

At Home and in the Field

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At Home and in the Field

ETHNOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTERS
IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

Edited by

Suzanne S. Finney

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PREFACE

Mulling the Intimacies of Dislocation

CHRISTINE R. YANO

READING THROUGH THESE VARIOUS ETHNOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTERS presents a surfeit of riches. One gets a strongly visceral sense of the field experience—the wafting aromas of meals cooking, the adrenalin of literally running for one’s life, the overheard sounds of a neighborhood without walls. One also gets an appreciation for the toll of insights derived through the challenges of the unfamiliar at its many stages and forms of knowing. These musings from the field make every effort not to romanticize, but to give readers substantive reality checks from those who have been there and done that. In short, the chapters in this volume instruct us that fieldwork is always challenging and sometimes arduous in ways that are unexpected. But it is in the unexpected that the rewards lie.

In fact, this is why we, as scholars, do fieldwork. We are part traveler, part bookworm, part misfit (sometimes in our home cultures, more so than in our host cultures). We share the faith of our disciplines—here primarily anthropology, but also ethnic studies, geography, linguistics, Pacific Islands studies, political science, and even history and philosophy—that something might be gained by being there, challenging our preconceptions, taking us out of our comfort zones into the unknown and presumed rewards of discomfiture. Fieldwork typically reveals as much about ourselves as individuals as it reveals something about the group of people or place we are studying. But “reveal” may be too loaded a term. This suggests that there is a body of knowledge waiting to be uncovered by the researcher through the process of fieldwork. This picture does not give enough credit to the interaction itself—one that is shaped as much by the fieldworker as

by the field. Both the fieldworker and the field transform each other in the process.

At times as researchers we may count things, measure distances, and make charts. These efforts are important, but may reveal more about our assumptions than about the places we study. Indeed, just as often as not, we ponder the uncountable, the immeasurable, the unchartable. We work to dream in others' languages, move our bodies the way they do, don the mask that lets us believe we may be able to pass as native to some small degree. And we have faith that the dreaming may disrupt our lives in ways that we can begin to understand. We go to the field armed with high hopes and fears for our dislocation. We trust the encounters, revel in the anecdotes, and sometimes remember to write them down. These constitute data, even if they arrive on our doorstep unformed and unprocessed. Call them gifts of fieldwork, the small and large insights that may come to us unawares. Of course we strive to be as aware as possible. But as so many of these fieldworkers recount, awareness may be a conceit of post-fieldwork reflections, rather than a research strategy that guides the encounter. Would the National Science Foundation fund a research methodology based in "serendipity"? Probably not. But any fieldworker understands the limits of our best-laid plans. We proffer humility at the doorstep of the encounter.

Importantly, these chapters reveal other kinds of fieldworkers than the ones I describe above. They are conducting fieldwork at home, fully realizing that different degrees of home-ness may yet beg dislocation. "Indigenous," "insider" research, "homework"—what they add to our discussion of fieldwork lies in the complex relationships of familiarity that they bring to research. Their ready-made, deep-seated obligations and affiliations are ones that other fieldworkers may accrue over time. Thus, the continuum stretches across boundaries of insider–outsider, particularly as the outsider becomes more and more an insider, or is allowed particular access to where few insiders may be allowed. Doing ethnography at home may be no more or less discomfiting, only differently so, from doing fieldwork elsewhere. Further, even amid what looks like familiarity lurks the unfamiliar—the insider language of a subculture, the hidden clubhouse within an urban setting, the coded visual cues of membership. Add to this mix the confusion when a fieldworker looks like a local, but is not. This situation points up the significance and implications of identities—perceived, performed, and accrued over time. The hallmark of fieldwork lies not so much on which side of the fence one takes up temporary residence, but in the continual and deliberate attentiveness of dislocation that may yield insights.

The relations of fieldwork incur deep obligations. And these obligations are well expressed in these various chapters. The obligations are not only to those individuals who have shared their lives but also to the field itself, held more broadly, as a site of lasting engagement and even advocacy. Here the morality of fieldwork, the ethics of asking people to give—frequently and deeply—brings research to its knees. These are not cut-and-dried things, but delicate negotiations that tug hard at our consciences.

Finally, one must ask, what of this might be particular to the Asia and Pacific Islands regions from which this volume emanates? Certainly, there is much shared with the processes of fieldwork in any number of sites. But consider these as regions that have held long relationships with fieldworkers (and colonists and corporations), developing in the process particular attitudes toward being studied (and ruled). In many cases, these are regions imagined by outsiders as sites of plenty. Their cultures (particularly gendered as women) have often been romanticized as paradisaical and alluring, and thus the destination of tourists. Fieldworkers in some of these areas may have to define themselves and their purposes in contradistinction to journalists and travel writers. Furthermore, these are regions that have yielded their own share of researchers—often trained abroad—actively decolonizing first- and third-world relations. Many of these regions possess their own universities that are in extended conversation with other institutions of higher learning globally. The result is a complex mix of power relations (the researched and the researchers, as well as the researched researcher) filled with ambiguities and ambivalences.

In fact, these ambiguities and ambivalences provide the critical texture of field encounters in Asia and the Pacific Islands. Each encounter meshes with a long history of encounters—imagined and otherwise, symbolic and literal—that provide a significant backdrop to the chapters in this volume. Led by a new generation of scholars in the field, this collection has its value in the tapestry of multiple disclosures of dislocation in the Asia-Pacific encounter. These disclosures weave a multidimensional portrait of intimacies that lead to insight. The profundity of the anecdote beckons. Awash in bodies, sentiment, responsibilities, and reciprocity, these stories beg our close and critical attention.

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Introduction

SUZANNE S. FINNEY, MARY MOSTAFANEZHAD,
GUIDO CARLO PIGLIASCO, AND FORREST WADE YOUNG

THOUGHT PROVOKING, sometimes humorous, the ethnographic encounters described in this anthology should resonate with many readers and provide valuable talking points for students and scholars to explore the human diversity that makes the study of ourselves and each other simultaneously rewarding and challenging. These stories will be of particular value to anyone with an interest in the cultural and social worlds, as well as global conditions of peoples of the Asia and Pacific Islands region.

Ethnography is a research method used by social scientists to examine how everyday and local practices are reflective of broader cultural, economic, environmental, and political trends. Contemporary fieldwork and ethnographic writing, as noted by leading anthropologists George Marcus and James D. Faubion (2009), “is not what it used to be.” The ethnographic updates (post-2000) featured here highlight new forms of writing and research prevalent in twenty-first-century ethnography. Ethnographers now investigate subjects such as the laboratories of scientific communities and the “virtual worlds” of cyberspace that challenge previous norms of what constitutes appropriate topics of ethnographic research. This anthology includes writings on digital social networks in Papua New Guinea and robotics communities in Japan that show ethnography adapting to twenty-first-century human lives.

Emerging trends in ethnographic writing now highlight autoethnography, narrative, and politically engaged participant observation. Moreover, ethnographers today no longer always conduct remote fieldwork, writing about peoples and issues far from their home worlds and social identities;

they conduct “homework” (Visweswaran 1994, 101; Teaiwa 2004). Homework is ethnography that directly engages with issues and identities in which the ethnographer finds political solidarity and belonging in fields at home. While twentieth-century ethnography often involved a quest for self discovery, through “the detour of the other” (see Rabinow 2007, 5), writings based in homework involve no detour. In this anthology, homework is highlighted by the work of scholars such as Hokulani K. Aikau, Lynette Hi‘ilani Cruz, and Ty P. Kāwika Tengan. Their teachings about Hawaiian culture, social predicaments, and worldview derive from direct inquiries into their own genealogies and political concerns as Kānaka Maoli people indigenous to Hawai‘i. These case studies of homework demonstrate that ethnography is a flexible methodology that can be expanded to engage in subjects and fields of inquiry of interest to scholars with postcolonial, indigenous, and minority identities that often have been excluded or marginalized by “classic” definitions of fieldwork and ethnographic writing.

The ethnographic writings and reflections featured in this anthology illustrate that many people of the region are responding to new developments and predicaments associated with globalization. Interestingly, these stories are less often tales of transnational identity than they are narratives of cultural belonging and struggle for place. Written from a variety of academic disciplines (ethnic studies, geography, anthropology, history, linguistics, media studies, Pacific Islands studies, philosophy, political science, sociology, and tourism), the stories are organized into nine sections defined by themes commonly addressed by ethnographers. Thus, while the stories are geographically situated, the issues represented are global in scope.

This anthology is designed as an educational resource for introductory courses in Asian and Pacific Islands studies, human geography, cultural anthropology, and ethnic studies, among others. All of the authors published in this volume are affiliated with the University of Hawai‘i, and many of the stories are written by scholars with indigenous or national identity in the region. It was inspired by our students and colleagues in the Asia and Pacific Islands region who sought geographically relevant ethnographies. We hope that the book represents a thoughtful contribution to the realization of this endeavor through the stories of ethnographic encounter that follow.

PART 1

Real Encounters

Predicaments of Ethnographic Fieldwork



(overleaf photo) The Mekong Delta region, known as Song Cuu Luong (Nine Dragons), is rich in agriculture, and abundant in tropical fruits such as papayas, milk fruit (or milk apples), mangoes, durians, longans, dragon fruit, and water coconuts. Enhancing the area, the surrounding environment is also full of beautiful tropical flowers, and is excellent for farming and fishing. Tourism and tour guides can be seen everyday in the narrow waterways that can be traversed by small boats, in an area where the mighty Mekong finally drains into the South China Sea. Photo by Carl Hefner.

Introduction

SUZANNE S. FINNEY

THE STORIES OF THIS SECTION introduce prosaic kinds of predicaments of ethnographic research: problems of various sorts that ethnographers encounter and strive to learn from, while conducting field research. As you read the stories, you will start to gain an understanding of what it means to be “in the field,” and how challenging and rewarding fieldwork can be despite all its obstacles. Ethnographic fieldwork should begin to emerge from these stories as a method that can be applied not only to learn about one’s research topics and fields of inquiry but also to learn, reflexively, about one-self, one’s own sociocultural worlds, and the global condition.

Carl J. Hefner, Jaida Kim Samudra, and Suzanne S. Finney introduce some of the more serious problems ethnographers may encounter. In “Tempting the Nāga: Local Knowledge and Mysteries of the Mekong,” Hefner reflects upon a journey along the Mekong River that he undertook to introduce students to ethnic groups and sociocultural worlds from China and Cambodia, to Laos and Vietnam. His story discusses encounters in the field that could have led to death—the most serious predicament an ethnographer can confront. Hefner highlights the ways an appreciation and respect of local cultural knowledge—a major topic of ethnography—was fundamental to surviving and thriving within the worlds of the Mekong. Samudra, while conducting multisited fieldwork on a transnational martial art in Indonesia, reflects upon actually becoming embroiled in street violence in her story, “Attacked in the Field: Encountering a Street Gang While Studying Peace in Java.” Though initially traumatized, she ultimately conceives the experience as fundamental to becoming an insider within the White Crane

Silat martial-art community. In “A Question of Permission in Pohnpei” Finney reflects upon her struggles to gain local permission to conduct research from a paramount chief, *nahnmwarki*, of the island of Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, despite official permission from the state government. Beyond revealing the complexities of actually carrying out research, the story illuminates some of the nuances of traditional chiefly power and cultural protocols in Pohnpei.

Lisa Humphrey and Alexander Mawyer introduce more humorous predicaments in the field. Humphrey’s “An Anthropologist Behaving Badly: The Case of the Missing Watch on Waya Island, Fiji” recounts how she learned sociocultural principles of Fijian reciprocity while, ironically, lying to the community hosting her research in Waya Island, Fiji. Mawyer’s “Grandmothers, Sharks, and Other Dangerous Things: Persistent Crises in Mangareva, French Polynesia,” in addition to returning readers to the serious dangers of fieldwork introduced by Hefner and Samudra, reflects on the funny predicament of being perceived as a viable husband for local women in Mangareva. Mawyer, importantly, also elaborates some of the general nuanced knowledge that can be gleaned from attending to the everyday predicaments of fieldwork. His, as well as all of the other stories of this section, provide an important narrative introduction to the practice of contemporary ethnographic inquiry.

Tempting the Nāga

Local Knowledge and Mysteries of the Mekong

CARL J. HEFNER

THE MIGHTY MEKONG RIVER is one of the largest rivers of the world, and one with increasing ecological, economic, and political regional significance in Southeast Asia as local, regional, and international agents fight for its future development or conservation (Campbell 2009, 1–12). As an anthropologist specializing in Southeast Asia, it was my good fortune to be asked to teach a course in Asian Studies at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa that would focus on the numerous ethnic groups and geography of the Mekong River—the focus of my ethnographic field research for many years. Particularly exciting was the fact that the semester-long course was to be followed by a field study that would take students enrolled in the course, several Thai professors from collaborating institutions, and me along a monthlong journey down the Mekong. Beginning our journey in Kunming, China, we would follow the mighty Mekong River as it flows through six countries all the way through to the Vietnam delta region where the river drains to the South China Sea. As professor for the course, I knew that this was to be a journey that would both enlighten and challenge the students who took the course, most of whom had never traveled through Southeast Asia.

With an array of aquatic creatures that include the world's largest freshwater fish—the giant Mekong catfish—that can weigh up to 670 pounds (Mansfield and Koh 2008, 15), and the increasingly endangered Irrawaddy dolphin (see Beasley et al. 2010), it is not hard to imagine how stories of the river abound. Powerful Nāga spirits, for example, which are said to take the bodily form of a great snake with either a single head or multiple heads (Holt 2009, 17–19), are said to dwell within and near the river depending on the

season (Hashimoto 2008, 221). In Laos, to ensure protection from malevolent Nāga, sometimes water buffalo, pigs, and chickens are sacrificed (Hashimoto 2008, 228), and local festivals of increasing interest to global tourism (see Cohen 2007) continue to honor Nāga with offerings of alcohol, cake, fruit, and rice (Hatsadong et al. 2006, 73). According to Khmer traditions, the survival of peoples of the river depends upon the goodwill of the Nāga (Gaudes 1993, 352–353). As we began our journey we could only hope that the Nāga would extend their goodwill to protect us as well.

Our travel, leaving from the port in Kunming, China, was orderly and smooth, as the Chinese “fast” boats had modern instruments, and were manned by professional boat captains who were quite capable of navigating the fast-moving river. The river, coming out of the mountains and originating in the high mountains of Tibet, is elegant and relatively fast moving until it reaches Laos. As a group, we were all taken aback by the beauty of the mountain slopes that surround the river, as the sights along the river through Laos are breathtaking. As the sun rises and sets on the river, there is a mystique and awe that seems to evoke a spiritual feeling among some of us, reminding us that geography, culture, and the human spirit have a connection, a kind of “power of place” (see Harm de Blij 2009). A person traveling through Laos on the Mekong could just sense the thousands of years of history of the region, intuitively knowing that each area was different and special. On at least one occasion, as the boat navigated the river, the students were able to see shifting cultivation in action, as swidden farmers were using elephants to clear trees that had been slashed from the forested mountainside.

In the craggy mountainous regions of Laos, the Mekong is wide, in places quite muddy, and to the casual observer, the water placid and slow moving. However, it was obvious that there was more to this river than meets the eye, as we could all witness swirling riverside eddies and whirlpools, indicating that there were unpredictable currents, which through our observations proved to be treacherous to the houseboats that navigate the mighty Mekong waters in this region. Each time we rounded a bend, we could plainly see the splintered remains of various boat crackups, found scattered along the rocky sides of the Mekong serving as silent reminders of the power of the current and the inherent dangers. We all knew that there must be a tremendous amount of local cultural knowledge (see Geertz 1983) surrounding various sites along the river, and that these wrecks were silent reminders of the power of the currents and the force of the water.

As if we had not seen enough reminders of the forces of nature in this area, there was another moment in time when the power of the Mekong

River was definitely shown. Jenny, an avid swimmer, personally experienced the treacherous river currents that compose the winding Mekong River as it makes its way through the mountains. In the late afternoon, as we arrived at an area known as Pakbeng in Laos, most of us made our way up the hill into our bungalows for the evening. However, now in my bungalow on the hillside, I just happened to be looking out the window, and as I glanced toward the river, Jenny had spontaneously jumped into the Mekong from a pier for a swim. Frightened for her, I began to yell to a group of our students who were walking a ways upstream along the shore. However, at first no one could hear my warning calls. Soon, Jenny was definitely in over her head, and quickly overtaken by the fast-moving Mekong currents.

Luckily, local Lao fishermen, floating in their boats near the edge of the river, had witnessed the event. As we called out in vain, Jenny was soon saved by the fishermen who floated their hand-carved wooden boats over to pick her up out of the water. Following the rescue, the fishermen began to impart local knowledge of this particular part of the river. Stunningly, the Lao fishermen began to relate that this area is known to all who live here as one of the many places of the Nāga. The locals all felt that without this knowledge you are taking huge chances, and putting your life at risk. Just around the bend, they said, there was a very dangerous current and a drop in the river toward the rocks that surely would have caused injury. That evening we all felt fortunate that all was well, and everyone had a new appreciation for the power of local knowledge that enables one to survive.

Continuing our journey, we knew one thing for sure: it would take years to acquire even a partial understanding of the regions of the river we were moving through, and in our short time there, we would only be able to grab a fleeting glimpse of local wisdom. As we proceeded in a southerly direction on the Mekong River, we had new geography to encounter, and could only hope that our journey would continue in a safe manner.

Once into Cambodia, the plan was to visit Khmer sites, then to travel by land until we got to a subsidiary of the Mekong, a river known as the Tonlé Sap that connects to Tonlé Sap Lake—the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. In a great act of nature during the wet season, the Tonlé Sap River actually reverses its flow, and the lake expands from approximately one meter deep and 2,500 square kilometers to nearly ten meters deep and 15,000 square kilometers (Kummu et al. 2006, 502). For thousands of years, there has been a wealth of local knowledge of the hydrodynamics that make up the timing, duration, and volume of the seasonal flow reversal into and out of the Tonlé Sap Lake. Annual celebrations such as the Bon Om Tok (Water Festival) mark the end of the season as lake waters flow back

into the river (Keskinen 2006, 466). Houseboats, which are year-round habitation for the Cambodians who make their living on this river, are seasonally towed from one area to another, based on the level of the river. As we entered the region of Lake Tonlé Sap, we were able to witness scores of fish that were kept in wells in the Cambodian houseboats. Fish were still actually living within the general confines of the lake, but captive in a wire cage within the houseboat, illustrating the ingenuity of the boat design and the people.

As we woke to a beautiful radiant sunrise on the lake, no one really knew the extent of the adventure we were about to experience. We needed to get down to two small boats that would take us for the next seven hours down the Tonlé Sap River to Phnom Penh. To get to the boats we first had to climb aboard large flatbed stake trucks that would now transfer us through the extremely muddy flats adjacent to the river. As we stood in the back of the large trucks, they shook, rattled, and rolled, at times sliding sideways through the mud, as we traveled approximately one kilometer to the river. Several of the students nearly became sick from the shaking of the trucks, and once or twice the trucks almost lost control, as if they were going to turn over. Finally arriving at the boats, we were amazed that the boats that would take us traveling on the Tonlé Sap River were so small, consisting of an outboard gasoline engine connected to a long driveshaft, and balanced on a fulcrum in the middle of the boat such that the operator could lift the propeller completely out of the water. We soon found out why this was important.

As we boarded the boats with our backpacks and bottles of water, we then embarked on a very precarious journey down the Tonlé Sap River on the way to the intersection of the Mekong and the city of Phnom Penh. We knew that there was a great deal of discussion among the drivers of the trucks and the boat operators, but since it was in Khmer, we sincerely trusted that all was going to be fine. However, we later realized that the discussion had to be about the fall of water and the lowering of the water levels in the river, as we encountered our first snag only about one and a half hours into the journey along the waterway. The small boat came abruptly to a stop, stalled on a sandbar, and with confidence the boat operator, cigarette in mouth, lifted the prop, cleared the seaweed and debris, and then rocked the boat and fully gunned the engine to shoot the boat and all of us flying off the sandbar. The boat plunged back into the water, and with a nonchalant countenance, the boat operator resumed his duties navigating the river. Within our travel group, many were beginning to ask, “will we survive hitting sandbars and debris for the next six and a half hours and arrive safely at our destination?”

When this happened a second time and we were motionless in the river, some became very worried, and the predicament became more intense. The small boat rocked in the river, as water lapped against the sides of the boat. The hot sun had been beating on us for several hours, and a few of the students were now seriously worried, as we sat baking in the hot midday sun. The question arose from one of the students, "Professor, are we gonna die here?" "No," I said with a good deal of trust and confidence, knowing in my mind that these waters had been traversed for centuries by intrepid boatmen, and with the assuredness that the locals knew their business on this river. Confident in the idea that local knowledge would pull us through, I answered, "I think you have to trust the boatmen, and their knowledge and understanding of the fluctuations in water levels of this river. We will survive with their help, as their experience and instincts about this river will be invaluable to successful navigation during this rough period."

As the afternoon was waning, the Cambodian boatmen's skill in negotiating the dangers of the river guided us to a safe landing along the shoreline of Phnom Penh. As the day ended, and the rays of the setting sun began to cast beautiful patterns over the city, I could not help but think about our journey along the mighty Mekong and the tributary, the Tonlé Sap River. Our predicaments of this eventful day were now as the shadows across the city, faded and seemingly in the distant past. I reflected on the great movement of water, the rise and fall of the great Tonlé Sap Lake and river. I pondered the greatness of the Khmer civilization, water, and the incredible knowledge of hydraulics that supported a vast civilization.

Our study tour now prepared for the next destination in our journey, the Mekong as it enters Vietnam, and we were excited to continue our quest to better understand the ethnic groups and geography of the Mekong River. Somehow, we knew that the spirit of the Nāga was protecting us and keeping us out of harm's way. Among ourselves, we began to understand how the spirits and the power of place are inextricably intertwined in local knowledge. The rich diversity of the area, the beauty of the geographical landscape, the massive movement of water, and the incredible practical, spiritual, and mystical knowledge of the people of this region were really more than any of us could take in, and we knew that the journey was, for all of us, only the beginning of a long association with this magnificent river.

An Anthropologist Behaving Badly

The Case of the Missing Watch on Waya Island, Fiji

LISA HUMPHREY

FOR AN ANTHROPOLOGIST, FEELING DISCOMFORT in the field is normal. It does not matter how eager you are to be there. You are often in a foreign (to you) place, far from your usual support networks. This is the whole point—the discomfort you feel is in fact fundamental to your fieldwork. Your task in your new surroundings is to transcend the limitations of your comfort zone and gain anthropological insights by making “the strange familiar and the familiar strange.” You undertake this challenge as a privileged guest of the people among whom you are living. So you try to always be on your best behavior, responding to discomfort with grace. Sometimes you fail.

In June 2000, I began my doctoral fieldwork on Waya, a small island in the Yasawa Group, Fiji’s westernmost archipelago.¹ Waya is forty kilometers (and two to four hours by boat) from Viti Levu, Fiji’s largest and most populous island. About one thousand people, all ethnic Fijians, live in Waya’s four coastal villages, which are connected by mountain and coastal footpaths. In 2000, there were few of the amenities that I was used to in the United States: no (nongenerator) electricity, no hot water, no regular phone service, no Internet, no cars, and no stores (except for village cooperatives selling staples like tea and flour). Waya’s people and happenings were so interesting that I rarely missed those things.

I was researching how Wayans use traditional clan histories to support, and challenge, claims to chiefly titles and landownership. These are delicate matters and I was anxious not to offend. So I spent my first six months on Waya soaking up as much of the language and codes of proper behavior as I could before posing difficult questions about history, chiefs,

and land. I settled in with a wonderful extended family of about ten people near the village of Nalauwaki on Waya's northern coast. This family embraced me as a member: I dined with them on Fijian staples such as fish and cassava, slept in their beautiful thatched *bure* (house), and partook in family weddings and funerals. Over time, other Wayans began to treat me as an honorary member of the island's wider network of clan-based kinship and social relationships. I knew I had passed a happy milestone when people around the island began to affectionately tease me using the names of my Fijian family's totem tree and fish. Even better, I knew how to appropriately tease back.

Still, six months into my stay on Waya, I desperately wanted a break. It was almost Christmas and I missed my family and friends back home. I was tired from the constant strain of decoding and balancing my growing number of Wayan relationships, each of which carried elaborate—and sometimes bewildering—reciprocal obligations and benefits. To make matters worse, December is summer in Fiji and the heat was suffocating. And so I lost my cool over, of all things, the loss of a beat-up old watch.

It all began one afternoon when I went with a few Nalauwaki village women to take a refreshing dip at Rurugu, a stream just outside the village. After we returned to Nalauwaki, I discovered that a watch I had taken off and stowed before my swim was missing. The items that had been with the watch—backpack, money, and camera—were all still there. I felt like I had been punched in the gut. But why? The watch was old, inexpensive, and had recently started to get on my nerves. The wristband stank from months of dried sweat. Worse, the alarm function had become resolutely stuck on 10:17. Every morning and evening at that hour, no matter how hard I tried to make it stop, the watch screeched loudly, annoying everyone within hearing distance.

Yet I was not okay with the watch's disappearance. Loud and smelly though it was, the watch had been with me for years. I had worn it through many previous adventures in the Pacific and beyond. It was a tangible memento of my pre-Waya existence and self, and I was yearning for both. I needed the watch back—urgently. I retraced my steps between Nalauwaki and Rurugu without success, carrying on a frantic inner dialogue: How could the watch have simply disappeared? Someone must have taken it, right? Who? There had been so many people around. How could I get the watch back? Where to even begin?

As my Australian friends in Fiji would say, I was “losing the plot.” I was unraveling, becoming a little weird. Publicly, I managed to keep a poker face. I may have “lost the plot” but I knew that it would be terrible behavior

to show public upset over an old watch. It would be even worse if I appeared to accuse anyone of theft. So I kept quiet. That night I listened hard for the screeching alarm, but 10:17 came and went in silence. I fell asleep tormented, not knowing what I was going to do.

I woke up the next morning with a plan. To get my watch back, I was going to work the *kerekere* system. In Fijian, the word *kerekere* literally means, “please.” It also refers to an important system of reciprocity among Fijians. If you have a close relationship with someone, you can *kerekere* a favor or an item from them. In return, you are obliged to help them out when they *kerekere* something from you. The closer the relationship, the more you can ask for and the more you are expected to give. Ideally, in this system everyone’s needs are looked after.²

I had seen *kerekere* operate in ways large and small. One small example: I had brought a baseball cap with me to Waya as a gift for a teenaged boy I knew from earlier research visits. He happily accepted the cap on the morning that he agreed to accompany me for a long walk around the island. Half an hour into our journey, his cousin ran down to the beach exclaiming how much he loved the cap—how very, very much he loved it. The message was clear. My teenaged friend cheerfully handed the cap over. Weeks later, I saw the cap on yet another person’s head in a different village. Through *kerekere*, objects are circulated and bonds are strengthened.

Not everyone on Waya loves the *kerekere* system all the time. Friends confided in me that they sometimes hid things they did not want others to *kerekere*. Sometimes they fibbed about what they had or did not have, to work the system to their advantage or to bypass the system altogether. The key was to be subtle so that you did not offend anyone and disrupt the wider balance of reciprocity.

My plan to work the *kerekere* system was this: I would give my watch a story that transformed it from a seemingly insignificant object into something so special that only people closest to me could justify having it. I went for maximum effect. My watch would be a special gift to me from my deceased grandmother, of whom I thought whenever I wore it. I knew how compelling it would be to have the watch reflect loving bonds of kinship. Once the story was known, wherever the watch was, *kerekere* principles would generate social pressure to return it to me.

My story was a lie from start to finish. It was a lie that has shamed me to this day, and for which my grandmother would have been ashamed for me, too. Regrettably, shame did not stop me from my crazy pursuit of the missing watch, and I plotted my next maneuver: I would release my story into the “coconut wireless,” local slang for the lightning-fast pathways of

oral communication that connect Wayan kinship and social networks. Through the “coconut wireless,” information can speed from one end of the island to another in less than an hour, despite a lack of phones.

I unveiled my grandmother story that day over lunch. While dining on fresh fish with my host family and assorted Nalauwaki villagers, I chose a conversational pause to lament in a low-key tone how I had carelessly mislaid the watch my grandmother had given me. “*Kerekere*,” I said, “if you come upon the watch, please tell me. I would be so happy to see it again and think of my grandmother.” Everyone nodded in sympathy and I said no more. Now I had to be patient and let the “coconut wireless” do its thing. Like a mantra, I repeated to myself, “*Mālua*, Lisa, *mālua*.” Slowly, Lisa, slowly. Slowly and carefully, I had learned, was the best way to accomplish things on Waya.

I did not have to be patient for long. There was an unexpected development in the case of the missing watch the very next evening. I was sitting on the large *rārā* (village green) in Nalauwaki, relaxing with a group of about fifty villagers after a daylong wedding feast. The clans of the bride and groom had exchanged elaborate speeches and made mutual presentations of food, bundles of cloth, dried *yaqona* (kava) root, and woven mats. Now these formalities were over and all was quiet on the *rārā* except for periodic calls by the chief’s *matanivanua* (spokesman) for another round of *yaqona* drinking.

Then, suddenly, the *rārā*’s evening air was pierced by a familiar sound—SCREECH! SCREECH! SCREECH! SCREECH! SCREECH! Aha, I said to myself, it must be 10:17. Every head, mine included, swiveled to find the source of the disruption. A young woman whom I barely knew sheepishly took the watch off her wrist and shoved it deep into the grass until the alarm stopped. I was within ten feet of my watch! But how was I going to get it back without embarrassing this young woman or her family? I kept my poker face. I needed to reassess my strategy. “*Mālua*, Lisa, *mālua*.”

The next morning, I took action. I sought out a group of Nalauwaki women belonging to the clan of the girl’s mother and joined them for breakfast. They were having fun gossiping about the wedding the day before. Perfect! Adopting a smile tinged with sadness, I chimed in with, “*Ei lei!* (Alas!) Did anyone hear the noise on the *rārā* last night? I was so stupid to have misplaced that watch a few days ago! I should have at least turned off the alarm before losing it!” Everyone laughed. Then one of the ladies said, “THAT watch! That is your grandmother’s?” Hiding my glee that the coconut wireless had worked so fast, I replied with a sad smile and a mild joking inflection, “Yes . . . I think of her whenever I see it—or hear it!” There

was more laughter and an exchange of meaningful looks. I knew that the case of the missing watch would soon be solved.

Sure enough, that afternoon, a young man whom I knew well approached me as I relaxed in the shade near the beach. I'll call him "Jone." Jone sat down and gently placed my watch on the ground between us. My heart swelled with absurd joy. I waited for him to speak. "I found your watch a few days ago, lying forgotten in the sand near the village," Jone said. "My cousin asked to wear it and she took it to the *rārā* last night. But here it is again." He looked down solemnly at the smelly, screechy old watch—the supposed special gift from my grandmother. I assumed a matching expression and, following Fijian custom, clapped several times to formally accept the watch back. "Thank you so much," I said. "Thank you and your cousin for saving the watch from being lost forever in the sand!" And then I put the watch back on my wrist.

The second I felt that smelly wristband touch my skin, I was flooded with shame and regret. I felt like a complete jerk—the most deceitful jerk of all time. Jone had found that watch somewhere (did it really matter where or how?) and he had put it on. If he liked it, why should he not have it? I wanted more than anything to give the watch back to Jone. But now I was locked into my shameless grandmother story. Jone and I were not close enough for him to comfortably accept the watch back now.

Every night for weeks thereafter, I tossed and turned in the summer heat, agonizing over my bad behavior. How could I have been so petty and conniving? How could I have lied to people with whom I had worked and lived, and who had been so kind to me, over an old watch? I told myself that the culprit was fieldwork fatigue. At a time when I yearned for home and family, my watch had felt like a comforting old friend I could not bear to lose. When I lost the watch, I "lost the plot." That was understandable, right? I reassured myself that, even in my craziness, I had worked hard to play by the Wayan rules of good behavior—at least outwardly. I had bent but not broken the rules of *kerekere*, a skill I had learned from my Wayan friends. To the best of my knowledge, nobody had gotten hurt or lost face. In the end, it was just an old, beat-up watch that smelled bad and had a stuck alarm. For Jone and his cousin, it was easy come, easy go. Right?

Maybe. But years later I remain troubled by the case of the missing watch and the questions it provokes about the ethical predicaments of fieldwork. We anthropologists go into the field determined to do our best. We often fail in small, and sometimes big, ways. (I will not spill any confidences here, but I know that I am far from the only anthropologist who has behaved badly in the field.) In behaving badly, had I been a bad anthropologist?

Or, despite my bad behavior, had I still managed to be a good anthropologist? This embarrassing episode demonstrated that I had learned a lot during my first six months on Waya, even if I had not used that knowledge nobly in my pursuit of the watch. I also like to think that I came away from the case of the missing watch with a more nuanced comparative understanding of Wayan and American social interactions and obligations, and what it means to “own” an object. Most important, I vowed afterward to never again behave so badly on Waya—and I kept that vow. Was all this enough to balance my anthropological ethics sheet? I can argue different answers but am satisfied by none.

When I left Waya at the end of eighteen months, I gave away most of the possessions I had brought with me. I gave my “grandmother’s” watch back to Jone. I told him that I wanted to leave the watch with him because he had saved it from being lost forever. He appeared moved; I certainly was. (He also seemed happy that I had replaced the smelly wristband and had finally figured out how to silence the alarm.)

I do not know what has happened to the watch since then. If it has not already died and gone the way of broken watches everywhere, I hope that it is traveling happily through the Wayan *kerekere* network, helping to underscore bonds of kinship and friendship. Now *that* would make my grandmother proud.

Notes

1. For more information on Fiji’s geography and history, see Chandra and Mason (1998) and Lal (2002).
2. See Ravuvu (1983) and Nayacakalou (1978) for more on *kerekere* and the complexities of kin and social relationships in Fiji.

Attacked in the Field

Encountering a Street Gang While Studying Peace in Java

JAIDA KIM SAMUDRA

ONE MORNING IN CENTRAL JAVA, Indonesia, Teguh (my research assistant) and I were walking to a community center where I planned to record a focus-group discussion among students of White Crane Silat (WCS), the martial art that was the focus of my research.¹ We stopped to buy water and snacks. Leaving the store, we saw a man standing with his arms folded, straddling the sidewalk. As we passed him, the man grabbed Teguh's shoulder and then started throwing punches. Teguh, a high-ranking WCS trainer, easily parried his punches. His attacker gestured, and a dozen more men ran out from nearby alleys. One man behind me held my arms as the others surrounded Teguh and began kicking and punching him.

I was dumbfounded by the unprovoked attack. Had they confused Teguh with a member of a rival gang? I screamed in Indonesian: "*Kenapa?!*" (Why?!) hoping to alert them to their mistake. I did not know there had been reports of street gangs killing people in that town, but Teguh knew our lives were threatened. He yelled at me to run, but in the adrenaline surge of the attack reverted to his native tongue, Javanese, which I did not speak.² I could not understand him, but the bystanders did and quickly fled.

I saw Teguh bending over under the assault. I thought, "No one will help him. I'm the only one who can try." I twisted out of the grasp of the man behind me, cocked my right fist, and punched one of Teguh's attackers in his left temple. I felt no fear, only the conviction that I must reach Teguh.

The hazards of fieldwork have changed since anthropology became a scholarly discipline. A century ago, most anthropologists hailed from

European or North American countries. They undertook fieldwork in remote, technologically undeveloped regions of the world. Reaching field sites required traveling for weeks or months by boat, horse, or foot. Once settled in some tiny village, they survived without access to medical clinics, potable water, electricity, or telephones. Anthropology students expected to get sick from water- or insect-borne diseases or have small scratches fester into septic ulcers. Professors told them such discomforts were part of the rite of passage toward becoming anthropologists.

Physical hazards were compounded by psychological ones. Anthropologists seldom worked in teams, so often felt isolated. They might spend six to eighteen months learning the local language before being able to converse with the people they were studying. They were expected to establish rapport with people who often viewed them as strangely ignorant, nosy intruders. No wonder anthropologists often succumbed to culture shock. Culture shock does not mean being surprised by cultural differences or shocked by different values; it is a psychological disorder resulting from immersion in unfamiliar social interactions and worldviews. Anxiety, depression, agoraphobia, even hatred of the people who surround you can be triggered by misreading their social signals, not sharing their fundamental beliefs, and not knowing survival basics such as how and what to eat, where to defecate, urinate, and bathe, and what animals, people, places, or activities are dangerous or taboo. Sometimes anthropologists' paranoia was warranted; they have been chased away by people who misunderstood their presence or were offended by their faux pas. Ethnographers have been beaten, raped, or killed in the field when they did not have enough cultural and political information to gauge the danger of their circumstances or whom to trust.

I had read about such risks in my methodology courses, but did not worry because I expected my twenty-first-century field experience to be quite different. Now that over half the world's population lives in cities, more anthropological fieldwork is being conducted in urban settings. I knew I would be staying in technologically developed areas from which I could e-mail or telephone family and friends back home whenever I liked. Furthermore, I was no stranger to the community I was studying. I had trained WCS in California for nearly two decades and visited the Pusat (WCS headquarters) in West Java in the mid-1980s. During my fieldwork in 2000, I rarely had difficulty establishing rapport. As soon as I joined the training sessions, *pesilat* (martial artists) recognized I was part of their community. I developed close friendships in the field, especially with Teguh. Consequently, I never experienced the culture shock so often reported in classic anthropology.

Also unlike earlier ethnographers, I was not stuck in one place. My fieldwork was multisited, meaning I traveled wherever necessary to observe and interview people doing *silat* (Marcus 1995). I joked in e-mail to colleagues that the deadliest risk I faced was asphyxiation from diesel exhaust inhaled on Java's congested roads. Sometimes I sported bruises or muscle aches from *silat* practice, but overall I felt safe in Indonesia. I chafed at my protective *silat* brothers who insisted on chaperoning me as they would their own Indonesian sisters or girlfriends.

It never crossed my mind that I might be attacked by a street gang or get into a fight unrestrained by sparring etiquette.

I do not remember what happened after that first punch. My memory remains stroboscopic—flashes of color, movement, noise. But Teguh's attackers must have been surprised by my incursion. Some turned on me. I blocked most of their blows and distracted them enough for Teguh to break free. As soon as I saw he was out of the melee, I ran after him.

We sprinted down alleyways to lose the gang. When I could run no farther, Teguh flagged a *becak* (three-wheeled pedicab) and directed the driver toward the community center. When some of the gang members caught up with us on motorcycles, the frightened *becak* driver ordered us off and pedaled away. We started to run again, but one of the men grabbed me as two others chased Teguh. I saw one man pick up a large rock to use as a weapon. I screamed. Teguh turned and saw blood trailing down my face from where my sunglasses had been driven into my skin by an unblocked punch. He suddenly looked so ferocious that our assailants backed away.

Teguh and I ran again until we reached a small outpost where military personnel served as civilian police. Safe, I thought. I collapsed on a couch inside, my stomach cramping from shock. The police questioned Teguh aggressively, then began propelling him toward the door. Teguh later told me they accused me of being a prostitute and him of starting the fight. The police said they would take him to the gang leader to clear up the matter, but Teguh believed they planned to allow him to be beaten to death. I did not understand anything they said, but terrified of being separated, I clung to Teguh and began sobbing. Having an overwrought foreign woman on their hands apparently discomfited the police enough that they let us go, though only after Teguh bribed them.

I originally became an anthropologist because I was troubled by public depictions of human nature as inherently aggressive, of humanity fragmented into competing factions. Evidence of people building peaceable relationships that crosscut ethnic and religious categories is often neglected

by the media and academia. Yet in the early twentieth century, Robert Lowie, one of the founders of modern American anthropology, noted “that individuals associate irrespective of whether they belong to the same family, clan, or territorial group; and that such associations play a dominant part in the social life of many peoples rivaling and sporadically even overshadowing other ties” (Lowie 1947, 309). Lowie called such voluntary associations “sodalities” and considered them universal social phenomena. I wanted to study how international, multiethnic, and nonsectarian sodalities develop even within divisive political contexts. The Republic of Indonesia seemed an appropriate setting since it was infamous for violent outbreaks between rival groups. Pundits liked to predict that this nation, founded in late 1949 after winning independence from Dutch colonizers, was doomed to disintegrate. One of its military leaders even claimed Indonesia had a “culture of violence” that encouraged “fighting between families, fighting between villages, fighting between tribes, fighting between ethnic groups, and finally fighting between religions” (quoted in Collins 2002, 582).

The friendly, cooperative relationships among diverse WCS students seemed to contradict such statements. Thus, although my field site was a school where people practiced interpersonal combat, my research agenda focused on peace, not violence. Indeed, a martial art school can be an appropriate site for investigating peaceful community because martial artists practice controlling aggressiveness and martial art teachers often inculcate ethics against violence (Samudra 2003).³

We finally reached the community center where the *silat* group I had planned to interview still awaited us. After Teguh told them what had happened, they began planning to find and beat up our attackers. I argued against retaliation because it could lead to a scandal that would diminish the reputation of the WCS school.⁴ And what if someone got killed? Teguh agreed to accompany me back to West Java on condition that I never again speak about the incident.

It was not easy to behave normally after we returned to the Pusat. I told myself my injuries did not look worse than those following a rough sparring session, but I was upset that no one noticed my distress. I knew that Indonesians show respect by not asking a lot of personal questions. Letting people handle their own problems is also part of the martial art ethos. Usually I found such attitudes restful, but traumatized by the attack, I interpreted silence as lack of compassion.

The first time someone threw a hit toward my face during *silat* class, I burst into tears and fled the room. Then I quit training. When I walked down a crowded street, I had auditory hallucinations of people screaming,

so I stopped going out. I withdrew to my dorm room, where I brooded over the gaps in my memory of the fight. I asked Teguh what he recalled, but he said that if I insisted on discussing it, he would have to return to Central Java to kill our assailant.

I did not understand his reaction, but tried to abide by his request. I now understand him better. Javanese men are normally quite reserved, but my reminding him of the incident threatened his emotional self-control. He was ashamed he had not been able to protect me and angry I had endangered myself by joining the fight. He was also ashamed that I, a foreigner, had been attacked in his country. I never blamed Indonesian society, however. I knew that street gangs existed in every nation-state characterized by extreme economic inequalities and mass unemployment, including the United States.

My symptoms worsened over the next month. Finally, I explained my problem to Teguh in cultural terms: “Maybe Indonesians don’t talk about these things, but I’m an American. Americans talk about everything. I’m going to go crazy if I don’t talk to someone.” He then permitted me to tell the WCS Grandmaster about the attack.

The Grandmaster explained the physiological mechanisms of memory loss following a chaotic, violent episode. He provided me with a new interpretation of the experience by saying: “You are a fighter! You never threw up [after the fight]. You didn’t get a fever that night. And you didn’t get very bruised or feel any pain. That’s because you do *silat*. Your body has learned to control normal physical reactions such as vomiting, fever, and bruising.” My symptoms disappeared after that conversation, and I was able to complete my ethnographic research.

I did not write about the attack until now because of Teguh’s stipulation that I not broadcast the incident.⁵ It was also too difficult to make sense of the violence at close range. Even “ethnographers who study violence have experienced bewilderment on first seeing it” and find it difficult to remain analytically detached (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, 13). An anthropologist who was raped while in the field writes that she “was in no position to record, understand, or utilize” the information about gender and sexuality that came her way afterward; putting her “situation to anthropological use felt blasphemous” at the time (Moreno 1995, 243–244). Like her, I could not turn my intimate trauma into a professional narrative.

Nor could I brush it off as just a hazard of fieldwork. Yet now I feel that it was indeed a rite of passage—not as an anthropologist, but as a martial artist. By reframing my actions and physiological responses into proof that I was a fighter who could protect herself and help a friend escape a dozen

(albeit untrained and disorganized) attackers, the Grandmaster showed me I was truly an insider in the White Crane Silat community.

Notes

1. With over three hundred ethnic groups spread over more than seventeen thousand islands, the Republic of Indonesia has one of the most diverse and largest populations in the world. Each school of *silat* (self-defense) is usually associated with a specific village, ethnic group, religious organization, or political party. WCS is taught in the second largest *silat* school in the nation; it is the only *silat* school in which gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and class are not barriers to membership.
2. I conducted research in Bahasa Indonesia, the official language used in education, business, and government. It is not the first language of most Indonesians. Javanese is the most widespread native tongue because the Javanese are the largest ethnic group and the political capital of Indonesia is on Java.
3. The counterintuitive notion that martial arts foster peaceful community has been supported by psychological studies suggesting that aggressive behavior diminishes over time among children taking self-defense classes (Twemlow and Sacco 1998; Zivin et al. 2001).
4. A primary ethical responsibility of anthropologists is not to bring harm to the people or communities they study (AAA 2012).
5. Over a decade later, Teguh's emotions, like mine, have subsided. He gave me permission to write about the attack as long as his real name was not included.

A Question of Permission in Pohnpei

SUZANNE S. FINNEY

NEGOTIATING WITHIN TRADITIONAL leadership in a place where one has no cultural standing can be frustrating at best and paralyzing at worst. The history of foreigners in the Pacific Islands is filled with stories of these outsiders being used for political or social gain either with or without the foreigners' direct knowledge.

My personal experience with these situations resulted from fieldwork conducted in 2000 in Pohnpei (see Finney and Graves 2002 for report). Pohnpei is part of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), which consists of four states (Kosrae, Pohnpei, Chuuk, and Yap) across three thousand miles of the tropical northern Pacific. It is also an island with a long and strong tradition of traditional authority within each of the five districts (*wehi*) that compose the island. The people respect the paramount chiefs of each *wehi*, who hold the title *nahnmwarki*. But their traditional authority is undermined by the Western-style political system that "runs" the country, with local, state, and national agencies operating largely outside the sphere of influence of the traditional leadership. This political system has been in place in various forms since the Spanish established an administrative center in what is now the state capital of Kolonia more than 125 years ago.

In 2000, funded by a grant from the American Battlefield Protection Program of the U.S. National Park Service, our team of five archaeologists and graduate students arrived in Pohnpei to investigate the remains of several shipwrecks thought to be the whalers sunk by the Confederate raider CSS *Shenandoah* as part of its activities at the end of the Civil War in America (April 1865). The story and the wrecks are known to the Pohnpeians,

but there is not much interest in them since they represent events from outside the local culture. There was interest in what we were doing, but the investigation itself did not generate any concern because we were looking at a site of Western activity.

Still, I wanted to be sure that all possible vested parties were contacted and I asked several people, both within the government and the community, if I should contact the local *nahnmwarki* to let him know what we were doing. This was my second time at the site; my first trip was in 1999 and on both occasions I asked this question. Everyone told me this would not be necessary, stating one of two reasons. First, the site was in the water and we were accessing it by water, which meant there would be no land access to the site, and therefore no permission to access the site by land. *Nahnmwarki* used to have authority over the waters in their provinces, but all water rights that the traditional leadership may have had were removed by the German colonial administration in the early twentieth century.

The second reason was that the project we were working on was small and no one I spoke with thought the *nahnmwarki* should be bothered or would be interested in such a small project; that is, there was no need to disturb him for something like this. To approach the *nahnmwarki* meant that I needed a Pohnpeian to make the introduction and act as escort. Without anyone willing to do this, and based on the advice I received not to bother the *nahnmwarki* with something so small, we began the project.

The harbor we were working in is part of the *wehi* named Madolenihmw, which is also the location of the famous and contested site of Nan Madol. I say contested because there is persistent debate in Pohnpei over who owns the site. The Pohnpei state and FSM national governments contend it is state property and want to manage it as public land. The *nahnmwarki* views it as private property, belonging to his family. This conflict continues to the present. At the time of my research the state government was in the habit of authorizing research and projects involving Nan Madol without permission from the *nahnmwarki*.

Even if I had known that, I am not sure I could have anticipated the events that unfolded one day when we were getting ready to go out to the site. A man came up to us and said he was a representative from the *nahnmwarki* and that he was there to stop us from conducting our research since we did not have proper permission. We were told if we went to the site we would be arrested. We were expected to stop work on the project until we could get approval from the *nahnmwarki*.

Never mind that the *nahnmwarki* had no authority to arrest people, or that Madolenihmw had no official boat with which to go and arrest us

on the site. When he left I spoke with our boat driver, who was the one who told us they had no boat to carry out their threat. He was still willing to take us to the research site if we wanted to go. He was also from another *wehi*. I suspected his answer might be different if it was the *nahnmwarki* from his *wehi* issuing the command. I spoke with the members of the team, all of whom came from the United States like me. They were all willing to go. But it was my decision. I was the only one actually planning to focus my career in the the Pacific Islands; the other team members had their own interests and projects elsewhere, so if continuing the project without permission from the *nahnmwarki* resulted in some future problems working in Pohnpei, it would not affect them.

I was not sure if I was going to continue my research in Pohnpei, but I had already made friends there from my previous visits, and I was an anthropologist, trained and committed to working within cultural boundaries and constraints rather than against them. We had permission to conduct the research from the proper state authorities, and the rights of *nahnmwarki* over the waters around the island had long been removed, but it just did not feel right to go against his express instructions not to continue. Besides, I had no idea at the time what had prompted this completely unexpected intrusion into our work. So I called off the research for the day and we ended up exploring a few of the tourist dive sites instead, observing coral reefs and manta rays instead of mapping shipwrecks.

The following day started what was to become a weeklong struggle to obtain permission from the *nahnmwarki* by going to visit him. For those of us conducting field research in seasons measured in weeks rather than months or years, the loss of a week to pursue this was huge. But I was committed to getting permission, so I continued to work within the Pohnpeian traditional and government systems, slowly inching my way toward a meeting.

I contacted the Historic Preservation Office (HPO) right away. It is through this office that permission to conduct archaeological research is obtained from the state, and I knew the head of the office needed to be involved if anything was going to be settled. It was from him I learned that this really had nothing to do with our project; we were being used as the only available resource at hand to let the HPO know that the *nahnmwarki* was not happy with being excluded from decisions regarding research in Madolenihmw, specifically Nan Madol. This was a common response I got from others as word spread through the community, as it does on small islands, that there was a problem. We became known as “the archaeologists,” and everywhere we went in town people already knew who we were.

Several different people came up to me and told me they sympathized and that they did not believe the *nahnmwarki* was right to do this. It had nothing to do with me personally, they all said, this was his way of sending a message to the government. But no one, true to tradition, would publicly speak out against the *nahnmwarki* and no one would have gone to him to speak about this. The only way to continue the research was to get his permission.

At the end of the week, working with the HPO, we were finally able to schedule a meeting with the *nahnmwarki* and his advisers. During that time we had been unable to conduct any research. When we were able to go see the *nahnmwarki* to ask for permission, we had to bring a small offering of food or drink, so we went and bought a case of grape soda. Soda in hand, the Historic Preservation Officer, a friend who lived on Pohnpei and who would act as translator for me, and I went to visit the *nahnmwarki* in a small house in Kolonia.

I do not speak Pohnpeian, but even if I did, I do not think it would have been easy to be at the meeting without a translator. Pohnpeian has a special form of the language that is used only for speaking with the *nahnmwarki*, so even if one were to learn everyday spoken Pohnpeian, one would still need to learn this special form for our meeting. I was not aware how much English the *nahnmwarki* might know, so I expected the entire meeting to be in Pohnpeian. I also did not expect to participate, but to sit there dutifully contrite and quiet while the advisers and the Historic Preservation Officer dealt with the real reasons for the delay in the project.

I sat on the floor with everyone else, never looking directly at the *nahnmwarki*, out of respect for the Pohnpeian belief that a spirit sits on each of his shoulders and one should never make direct eye contact, and listened politely while issues were discussed, apologies were made, and the matter was sufficiently resolved for me to complete the work. The *nahnmwarki* gave his permission, and after that there were no problems continuing the project.

Three years later, in 2003, I went back for further fieldwork. At that time I did not have to meet with the *nahnmwarki*, nor did I have any problems accessing the site, so whatever issues had been between the two groups, the traditional leadership and the state government, seemed to be no longer a concern.

As I mentioned, I do not see how this incident could have been prevented. Even the Pohnpeians involved with the project were caught off guard, and no one gave me any warning or indication that there was a problem with the *nahnmwarki* that could result in a temporary halt to our work. But

once the matter arose, the only two options available were to proceed without his permission, or stop our project and wait for permission. I am satisfied that the response I chose, to wait until we could get his permission, was the best option, and I believe the sympathetic response from the community was proof that this was the right choice.

Did I feel used by the *nahnmwarki*? He did take advantage of our being there to make his frustration known to the state government. Issues of water rights and permission and land ownership are still being contested today, so this is not a problem that has gone away. But while I suspect that this one incident did not serve to strengthen the traditional leaders' authority versus the newer Western-style state and national governments, I understand the desire to take advantage of an opportunity to voice displeasure with the current system. By threatening our project the *nahnmwarki* was able to bring attention to an ongoing concern he had about who has authority over cultural and historic sites in his *wehi*. In this case the *nahnmwarki* found a way to make his frustration known to the state government without affecting the local population. This incident was just one of many such examples of local leaders who seize an opportunity to solve a separate issue. It seems that my experience was but one in a long line of negotiations during changing times.

Grandmothers, Sharks, and Other Dangerous Things

Persistent Crises in Mangareva, French Polynesia

ALEXANDER MAWYER

MOMENTS CHARACTERIZED by some personal danger, whether conceptual, practical, or social, are an important genre of ethnographic storytelling. Since they draw attention to the fact of fieldwork, such anecdotes contribute to its enduring romance. In contemporary work, anecdotes often deploy an ironic self-regard that simultaneously critiques the putative romance of fieldwork while confoundingly maintaining it. At their best, such stories provide a useful contrast to the more lasting and sometimes profound crises and challenges confronting local communities. Scratch one of your anthropology professors and it may well turn out that she or he is reminded of a moment in the field when something startling and memorable happened. I too have anecdotes that speak to such moments. I trot them out in appropriate venues and put them to work.

My fieldwork has been in French Polynesia, a partially autonomous French dependency in the southeastern Pacific. Like Oceania in general, this region is vast and complex. Five island groups distinct in geography, language, culture, and history are notable for the density of their lines of connection as well as potent aspects of disconnection. Two of these groups, the Society and Marquesas Islands, are well known in scholarly writings, art, literature, and film. Giants cast long shadows. Such well-known islands can obscure even basic facts or knowledge of their neighbors, including the Gambier Islands in the far southeast of the region.

Rising from the oceanic deeps about 1,700 kilometers from the Societies, the Gambier are eight high islands amounting to 27 square kilometers of land and numerous *motu* or islets encircling a 90-kilometer barrier

reef and vibrant coral lagoon. Terrains including high grassed peaks, upland pine forests, traditional and neotraditional down-slope woods, and highly varied near-shore house gardens and plantations of taro, manioc, and varieties of sweet potato characterize all of the high islands, of which Mangareva is the largest. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, the islands of the chain were densely occupied. However, the sixty years following first contacts with European outlanders saw a tragic demographic apocalypse resulting in the emptying of the bays, the silencing of many villages, the dissolution of the traditional competing chiefdoms, and the loss of an immense legacy of local language and culture. By the 1880s, the archipelago's population had reached a low point of fewer than five hundred people, and the vast majority of its inhabited bays were rapidly turning into wilds.

Today, however, the Gambier's population is burgeoning and pushing back out into these formerly inhabited spaces, yielding encounters that can be both surprising and disconcerting in their historical inflections, as families—whether youthful or mature couples—clear land off for the first time in many decades or even in a century. New technologies, particularly satellite-supported radio, television, and Internet, as well as increased flights and cargo-ship arrivals have made the islands more attractive homes for the current generations of youths and working-age adults who might otherwise have sought life elsewhere in Tahiti or France, the United States or New Zealand.

Most Mangarevan families support themselves directly or indirectly by farming pearls. After a lustrous twenty years in the 1980s and 1990s produced a great deal of wealth from the sea, a collapse in pearl revenues and governmental attempts to restructure the industry by excluding small-time farms from participation, beginning around 2000, yielded talk of a “persistent crisis.” Fears about the industry of cultured pearls thus joined ranks with a number of other local crises perceived as imminent, from contemporary ecological problems of trash and diminishing fresh water on small islands to profound questions of personhood and identity—for instance, how to avoid cultural erosions, including the ongoing loss of language, and renew important traditions.

A sense of crisis has thus been an important feature of the contemporary moment for Mangarevans. Confounding and enduring issues of development, modernity, globalization, and cultural preservation are perceived and regularly discussed over dinner, while repairing nets on the platforms of pearl farms during the working day, in front of the island's trade stores, and in living rooms after the evening TV news broadcasts. A pervasive sense of crisis also resonates with the kinds of profound issues that motivate

anthropological research, justify its funding, and energize our passions as scholars. But such topics of heightened importance sometimes obscure or overshadow aspects of the everyday lives and experiences of real people that are just as important if not as easily recognized. On a number of occasions, everyday happenings that I initially experienced as personal crises, in some opposition to the kinds of collective crises discussed above, taught me something meaningful about anthropology, about doing anthropology, and about life in the Gambier. These stories initially seemed to me merely personal before I came to understand them as anthropological moments that helped me move beyond abstract concerns and into the fabric of daily life, where the fundamental issues confronting local communities often find their actual expression.

During the years of planning my fieldwork, evening TV news broadcasts seemed to play a huge role in local conversations, considering that there were only a few radio stations, biweekly flights, and only a single television channel dating to the end of the 1980s to funnel external news into the island. Here was a chance to carefully study broadcast reception and the social significance of news in circulation in a tightly news-bounded setting, and an opportunity to identify and enter fluidly into concerns of broad public interest, the stuff of news. With the anticipatory romance of fieldwork in mind, I imagined a number of happy surprises, the regular accidents of everyday life bubbling along, but I did not imagine the cable guy.

My fieldwork began in earnest a few days after New Year's 2002 when I began the complex, multistage, and nearly full-day journey from Tahiti, across the Tuamotu atolls, to Mangareva. I traveled by small plane from Papeete, Tahiti, to the Tuamotu atoll Hao. Another plane took me from Hao to the long *motu* Totegeigei, and finally to Mangareva by municipal ferry. All the challenges of transit, the distance in a small plane over the deep ocean, the stops and boat ride, lived up to my anticipations. Imagine my surprise on learning that the same plane dropping me off was coincidentally picking up technicians from the Office of Posts and Telecommunications (OPT), who had in the previous weeks upgraded the island's techno-infrastructure. Indeed, they had just made it possible to receive a broad array of television signals from the decommissioned and newly repurposed Intel-sat satellite previously used by the United States to monitor French nuclear testing over nearby Moruroa and Fangataufa.¹ So much for the dependability of research plans; Mangareva had gone the full cable-box route. With the availability of many channels of film, cartoon, music video, and sports, few folks were talking about the news. Years of coursework and prefield study, my nearly yearlong proposal preparation and defense, the methodologies

submitted to granting agencies, long conversations with my dissertation committee members, all turned to ash in my mouth within minutes of arrival.

Moments of some danger take other forms as well. Over the course of my first six months, before my wife joined me, and as I reconfigured my project, I often had a period of unscheduled time in the mid-afternoon. Several times a week, I was invited to take Nescafé with a group of senior women, all mothers and grandmothers who no longer worked outside the domestic sphere but whose labors should be understood as the foundational glue of a great deal of contemporary social order. Such afternoon *varaga*, or conversation, seemed to play an important role in establishing a shared, community-wide sense of the issues of the day and the broad concerns of the island. Our talk ranged over numerous topics, from the little things of village life, shows playing on the newly available channels, tides and currents in the pearl industry, successes of children and grandchildren at school, to more profound issues including the actions of the Gambier's leading men and women, the future of Mangarevan language and culture, and regional and national politics. On a number of occasions, these otherwise kind and generous ladies would turn the talk in a rather scandalous direction. Mocking my status as a supposedly married person before my wife had physically joined me on the island, on several occasions one or another of them posed a rather indelicate proposal: You know, my granddaughter thinks you are rather handsome . . . Oh, what handsome babies you would have (cough) . . . You know, she's just inside (pointing). Silence. My somewhat cagey response could be depended upon to generate howls of laughter. Um, *maro'i*, thank you, I would respond, *ei mate 'ia vau . . . ki toku ipo e* (but my wife would kill me). On the first occasion, I assumed this was mere pleasantry, the humor of the senior generation. Later, several similar incidents left me rather shocked and not at all certain about the codes of humor involved, particularly when, one day, I couldn't help but overhear several men at the post office laughing gently at me as I was leaving with stamps in hand, "his wife would kill him." Were the uncomfortable if amusing ribbings I received rather more serious than I understood?

Throughout my time on Mangareva, when English-speaking outlanders arrived for reasons other than official, and at least twice for official reasons, I was sometimes asked by the mayor or others to serve as an interpreter and facilitator. Several of these occasions proved once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. One time, after she had joined me in the field, my wife and I arranged a boat to travel to Temoe Atoll about forty kilometers southeast of Mangareva to accompany a visiting archaeologist who hoped to take scaled

photos of the precontact stone works. Visiting Temoe requires a swim from the deep ocean over the breaking reef into the lagoon in low tide. When first entering the water to start the swim, I was shocked to hear the captain start yelling in extreme consternation, *mago, mago, requin, requin*, having spotted a large tiger shark swimming in feeding agitation just ahead of us, along the drop-off of the reef's ocean edge. Usually nonplussed by *mago*, the captain's friends Niko and Pano, who were swimming onto the atoll with us to do a spot of lagoon net fishing, were equally intense, directing us all together into a still circle until the shark was out of sight. After the photographic excursion and successful net fishing amid yet more encircling sharks (these were small reef sharks well over twenty in number visible by fin-count), our swim back out to the boat against the rising tide, over the breaking reef, pulling three man-sized bags of more-or-less-bloody fish behind us, produced an evident anxiety in Pano and Niko. Meanwhile, my wife had cut her leg badly coming over the reef. Niko, raised in the Tuamotu islands, suggested that no one put masks on or look underwater and instead focus on swimming out to the boat. A quick glimpse under the surface revealed the sensibility of this suggestion—I saw a very large number of dangerous animals swimming in a fearsome geometry just under and around us in all directions, a scene that chills me to this day. Happily we all pulled up onto the deck of the boat without incident. I have never seen two swimmers more relieved to come up out of the ocean.

This story asks you to consider such anecdotes by way of pointing to the at times challenging personal dimension of fieldwork, and of course fieldwork can quite literally be dangerous. However, it does so not merely to highlight the fact of the fieldworker as an embodied, practically situated, socially embedded person with respect to the individualized pragmatic or psychological challenges of being there. Rather, it does so in order to set up a broader tension between the kinds of personal crises that characterize the predicaments of fieldwork with the sorts of persistent crises that draw many anthropologists to the field in the first place.

Looking back at the place of these fleeting moments in my own fieldwork has fostered a sense of the long-running relationship between the romance of anthropology and danger. Research is expensive and the human condition fraught. The intersection of fundable issues, disciplinarily hot topics, and long-running human concerns has perforce, and for good reason, oriented so much of the best anthropology to forms or aspects of crisis from the conceptual and slow running, such as language loss or other forms of cultural erosions, to the dynamics of economic life on the fringe of a global order that cannot always be depended upon to desire one's pearls, to changes

in the statutes governing autonomy and the constitution of politics, to the intimate and visceral in the legacies of French Pacific nuclear testing.

This then is another sort of predicament, that one is drawn too far into the study of persistent crises, and misses what is there to be learned from the risks and challenges latent in the quotidian, the everyday. Or, that as outsiders, we impose an anthropological sense of persistent collective (or social, or global) crises on the local, at the risk of missing critical dimensions of local significance. The possibility of being eaten, devoured by sharks, injured while swimming over breaking reefs, almost crushed by a yacht coming off of Pitcairn (another story), deliciously mocked by grandmothers, foiled by everyday contingencies, draws attention to the problem of one's entanglements in a small place, the everyday and not-so-everyday risks of life in the world.

Stories such as mine about the fragility of research plans, the uncertainty of social relationships and the goodwill of others, and the fragility of the human body are all more than merely piquant. They point to the sorts of everyday issues with development, modernity, and globalization that rest at the heart of real human engagements with the world, with others, and with others in the world. Here they point toward fundamental issues with technosocial shifts and the ways that emerging technologies are hinged to many facets of life and may complicate research plans that do not take change into account; they point to demographic legacies and the social histories of westerners in these islands, for instance, how men coming onto and off of these lands have acted and interacted with local women, and how many seemingly humorous sentiments may be layered in uncomfortable histories of encounter; and they point to everyday qualities of emergency and palliative health care, issues of everyday risk and safety and health, that should *also* be at the heart of contemporary anthropological projects—not in place of, but complementing concerns about tectonically vast persistent crises.

We are writers of limited comments, of parenthetical and explanatory statements that provide context about something in a certain number of characters. In the case of the anthropological statement, that something is *culture*—that affordance, at once individual and collective, that provides a shared response to, and accommodation with, the fact of being in the world. Moreover, anthropological notes should have an essential modesty, acknowledging the limits of observation and interpretation. Anthropology is writing about culture, and anthropological writings are themselves a potent form of culture. However, anthropological writing is a note, and not the thing itself. Writings about the lives of cultural others are necessarily fragments: parenthetical if explanatory, bounded if illuminating, partial if revelatory.²

Certainly, the idea of anthropology as note-like, as offering a narrow glimpse of the lives of others, had a definite resonance for me in the lead-up to my own fieldwork in French Polynesia. Even so, I still had to learn how to take note, how to acknowledge and value the potential insights made possible by otherwise seemingly minor events and everyday moments. Between differences in language and the legacies of the imposition of colonial states, even in an age of renewed, powerful linkages between Oceanic peoples and places, the contemporary French Pacific, including the Gambier Islands, too often appears visible as if from a distance, through a mist. I recommend that if one would pass through this mist, attention be paid to the modest crises and dangers, bumps and laughs, and toothy things of the everyday in addition to the persistent concerns with the global, the nuclear, the modern, and the economic that dominate so many of our best disciplinary intentions. Attention to the everyday taught me that while the profound concerns of anthropological theory are never entirely visible, aspects of them do emerge and become surprisingly intelligible in easily overlooked, passing moments.

Notes

I wish to thank the editors for extremely useful comments on an early draft, as well as several of my students, particularly Marie Soderbergh, for useful feedback.

1. The French state moved its nuclear testing establishment to French Polynesia in the mid-1960s. The individual, social, and cultural legacies of the nuclear experience—testing finally ceased in 1996—are still unfolding to this day.
2. Student readers interested in these points may wish to pursue them further with Clifford Geertz in his inimitable *The Interpretation of Cultures* as well as the stimulating *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George Marcus.

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