

Review.

The Anthropologist's Dilemma by Fiona Bowie.

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This paper is by Fiona Bowie, a former student of Wales, Durham and Oxford Universities. Her travels and interests have taken her far and wide. She currently is a Member of Wolfson College, Oxford and a Fellow of the Royal Anthropology Institute, London. She is the founder of the Afterlife Research Centre (<http://www.afterliferesearch.co.uk>). Her interests are listed as; Ethnography of the afterlife, mediumship, shamanism, spirit possession and spirit release. Alternative forms of spiritual healing (current research), witchcraft and healing in Northwest France (also current), Anthropology of consciousness, Religious experience, Pilgrimage, African religion and society (Cameroon), African diaspora, Religion in Wales, Kinship (adoption and child circulation) and Gender and Spirituality.

This is a reflective piece considering the cultural 'baggage' we have discussed in class; Bowie is specifically interested in the effect of personal religious experience in the wider context of the study of religious experience. She is interested from a personal stand but also how this interface works for other anthropologists too. She discusses how anthropological fieldwork can be used as a 'distinctive methodological tool' in the study of religion and how this study can give insight into religion as a 'social fact'.

The problem that language poses comes up; 'the complexity of language and its embeddedness in culture'. (Bowie 2005) in other words, how does one translate and then interpret ideologies that are not a part of one's own cultural understanding? Dale Spender (1990:103), proposes that language is in itself a shaper of ideas, and the framework for our comprehension. He argues that we cannot be impartial, as through our culture we all have an ingrained classification system. He suggests this therefore takes the neutrality out of fieldwork. James Fernandez, (1986) argues that during ethnographic fieldwork, an anthropologist's imagination is given primacy over language, that the interpretation of immersive cultural experience is via language, but primarily via the language of everything that is not language. (Fernandez,1986).

Bowie uses an example at an Anthropological conference in London, with the theme being Indigenous Knowledge, where the Lord's prayer was part of the opening ceremony. This caused debate and discussion amongst the attendees for two reasons, one, because it highlighted the 'private life of anthropologists', how personal ideologies amongst academics seem to be rarely shared, and secondly, for the apparent disregard to the notion of a more inclusive opening ceremony. It was brought up that maybe the subjects of the conference should be asked if they would suggest a prayer or blessing

(or other culturally appropriate term). A tart response to this was that surely a far greater sign of respect and equality would be if the subjects under discussion were actually part of the organising of the conference. (Strang, 2005). I agree that the dynamic of observer and observed is uncomfortable and that this example clarifies the need for the subjects to hold a more participatory role. This also raises the point that although it is undeniably exclusive to use the lord's prayer, how to be inclusive of all? Is suitable for all possible? At its worst, could catering for all mean meaningful to none?

As to the 'private lives of anthropologists', it is not as if it's a deliberate effort to be secretive, simply that the work of an anthropologist is objective not subjective. Some anthropologists choose to remain private; two examples given by Bowie are for fear of being misunderstood by the informants (Ewa Klekot) and not considered 'functionally useful when presenting to the academic establishment' (Natalie Tobert).

Indeed, we recognise and respect individual choice for privacy and not to expect anthropological fieldwork notes to include the private beliefs of the author, so how does this balance out with an expectation from the study of 'others', where is the fundamental understanding of the relationship between observer and observed at the outset? So, two points here, firstly that it's problematic for subjects to not understand what they are engaging in during fieldwork and secondly that there's an imbalance when the revelations are one-sided. I don't know if we want to hear about 'Jonny from Oxford's' views on his faith in the Anglican church during his fieldwork with The Forest People. I don't think I do, but it would address the imbalance if the fieldwork exposed all of Jonny's Jonny-isms as well as the intimate workings of the subject's world.

As anthropologists we are aiming to attain sound intention, reflexivity, neutrality, non-prejudice and honest representation but evidentially, certain cultures seem to be favoured more than others (Simon Coleman). This shows bias, we are human!

How to address all these problems? The paper raised a lot of uncomfortable questions for me on anthropological ethnography and methodology which remain uncomfortable. The weight of colonial cultural baggage with all its hideous connotations and actions at one hand puts the indigenous knowledge high on a pedestal and rubbishes it on the other by perpetuating the 'otherness' of anthropological ideology. Fernandez states that neutrality is not possible. We cannot respond in any other way than we are culturally assigned to do so, and the situations Bowie uses clarify the staggeringly long lengths institutions and individuals need to go to in order to create a level playing field.

Although I feel Bowie softly-softly around ethnographic fieldwork she also sheds light on problematic areas highlighting human error. She states that it 'shows vulnerability by putting yourself forward to use as a tool for learning. By doing

fieldwork.' And thus, brings us round to the conclusion that intention is given primacy here, granted that cultural baggage is unavoidable. Although ethnography may be a personal and private undertaking, the subsequent work will be reviewed and critiqued. The academic arena accommodates human error, or just being human, and debate develops theory, methodology and attitude.