

# ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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**Abstract:** *As a very often repeated observation says, in order to find out what anthropology is, one must see what anthropologists do, and what they do is mainly ethnography. Ethnography can be understood both as a process and as a product. As a process, it is for the anthropologist the same thing laboratory research is for the scientist and survey for the sociologist, the method par excellence. It has to meet three main requirements: long time residence among the members of the studied culture, linguistic proficiency and must be conducted in the form of participant observation. Understood as a product, ethnographic monograph must be holistic and to adopt the emic perspective, as opposed to the etic one.*

**Keywords:** *ethnography, ethnology, anthropological triangle, participant observation, emic, etic, holism.*

The research method in anthropology, according to Professor Harvey Russell Bernard, from the University of Florida, is ultimately a matter of choice, of personal decision: “the choice of taking a *verstehen* or a positivist approach; the choice of collecting data by participant observation or in the archives, by direct observation or by interviewing; the choice of making quantitative measurements or collecting oral, written or visual text [...] There has always been a certain tension between those who would make anthropology a quantitative science and those whose goal is to produce documents that convey the richness – indeed the uniqueness – of human thought and experience.”<sup>1</sup> This methodological tension has indeed always existed and continues to shape the field of anthropological research today.

In an introductory book designed to familiarize us with the problems and methods of anthropology, John Monaghan and Peter Just highlight the importance of understanding the role and principles of ethnographic research, as it defines the status of this discipline: “As has often been said, if you want to understand what anthropology is, look at what anthropologists do. Above all else, what anthropologists do is ethnography. Ethnography is to the cultural or social anthropologist what lab research is to the biologist, what archival research is to

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<sup>1</sup> H. R. Bernard, *Introduction. On Method and Methods in Anthropology*, in H. R. Bernard (ed.), *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, Walnut Creek, CA, AltaMira Press, 1998, pp. 9-10.

the historian, or what survey research is to the sociologist.”<sup>2</sup> Ethnography, according to the two British anthropologists, is based on the simple idea that in order to understand people, it is best to observe them and interact with them over a long period of time. This is why anthropologists, whose fundamental objective is to understand the human race in all its diversity, spend long periods in the middle of the communities they study and integrate as much as possible in their lives, trying to live as their members, and nowadays, especially in developed countries economically, where anthropological research is substantially funded, the unwritten rule is that each researcher who wishes to dedicate to this discipline to begin with a few years long ethnographic research stage in the field.

The results of this research are ethnographic monographs, among which we can mention famous works, from *The League of the Ho-de-no-or-nee or Iroquois* (1851) by LH Morgan, and continuing with that of the Russian naturalist Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay, *Ethnologische Excursion in Johor* (1875), *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) by Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) by Margaret Mead, *The Nuer* (1940) written by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Naven* (1936) by Gregory Bateson, *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) by Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Lele of the Kasai* (1963) by Mary Douglas, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1967) by Victor Turner, *The! Kung San: Men, Women and work in a Foraging Society* (1979) by Richard B. Lee, to the most recent, as is the work of Bartholomew Dean, *Urarina Society, Cosmology, and History in Peruvian Amazonia* (2009).

If we will admit that the ethnographic method is the main feature of anthropological studies, then we need to see what it consists of. This is because, as Tim Ingold notes, the specific feature of anthropology is not easy to define: “Anthropologists study people. They do not study stars, rocks, plants or the weather. But whilst we may have little difficulty in separating out the field of anthropological inquiry from those of astronomy, geology, botany or meteorology, it is not so obvious how – if at all – anthropology may be distinguished from the many other branches of the human sciences, all of which could claim to be studying people in one way or another.”<sup>3</sup> Psychology studies the human mind, history deals with its past actions, the sociology with the institutions of human society, and so on, so that specific of anthropology is not easy to identify among these other disciplines.

Ethnographic study of human societies, large and small, is what constitutes the specific of anthropology in the context of humanities. In the early anthropological studies, the object of interest were the so-called “primitive”, relatively small communities outside the Western world, where the social institutions were considered to be relatively less complex – an idea which then turned out to be just an illusion – and relations between their members are almost entirely from person to person.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Monaghan, P. Just, *Social and Cultural Anthropology. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> T. Ingold, *General Introduction*, in *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. XIII.

The main reason they were so meticulously studied was the conviction that they offer to researchers a schematic and simplified perspective of the basic structures and processes of human society, in contrast to the complexity of modern Western society, where these elements and phenomena are difficult to identify and study.<sup>4</sup> A second reason was that, according to Tylor and other early evolutionary anthropologists, these primitive societies can give us a picture of certain phases from the distant past of our own culture and civilization. Finally, it was considered, rightly, that, in the process of increased contact with Western civilization expansionary these small societies faced imminent danger of their disappearance, so it was urgent that all the elements that constitute their culture and civilization to be known and recorded, in order not to lose them forever. This was the situation during the so-called “romantic days” of anthropology, when field research work represented an additional attraction for those who wanted to escape the modern Western world and to isolate for a while (or, in some cases, forever) in a remote corner of the world not yet affected by the less pleasant aspects of civilization. Subsequently, the ethnographic method was successfully applied in specific contexts of the Western world: anthropologists began to study various marginal social groups (drug users, members of gangs, immigrant communities, etc.) or professional groups (employees of large corporations, owners of family businesses, categories of civil servants, etc.) so that field research has begun to take place in the heart of civilization, which does not mean that it became easier or less dangerous.

Ethnography should not be confused with ethnology. The first is the exhaustive study of a single society, while the second is the comparative study of several societies: “Ethnography and comparative research deal with the same observable characteristics, but they look differently at reality [...] Ethnography tells us about the unique, what is distinctive about a particular culture; cross-cultural comparison tells us about what is general, what is true for some or many or even all human cultures.”<sup>5</sup> Anthropology has always started the ethnographic study with the specific particularities, in order to provide us with the most complete description of human societies, but always showed also a trend towards generality, in order to discover also those general features, which belong to any culture, in any time and place. “Without ethnography, to be sure, cross-cultural comparison would be impossible. But without cross-cultural comparison, we could not talk or write about what may be universal and variable about human cultures, and we could not discover why the variation exists.”<sup>6</sup> Ethnology or the comparative study of cultures is the foundation of what is now called cultural anthropology. Ethnography, on the other hand, is the anthropological method *par excellence*, so we must see what it consists of more precisely.

In anthropology, Roger Sanjek reminds us, the term “ethnography” has two meanings: ethnography understood as product, in form of ethnographic

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<sup>4</sup> J. Monaghan, P. Just, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> C.R. Ember, M. Ember, *Cross-cultural Research Methods*, Lanham/New York/Toronto/Plymouth, AltaMira Press, 2009, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

documents, articles or monographs written by researchers, and ethnography as a process, as a method, i.e. ethnographic field research that anthropologist undertake in order to produce ethnographic writings.<sup>7</sup>

Understood as process, ethnography consists in all the specific procedures of fieldwork. According to Professor Peter Metcalf of Harvard University, the anthropologist engaged in ethnographic field research must keep in mind three main requirements: to integrate into society studied for a long time, to become proficient enough in the local language, as to have a direct dialogue with the members of the studied society and to practice what it's called participant observation.<sup>8</sup>

The first requirement is that of long-term residence amidst the members of the group he intends to study. This means that the anthropologist must not only to move in with the people he wants to study (it may be a remote destination, or, as we have seen, some special area in the Western world), but also to try to live together with them and to learn as much as possible about their lifestyle, ultimately to live as much as possible like them. The ideal is for him to become so well integrated into the studied society, as its members will behave as natural as usual, without the feeling of being subject to researcher's observations. Of course this is not possible in most cases, and residential arrangements vary so much around the world that there can be no only one way of doing that. When, between 1914 and 1918, Bronislaw Malinowski gathered data for his monograph about the natives of Trobriand Islands (now known as Kiriwina Islands), at first he installed his tent in the middle of Kiriwina village and sought to live like a member of the community, or at most as a regular guest. But there are not any general rules that can be applied in all situations, as local customs regarding foreigners are very different. In all societies there are rules for the behaviour regarding guests, which can sometimes be beneficial for researchers, to the extent that it facilitates integration, but sometimes they raise barriers between them and local people: "Sometimes there are clear rules of hospitality, which make things easier. There can be disadvantages even to such a convenient arrangement, however. If, for instance, custom requires that you stay with a community leader, you may be seen as his ally or client, so impeding communication with other factions. Alternatively, people may live in dispersed homesteads and you need to find a host family. This can be difficult. After all, it is no small thing to ask of people that they take in a total stranger for months at a time. In some places, it is improper for anyone not a close relative to enter the house at all, and the anthropologist must find an empty house to live in and interact as much as possible with people outside their homes."<sup>9</sup> British anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard reports about conditions in which he conducted his research in the 1920s and 1930s in Sudan, where the way it was received in various communities has been very different, although the geographical distance between them was only a few tens of kilometres: "Among

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<sup>7</sup> R. Sanjek, *Ethnography*, in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, Edited by A. Barnard and J. Spencer, Second Edition, London, Routledge, 2010, pp. 243-249.

<sup>8</sup> P. Metcalf, *Anthropology. The Basics*, London/New York, Routledge, 2005, pp. 9-11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

Azande, I was compelled to live outside the community; among Nuer I was compelled to be a member of it. Azande treated me as a superior; Nuer as an equal.”<sup>10</sup> The difficulties encountered are diverse and the compromises that need to be made are many, but the aim is always the same: to get in a position as to interact naturally with members of the group studied and in the most direct way that is possible in the given circumstances.

The second requirement derives from the fact that it is not possible to accomplish a real anthropological field research through an interpreter. The main reason is that the complete and rich meaning of words can be easily lost in translation. In addition, studying an exotic culture always means the need to use a language that contains a multitude of concepts that cannot be translated because they lack an equivalent in Western languages. Finally, if the researcher does not speak directly with people he studies, it will not be possible to have normal conversations with them, without the inherent embarrassment induced by the presence of an interpreter, and to enter in close personal relationships with them, which would much facilitate the data collection work.

Consequently, anthropologists must try to learn as good as possible the language spoken by the members of society they are studying, which is one of the reasons why field research takes at least a year, because is impossible to master a foreign language in a shorter time. The difficulties increase when the language has no written alphabet so, on the one hand, it cannot be learned before, using various documents or dictionaries and grammars, but only after arrival on site. On the other hand, the absence of writing means they lack the necessary instrument for keeping record of the conversations between the researcher and his subjects, and that means that he will have to invent a system of notation himself, using Latin alphabet, which can often proves to be not versatile enough for this task, allowing only a rough rendering of certain phonemes. This requirement of language proficiency has left its mark on the science of anthropology decisively, evident from the fact that there is, a sub-discipline called linguistic anthropology.

Finally, the third requirement that any anthropologist conducting ethnographic field research must fulfil is to engage in what is called “participant observation”, which according to Peter Metcalf, is the most difficult to define. “Basically, it means that the anthropologist participates in the lives of local people, living as they live, doing what they do. In practice, however, this is a goal that can only partially be met. Most likely, the anthropologist is simply incompetent to do what local people do.”<sup>11</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski reported that he took part in fishing expeditions together with the Trobrianders but, Metcalf observes, he does not tell us how many fish he ever managed to catch. But it is not only the lack of skills to do certain things, such as fishing, hunting, manufacturing certain objects, but also the fact that the researcher often does not have enough time to complete certain activities: he has no time to pass through all stages of cultivating a crop, or take part in a commercial expedition, all which involve the allocation of long periods. In addition, participant observation becomes sometimes difficult or even

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<sup>10</sup> E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1940, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> P. Metcalf, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

impossible, if in the studied society there are certain rules, prohibitions which are based on custom, or on criteria of social status or gender. Those interdictions do not allow the participation in some activities to those that are not part of the family, or to men, or to women, other actions do not usually take place in the presence of foreigners, as is the case everywhere in the world with certain close conversations between people. Also, there are activities reserved for the initiated, as is the case of religious rituals.

Even if it is virtually impossible for the anthropologist to live the same life as the members of the community he studies, it remains important that he should try to do that as much as possible, keeping also in mind all the time that his objective remains to gather data. When Malinowski went fishing together with the Trobrianders, his main purpose was not to catch fish, but to observe and to record information about fishing techniques, the specific terminology of fishing, customs and religious rituals connected to this activity.

Another controversial aspect of participant observation is that it is by definition spontaneous, unprovoked, that it cannot be planned in advance. Anthropologists cannot plan in advance events, but must be ready to take part in them as they happen. This situation has attracted some criticism from researchers in related disciplines such as sociology or social psychology, which prefers to conduct structured and planned in advance research, such as surveys or experiments. Participant observation method is said to rely too much on “anecdotal” material and therefore be subjected to influence of chance and randomness. Anthropologists prefer it, however, because they believe that in the case of planned research, the data are structured in advance, and the investigator must know from the beginning what he wants to know, to check (such as social structure of the television audience), but cannot discover new things.

With all its inherent difficulties, participant observation remains the instrument of anthropology *par excellence* and, as can be seen immediately, it includes in a certain sense the other two requirements mentioned above, long term residence and linguistic competence, because the anthropologist must be at first wholly accepted in the community and then be proficient enough in the local dialect, in order to perform participant observation. The consequence of this situation is that in many contexts, ethnographic research method came to be synonymous with the participant observation.

We have seen what means an ethnography understood as a process. As a product of research, on the other hand, it most often means ethnographic monograph. Etymologically, “ethnography” comes from the Greek words *ethnos* (nation, people) and *-graphia* (writing) and means therefore a written presentation of a people or a population, which seeks to identify and interpret its universal traits (those shared with other populations), but also the particular characteristics, specific only for the group studied.

In order to accomplish this task, ethnography makes use of elements of the other two methods of study which compose, together with it, the so-called “anthropological triangle”: the comparative study of cultures and

contextualization.<sup>12</sup> This means that knowledge acquired through ethnographic research is filtered and interpreted by comparing it with data from other human societies, but also that it is integrated into the general context of the local situation, consisting of the historical, ecological (related to the natural environment), social, political and economic information. So is the case, for example, with the first ethnographic monograph in the true sense of the word, L. H. Morgan's, *The League of the Ho-de-no-or-nee or Iroquois* (1851), mentioned before, which is an attempt to reveal the interior structure and functioning principles operating in the Native American Iroquois society, i.e. viewed in terms of the perspective of Iroquois themselves, thus placing the explanation explicitly in the ethnographical “tip” of the anthropological triangle, namely ethnography. Nevertheless, it adopts also the monogenist interpretation point of view (the idea that all human races have a common origin, and therefore none is superior to another for this reason) and so uses also the comparative method, the second tip of the triangle. Morgan further described in detail the Iroquois kinship system, matrilineary structured, their religious life, the political and ceremonial acts, but also historical and geographical context of the life of this society, the economic and political impact of their contact with white settlers, and thus introduced also the third tip of the triangle, contextual analysis.

Consequently, an ethnographic monograph requires a holistic approach (from *holos* - meaning whole), that is based on the idea that none of the properties of a complex system, be it physical, biological or social, can be understood and explained starting from its isolated parts, but only if you consider all these components together. The whole, the structure, is the one that determines the role and importance of its parts. The holistic ethnographic approach involves first an overview of the environmental context of a society, its geographical location, climate, vegetation and fauna, i.e. what in anthropology is called habitat. In this context, the local knowledge of botany and zoology must be presented, under the name of ethno botanical and entomological notions, which are then explained and translated in terms of Western natural sciences. Next, the anthropologist must present the elements of material culture, i.e. the methods and means local people employ to make a living, specific technologies, which are also called elements of infrastructure and economic life, in the context of the fact that they are essentially determined by the environmental conditions presented before. After that follows the description of non-material culture, which is preceded by a history of the society in question, to the extent that it can be reconstructed from data collected both on site and from what we know from other sources. The elements of non-material culture are the spoken language, together with its history and its dialects, social structures (family relations, the rules that establish the status of individuals according to gender, age, membership of a particular clan, and the criteria of association between individuals), explicit and implicit rules of social behaviour, religious ideas and rituals, customs, ceremonial practices. Behind these more or less visible elements, of most interest to anthropologists are the mental structures underlying them, such as the values that members of the

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<sup>12</sup> R. Sanjek, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

community share and ideas that constitute their general image of the world – which in philosophical terminology is called *Weltanschauung* (literally, “world view”) – and the “ethos” of culture, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz names it.<sup>13</sup> According to Geertz, a culture is “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”<sup>14</sup> One culture's ethos is the moral and aesthetic aspect of life and is the force that determines all aspects of individual behaviour in that culture, the values and ideas that together configure the motivation for all people's actions: “a people's ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects.”<sup>15</sup> Ultimately the ethos is the underlying force that determines in every culture the specific way of being human and configures all the actions and attitudes of its members, so that it was always the subject of a special interest from the part of ethnographers.

The fundamental rule that the author of an ethnographic monograph must follow is to place himself in an *emic* perspective, as opposed to the *etic* one. The distinction was operated in 1954 by linguist Kenneth Pike, inspired by the difference between *phonemics* (the functional study of sounds in a specific language) and *phonetics* (the study of sounds in general, not limited to a particular language).<sup>16</sup> By analogy, an “emic” approach means for the anthropologist to adopt a perspective “from inside” i.e. to make a description of the behaviour, customs, ideas, beliefs (conscious or not), in terms of the individual who has that behaviour or that idea, one that takes into account the meaning and purposes that it has for the subject. Anthropologist tries to put himself in his subject's shoes, in order to understand how he conceives things. In contrast, an “ethical” approach means an external description of the same behavioural or conceptual elements, “from the outside”, i.e. in objective terms, from the perspective of the researcher, and using concepts considered to be universal and culturally neutral. As Romanian anthropologist Gheorghiță Geană explained, “Emic designates facts, beliefs, attitudes, understood in the way they are real and meaningful for members of the studied culture”, while “etic designates phenomena that are identified, described and assessed independently of the position towards them of the members of the studied culture.”<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, an ethnographic monograph should have an emic perspective, i.e. must study a social system from inside, and not from outside it, must describe a single culture (and not many cultures, in a comparative way), to discover the characteristic structures of the system by field research, on site (not create them before, in theory) and to use the interpretation criteria that are related to internal characteristics of the system (and not considered absolute or universal).

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<sup>13</sup> Vide C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, London, Fontana Press, 1973, Cap. I.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 127.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. K.L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, The Hague, Mouton, ed. II, 1967 (first edition, 1954).

<sup>17</sup> G. Geană, *Complexul problematic emic-etic. Aspecte antropologice și implicații filosofice*, in A. Botez, G. Nagăț (eds.), *Tendențe în filosofia științelor socio-umane*, București, Ed. Academiei Române, 2008, p. 147.

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