

GOING NOWHERE:  
FROM MELANESIA TO THE MEDITERRANEAN

Second fieldwork is erotic dream to first fieldwork's nightmare. The ethnographer is older, more confident. She knows what to ask, how to ask it, and who to approach. Her ideas are clearer and her questions more precise. She knows when to keep quiet, when to let her fieldwork friends go on and apparently on, and when to interrupt. She has a shorter period in the field than the first time round, but that doesn't matter because she is so much more organized, her work is so much more efficient. There is very little of the anguish, self-recrimination, periodic depression, violent pendulum swings of mood, or general trauma that characterized the first trip away from her institutional home. She doesn't need to be over-earnestly self-reflexive and isn't paralyzed by doubt or left dumb by worry over the political nature or ethical aspects of her work. She has answered those questions to her own satisfaction before, and now simply gets on with the job.

All this is the received knowledge, the conventional wisdom. None of it applies to me. I do not boastfully claim to be unconventional. I simply question the hardening dogma that second fieldwork is, by its very nature, easier and more fruitful. Since 'fieldwork' is rapidly becoming an acceptable subject of study bolstered by a mainly tedious and narcissistic literature, I wish

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*Editors' Note:* Dr MacClancy's first fieldwork was carried out in Vanuatu (New Hebrides) from 1978 to 1982. This resulted in a doctoral thesis (MacClancy 1983), a book (MacClancy 1980) and a number of articles (see, for example, MacClancy 1988a). His 'second fieldwork' has been in Navarre in Spain from 1984 to 1988. He is currently writing up this research; a number of articles are in press and a book is in preparation (see also MacClancy 1988b).

to query certain beliefs before they achieve mythical status, or become hasty charters for action misguiding future anthropologists. Like any ethnographer, I illustrate my points with ethnography. Only this time the subject on centre stage is me.

My aim is not public self-flagellation, a literary performance by a masochistic author only intended for himself and the odd intellectual voyeur. Instead I wish to tell a cautionary tale, to introduce a note of doubt in an otherwise increasingly confident discourse. Before generalizations about fieldwork become commandments written on stone, I wish to cry *caveat peregrinus!*

Pulled by a South Pacific dream and attracted by tales of Malinowski, I chose Melanesia. It seemed a suitable site for my anthropological apprenticeship, for if fieldwork was meant to be a testing, profound encounter with the Other, then, I was told, you could not get a more extreme Other than in Melanesia. Such was the word in the corridors of the Oxford Institute of Social Anthropology. Fieldwork was a meeting with oneself as much as with others, and that self-confrontation could be played all the harder on the other side of the globe. The distance was tempting, I liked the challenge, and I wanted the knowledge. The New Hebrides, found on both the extreme left- and the extreme right-hand sides of the Mercator projection of the world, seemed suitably eccentric for my purposes.

An eager but ignorant twenty-five year old, I flew into a colonial archipelago whose blacks were fighting to get the whites off their backs. The struggle for independence had started eight years before, in 1970, and had divided the islands village by village into opposed factions. The islanders, controlled by a system of joint neglect called an Anglo-French Condominium, opted for or were bribed into accepting the support of either colonial power. The English, thinking of their purse strings, wanted independence soon. The French, thinking of their nuclear testing site in Tahiti and regarding the Pacific as *the* strategic area of future decades, had a rather slower schedule.

I chose to work with the Big Nambas of northern Malakula island because no one had worked with them. No one had worked with them because they did not want to be studied. The big-man who did finally accept me turned out to be only one of the claimants to the chieftaincy of his village. My arrival precipitated a major row, then a fight, and finally a court case which ended with thirteen men going to jail for three months each and me wondering where to go next.

The Small Nambas (*nambas* = penis-wrapper) were too expensive. My grant could not cover the fees they demanded. I visited the Middle Nambas, but their chief said they had to be careful, as a white man was now going around saying he wanted to live in a village and then getting all the men locked up. I wrote to an Australian anthropologist asking about certain rituals on an island where she had worked. In her speedy reply she made rude noises about the idea of someone wanting to work in 'her' area. I wished

to avoid such ethnographic imperialists and so, following others' advice, I contacted the big-men of a village on a different island. But they wanted to make up their minds before I even went there. I was told to wait. Six days later they radioed that they could not come to an agreement and thus the answer was no. I then visited the headquarters of Nagriamel, a cargo-cultish co-operative movement promoting resettlement of alienated land. But the rumours grew stronger that its half-caste leader, Jimmy Moses Tubo Stevens, was colluding with extreme right-wing American businessmen bent on realizing their own millenarian dreams. It seemed best to stay away.

I will not continue with the details of this picaresque tale. Nine months later my girlfriend introduced me to her old friends, the family of a once big-man living in Sulfa Bay, the headquarters of the John Frum movement. This anthropologically famous cargo cult had recently become a quasi-Francophile political party. But her friends seemed prepared to take me, the village was large and interesting, and the island (Tanna) still had a flourishing ritual life. I could now do fieldwork in the classical manner. I decided to stay.

It seems clear to me now that the shock of being the precipitatory cause of thirteen men going to jail still affected me. The sense of guilt for their plight, plus the repeated, subsequent refusals and setbacks, compounded by my increasing awareness of the worsening political situation made me very wary in my first attempts to make friends and do fieldwork in Sulfa Bay. I was bluntly told to keep out of 'politics' and not to discuss the business of Sulfa Bay if I should decide to visit other villages. Though the big-men of the village were friendly and liked to see me getting drunk on kava, they refused to chat about political matters with me. Everything I learnt I found out through subterfuge: discreetly asking my close friends in snatched moments what was happening, eavesdropping, or reporting what I had heard about Sulfa Bay in other villages and asking whether it was true. Those who spoke to me were the isolated, the lonely, the embittered, or simply those who lived next door and whose actions they knew I could observe. The various members of the family which had taken me in kept me more informed than anybody, but they were indebted to my girlfriend. Almost all my work seemed to be done in a sideways, glancing fashion. I could approach very little head on.

Two months before independence the Francophilic minority rebelled against the Anglophone majority party that formed the government. Sulfa Bay became the headquarters of the Tannese rebels, and I had to get out. After independence and the squashing of the rebellion, I tried repeatedly to return to Tanna but was not allowed to. Despite the suggestions made by my supervisor in his letters, I now had no wish to start to do fieldwork on yet another island. Instead, having suffered the political situation for the last two years, I decided to study it. I changed the focus of my research from ritual systems and cosmology to Melanesian nationalism and its cultural symbolism.

The causes of the rebellion forced me (and many others) to consider the nature of democracy, while the reality of colonialism

was something I could never avoid. Getting dirty in a black village was not going to mask the fact that I was white and therefore privileged. The locals' stark division of all whites as either staunchly pro-French or staunchly pro-British (leaving no space for diffident dissidents) also made me, the British-born son of an Irish father and a Maltese orphan, question my own nationality. I had always carried a British passport but had never before considered that I had a nationality that I might have to defend. I doubted whether I wanted to defend it.

My problems did not go away. Certain politicians would not talk with me. Some whites were too worried to tell me anything. The security department of the police refused to lend me their transcripts of rebel radio broadcasts. When I finally gained access to a boxful of declassified ex-French Residency documents, the curator of the national museum and the director of the local branch of the University of the South Pacific complained in person to the Prime Minister, arguing that my support of the majority party was in doubt. Though I was now trying to gather material on my new topic, I remained fundamentally unsure how it might cohere.

Several months later I was told to leave the country within three weeks. I gained an audience with the Home Secretary. He began by saying he could not revoke his decision to expel me. I replied that certain jealous whites were trying to get me deported. My visa was extended for another three months. In a bid to bypass my enemies' manoeuvres and stay in the country so I could finish my research, I became the owner of a local soap-making concern and so applied for a businessman's visa. My application was turned down and I had to leave the islands, three years and five months after my arrival.

My doctorate done, I looked for a different area, a new challenge. Friends derided European anthropology, saying they had not read anything which struck them as intellectually illuminating. I disagreed with their prognosis and liked the idea of a strong contrast.

Melanesia is not a literary culture, Europe is: anthropologists of the area compete against novelists as fellow students of social life and so are forced to do finer-grained fieldwork if they wish their cultural characterizations to be ethnographically credible. Literate natives can all too easily crab what they consider to be caricatures. They do not want to be remembered in print as unsophisticated handlers of crudely defined concepts. In these settings the Other is not radically different, and fieldworkers, by studying and living with people so culturally similar to themselves, come to a more detailed understanding of their own social selves. The careful consideration of this narrow cultural gap is a test both for the individual and for the discipline. For if anthropology has little to report about our own societies, then what *can* it say?

I was told Basque, Catalan, and Galician nationalisms were

already well studied, while the Andalusian variety 'isn't really nationalism', but that the semi-Basque province of Navarre nursed a regionalism worthy of study. I spent nine months in the bars of Pamplona's Old Quarter, gained a research fellowship for what I had learnt there, and went to live in 'Ulí Alto', a small, aesthetically pleasing village with friendly people, excellent cuisine, and a wine that deserved prolonged investigation.

In Ulí Alto, division is masked by avoidance and silence. Basque patriots and Navarran regionalists tend to go to different bars and not to talk to one another. It is during the week-long annual fiestas that political difference, stimulated by drink, tiredness, and sustained physical proximity, can lead to fights. I timidly asked a few questions about politics, but people seemed not to hear me and talked of other things.

My lack of confidence about buttonholing others and querying them about their lives was not just a product of the acute political situation. If the villagers were not radically different, then I needed time to see in what subtle ways we were not the same. I wanted to learn, I had to listen, I had to watch. I assumed as bland a personality as possible, at times perhaps overly so. Adopting an unassertive character in a culture framed by *machismo*, the male fieldworker was feminized. No wonder some thought I was bisexual: I was not fulfilling the local role outlined for men, at least not at the beginning.

Despite my insistence, people did not want me to work in the fields. I was never too sure why not - they did not want a pen-pusher breaking the earth? They knew I would be slow? They wanted to be alone? My landlord only called me out when many hands were needed to store the hay, bring in the grapes, harvest the olives, or kill his pig. I gave a few English lessons, chatted in the shops, drank in all the bars (five of them excluding the one in the brothel), ate at my age-groups's Saturday dinners, and cradled my hangover while I dutifully attended Mass the next day. I was being quietly assessed and could not yet ask people to confide in me. It was my landlords who provided the exit (I have heard similar from other ethnographers of rural Europe). Sonless, they inquired into my life and, day by day, revealed theirs to me.

Warmed by the salary and length of my fellowship, I did not have to force friendship but slowly came to know others as they began to understand me. I deliberately delayed intensive interviewing for some time, preferring to learn from my landlords and to drop pregnant questions informally in bars. Then I concentrated on village officials (councillors, ex-mayors, the priest etc.), constantly supplementing their comments with long talks with my now increasing circle of acquaintances. I lived in the village for twenty-one consecutive months. Simply remaining there (though I might be in Pamplona many days), being seen, seeing others, seemed to confirm my commitment. Returning to the village after brief trips to the UK showed I was not staying out of inertia but wanted to come back and even knew the road home.

To avoid the consequences of division, I never stated my own politics. If explicitly asked, I said I was 'on the Left', but skirted further precision. Villagers seemed to accept that; they

appeared pleased that a middle-class academic from a prestigious university they had heard of had come to live with them, valued their knowledge, and took them seriously. For, as some middle-aged and elderly people will bitterly recount, they are the exploited and ignored. From tales of back-breaking work and Civil War grievances to present problems of chronic unemployment and miserable pensions, they will justifiably complain. On reflection, I was almost relieved when someone finally intimated that I, funded by the British Government, was a spy. My accuser clearly thought I was learning a lot about the village.

Teetering on the political fence became an even harder game to play when I started to interview politicians outside the village. In Ulí Alto I would not advertise the fact that I had just spent the afternoon with a pair of ageing fascists, or with an ideologue of Herri Batasuna, the radical coalition seen as the political wing of the terrorists. I kept very quiet that my girlfriend worked with the police. I was ultimately pleased that she did not want to visit the village much.

People asked what I was going to do with what I was writing. They wanted to know if I had already published anything, and to see it if I had. I used to explain the nature of my research as honestly and as fully as I could. I made no promises about how I would portray their home town. They seemed satisfied that I will return with the manuscript of my proposed book to read to them the relevant sections and to hear their comments. In this way they will have some counter to the power of the author. We both gain here: I produce a finer ethnography, and they are not confined within hard covers as unsubtle actors crassly playing out their roles. But I do not look forward, for instance, to telling a physically large man of confirmed opinions who has held public office that many of his neighbours think him dictatorial.

Events in Melanesia had made me ponder the nature of democracy. This time, I was forced to consider seriously the political theories of non-democratic government and of bloody revolutionary terrorism. Also, I could not study local debates without simultaneously questioning the nature of nationhood and nationality. Some Basque patriots received me politely, though I said I was British, then gesticulated joyfully when I said I was Irish: 'Why didn't you say so before? That's something to be proud of!' 'But we have the same struggle!'

I wondered how much of the difference I was perceiving was due to class, not ethnicity. I found I compared life in the village with that in my father's native County Clare, and contrasted it with Oxford manners and the London I know. In all these matters concerning difference (political, national, and social) I did not come to satisfying conclusions, just temporary solutions, a steady flux that makes me read my field notes like an evolving autobiography. My sense of sameness with the villagers expanded and contracted over time. For, of course, recognition of others' difference is matched by one's own definition of self and, for some academics, that definition can become extremely restrictive.

In Sulfa Bay I was gravely uncertain about how to learn what was going on politically in the village. Back in the capital I suffered corrosive worry whether my new thesis topic, about which I knew nothing theoretically, would prove successful. Similarly, in Navarre I was very diffident in my initial dealings with the people of Ulí Alto so as not to smother their distinctiveness with my own personality. And the political situation in both villages meant I had to use cunning and guile in order to learn anything. At the same time, the very difference of the two communities with respect to 'my' London and Oxford forced me in both cases and in different ways to reflect upon my own position. In sum, despite the great cultural difference between Melanesia and the Mediterranean, uncertainty, self-doubt, and the gravity of politics framed my time in both places.

The villagers' main grumble about me was that I was too *formal* ('formal, punctual, serious'). They wanted me more emotionally involved, sentimentally anchored in the *pueblo*. What I needed, they said, was a steady girlfriend, one from Ulí Alto. While I would have been very happy to have gone out with any one of a number of women in the village, I could also imagine the unlikeable consequences of breaking up with her and, thus also, with her family. But dedicated fieldworkers are meant to observe *and* to participate, to prostitute themselves for experience and revel in the process. The anthropologist is a whore, and a poorly paid one at that.

A senior academic advised me to go into the field *alone*. 'You learn the language quicker,' he said, 'if you're not talking English every night with a girlfriend who's gone with you.' The Pamplonan women with whom I did finally go out taught me much about local ways, both formally and informally, intentionally and unintentionally, just as the English expatriate with whom I lived in the South Pacific told me about aspects of the local scene and its history that I would otherwise never have learnt. Anthropologists often make much about their 'chief informants' or 'co-authors', but rarely mention their local lovers. (A neglected topic within 'fieldwork' studies?) For when fieldworkers become authors they make mileage out of their own emotions and use their feelings to add to their ethnographies. By laying their heart on the line they gain a sentimental education which can be turned to 'good' academic use. They don't just exploit others, but also themselves.

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