

Researching Contemporary Cosmologies: Ethnography and Autoethnography



Overview

- What is ethnography?
- A brief history of anthropology - from the armchair to the field (and back).
- Participant Observation.
- Positionality in fieldwork.
- Keeping diaries and field notes.
- Strengths and Limitations.
- When ethnography gets weird...
- What is autoethnography?
- Edith Turner and the Ihamba.
- My own fieldwork experience.
- Insider-Outsider and Going Native.
- Reflexivity
- References.

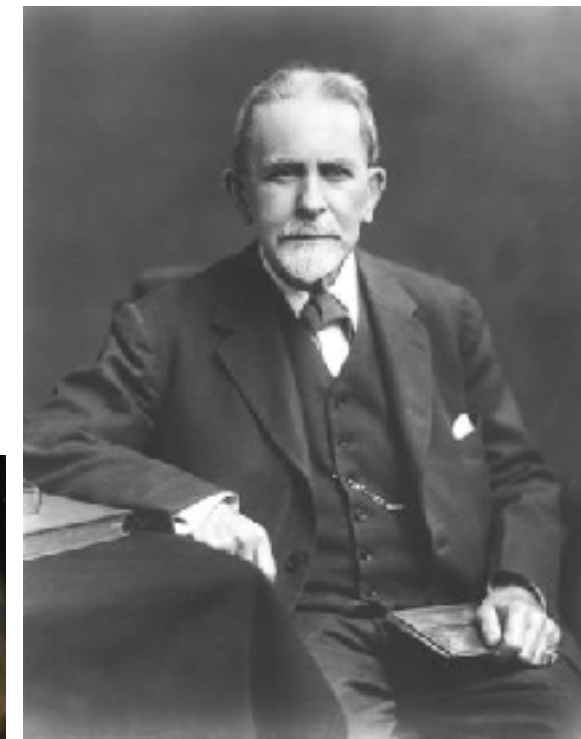
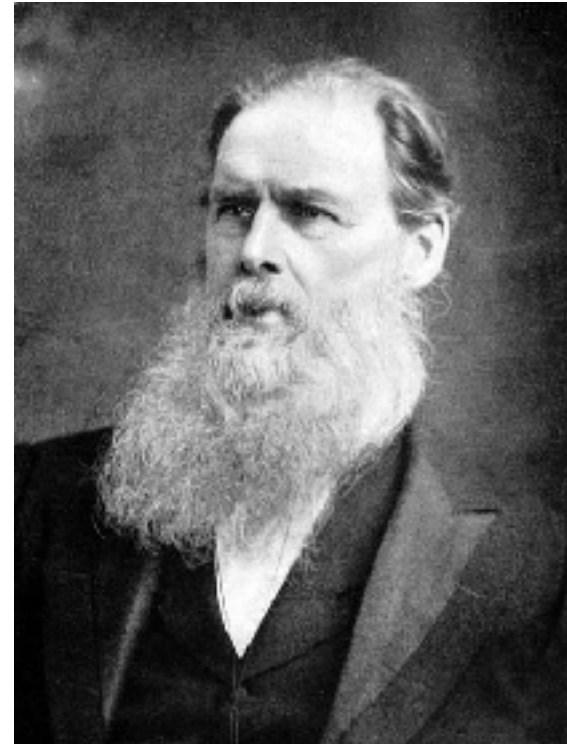
What is ethnography?

- From Greek - *ethnos* - a tribe, or ethnic group (culture).
- *Graphos* - to draw or write.
- Ethnography is to do with “writing culture.”
- Aim is usually to produce a monograph, or *ethnographic text*.



A brief history of anthropology

- Nineteenth century anthropologists - E.B. Tylor (1832-1917), J.G. Frazer (1854-1941), R.R. Marrett (1866-1943).
- Armchair anthropology - reliant on the reports of explorers and missionaries.
- Largely influenced by Darwinian evolution - social and cultural evolution - *developmentalism*.
- This is still ethnography - they are still writing about culture.



Fieldwork

- It wasn't until the twentieth century that anthropology became a field-based discipline.
- Largely influenced by the work of Polish-British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), and American ethnologist Franz Boas (1858-1942).
- It is from the work of Boas that we get the framework of *cultural relativism*, and from Malinowski the methodology of *participant observation* (Barnard, 2000, p. 69-70).



Malinowski

- “What is...this ethnographer’s magic, by which he is able to evoke the real spirit of the natives, the true picture of tribal life?...success can only be obtained by a patient and systematic application of a number of rules of common sense and well-known scientific principles...first of all...the student must possess real scientific aims, and know the values and criteria of modern ethnography. Secondly, he ought to...live right among the natives. Finally, he has to apply a number of special methods of collecting, manipulating and fixing his evidence.”

(Malinowski, 2014 [1922], p. 5).

- Even at this early stage, there is recognition of a balancing act between academic theory and methodology and living ‘right among the natives.’
- How do we do both? Is it possible?



The end of evolutionism...

- Through participant observation the old anthropological schemes of Tylor, Frazer and Marett were found to be lacking.
- No longer “primitive” societies - complex cultures, modern humans, advanced.
- Racist, colonial and evolutionist models challenged by participation in, and engagement with, other cultures.*



* Though Malinowski's private fieldwork diaries famously revealed that he was not quite free from these attitudes (Malinowski, 1989). He sought to excise his personal feelings from his ethnographic writing - detached observer.

Reflexivity.

Participant Observation

- “In participant observation you thus participate in the life of your study community or participants, behave according to their norms and values, and adopt a certain social role (e.g. as a student, guest or carer), while you maintain sufficient distance to observe the situation”

(Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020, p. 181).

- In my own research I participated in the role of “sitter” during seances, and on a couple of occasions as “medium.”



Positionality in Fieldwork

- Hennink, Hutter & Bailey point out that it is important to think about our position in the field before and after our research:
- How do I enter the community and introduce myself to community members?
- What are the possible questions that the group/community may ask me?
- What will they think of me and how will they react to my presence?
- What were my personal impressions when I started the observation? What are my personal impressions of them after the observation?

(2020, p. 191).



Diaries and Field Notes

- There are many different ways of keeping track of observations.
- Diaries and field notes are the most obvious.
- Hennink, Hutter & Bailey make a distinction between notes and diaries:

Field diary: “A written record of the the researcher’s own thoughts, reactions and interpretations”

Field notes: “A written record of the people, places and activities observed by the researcher” (2020, p. 327).

- Record as much detail as possible.
- Can also be supplemented by photographs, audio and video recordings, etc.



Strengths and Weaknesses

- Rich ethnographic detail.
- Understand practices, beliefs and experiences in their social, cultural and lived context.
- Can be incorporated with other approaches - e.g. mixed methods - to build a “thick description.”
- Can be challenging - emotionally and physically.
- Can be confusing and chaotic.
- What about the dangers of “going native”?
- Subjective biases.



When things get weird...

- “...there are times when an ethnographer involved in an event of ultimate concern to the subjects of her work goes deeply into an experience herself - something which at least may be said to parallel theirs” (Turner, 1992, p. 1).
- What do we do with this kind of “subjective” data?



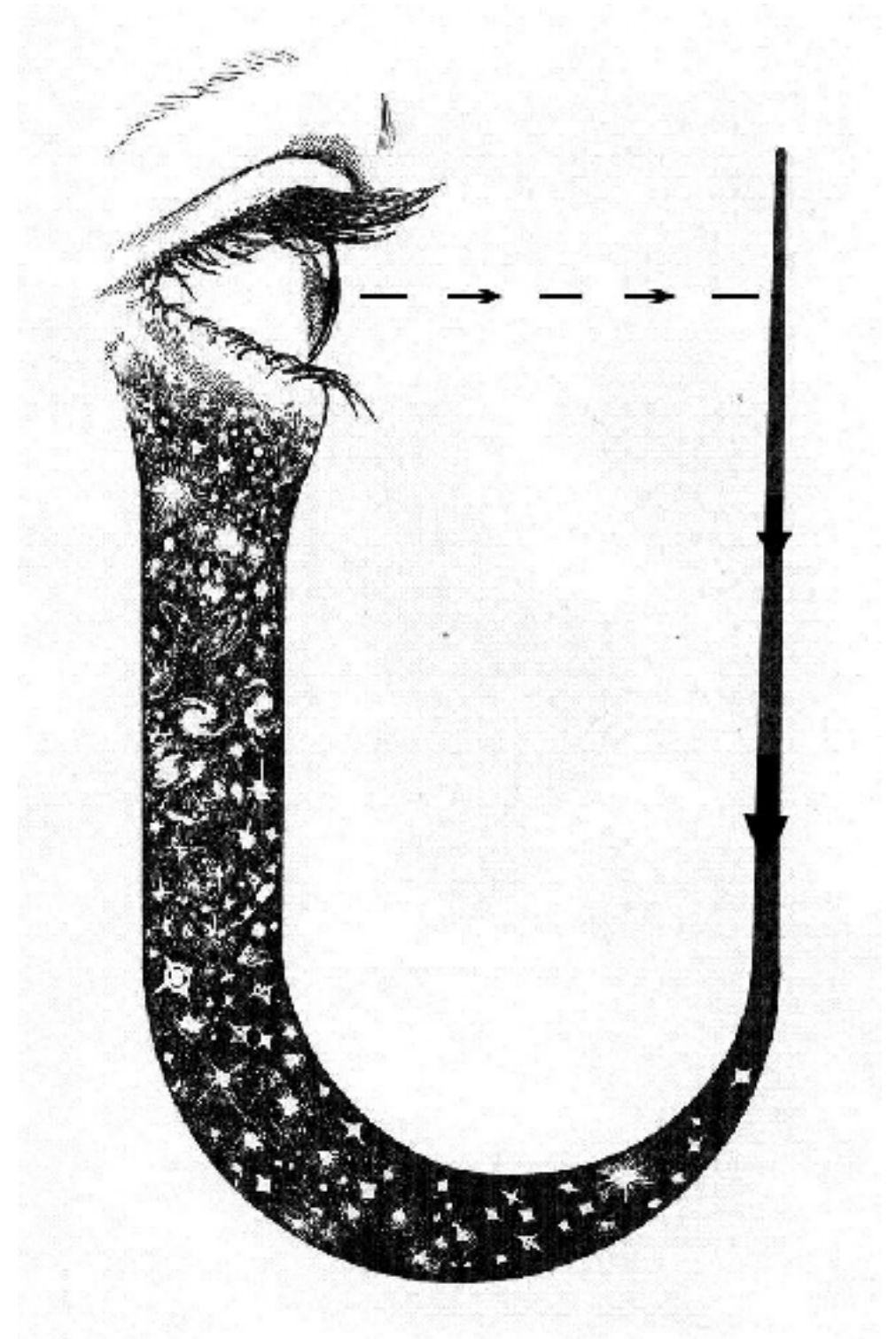
What is autoethnography?

- Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011) explain that:

“Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)...”

(2011, p. 273).

- What can our own “subjective” perceptions and experiences bring to our understanding of the group we are researching?



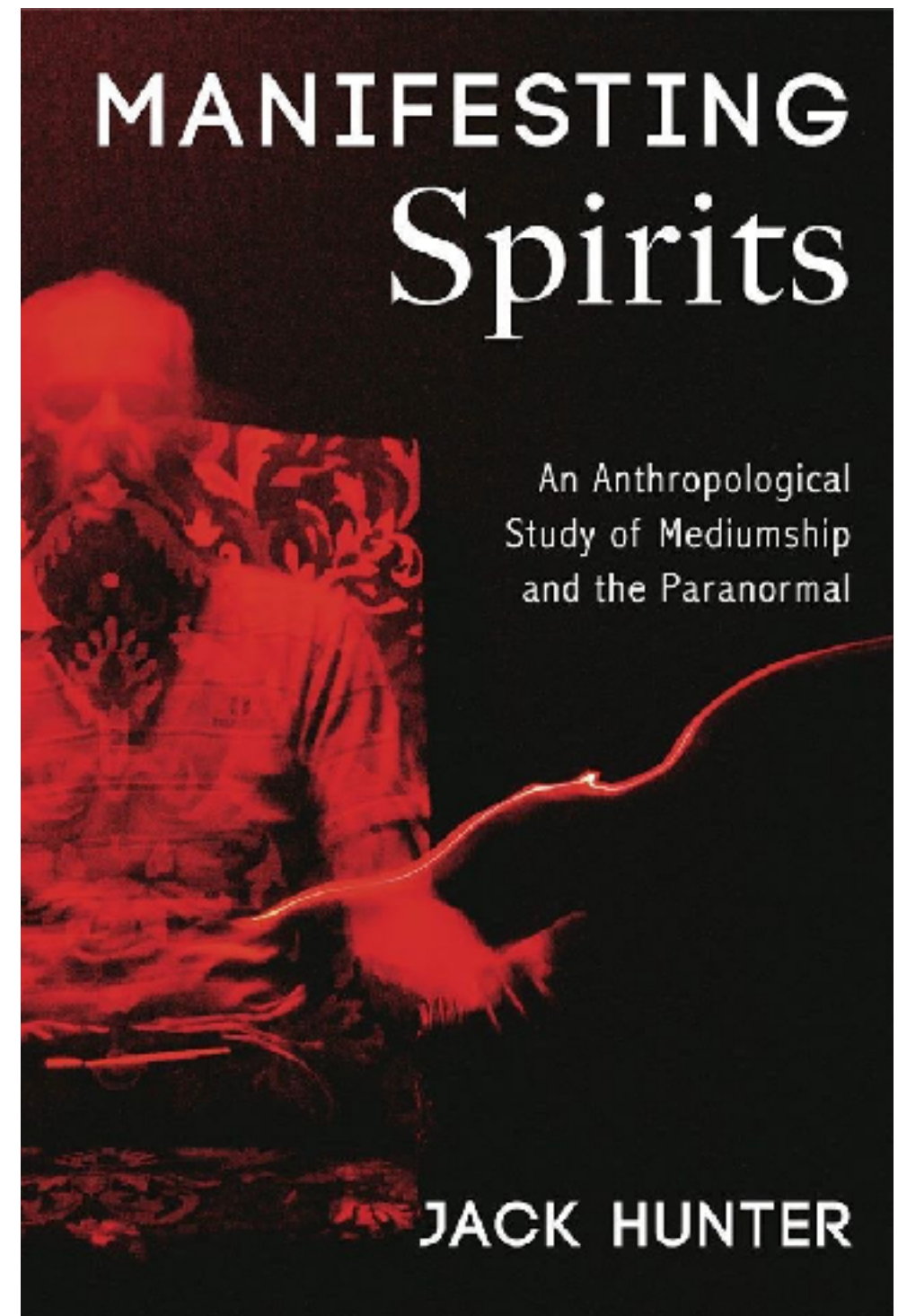
Ihamba

- “In his 1968 book, Victor Turner wrote a long account and analysis of the Ihamba ritual, discussing its social context, the psychological state of the patient and the psychological skill of the Ndembu doctor, the social reintegration achieved by the lengthy curative process, and the symbols...the ethnography of ritual was usually presented as if it had been witnessed from the outside” (Turner, 1992, p. 2).
- “...thirty one years after...I returned to the same area...and attended two more of these rituals. In the second one I participated instead of merely witnessing. At the climax of the second one, to my surprise, I saw with my own eyes a large afflicting substance, some six inches across, emerge from the body of the patient under the doctor’s hands. It happened at the moment when the participation of the whole group became total” (Turner, 1992, p. 2).
- “...the two rituals of Ihamba affected me personally in a way that they had not done before, culminating in the spirit experience; this event was unique for me and shed new light on my research. It was then that I knew that my conclusions would have to be different from those of most African research” (Turner, 1992, p. 2).



My own fieldwork...

- Autoethnographic descriptions of my own experiences during seances - written up shortly after the event in my fieldnotes.
- “Eventually, after a short while of uneventful meditation, I felt my hands begin to tingle as they rested on the arms of the chair, and my heart rate began to quicken. It started to feel as though I was going to lose control of my body, as though I was on the verge of fainting or passing out, though still physically sitting comfortably in the chair. Gradually I felt as though I was becoming distanced from my physical body, as though I (the conscious “me”) was somehow sitting just behind my own body. At the point when I felt most distanced from my physical form I heard Christine, the circle leader, say that she sensed a presence standing by me, a male presence that wanted to communicate. This unsettled me, because I too sensed an unusual, invisible though tangible presence to my left. I felt on the verge of losing control of my body. I panicked. I swore. I opened my eyes and snapped myself back into the room. I felt light-headed, and my heart was racing. I had to regain composure, calm down, and reassure myself that everything was OK. The group laughed.”
- Gave me an appreciation of the *experiential dimension* and *processes* of mediumship development that could not have been achieved in any other way.



Intersubjective entry

- This experience was for me what the anthropologist Zeljko Jokic called a “point of inter-subjective entry” (Jokic, 2008, p. 36) into the “lifeworld” of developing mediums.
- Jokic’s own paper includes auto ethnographic accounts of his experiences with the psychoactive snuff Yopo amongst the Yanomami in the Orinoco Valley, Venezuela.
- A shared experience that helps to make sense of the culture.



Learning to see what the natives see...

- Edith Turner argues that we, as researchers, must “learn to see what the Native sees” (1993, p. 11) - this is not the same as “going native.”
- As Malinowski suggested, we can bring “real scientific aims” to the table, and apply auto-ethnographic approaches in combination with other methods (e.g. ethnography, interviews, questionnaires) to make sense of the lifeworld under study.
- Autoethnographic insights can be a valuable addition to objective ethnographic observation.



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