
VIDEO AND OBSERVATION OF COMPLEX EVENTS — THE NEW REVOLUTION IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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We take the data from which anthropologists make analytical statements as unproblematic. The methods used to collect data are largely unquestioned, yet what constitutes so-called primary data has already been analytically reconstituted. An article by Tambiah is a case in point. The whole notion of observation itself is the starting point for obscuring what actually constitutes knowledge. The very nature of the social production of knowledge in the activity of fieldwork demands a re-examination of what constitutes anthropological data and observation.

Not only are the methods used by anthropologists largely ignored or left out of fieldwork accounts but also the reflexive and interactive nature of fieldworkers is left largely unexplored.

The use of video forced me to consider the importance of working out new strategies for field-research and of making such strategies overt. It forced me to further question the nature of fieldwork.

In the first instance video offers a radical new departure from previous practice because with the instant playback facilities available in the field one finds oneself immediately involved with informants in the interpretation and meaning of 'data'. This is quite different from the covert practise of note-taking. This consideration led me to articulate a strategy for filming complex events. This is a move in the right direction but it still leaves the actual processes of interaction by which such data was collected — unexamined.

There are important factors influencing field interactions. There is the whole question of the routinization of fieldwork competence, but above all I argue that the use of video — which can lead to a truly emancipatory fieldwork practice forces one to realize that our real focus of attention should be the actual social production of knowledge. Video offers us the opportunity to expand our strategies for fieldwork and observational filmmaking and more importantly it offers a real break — through in making possible the observation of the social production of knowledge which is, in reality, the central activity of anthropology.

My starting point for this article comes from Tambiah's: "A Performative Approach to Ritual" (1981) a complex but stimulating theoretical paper on the nature of ritual, with particular reference to Sri Lankan exorcisms.

During the course of the paper Tambiah gives a definition of ritual:

Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences or words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotyping (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). Ritual action in its constitutive features is performative in these three senses; in the

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Austinian sense of performative wherein saying something is also doing something as a conventional act; in the quite different sense of a staged performance that uses multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively, and in the third sense of indexical values — I derive this concept from Pierce — being attached to and inferred by actors during the performance (p. 119).

Without going into the customary summary and critique of ritual theory suffice it to say I found this meaningful in the context of my own fieldwork. But as I read on I became increasingly aware of how abstract the whole thing was.

There seemed to be a rather large gap between Tambiah's analysis and the ritual corpus to which he was referring. What reality did his analysis claim to represent?

I did not recognize the ritual performances upon which his analysis was supposedly based. The limited descriptions in this article did not seem to me to belong to the same world of exorcisms which I had studied and filmed in Sri Lanka. I was very aware of the shortcomings of his data because I had worked in the same area.¹ In general the literature on Sri Lankan exorcisms is very incomplete. I have read most of it and it is lacking in a number of respects. Perhaps the most important omissions stem from the fact that it appears that few ethnographers have had the stamina to sit through complete rituals. This means that their accounts of rituals are difficult to follow. Even Wirz (1954) a main source for these exorcisms seems to suffer from this defect. In general one cannot find complete ordered descriptions of all the major rituals, and many significant details are lacking. The literature also suffers from lack of theoretical coherence.²

I began to think of the way we take for granted the conceptual groundwork of general anthropological accounts and forget the processes from which they appear to be derived, that is: observation, organization analysis, and textual performance. Most critically the nature of observation, particularly of complex events, is taken for granted.³

What was the epistemological status of the observations to which Tambiah was referring?

Geertz has said what anthropologists do is write. This may indeed be the case. But what is it they write about? What they mainly do is fieldwork and their writing original ideas and theories derive from this activity. What this activity actually comprises has been largely neglected and appears to be almost a taboo topic of discussion. Rabinow has put it this way:

"Rarely have anthropologists regarded fieldwork as a serious object of study, it is tacitly accepted as their major activity" (Rabinow 1977 in Ruby 1980).

All analysis derives from fieldwork and hitherto sacred participant observation yet most anthropologists do not discuss the way their primary data was produced. We are asked to accept what are in fact already analytical notes as primary observations. The means by which such "observations" are derived are largely regarded as unproblematic.

Ruby says:

An examination of the ethnographic literature for the past 75 years reveals a fairly consistent lack of systematic and rigorous methodological statements and discussions of the relationship between the research and the researcher (Ruby 1982: 8).

And Ridler:

Ethnographic realism in writing, in other words, like the realism of illustrative ethnographic films, achieves its contours by the concealment of its own mechanisms, in which the anthropologist's experience (and not simply experience in the field) constitutes a primary datum. In this non-reflexive mode, analysis grasp its subject through a "discontinuation of modes of description and discourse". (1983: 6)

But it is the experience in the field which is of utmost salience to the nature of anthropological knowledge.

So we can say that the actual practice of fieldwork as a means or organising data has been relegated to the backstage of anthropological performance.

There are several factors to consider here.

1. The factors which influence this social production of knowledge.
2. The routinization of competence.
3. The social production of knowledge in the field — actual *praxis* which can affect the collection of information.

Few anthropologists have considered some of the basic factors of influence. Rosenthal (1968: 668) lists five categories of interactional effects between the experimenter, and his or her subjects: the biosocial, psychosocial, situational, modelling and expectancy effects. The biosocial effect refers to the sex, age and race of the investigator. Experiments of different sexes seem to approach "the same experiment quite differently, and young subjects are less likely to say unacceptable things to older investigators". He says:

In one study the effect of the characteristics of the subject on the experimenter, the interaction between the experimenters and the subjects was recorded on sound film. Only 12 % of the investigators smiled even a little at male subjects, but 70 % smiled at female subjects... men and women really were not in the same experiment at all.

Such psychosocial effects are due to the differing personalities and needs of the experimenters. The higher the status of a person the more respondents confirm the expectations of the research. Differences in "warmth" result in more pleasing responses. Situational effects are the results of differing experience during an experiment. Early confirmation by a few subjects of *a priori* assumptions leads an investigator to change his or her behaviour in such a way as to further confirm and support the original hypothesis. Modelling and expectancy have similar results. Rosenthal mentions the famous case of Hans the horse, who was able to answer complex mathematical calculations because of his sensitivity to cues given unconsciously to him by the human observers of his performances.

ROUTINIZATION OF COMPETENCE

And then there is the fact that we do not actually remember what our method was and cannot report it. We cannot report it because of what I chose to call the routinization of competence. This is more obvious in a simple example.

I ride a bike with great ease. In order to ride a bike I don't have to remember each time how I do it. I remember at the age of 8 or 9 trying to learn and working out all kinds of theories of bike riding which were immediately tested against reality. Many pratfalls later I was immediately successful. Straightaway I forgot the details of how I reached this pinnacle of achievement. And it becomes increasingly difficult to remember learning the further one gets from the event. The more complex the learning the more problematic. Fieldwork skills are even more complex and can involve so much knowledge, experience and emotions, which are already based on previously incorporated skills and therefore even more difficult to explain and make conscious once again.

In Sri Lanka my attention was drawn to this problem by the general inability of ritual experts to explain what they were doing. This is something to a greater or lesser degree that all fieldworkers have reported. It was much more of a problem for me in Sri Lanka than in any other fieldwork situation I have encountered. Native fieldworkers in Sri Lanka have reported the same problem. A recent examination of experts in our own culture found the same thing: experts were the least able to explain their knowledge. And we are in exactly the same position with regard to fieldwork.

In anthropology we acquire skills in the field which rapidly become unconsciously incorporated into our overall strategies for research. Each new situation calls on earlier knowledge and experience which has often been earned with great difficulty but stored away once acquired, and ignored as essential constituents of the interactive and participant experience.

What we take for granted is built on complex conscious and unconscious learning. It is in fact often extremely hard to recall actual learning processes in the field because of the way such learning occurs i.e. armed with the notion of observation we pursue our momentary interests largely casting aside the events which produce and surround our acquisitiveness. The lack of specificity of fieldwork makes the social experience of fieldwork even more likely to be inaccessible.

What currently passes as method is simply a recipe for staging action in the field, it relates to no scientific paradigm and has little to do with actual praxis.

These reflections led me to attempt to provide an account of my "observational" fieldwork and filming in Sri Lanka and the strategies I developed to video and uncover the structure and process of ritual exorcism.

PROCEDURES FOR OBSERVING AND RECORDING COMPLEX RITUALS WITH VIDEO

Admittedly my recall for what actually happened in the field has already lessened considerably, but I am aided by notes I took near

the time and by the very nature of the type of fieldwork I undertook which forces a degree of accuracy which is unusual in normal fieldwork. Here I refer to the revolutionary nature of anthropological fieldwork with a video camera. Advances in science often follow technical improvements and in my view video is a radical new instrument for anthropology, I believe this because it makes one's observations instantly available to oneself and one's informants and partly because of the enhancement of attention it produces in the operator — something Rouch refers to as "Cine-trance" (Yakir: 1978).

What follows is a description of my Sri Lankan or detective work fieldwork practice and participative filming.

I started out of course with an examination of the literature, in particular I read Wirz and several versions of Kapferer's book so I had a good general grasp of what probably happened in healing rituals in S. W. Sri Lanka.

Once in the field I had to locate performers (there are some difficulties here associated with the Sinhalese caste system).

1. Having located an exorcist group I attended my first ritual and filmed it. I won't describe my first series of practical disasters this is the subject of another paper. But suffice it to say that some people advise delaying filming until several rituals had been attended. In my view filming should start straightaway for practical reasons. These are public performances and one's presence is not very intrusive, certainly less so than a notebook. I should point out that I had already a relationship with the performers themselves.

At this first performance my daughter took photographs and notes while I filmed.

2. The next day we replayed the ritual to myself and then showed the exorcists. Immediately this gave me the opportunity to examine my own observations and to question the performers. The problem then arose that performers of the same group, that is *experts* had different levels of knowledge and different interpretations of the same event. This was even true of the two leading *eduras* or spirit doctors.
3. The next step was to go over the film numerous times with the priests in order to discover the overall details of the basic pattern of the ritual and its mythological explanation. These rituals are irritatingly complex, but I believed that there would come a point when the whole thing made sense and followed a logical order and meaning whether or not any particular expert was able to explain the ritual. These are normal fieldwork assumptions.
4. One thing I discovered was that because the exorcists were not used to seeing film they became confused they often mixed up bits of the ritual mistaking some sequences for others. We began to correct this by starting out asking for a summary account of the whole ritual and then telling the exorcists which point of the ritual we were viewing.
5. Another technique we quickly adopted was to ask other exorcists from a different group to view their competitor's

rituals. Again asking them for an overall account first — this gave us different interpretations but also oriented the informants to the film.

6. By the time we filmed another ritual, I had employed a native english speaking informant who embarked immediately on textual translations.
7. At the next ritual my daughter without specific instruction started keeping a minute by minute notebook of the ritual events. We were thus able to correlate our notebook with the number counter on the portopac and screen, an invaluable cross-check, for in several accounts in the literature the order of events was in question and without film informants as I have said, got the timing of ritual stages.
8. Thus armed with notebook and time schedule we went through a film many times with ritual experts, and translation.
9. We also interviewed several ritual experts about the structure of rituals and demonic cosmology to get a fuller picture and clear up difficulties of interpretation.
Our first period of fieldwork was in Tangalle we then moved to Udapila new Weligama. In Tangalle the ritual emphasis was on the ritual for safe-labour, in Weligama it was primarily Iramudun and Mahasona the ritual to the prenoon demon and the cemetery demon used for a variety of sickness. Exorcists in each area seem to specialize in specific rituals.
10. By this time we had "invented" a performance time grid which proved invaluable. What we had arrived at was something very like some of the shooting scripts I've written for ficitional film. In Udapila we worked with three groups focussing mainly on performers whose rituals made more sense and who were better informants. We also had a clearer idea of the course of events. Here my daughter improved her notebook recording. We filmed with notebooks, performance-grid and interpreter.
11. We also began to tape-record rituals at the same time as filming as an additional aid in the transcription of ritual text which is in itself a mammoth task. One of the common complaints of observers of these rituals is the difficulty of hearing the ritual songs and the jokes which occur mainly during the masked performances which take place after midnight. Exorcists themselves find it difficult to report on this because they have learned the performance by heart and few of them can quote textual selections. This in itself is significant not simple because of the complex nature of learning but because they see the ritual as a whole, with the magical cures stemming from teh whole.
12. We arrived at a situation where the exorcists themselves began supplying information at key points in the ritual. I think this arose in response to our lengthy questions in front of a television screen. (We also interviewed members of the patient's family and audience although this was not the primary focus).
13. During the latter period of fieldwork we were aided in our task by another assistant who was fluent in English, Sinhala and Pali. He was invaluable in a variety of ways; for translation later and at each performance he was able to gather information not only about the ritual itself but also about the families paying

for the ritual and about conflicts that appears to relate to the patient's disorder.

In sum, at the rituals themselves we ended up using the following system of observation.

1. Notetaker
2. Cameraperson
3. Commentary from ritual experts, i. e. priests
4. Two informants observing the ritual and social relations at the ritual as well as finding out about past events. Actually at the filming of the Suniyam ritual we were graced with the presence of a Sinhalese professor of social anthropology Gananath Obeyesekere.

Ideally I would add to these basic accoutrements a second camera held by another anthropologist to film the audience and some of the other activities which occur in the ritual context and a native informant giving a running commentary and interpretation into a tape recorder.

I think these are the minimal personnel for the observation of a complex event like a ritual. On top of this it is necessary to go through the prior detective work. And built into this from the start was all the previous learning I'd acquired in previous fieldwork and filming and in the routinisation of creating relationships in the field.

As a consequence of having constantly to refer back to complete recordings I believe that the films I have been able to create are superior analyses and descriptions to written accounts. I also believe that previous attempts at the description of complex events like ritual have been inadequate.

This method was a complex cooperative effort between myself, my daughter, exorcists and other native informants. As a consequence the camera is in continuous relationship with the people who could not be involved in the actual editing as MacDougall does with film, but because of the instant playback facilities of video, Sri Lankans were always involved in the production of the films.

As a consequence of their cooperation in determining what Heider has called "whole bodies whole acts" we produced analytical cultural scores which were recombined filmically to produce documents in which the codes of exorcists and the analytical codes of the anthropologist combine in both an act of translation and interpretation.

IS THIS ENOUGH?

Having gone this far in describing some of the strategies I adopted as a consequence of using video as a central tool for fieldwork investigation. I think I should have monitored these processes much more thoroughly from the outset. In other words I was still operating with the old model of data in mind in which the social interaction is merely a means of acquiring "objective" data.

There are three components to getting close to this method and making it explicit.

1. Monitoring in great detail the actual pathways of the detective work
2. Monitoring one's subjective responses

3. Making the actual process of interaction the central focus of investigation, this last point I cannot emphasize enough because I believe it represents a radical shift of emphasis in anthropology and I could only have grasped this through using video. It is only possible, in its fullest potential, through the use of video.

I am not talking here simply and vaguely acknowledging the importance of reflexivity. That in itself is not enough.⁶ Sure we must be reflexive, yet we must incorporate the Other. As Ridler in a recent article on ethnographic film says:

If a central and distinctive contribution of the discipline has been the exploration of the techniques of participant-observation — a methodology in which the interaction of anthropologist and informants furnishes the material for analyses of social constructions, then clearly the concerns of reflexive and participatory film are the heart of the anthropological project. (1983: 4).

He points out that ethnographic films often fail to incorporate the other in a fully reflexive and participatory experience in which narrative or detachment intrudes.

McDougall has drawn attention to the problem of the "pure observer" detached by the camera:

In his refusal to give his subjects access to the film, the filmmaker refuses them access to himself, for this is clearly his most important activity among them. In denying part of his own humanity, he denies a part of theirs. If not in his personal demeanor, then in the significance of his working method, he inevitably reaffirms the colonial origins of anthropology... The traditions of science and narrative art combine in this instance to dehumanize the study of man. It is a form in which the observer and the observed exist in separate worlds, and it produces films that are monologues (in Ridler op. cit.: 11).

A consequence of this viewpoint which is a continuing point of debate among visual anthropologists has often been to incorporate or make obvious the relationship between the anthropologist and the partners in the venture. (Sometimes this has led to giving natives total or partial control of the filming itself with varying and uncertain results).

The way in which this debate is conducted assumes that the process of interaction must be made obvious in some way. Yet such homilies to reflexivity gloss over the real difficulties of such a new endeavour in anthropology. We have not begun to produce a reflexive anthropology which incorporates an understanding of observer effects or the routinization of fieldwork competence. This is because our focus in anthropology has been entirely misdirected. To arrive at this point I had to go through the process of understanding to which video leads. It offers a truly participatory method and it leads to the possibility of making the social production of knowledge, of meaning, the central focus of attention in anthropology — and here is the breakthrough. Once this is grasped then we have the possibility of a reigning paradigm which was offered to us by Kuhn via Polyani and Evans Pritchard — if knowledge and theories are socially produced in our own as well as other cultures then a truly emancipatory anthropology will organize itself around

this central project in the future — Video offers us a radical new departure from the past. It offers not only the means to practice observational film... the means to cooperate in dialogue with other people, it also offers us the means to observe the very processes of social interaction the social production and constitutive processes of thought and interpretation which is the central goal of anthropology.

That which has hitherto been rendered harmless through anecdote, the amusing after dinner stories are the central datum of anthropology. That which has hitherto been central, is in fact, peripheral to our enterprise.

NOTES

This is rare in anthropology. It is often considered unprofessional anthropologists are territorial. This ethic protects the fieldworker from criticism and prevents the questioning of his or her data.

- * An exception to this is Kapferer (1983). There are five major rituals Mahasona, Iramudun, Rateyakuma, Sanniyakuma and Suniyama. There are no full descriptions of Iramudun or Suniyama in the literature. In my opinion this means that my films and their scripts stand on their own as ethnographic descriptions and at a certain level as theoretical statements.
- * Courses in fieldwork methods do not tackle this problem. All this is inconsequential, if it doesn't lead to something more tangible, less trendy. In my view method cannot be separated from epistemology and the routine nature of process because of the experiential and reflexive nature of anthropology itself.
- * There has of course been a discussion of male bias in anthropology but little has been said of other interactive effects. Even this discussion has glossed over real effects.
- * I would suggest that such an informant is an essential feature of all fieldwork.
- * Homilies about reflexivity can be delivered quite easily even by anthropologists marred by the taint of the inductive approach. Leach (1982) for example in his recent introduction to social anthropology argues quite strongly against the straw man of science. Anthropology and physics, for example, are engaged in similar conceptual processes. Leach might best be described as a nihilist in that he appears to operate deductively but has an abhorrence of general theory. His relativism is implicitly ideological.

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VIDEO IN OPAZOVANJE KOMPLEKSNIH DOGODKOV — NOVA REVOLUCIJA V ANTROPOLOGIJI

Podatki iz katerih antropologi izvajajo svoje ugotovitve, se nam navadno ne zdijo problematični. Metode, ki se uporabljajo za zbiranje podatkov, se nam ne zdijo vprašljive, čeprav se je že dosti razpravljalo o tem, kaj pomenijo t.i. primarni podatki. Kaj pravzaprav sestavlja **znanje**?

Prava narava družbene produkcije znanja na področju terenskega dela zahteva stalno ugotavljanje iz česa je sestavljen antropološki podatek. Ne samo, da se zanemarljivo pomen antropoloških metod v okviru terenskega dela, ampak je popolnoma neraziskano področje razmišljanja in interakcije samih raziskovalcev.

Uporaba videa me je prisilila, da sem začel več razmišljati o izdelavi nove strategije terenskih raziskav, oziroma da sem se poglobil v vprašanje narave terenskega dela.

Že na prvi pogled video ponuja radikalno novost v primerjavi s preteklo prakso. Takojšnji pregled posnetkov nas sooči z možnostjo, da informator interpretira in oceni pridobljene »podatke«. To je močno različno od prakse z beležnico in svinčnikom.

Ta ugotovitev me je vodila pri oblikovanju strategije filmanja kompleksnih dogodkov. To je premik v pravo smer, ki pa še vedno pušča neraziskane številne dejavnike, ki vplivajo na zbiranje podatkov. Tu je celotno vprašanje postopkov in pristojnosti terenske raziskave, toda predvsem ugotavljam, da uporaba videa, ki lahko vodi v emancipacijo prakse terenskih raziskav, sili k ugotovitvi, da je naša glavna pozornost usmerjena k sami družbeni produkciji znanja.

Video nam omogoča, da razširimo strategije terenskega raziskovanja in vizualnega opazovanja in kar je še važnejše, omogoča resnični prelom pri vlogi v družbeno produkcijo znanja, ki je v resnici glavni predmet antropološkega preučevanja.