

# *'Ethnographic Situation' and Ethnic Movements*

Notes on post-Malinowskian fieldwork<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** ■ This paper analyses the changes induced in the political, ethical and epistemological parameters of classical anthropological fieldwork by the world-wide emergence of indigenous political movements and related support NGOs. It looks first at the links between post-war development policies and the rise of these indigenous and indigenist organizations. It then introduces a general discussion about the relationships between ethno-political struggles, anthropological advocacy, ethnographic research and 'participant observation'. It finally examines the conditions of intellectual independence of an engaged anthropology and the possible heuristic potentialities of its new field perspective of 'observant participation'.

**Keywords** ■ anthropological advocacy ■ anthropological fieldwork ■ ethno-political movements ■ indigenous people ■ participant observation ■ social anthropology

The main source for the following reflections is my experience of a long-term anthropological research and advocacy work with the Yanomami Indians in the Brazilian Amazon (1975–95). Here, however, I do not intend to enter into the details of this fieldwork experience,<sup>2</sup> but to extract from it some general ethical and political parameters which seem to me to be exemplary of current anthropological fieldwork with peoples who were once the major ethnographic reference of the 'invention of primitive society' (Kuper, 1988).

Traditional fieldwork, as canonized by Malinowski in the preface to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski, 1978; see Stocking, 1983; Kilani, 1990), is, as we all know, dying out. Not because indigenous peoples are doomed to extinction, as Malinowski wrote – a recurring blind prophecy since – but, on the contrary, because they are increasingly becoming subjects of their own history and readers of their own ethnographers (Geertz, 1988: 129–49). Yet the founding mythology of Malinowskian fieldwork continues to haunt anthropology's imaginary – so much so that the growing

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empirical challenges to its basic formula are generally buried in a corporatist discourse about the closing of classical research fields. This nostalgia makes it sound as if ethnographic research presumed a transcendental right to cultural objectification, and this right was suddenly being put into question by 'anthropological peoples' losing their authenticity – and even worse their docility – by unduly entering into occidental (post) modernity.

But, what is vanishing today are not the peoples and the societies who were the one-time privileged objects of 'tribal ethnography' (Leach, 1989) – although many are still dramatically threatened. It is not even the accessibility to traditional field sites. What is increasingly disappearing are the epistemological illusions on which classical anthropology was based. That is, first, the empirical evidence of the boundedness of its object – 'traditional society' as a clear-cut social and cultural isolate – and, second, the scientific transparency of its methodology – participant observation as a simple device for recording pre-existing social data. The disappearance of these two founding illusions will be the subject of this short note, which will be divided into two parts. I shall start by looking at how the emergence of ethnic movements has transformed the 'ethnographic situation';<sup>3</sup> then I shall examine the intellectual implications and perspectives created for the discipline by this transformation.

Admittedly, Africanist anthropologists and sociologists will hardly find this problematic to be something new. What may be interestingly new, however, is to find this situation now arising in the context of Amazonian anthropology, for Lowland South American anthropology underwent a substantial transformation of its field research in the 1970s and 1980s. It broadened, in particular, the historical and sociological contexts of its studies, and widened its traditional culturalist concerns to embrace social and political changes (Descola and Taylor, 1993). In fact, this transformation accompanied deep changes going on in Amerindian societies which, at that time, were gradually beginning to constitute themselves as political subjects vis-a-vis the nation-states ruling over and circumscribing them.<sup>4</sup> This process of 'internal decolonization' offered South Americanism new perspectives for redefining its field, probably as important as those that opened up for Africanism in the decolonization period of the 1950s and 1960s.

### **Ethnicity and development**

This process, however, is hardly limited to South America.<sup>5</sup> Worldwide, indigenous societies represent approximately 300 million people living in 70 countries (IWGIA, 1996). Their emergence on the political scene during the last decades, both locally and internationally, can be attributed in large measure to the world development order established after the Second World War and to the national modernization projects that ensued.<sup>6</sup>

Multilateral organizations had a decisive role in this, both because many indigenous resistance movements arose in reaction to their policies (World Bank and regional Development Banks), and because of the international recognition they were then forced to accord to these movements (United Nations agencies, Inter American System, European Union).<sup>7</sup>

The United Nations, through the ILO, published in 1953 a voluminous report on the 'economic marginality' of indigenous peoples. This report was followed by the 1957 international convention 'on the protection and integration of indigenous, tribal or semitribal populations in independent countries' (Convention 107), a text written in a highly paternalistic and assimilationist style which prevailed until 1989.<sup>8</sup> Then, during the three intervening decades, these 'marginal' societies officially became the object of 'economic development' schemes targeting either the populations themselves or, more frequently, their lands and natural resources. By the late 1960s, resistance to these operations led progressively to the rise of new forms of ethnicity-based political organization and empowerment strategies, effectively relayed in the decades to come by the growing influence of NGOs on the international development scene (Cernea, 1988).

From the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, the number of indigenous organizations grew substantially, and in 1975, the creation of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples marked the beginning of their interaction at a global level.<sup>9</sup> They also began receiving the backing of several specialized NGOs founded in Europe and the United States at this time.<sup>10</sup> Thus, issues concerning indigenous peoples began to be increasingly discussed by international organizations: a special study on discrimination against 'indigenous populations' was authorized by the UN Economic and Social Council in 1972 and the first NGO conference on the topic was held in 1977 at the United Nations in Geneva.<sup>11</sup>

This movement for the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples started out with reference to the political notion of internal colonialism.<sup>12</sup> It then moved on to analyse the relationship between native lands, economic resources and the international system of development. This stage was marked by two international meetings in 1981: the 'NGO Conference on Indigenous Peoples and the Earth' (United Nations, Geneva) and the 'Conference on Ethnocide and Ethnodevelopment' (UNESCO, San José de Costa Rica). Finally, the dynamism of conservationist NGOs in the late 1980s helped to reinforce the movement through the widespread – and often stereotyped – invocation of indigenous superiority in ecological knowledge and natural resources management (Ellen, 1986; Redford, 1991).

This ecological boom and the 'sustainable development' rhetoric that subsequently invaded multilateral organizations has led indigenous peoples to seek legitimation of their territorial and cultural claims in terms of an 'ecological ethnicity' which combines their own cosmological references with the borrowed idioms required for political recognition (Albert, 1993,

1997b). This politico-symbolic synthesis has earned them both negotiating power and a political audience far surpassing anything they might have obtained ten years before. Two international conferences held in 1992 represent the high points of this phase: the 'International Conference on Indigenous Peoples of the Tropical Forest' (Penang, Malaysia) and the 'Indigenous Peoples World Conference on the Earth, Environment and Development' during the 'Earth Summit' (UNCED, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil).

The World Bank's changing attitude towards the question of indigenous people perfectly sums up the evolution of this issue in the developmentalist ideology that prevailed from the 1970s to the 1990s: in 1974, the World Bank 'discovered' the problem of native land rights when the tribal peoples of the Central Cordillera of Luzon (Philippines) and their allies (NGOs and political movements) successfully stopped it from financing a giant hydroelectric project on the Chico River (Drucker, 1988). It then came out with a first policy directive concerning indigenous peoples in 1982 and with a revised Operational Directive in 1991.<sup>13</sup> In 1993, for the United Nations International Year of Indigenous Peoples, the Bank organized an international conference on 'Traditional Knowledge and Sustainable Development'.<sup>14</sup>

These processes – local indigenous empowerment and the politico-symbolic globalization of ethnicity – define the context in which the conditions and stakes of anthropological research on the referent societies of classical ethnography are being drawn today. This dynamic confronts most anthropologists in their research and many are directly involved through their work with indigenous organizations and supporting NGOs.

### **Ethnic movements and anthropological advocacy**

Needless to say, this changing situation has wreaked a fair amount of havoc on the canonical precepts of ethnographic 'participant observation', the master chart (and trope) of modern anthropology. Since the 1970s, indigenous communities and organizations have been openly questioning the purpose and consequences of anthropological study in relation to their own projects for self-determination. Under these circumstances, anthropologists find themselves faced with two ethical and political obligations which were eluded by classical ethnography, but are unquestionable nowadays: on the one hand, being accountable in their work to people who were traditionally only the 'objects' of their studies; on the other, assuming the responsibility their knowledge entails for these peoples' resistance strategies vis-a-vis the dominant nation-states' discriminatory and despoiling policies.

Yet far from leading to a mere condemnation of anthropology, this situation has created an increasing demand for anthropological involvement.

The demand comes both from indigenous communities and organizations, and from NGOs engaged in human rights, local development, or indigenous advocacy. This sort of 'applied' anthropological work is increasingly recognized in its own right as 'anthropological advocacy' (see Paine, 1985; Wright, 1988). The expression covers initiatives which are generally associated with one of five key sectors: land, health, law, education and social economy. Activities in each of these areas may be very diverse, more empirical and technical than anthropological as such, but they are closely connected with knowledge and expertise gained through ethnographic research experience. The following, for example, are based on common anthropological work in Brazil:

1. *mediation activities*: technical consultancy for indigenous leaders and organizations; expertise for legal causes (land and human rights); information work linked to NGO advocacy campaigning;
2. *documentation activities*: analysis of documents related to regional development policies and economic ventures that would affect native lands and rights; covering legislation on indigenous issues and monitoring the politico-economic lobbies involved in drawing up this legislation;
3. *action-oriented research*: conception, setting up and evaluation of technical aid projects (health, education, environment, social economy); studies for legal or administrative purposes (land conflicts and human rights);
4. *didactic ethnography*: production of technical manuals and pedagogical material for use in training indigenous and/or non-indigenous health workers and school teachers; writing up 'lay' or simplified ethnographic texts for legal or NGO use.

It is obvious that such activities cannot be considered to be anthropological research strictly speaking, and they neither presume nor intend to replace it, but they certainly set up a current context for the work of ethnographic research in the field today, given the increasing integration of ethnic movements and NGO intervention into local social and political landscapes.

Anthropologists work on these activities while attending to their own research agenda and, very often, the latter is only accepted and understood within the context of the former. This kind of arrangement increasingly comes about as a result of formal negotiations with representatives of the host communities or of local or regional indigenous organizations. Such negotiations, comparable, for example, to those in which anthropologists working in France are involved nowadays (Althabe, 1993), were not deemed necessary before with 'exotic' people who, in various degrees, were forced to accept the presence of researchers by the 'colonial situations' in which they were inserted (Leclerc, 1979: 117-62).

In this context, the social engagement of the ethnographer can no longer be seen as a personal political or ethical choice, optional and foreign to his scientific project. It clearly becomes an explicit and constituent

element of the ethnographic relationship. The anthropologist's 'observation' is no longer merely 'participant'; his social 'participation' has become both the condition and the framework of his field research.<sup>15</sup> This situation shows, in contrast, the extent to which the ideology of ethnographic neutrality depends on dodging the relationship of domination which makes possible the anthropologist's intrusion – whether forced or bought.

The parameters of traditional fieldwork being thus transformed, it is no longer possible to forget or ignore the fact that anthropological observation is inscribed in a historical and political context in which the observed society is directly or indirectly submitted to the observer's society. Omission and ambiguity are even more unthinkable now that the actors of this interethnic social field generally require of the anthropologist a very explicit ethical and political position. Combining ethnographic research with advocacy work has thus become the basic fieldwork situation for many anthropologists in countries where indigenous people have emerged as important political actors, as in Australia (AIAS, 1986), Brazil (Ramos, 1990) or Canada (Dyck and Waldran, 1993). For French anthropologists the case of the Kanak situation in New Caledonia is exemplary (Bensa, 1995).

These new aspects of fieldwork pose two types of problems for anthropological research: first, concerning the maintenance of its independence in the face of new kinds of 'social demand' which imply certain intellectual restrictions; and, second, concerning the heuristic potentialities for an ethnographic relationship no longer based on political subjection and positivistic naivety. I shall now examine these two issues.

### **'Social demand' and independence of criticism**

As with any action-oriented research, whether directly commissioned or simply induced by the representatives of a certain 'social demand', applied anthropology with indigenous peoples raises the problem of the researcher's intellectual autonomy. Indigenous communities or organizations and their leaders, as well as supporting NGOs, always hope that the anthropologist's work they commissioned or encouraged will lead to a legitimization of their own cultural and political empowerment project. Though this kind of expectation may certainly elicit more sympathy than others, it is nonetheless a social construct which, as such, is open to anthropological analysis and criticism.

Today the economic (forestry, mining and energy resources), geopolitical (border conflicts, civil wars, international migrations) and ecological (biodiversity conservation, protection zones, intellectual property rights) interests at stake in concerns where indigenous peoples are involved have worldwide ramifications.<sup>16</sup> Preserving their lands, gaining social

recognition and controlling their own development are goals which increasingly depend on these peoples' legitimation as collective subjects in the international media-dominated political arena. The means and price for this legitimation is to self-objectify and negotiate their otherness as emblematic 'indigenous culture'. This is generally done through an ethnicity-based political discourse which borrows a great deal from the official rhetoric of state 'indigenism' and from the ideological concerns (communitarism, culturalism, ecologism) of the indigenous peoples' non-governmental allies, e.g. in the Brazilian Amazon, the progressive branch of the Catholic Church and the NGOs (Albert, 1997b). Of course, indigenous leaders or spokespersons play a key role in these self-objectification dynamics which resemble very much the symbolic politics of group construction – the 'classification struggle' – classically analysed by Bourdieu (1982, 1987).

The self-representation formulae produced by this process of 'mimetic resistance' (Augé, 1989) become highly effective political instruments on the postmodern scene of globalization and multi-ethnicity where identity-based struggles have over-run traditional social movements and ideological differences. They serve as catalysts for far-reaching transnational mobilizations orchestrated by non-governmental actors, and help to upset local balances of power which have always been unfavourable to the interests of indigenous peoples.

In this global 'culturalist' political environment, ethnographic discourse has become a strategic tool – a symbolic mirror (in identity reconstruction) and a means of legitimation (by scholarly recognition).<sup>17</sup> As anthropologists get more involved with indigenous movements, they progressively slide away from their external objectifying (ethnographing) position to find themselves directly implicated in the process of cultural self-objectification going on in the societies with which they work. They are given a role of intercultural adviser, and are thus led to contribute, explicitly or not, to the production of the new cultural identity and ethno-political discourse through which indigenous leaders legitimate their cause on the international political scene and in the mass media, a strategy for their peoples to gain access to the decision-making process in public policy, to public facilities (health, education, justice), and to NGO campaigning and financial resources.<sup>18</sup>

Given that the aim of this process of ethnogenesis is the respect of minority human rights and self-determination, many anthropologists are inclined to get involved in the politico-symbolic maieutics that underpin it. But, whatever the sympathy they may have for their hosts' struggles, it does not imply an agreement to limit the exercise of anthropology to a mere apologetic reproduction of their ethnic discourse, which would lead to a complete renunciation of any scholarly enterprise. In order to get around this apparent incompatibility between solidarity and research, engaged anthropologists must incorporate all aspects of this new indigenous

political and symbolic demand towards anthropology (discourses and conveyers, stakes and effects) as new objects of their ethnography.

On the other hand, constructing a sociological object out of the overall context of their involvement with ethnic movements and NGO advocacy work places anthropologists in an awkward position vis-a-vis those with whom they sympathize. The ensuing debates, being felt as 'in-house' drama, are much more uncomfortable than the usual conflicts that arise between researchers and the traditional commissioners of applied anthropology (public institutions or private companies). This is the case, for example, with debates over certain blind spots in non-governmental policies towards indigenous people. I am thinking, in particular, of the questionable use of stereotypical and exoticizing imagery (the ecological and/or New Age noble savage) to which certain NGOs link the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights in order to guarantee their own legitimacy and boost their fund-raising activities. I am also thinking of their persistent social blindness towards the traditional systems of dependence and patronage (mission or state-bound) that their field projects tend very often to reproduce.

But, in fact, the 'working uneasiness' that goes with an ethnography of 'observant participation' and critical solidarity is what makes this sort of engaged anthropology particularly interesting. Under such circumstances, anthropological research is situated at the crossroads between an ethics of responsibility which links it to relativism (care for the local), and an ethics of truth which turns it towards universalism (concern for the global). This articulation between values and knowledge thus makes way for a 'relativistic universalism' (Caillé, 1993) or a 'universalism "as one goes"' (*'universalisme de parcours'*; Todorov, 1989) which, in my opinion, is what gives anthropology its true quality as a critical humanism.

### Heuristic outcomes of anthropological advocacy

This shifting of the original parameters of Malinowskian fieldwork opens up a new outlook for ethnographic scrutiny, and this change of perspective is certainly rich in heuristic potential for anthropology. First of all, in terms of thematics: the social and symbolic dynamics at the heart of which the anthropologist works provide many new research areas (beginning, as we have seen, with the context of the anthropologist's own involvement with ethnic movements and supporting NGOs). I am thinking, for example, of the political mobilizations, social restructurings and cultural redefinitions prompted by government or NGO intervention in the name of (sustainable) development. To that I would add the social and symbolic micro-processes of 'resistant adaptation' (Stern, 1987) which are at work in the local reinterpretation and subversion of the discourses and practices associated with these interventions. Finally, I would mention the necessity for an



anthropology of the initiatives and ideologies of non-governmental 'indigenism'.

But the heuristic contribution of this post-Malinowskian fieldwork situation also concerns the very background of object construction in classical social anthropology. It underpins a new ethnographic gaze which induces a radical shift in the focus through which the configuration and the temporality of the social spaces are apprehended. As a matter of fact, working on both sides of the interethnic boundary and usually on a long-term basis, this kind of ethnography can only dissipate the founding fictions of the cultural isolate and of the ethnographic present as products of an optical illusion.

Under this new fieldwork experience, indigenous societies are simultaneously seen through the double perspective of cultural reproduction and of historical change: on the one hand, through their work of self-production and, on the other, through the transformations induced by their being encroached upon by the nation-states. In this context, the anthropological analysis has to deal with a total social space of interwoven networks and discourses, integrating the local field of interethnic relations to the global sphere of relations between societies. Moreover, the time of observation, abandoning the photograph-like monographic fieldwork, converges towards the kinetic time of long-term involvement. Hence, anthropological analysis also shifts its focus from the architecture of social units and symbolic forms to the historical and political dynamic of their production and reproduction.

The most interesting consequence of this opening up of the boundaries of the classic ethnographic time-space is, however, the subversion of our theological and reifying notion of 'culture(s)' (Viveiros de Castro, 1993): 'culture' fetishized as a 'belief system' for which change can only mean degeneration – as social self-repudiation ('acculturation'), as symbolic patch up ('syncretism') or as opportunistic reconstruction ('ethnicity'); 'cultures' textualized as systems of essentialized differences serving a politically biased construction of otherness (Abu-Lughod, 1991).

Such a vision of cultural identities as theological monads haunted by history's corrosive process clearly has little to do with what we are given to observe in the way of 'culture(s)' in ethnographic fieldwork today. Rather, we are confronted with processes of symbolic self-production, intricately wound up with a generalized invention of traditions and a global interdependence of discourses. This neologistic intertextuality of cultural identity promises to be a very fertile ground for an anthropology of the present, in indigenous societies as well as in any other (Marcus, 1991).

## Notes

I thank Jennifer Kaku (Survival International France) and Alcida Ramos (University of Brasília) for their help with the English translation of this paper.

- 1 This paper incorporates and enlarges on a certain number of points previously developed (Albert, 1995), but from a different angle.
- 2 See Albert (1988, 1992, 1993, 1997b) for different aspects of my research on interethnic contact. On advocacy work, see, for example, Albert (1992) on land rights, (1994) on human rights, and (1997a) on health care.
- 3 Borrowed from Zempléni (1984). This expression refers to Balandier's 'colonial situation' (see Balandier, 1951).
- 4 See Brackelaire (1992) and Morin (1992, 1994) on the political and territorial stakes of the indigenous struggles in the Amazon.
- 5 On the rise of the world indigenous and indigenist movements, see Burger (1987) and Wright (1988).
- 6 On the worldwide administrative structure of aid and development created after the Second World War see Guichaoua and Goussault (1993: 43).
- 7 On the growing recognition of indigenous peoples by international organizations see Van de Fliert (1994) and Rouland (1996).
- 8 Through pressure from indigenous organizations and indigenist NGOs, it was revised into Convention 169 'concerning indigenous tribes and peoples in independent countries'.
- 9 Eighteen years later the First World Summit of Indigenous People was held in Guatemala (May 1993) as a satellite meeting of the Vienna UN World Conference on Human Rights.
- 10 In Europe: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA, Copenhagen, 1968); Survival International (London, 1969); Indigenous Peoples Center for Documentation, Research and Information (DOCIP, Geneva, 1978). In the US: Cultural Survival (Cambridge, MA, 1972).
- 11 The UN ECOSOC special study led to the creation (1982) of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Peoples (UNWGIP) which finalized in 1993 a Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (see Burger, 1994; Morin and Saladin d'Anglure, 1994; Schulte-Tenckhoff, 1995).
- 12 On the origin of this notion and its use in Latin America, see Cardoso de Oliveira (1978: 75-82).
- 13 'Tribal People in Bank-financed Projects' (OMS 2.34) and OD 4.20 on 'Indigenous Peoples'. See also Goodland (1982) and Davis (1994).
- 14 See recent World Bank papers on this subject: Warren (1993); Davis (1993a,b) and Davis and Ebbe (1995).
- 15 See Turner (1991) and Albert (1993) on this 'participant observation' in the Amazon.
- 16 For a recent global assessment see IWGIA (1996) and Johnston (1994).
- 17 For Yanomami, Kayapo (Brazil) and Kanak (French New Caledonia) examples see Albert (1993), Turner (1992) and Bensa (1995: 247-53).
- 18 In this instance, the structural ambiguities of political delegation – or its deviations – are no less pronounced than those we are familiar with in our own societies (see Bourdieu, 1987).

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