no written rules and no central force of implementation of behavioural norms, depends very much on what Plessner has called "tact relations between natural persons" (Plessner 1980: 109). I am inclined to assert that this is more generally true for many situations in which fieldworkers find themselves who work

in “small communities” (long seen as synonymous with typical ethnographic field-work). There is a widespread but false impression that these groups are necessarily tightly integrated collectives in which the individual self is given up – and that the goal of ethnography would be to merge with the target group as it were. With Plessner I think it is important to point at the “limits of the community” in this context. The small groups in which ethnographers often find themselves are not undifferentiated collectives, the antithesis of our individualist society in every respect. Rather, in these contexts, too, we encounter the “bitter necessity” of tact (Plessner 1980: 105), tact as a “means of making sociable intercourse possible and pleasant, because it never lets us get too close nor too far away” (1980: 107). Here, and not only in large complex societies, we find the sociable “sophistication of allusion” and a “culture of conduct” that makes use of various “means of distance” (1980: 106). In his critical assessment of Elias’s process of civilisation, Hans-Peter Duerr (2005) has pointed out in great comparative breadth that the indirectness and distancing in human coexistence did not arise only through the emergence of bourgeois society in Europe. It also characterizes the small groups and the milieus in which anthropologists prefer to conduct their research.

Conclusion

After decades of successful anthropological research it may be time to move away from the mantra that we must excessively seek proximity and exclusively “embed” ourselves as much as possible, according to the motto “the closer, the better”. To be sure, in some situations the insistence on participation and involvement is still necessary, especially where there is a tendency to do research “from a distance”, remote sensing, mediated entirely by the media, filtered through translators (Widlok 2020) and precisely *not* oriented towards the relevances set by local actors. But it is equally important to emphasise forms of distance and tact, not only methodologically in the act of reflective writing, but also with a view to social interaction, which also includes the relationship between researchers and researched.

Accordingly, anthropology’s attitude to proximity and distance needs to emancipate itself from a natural-science type of opposition between near and far. Helmuth Plessner formulated this very aptly almost a hundred years ago: “In nature, everything is mutually distant or close; the intermediate realm of the distance luring us towards proximity, of the proximity driving us into the distance, of an unresolved distant proximity, is known only to the psychic world” (1980: 69). For Plessner’s philosophical anthropology, it was about describing the special situ-

ation of humans in comparison to other organisms, but the basic point is still valid: Human phenomena, the positionality of actors, cannot adequately be described one-dimensionally on a line between near and far, because people themselves are reflective about this and continually (re)position themselves. Humans can perceive “closeness and distance” either as problematic, experienced as “narrowness and distance”, or as liberating, experienced in terms of “familiarity and expanse”. Their reflections and reactions on proximity and distance vary accordingly. Plessner (1980) summarises this in the concept of the “eccentric positionality” of people. Occasionally, other disciplines at the university, but also the public at large, think that anthropology in its field research practice is a rather “eccentric” affair. In line with Plessner’s thinking and against the backdrop of rich ethnographic evidence we may come to think of this “eccentricism” as a compliment.

References

- Breidenstein, Georg, Stefan Hirschauer, Herbert Kalthoff, and Boris Nieswand. 2015. *Ethnografie: Die Praxis der Feldforschung*, 2nd, revised edition. Konstanz: UVK Verlag.
- Duerr, Hans-Peter. 2005. *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozeß*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp
- Elias, Norbert. 1939. *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*. Basel: Haus zum Falken.
- Ferguson, James. 2013. “Declarations of Dependence: Labour, Personhood, and Welfare in Southern Africa.” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2): 223–242
- Marshall Thomas, Elizabeth. 1959. *The Harmless People*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Moore, Sally Falk. 1987. “Explaining the Present: Theoretical Dilemmas in Processual Ethnography.” *American Ethnologist* 14 (4): 727–736.
- Plessner, Helmuth. 1980. “Grenzen der Gemeinschaft: Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus.” In *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 5, by H. Plessner, 7–133. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. First published in 1924.
- Widlok, Thomas. 1999. *Living on Mangetti. Hai//om „Bushmen” autonomy and Namibian independence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- , 2017. *The Anthropology of the Economy of Sharing*. London: Routledge.
- , 2020. “Who is Poor and What Is Poverty Anyway?” In *Poverty and Inequality in Early Civilizations*, edited by R. Bussmann and T. Helms, 119–127. Bonn: Habelt.
- , 2022. “Näher dran oder mit genügend Abstand? Ethnologie in die Praxis getrieben.” In *Ethnologie als angewandte Wissenschaft: Das Zusammenspiel von Theorie und Praxis*, edited by R. Hardenberg, J. Platenkamp and T. Widlok, 45–60. Berlin: Reimer.