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“BIAS-OBJECTIVITY”:
REFLECTIONS ON THE MARGINS
OF DISCOURSE ON POLITICAL ENTANGLEMENTS
IN ETHNOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract

This text is an anthropological self-reflection resulting from the experience of an ethnologist dealing with the Tibetan community and culture, which is experiencing complexities of a political nature associated with this national group. Discussed here is the problem of scientific objectivity, the need to deconstruct the myth of the “innocent native”, and political entanglements in socially sensitive areas – especially in cases in which we are dealing with a country that is non-democratic, occupied, or engulfed in war or ethnic conflict – and the engagement of field anthropologists in humanitarian aid.

* * *

Tekst jest antropologiczną autorefleksją, wynikłą z doświadczenia etnologa zajmującego się społecznością i kulturą tybetańską, który chcąc nie chcąc doświadcza złożoności natury politycznej, związane z tą grupą narodową. Poruszony jest tu problem obiektywizmu naukowego, konieczności dekonstrukcji mitu „niewinnego tubylca”, uwikłania politycznego na obszarach społecznie newralgicznych, szczególnie tam, gdzie mamy do czynienia z krajem niedemokratycznym, okupowanym, objętym wojną lub konfliktem etnicznym oraz zaangażowania antropologów terenowych w pomoc humanitarną.

Key words: professional ethics, political entanglement, myth of the “innocent native”, Tibetans, scientific objectivity, engaged anthropology.

The problem of maintaining a distance in relation to the topic and subjects of research affects every “field ethnologist”. At times, self-restraint can be interpreted by the environment in which an anthropologist is working as a manifestation of personal views and social attitudes. Such cases place researchers in an imbroglio with which they then have to cope. Such difficulties affect, in particular, researchers working in “politically sensitive” areas – in countries caught up in conflict, in territories that are occupied, controlled, or colonized, in regions seeking to gain autonomy or

independence, and in refugee camps. All of these areas/fronts share a few things in common. First, they are marked by human suffering, and thus, require mental resilience on the part of the researchers. Second, they often impose an activist role on ethnologists, which can lead to a situation beyond their control or which forces them to make difficult choices. Cognitive and ideological motivations are often in conflict with one another. Thirdly, in forcing a researcher to take sides with one of the parties involved – the subjects may hope to succeed in legitimizing their own ambitions by means of his or her scientific authority. This, in turn, causes him or her to become subject to manipulation by them.¹

The myth of the “innocent native” is an interesting issue that an anthropologist observing Tibetans must deconstruct in the field. This is not easy because, on the one hand, the group selected as the subject of observation is actively carrying out a policy aimed at building a positive self-image in order to gain support; on the other hand, the researcher feels an ethical pressure to “preserve an endangered species”. This deconstruction takes time and is often feasible only after entering into the internal structure of the community being studied, not as an ethnologist, but as a person involved personally in the lives of the members of the group.

Therefore, during field work and afterwards we often ask ourselves questions to which we are not always able to provide a clear answer: 1) Is the demand for objectivity in ethnological investigations an ethos that is unachievable in regions of political and cultural conflicts? 2) Can anthropologists have their own political views and simultaneously maintain scientific objectivity, without ignoring their conscience? Do ethnologists have the right to be “for” one side? 3) Can one engage in charitable aid and rescue activities for the community being observed, and, at the same time, maintain the required distance and objectivity? 4) When does one become more impartial? When does “infatuation” with the “innocent native” begin to wane and the process begin of perceiving the subjects of study as human beings who possess not only the virtues, but vices, as well? 5) When does maintaining an ethical stance become a challenge for an ethnologist? This is a question of scientific objectivity colliding with the fashionable ideology of “protecting endangered species”; and finally, 6) How do anthropologists perceive people involved in social work for marginalized groups, and how do they view the socially engaged anthropologist?

In this text, I am not going to answer these questions, but merely emphasize that researchers should be aware of these dilemmas, asking themselves these questions and trying to answer them in order to make self-reflection a required tool for self-criticism of one’s own research and actions. Many years of dealing with an “oppressed” social group gives one the ability to perceive it less mythically. After some time, the blinders

¹ According to Natalia Bloch in: Agnieszka Chwieduk, Proceedings from conference “The Anthropology of Politics and Politics in Anthropology”, Będlewo, 18–20 May, 2009” in *Lud*, no. 93, 2009, p. 363.

of "infatuation" with the "native" fall from the eyes of ethnologists, and they begin to perceive the group as a typical minority community, which can, like others, make use of and take advantage of social, cultural, economic, and political opportunities. They begin to perceive the entity being studied as a normal human being, not a romantic, oppressed "savage". This takes time, and requires one acquire a distance to the subject and often to one's own personal life experience.

In some geographical regions, the anthropologist's taking such an objectified approach inevitably collides with political ideology. In the case of someone researching ethnic and religious minorities from peripheral regions of non-democratic countries, and who observes that representatives of the oppressed minority are also conscious consumers exploiting international aid, and then describes this issue, the commentator exposes himself to allegations of bias – understood as representing the interests of the so-called "oppressor". This means that when taking up certain topics, scientific objectivity, a morally required stance, becomes an ethical challenge for ethnologists. Indeed, they must be prepared to face various reactions, both in the scientific community, and, especially, among the socially engaged – who are often addicted to the promotion of the total innocence of the "oppressed native". In my opinion, within these circles one should distinguish between those in the "media group" and long-term of NGO activists. It is this first group that tends to succumb to the stereotype of the "oppressed native", as opposed to the experienced volunteers and staff of organizations who for years have been dealing with problems in the field resulting from direct contacts with representatives of the communities being supported. These activists have already gone through the process of "humanizing" the people they are helping, that is, of seeing in them not only victims, but in the full sense of the words – beneficiaries, consumers, and often, businessmen dealing in humanitarian aid, with all the attendant advantages and disadvantages.

At this point, I will cite an example from my own field experience. For several years, I have been conducting research on selected aspects of Tibetan culture. I began, like the vast majority of researchers around the world, concerned with the so-called "issue of Tibet", convinced of the organic "innocence of the natives" and their permanent oppression, with a vision free of shades of gray. The first veil fell from my eyes after a few months in the field. Yet, it took me several years to learn the internal social mechanisms guiding the behavior and activities of the subjects of my research. Only after working with an NGO on behalf of one group of Tibetans both in exile and in the region it of the group's origins, and after establishing numerous private relationships with local families, were the "ethnographic mysteries" revealed to me.

A social group, even under the most adverse political and cultural conditions, is able to develop defense mechanisms, ensuring the fullest use of what fate brings them, in this case, foreign aid. In time, we discover that we – people from the West, whether we are scientists or volunteers – are just as much objects of research and exploitation for

them as they are for us. The difference is mainly in terms of measurability: their needs are financially more quantifiable, because they start at a decidedly lower economic level than we do. They try very quickly to learn the mechanisms developed by Western culture and civilization, in order to utilize them, and thus achieve a higher economic or social standard. Those researchers who manage to “break down into primary components” their ideas of the “innocent native” in time (before they finish their stay in the field or formulate their final conclusions) have an excellent opportunity to observe new phenomena occurring in the community under the influence of the presence of charitable and so-called development organizations, as well as the influence of the researchers themselves. At this point, we have to say goodbye to the naive ideal of not imputing one’s own elements of culture and civilization in the local environment. It is not possible for us not to initiate new phenomena or behaviors through our presence, or to avoid developing something that was previously only smoldering or embryonic in form. The only thing we can do is to use our presence to register further new and interesting research issues.

When the “disenchantment of innocence” is not yet complete, we may feel disappointed with “our native”, which materially affects our approach to the problem. Right or wrong, we then begin to see the “arguments” of the “oppressor”. This openness to various philosophical and political positions helps us reach a complete deconstruction and subjectification of the object of study. The native becomes a man like us. By understanding ourselves, we begin to understand him only then we enter into the heart of the problem. Looking from a distance at our own views and their determinants, we begin to understand the position and behavior of our native. Can we now maintain this mythical research objectivity? Perhaps we are closer to the ideal, but does scientific impartiality really exist?

There is yet another aspect concerning the collision of political ideology in regions that are politically closed and undemocratic. If the objective conclusions resulting from the anthropologist’s findings do not please the “oppressor”, the ethnologist runs the risk of a reaction expressed at the very least with disapproval, which may be accompanied by specific actions (not admitting you into the country, not granting permits, a ban on your publications, expulsion, internment, detention). The real danger begins once one begins conducting research in the field. Valuable and reliable materials can generally only be obtained when we are free of supervision by local authorities, that is, when we are not under the control of the regime. This is intimately linked to travelling freely through the country without a permit, having conversations with people without a so-called guardian or official “translator”, which means for both the authorities and the inhabitants that the researcher has taken a clearly defined political stance. Even among anthropologists themselves, there is a hierarchy between those who make use of the political “conveniences” in a country, and those who try to move about its territory without official support, in order to gather information and record interviews.

The conclusions resulting from the observations of the first, although they may be correct, are generally not taken seriously by the academic community.

And here again we return to the question of the ethnologist's political views and the question of preserving research objectivity as an ethos that is difficult to achieve or even unrealistic. Actually, why do we need this mythical objectivity? We know why – in order to depict the group or socio-cultural issue as truly and accurately as possible, in order to penetrate the inner mechanisms of the phenomenon as deeply as possible. But it is also to maintain an honest approach to the topic, which means defining one's own views (religious, social, or political, depending on the topic) to oneself and to the audience, and being aware of how they are conditioned and how they limit us, in order to allow room for different perceptions of the world by others. Therefore, we surely have a right to be "for" or "against", provided that we are aware of the sources of our views, and that we have already humanized both the "victim" and the "oppressor", the "native" and the "foreign". As was rightly pointed out during a conference on politics in anthropology, although it is impossible in such politically sensitive areas to remain neutral (researchers are people, too!), one needs to maintain transparency and reveal in the resulting text one's own limitations, entanglements and ethical dilemmas, and be constantly alert to how politics affects science.²

When an anthropologist works in the field over a long period of time in a place where there are social injustices and gross violations of human rights, or where he or she is faced with a permanent state of natural disaster and economic crisis and, where there is structural and multi-generational poverty, it is difficult not to become engaged socially. Among the field ethnologists I know, most occasionally or regularly provide social assistance to the community in which have conducted or continue to conduct research. How is this involvement perceived by their professional community? Organizations and social activists working on behalf of marginalized groups have always clearly been treated positively. In Poland, however, anthropologists actively assisting the community they are studying have long been considered to be biased and unreliable, suspected of lacking the proper distance to the objects and subjects being analyzed.

However, in the last decade, much has changed in this respect. First of all, the economic standard of Polish society has increased sufficiently that so-called higher needs (civic involvement, charity and volunteer work) have become evident and necessary for educated people. A generation has come to the fore that was raised on democratic ideas, and which is sensitive to and committed to various global social issues. In addition, opportunities for Poles to travel and conduct research virtually worldwide have resulted in an increase in the number of ethnologists pursuing long-term field work in areas where external humanitarian, development, and civic aid is essential for survival and to raise the standard of living of the inhabitants. All of this and

² According to Natalia Bloch in: Agnieszka Chwieduk, Conference proceedings, op. cit., p. 363.

theoretical humanitarian digressions in cultural anthropology have contributed to changes in the approach of the anthropological community to so-called “field workers” who are socially engaged. As is the case in Western Europe or the United States, engaged anthropology is gaining a voice. It has numerous supporters and is beginning to have a significant effect on the directions taken in ethnological research.

One can most likely not separate ethnological field work and the resulting published material and conclusions from political entanglements. And perhaps self-reflection and an awareness of this are a certain form of liberation? If not, they certainly provide us with more room to breath room, more distance, and allow us to recharge before the next stay in the field.

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