

## **'What are We in Fieldwork for?'** **Ethics and Politics of Ethnographic Research**

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*"With my own background I am unable to do  
what so many researchers do—just study and leave."*

Leo Alting von Geusau

**T**he practice of ethnographic fieldwork is first experienced as a social intervention before it is transformed into a textual invention. Fieldworkers do not only work *in* the field, however the field is understood; they also *work* it. In the process of inserting themselves into a community or accompanying a group in their movement they also encounter, delight in, collide with, adjust to, miss or misunderstand other people's actions and reactions. They impact on the lives of the people involved in their study perhaps as much as those people transform the researchers' views of things. Fieldworkers then move almost inevitably from the already complex participant observation to an even more entangled, often multistranded, partisan participation (Gupta & Ferguson 1997; Marcus 1995). This seems especially true in studying nascent social movements in the context of contested development projects (Gardner & Lewis 1996; Albert 1997) as the following reflection on a Philippine case wishes to show.

### **From Narmada to Apo Sandawa**

This reflection on the political and practical dimensions of fieldwork started when I met Medha Patkar who was the leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan in India. From London, I took a short one-month visit between July and August in 1994 to the area of the Bhils who were among those affected by the Narmada Dam Project. Medha Patkar's position posed a challenge to me. Exploring her Hindu and Gandhian tradition, she moved among the tribal groups as speaker and chanter, sometimes as cook and counsellor, as trainer and translator. Among those supporting

the movement were book writers, some of whom were themselves vending their own books on top of cars during rallies.

I thought that there must be a way of doing research without always having to draw a very sharp line between academic rigor and social relevance, and that if pressed to make a preference, one could go further by considering a legitimate people's movement more important than one's research. As Medha Patkar argues, "general writing on paradigms of development, even alternative development... would not change the world and the exploited systems." The necessary thing to do was to commit oneself to a real community, "like staking a territory as your own by planting your flag there, by capturing a symbol and shaking it for all its worth" (Patkar 1992, 278).

In the Philippines, Virgilio Enriquez pioneered a search for an ethical, relevant and culturally appropriate approach to social science research (1994b). One can argue that his call for a "liberating" research practice (Enriquez 1992 and 1994a) ran the risk of equating the social with the national project (Perterra 1997, 11-12.20; 1992, 43). But I resonate with the way he stretched the meaning of "indigenous facilitation research." Whereas participatory research assumes equality between the researcher and the researched, *indigenous facilitation research* "goes farther by recognising the superior role of the participant or the culture bearer as the one who determines the articulated and implied limits of the research enterprise". In this framework, the facilitative researcher becomes more of a "morale booster, networker, or at most a consultant who confers about the research problem with the community who are, in this case, the real researchers" (Enriquez 1994b, 59).<sup>2</sup>

And just before going to the Philippines to start my fieldwork in 1995, I visited a Dutch anthropologist in Chiang Mai. Leo Alting von Geusau has built up a library on the Akha. In the short weeks that I was with him, I learned how, along the way, his scholarly work became inseparable from his commitment to the people he studied. He explained, "I discovered on the one hand, a wealthy, enormous complexity of the Akha culture. On the other hand, I discovered the many problems they have. I felt committed, 'very involved' (Alting von Geusau 1985, 44).

This involvement resonates with the words of Dell Hymes, who recognized that "by virtue of its subject matter, anthropology is unavoidably a political and ethical discipline, not merely an empirical speciality" (1974, 48). Our simply being there among the people we study already has consequences, over and above the textual production which results from that experience. Nancy Scheper-Hughes puts it more

emphatically: "We cannot delude ourselves into believing that our presence leaves no trace, no impact on those whose lives we dare intrude" (1992, 25; 1995). So, for better or for worse, wittingly or unwittingly, the practice of fieldwork places the ethnographer in a relative position of power, the handling of which calls for an ethical and disciplinary reflection (Gledhill 1994, 217; cf. Kahn et al 1998).

Anthropological reflections in the 1980s promised to provide insights on this notion of practice (Ortner 1984; Marcus & Clifford 1986, etc.). This project unfortunately narrowed down its focus on the poetics of representation (cf. Fardon 1990; Pels & Salemink 1994, 5.16ff; cf. Denzin 1996). Apparently, the new ethnography neglected the "social and political processes almost completely, not necessarily by denying them salience, but by backgrounding them to questions of representations, construction and deconstruction" (Gledhill 1994, 225; also Scheper-Hughes 1992, 24). The concept of practice as a set of activities, strategies and social intervention was "relegated to the back burner" despite its relevance to issues of development and social movements (Gardner & Lewis 1996, 40).

The more recent studies call for flexibility in diversifying our knowledge from different field positions (Giri 1998; Gupta & Ferguson 1997; Clifford 1997; Hastrup & Fog Olwig 1997). They call, too, for reflexivity and 'self-awareness' (Pels & Salemink 1994) in the ways we as fieldworkers "follow" our subjects and their movements (Marcus 1995), or 'tame' them to become good informants (Hobart 1996). Finally, they call for "reflection" on how our "fieldwork relationship meant to our research subjects" (Paine 1998, 134; Ginsburg 1997, 140, 123).<sup>3</sup> All this suggests that anthropology stands to gain by seeking to combine reflexivity and relevance in making fieldwork itself as a time, space, and infrastructure for people's self-assessment and empowerment.

I carried similar ideas and models of solidarity during my own fieldwork in Mount Apo Sandawa, site of the geothermal power plant which was constructed by the Philippine government and was opposed by environmentalists and advocates for the indigenous people's rights. Although I was in contact with the protesters as well as the government, I found myself studying and working with a small Manobo social movement that was critical of both camps. My Manobo hosts became key figures of this new indigenous movement. The group, called Tuddok, wanted cultural regeneration and ancestral domain claim. And for this aim, they saw my research as a possible ally. Without formal contract, but with constant assessment of our roles, a partnership developed between my cultural research and their cultural movement. My research then served

as a resource for the movement just as the movement provided substance for my research. To understand this, we need a general background on how the Mount Apo environment has been politicized.

### Geothermal Project and Political Protest

Burdened with debts and wanting to catch up with Asian tiger economies, the Philippine government decided to speed up the exploration of its indigenous sources of energy. In 1987 the government-owned Philippine National Oil Company (PNOC) drilled two exploratory wells for the 250 MWe Geothermal Project at the heart of the remaining rainforest of Mt. Apo, the highest mountain in the Philippines. This home of the endangered Philippine Eagle is included in the 1982 United Nations List of National Parks and Equivalent Reserves, and is listed as one of the heritage sites of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. More importantly, perhaps, Mt. Apo is considered the ancestral territory of the Manobos and the Bagobos.

A wave of protest emerged, starting from a small tribal organization and individual government officials. The protest intensified with the participation of big environmentalist groups and Catholic and mainstream Protestant church activists, supported by advocates not only in Manila but also in Britain, the Netherlands, Japan, and the United States. This led to a decade of debate on issues ranging from the legal status of the project to its environmental consequences and its cultural impact on the resident tribes who claim Mt. Apo as their ancestral domain (Broad & Cavanagh 1993, Mincher 1992).

In 1989, twenty-one datus from nine tribal communities around Mt. Apo performed a *Dyandi*, a historic blood pact, vowing to "defend Mt. Apo to the last drop of our blood." This was followed by a counter-ritual called *Pamaas*, sponsored this time by PNOC, to dispel the cosmic effect of the Dyandi curse. This conflict of rituals dramatized the violent exchange between the government military and the Communist New People's Army, which claimed lives from both camps. A huge multisectoral coalition, called Task Force Apo Sandawa (TFAS), spearheaded the fight against the PNOC's "development aggression" and coordinated the local and international opposition (Rodil 1993, Broad & Cavanagh 1993, Durning 1992, 5, Tabak 1990)

As a result, PNOC operation was temporarily suspended. The World Bank and the ExIm Bank of Japan withdrew their funding commitment.

PNOC's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) had to be redone. Its staff had to reexamine the company's policy and improve its technology.

But in 1991, PNOC submitted a comprehensive 10-volume *Environmental Impact Study* which included a module on the sociocultural dimension of the project and its response to the legal and environmental complaints of the opposition. This won for the company the much-coveted Environmental Compliance Certificate (ECC) from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). Other factors also led to the granting of the ECC. Extreme droughts rendered the existing hydroelectric power plants incapable of supplying enough energy. The result was long months of daily 8-hour power outages. The Gulf War also triggered insecurity on the part of government planners who warned against too much dependence on the Arab oil-producing countries (Lamberte & Yap 1991).

Appeals against the granting of the ECC were dismissed by the Supreme Court. A special Presidential Proclamation carved out from the 72,000-hectare national park the 701 hectares of the project as geothermal reservation. In 1992, President Ramos signed the Memorandum of Agreement between the government and the representative organizations of the affected communities thus sealing the legal status of the project.

Meanwhile, PNOC was winning the battle of representation. It had succeeded in presenting itself as a "nature-friendly" company. It even received environmental awards from government and private sectors for its *Environmental Impact Study*. In terms of policy, the company moved from simply providing mitigating measures to winning social acceptability and even championing environmental and social sustainability (De Jesus 1996).

But national and international advocacy against the power project, especially in London and the Netherlands, continued even up to the mid-1990s (e.g., PRC 1994, Broeckman, et al 1996). In Mindanao, the local Catholic clergy kept the fight by continuing to denounce the project in its pastoral messages and radio homilies. The annual commemoration of the Dyandi blood pact dwindled in attendance, but a significant number of protest groups still maintained the hardline stance of "no compromise" with the power company.

Existing researches and documents tended to reduce the actors in the field into two: the project proponent and its loyal opponent. The former was learning from and winning over, but not quite beating, the latter. Those who did not fall within these categories were not considered actors. This was clear, for example, in the thesis written by a PNOC

manager who studied in Britain. Castro, who helped create the PNOC office for "dealing with public opposition," did not discuss those who were in between "since we do not expect severe complications" from them (Castro 1996, 11). Castro's analysis is valuable for the understanding of the company's discourse and practice. Her lack of fieldwork, however, prevented her from seeing other contextual actors who might not be as disturbing as the project protesters, but would later become quite crucial in their emergent roles.

### (En)Countering Culturelessness

From initial readings, I reckoned that the controversy surrounding the Mt. Apo Geothermal Project would make it difficult for me to enter the village. So armed with permits from the Provincial Governor, the Office of Southern Cultural Communities, the Municipal Mayor, and the Chief of Police, I approached the Barangay Captain. While he appreciated my research, he asked me to explain to the Barangay Council the following week. The Barangay Council expressed fears regarding my stay in the village. It asked me to come back the following week to explain my research project to the Tribal Council. The Tribal Council, which included the resident Protestant pastors and the paramilitary personnel, also raised a number of issues attendant to my proposed residence in their area. From the open discussion and from the informal conversations that followed, the following arguments led the Council to suspend its decision and to call instead a special session of the Tribal Assembly:

First, being a priest, I was automatically identified with the activist local clergy that had been in the forefront of protest against the State-owned power project. Since the protest movement was associated with the Communists, they feared that if I stayed in the area, the place might get militarized again.

Secondly, being a Catholic priest, my presence could be divisive of the village that was predominantly under evangelical Protestant churches. The stigma of being a harbinger of the fatal "666" from the Book of Revelation had never been totally erased even up to this time.

Thirdly, being a Tagalog from Manila, I could also end up getting their lands, as the settlers from the north had supposedly done since the war. The fact that I was born in the same island of Mindanao did not help.

Finally, what do people get from researchers, anyway? They take pictures, interview old men, and report about them to faraway places.

Apparently, they had bitter experiences with researchers both from the supporters of the project as well as from its opponents who used them only for their own agenda.

Later, the Tribal Assembly was convened. They decided that I could visit but not reside in the village. In the process, I got to learn about their political institutions and practices. Their questions revealed their fears, which in turn gave hints about their history.

It dawned on me that within this Protestant Manobo village penetrated by a government project and hurt by the consequences of political and environmental activism, this dual identity of being a Catholic priest and anthropologist also meant double access to both knowledge and power which these people had all the right to be cautious about. Looking back, the rejection of my stay in the village was the people's way of establishing some kind of a damage control to my potential for harm (cf. Hobart 1996).

The most disturbing question, however, came from the sidelines. "But Father," asked Apo Ambolugan, a gentle elder in the village, "why do you still want to study us? We have no more culture here." This question really hit me hard. It betrayed the state of collective low self-esteem of the tribe.

He continued. "Why us? Why not the T'bolis of Lake Sebu? Or the Matigsalugs of Bukidnon? They still have *agongs* there. They still dance. And they still wear our native clothes. We have nothing left here."

This avowal of what may be called "culturelessness" (cf. Rosaldo 1989, 197; 1988) haunted me for the rest of my fieldwork. James Eder (1993, 131), working among the Bataks, also found a parallel "deculturation" "the single most vexing problem" he encountered in his own research in the field.

Apo Ambolugan's statement could just be an oblique way of driving me away. But he was not alone in harboring this feeling. There was, indeed, a prevailing feeling of *kabiubos* or collective low self-esteem among the Manobos, not simply in relation to the Visayan settlers but to other tribes as well.

Part of this feeling marginalized is due to the marginality of the land itself. The terrain is mostly steep and sloping. The climate is too cold for the lucrative fruit crops like durian and mangrove. Bananas are plagued by many kinds of diseases. Other possibilities like strawberry and cut flowers are still at the experimental stage. The only regular source of income is soft broom production using tiger grass or *tabiti*. Coffee would have been good if they had not been abandoned in favor of PNOC employment.

The PNOC road promised access to big markets for the natives' products; unfortunately more goods come up to the village than go downtown.

The original center of the tribal community, an open space that served as a basketball court and cultural arena, was abandoned when the new PNOC road was constructed. Many houses transferred to the side of the new road, thus symbolically and literally splitting the village to give way to the huge trucks that connect the geothermal plant to Kidapawan poblacion.

In the genealogy of the Apao, the first ancestor remembered by the local people was himself a poor man. He was so poor he had to borrow garden tools from the Tagabawas on the Davao side of Mt. Apo. The name Apao itself means a tiny flea. Apao left no legacy of handicrafts or huge dwellings. But Apao had at least five wives and many descendants. And they like talking together, and they have dreams. For at least two people, these were enough to start with in regenerating their culture. And for academic as well as personal reasons, I decided to share my research with their project.

### Simple Steps, Complex Moves

I had the courage to say to Apo Ambolugan that I knew they had springs of energy because on 5 October 1995, on my very first visit to Sayaban, I met the two would-be leaders of a gentle cultural regeneration of the tribe. They were the cousins Beting Umpan Colmo and Pastor Tano Umpan Bayawan. Even before I arrived, they had already dreamt of "regenerating" their culture.

"We start with a family reunion," Tano and Beting explained. "We envision a lively tribal culture. But since we are not in any influential position to do so—we are not the barangay, we are not datu, we are not wealthy—we will start with our family or clan. The Umpan clan. If we could bind ourselves together, and then later play the agong, and dance as a family, then we can perhaps be the model for the rest of the clans to follow."

It sounded extremely modest. But considering the entropic situation as I was beginning to understand it, it made realistic sense.

My instinct told me that this was the kind of movement I was looking for. In the midst of a general social paralysis, here was a source of energy. They told me they did not want to become involved with and be manipulated by NGOs who present themselves as alternative to the powerful government and development projects. They wanted a movement of their own, addressing the tribal situation according to their own analysis

and interpretation. Theirs would not be an action directly or primarily against PNOC, although it might have to reach that point later. It would have something to do with their dignity as a people. It would touch on the land issue, but the first priority was culture.

Tano and Beting came from slightly different backgrounds. Tano Bayawan, in his late thirties, was a pastor of the Church of Christ. His work as a Bible translator under the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) was for him a spiritual devotion and a service to his tribe. But SIL was not addressing the development of their culture to which he was equally committed. He wanted a book written about their tribe.

Like Tano, Beting was also in her thirties. But unlike her cousin, Beting had been away from the tribe for many years. Her Visayan father already had children when he settled in the nearby Muaan. Her Manobo mother died when she was six. She was reared by her Visayan half-sisters who, aside from inheriting more lands, attempted to instil in her a disgust for her tribe. Her other sister by her native mother, who had more experience with the tribals, later became an outspoken opposition of PNOC. Beting worked with a human rights law office and with a foundation for young victims of war. She received a German scholarship for a college degree in psychology which, for some reason, she did not complete. After seeing the ways of NGOs, and the situation of her fellow natives, she decided to go back to her tribe. It was just in time that I met her accidentally in my first jeepney ride to their place. She was very articulate in Visayan, Tagalog and English. But she needed to brush up on her Manobo.

When the Tribal Assembly rejected my stay, I decided to concentrate on their movement. They welcomed my research as possible assistance to their cause. In what follows, I shall offer some instances illustrative of the overlapping projects of research and movement during fieldwork. Like Ginsberg (1997, 140), I want to present this "not as self-justification but as part of perennial discussion of the role of scholarship in processes of social transformation."

1. Family, Movement, and Ironies of Fieldwork . . . From the time we decided on a kind of partnership, Beting and Tano started listing down their relatives. The process so excited their relatives that, to their surprise, the planned clan reunion was held in three months' time rather than in two years' time.

There was one problem during the preparation. Since they had no single percussion left, I was asked if I knew anyone who could lend them an agong and a set of *kulintang* (brass drums). Because I was not allowed to live in the village, I had to stay in the parish at the town center. Through

my new contacts in the parish church, I was able to convince a Manobo family, already residing in the lowland, to lend their heirloom.

On 5-7 January 1996, the whole clan of Ayon Umpan gathered in Muaan, the legendary origin-center of migration among the tribal communities in Kidapawan. It broke the ice of lethargic existence. They revived an old ritual called *Pakaa't Kallo*, which literally meant feeding the tools of the farm. A number of young Manobos recited their poems in the vernacular. These poems were created during a poetry workshop we held a few days before the reunion. The family marked the grave of two relatives who drowned in the river. They also invented a new ritual of giving native names to those who had only "Christian" names. A guest priestess improvised the naming ritual out of traditional elements like bamboo, water, flower and comb. And where did they get their native names? From *our* unfinished genealogy that Beting presented on the table. The presence of the musical instruments spelled a big difference. They were surprised to recall the many tunes they feared they had forgotten. There was joy in being able to dance again. Then the children took over the drums when their elders got tired.

Towards the end of the *Kalivunggan* (celebration) they selected officers for the new organization, called Tuddok to Kalubbaran ni Apo Ayon Umpan (Pillars of the Descendants of Elder Ayon Umpan). Beting, my research partner, was appointed leader of the Tuddok. Then they formed committees to handle concerns like financing marriages, assisting the sick members of the family, establishing communal farm, and sending children to school.

They also created a special committee to work on their ancestral domain claim. The committee reflected a recent concern. They argued that regenerating their culture meant, among other things, the revival of dancing. But how could they continue to dance if they were not secure in their land?

Legally, there was an opening for this plan. They had heard of the Departmental Administrative Order No. 2 (DAO No. 2), which provides a detailed procedure whereby a tribal community could present a claim to their ancestral domain. Once the claim was validated, the government could grant a certificate of its recognition. Tuddok started working for this recognition.

Some leaders of the protest groups dismissed the Tuddok initiative for being clannish. They wanted to help them so that their narrow vision of the Mt. Apo problem could expand to include the bigger issues of development aggression, biodiversity, and ethnocide.

Tuddok leaders argued, however, that the issue-based protest campaign against the powerful geothermal project had done nothing to stop it. That type of movement had not improved the lives of the affected tribal community. They wanted to assert their self-determination not only in the face of the PNOC geothermal company, but also of the NGO community. In her written reflection, Beting said that Tuddok aimed to explore a path of development that was an "alternative to the alternative".

At this point, it was clear how the new group was opening up a new space for their participation in the making of their contribution to history. The consolidation of the clan, the marking of places for the living and the dead, the invention of a naming ritual, the resourcing of their genealogy for the new generation, the re-playing of the agong and the re-animation of the body in dancing—these were all micro-processes charged with the Manobo agency.

In this light, would the fieldworker's facilitation in the loan of musical instruments be considered a breach of professional standard of objectivity or a form of militant interventionism? If in earlier fieldwork, extracting artefacts—by buying or borrowing or simply receiving as gifts—was considered part of fieldwork practice, does working the other way round that problematic?

2. Mobilizing Bloodlines . The movement that chose to start from the family and the body had to encounter the trial precisely there—in the weak family attending to a sick body. Ettok, the seventeen-year-old poet-artist, was sick. He worked part time with the geothermal company to earn his allowance for his secondary education. But he came home one day with infected marrow in his left thigh. After the long discernment whether it was caused by mountain spirits or by company chemicals, they finally decided to bring him to the hospital—in the faraway Davao City.

Ettok's case became complicated. Ettok had to undergo two operations. His daily antibiotics and food alone cost the equivalent of the family income in one week. Ettok's father thought of selling a piece of land. In the midst of their struggle to claim their ancestral domain, they were sometimes pressured to do what they hated most in their forefathers' mistakes.

My fieldwork identity also had to be reshaped. At one point, the PNOC Community Relations Officer needed a priest to bless their new office building inside the power plant. Most of the employees, he argued, were Catholics. The parish priest found different alibis to evade it. The task fell on me because, as a researcher, I was supposed to be in a more neutral position. But what could blessing the PNOC premises mean to

NGOs, to activist clergy, and to Tuddok members themselves? With the consent of my Tuddok friends, however, I agreed to perform the rite and even managed to drop a line during my homily which, according to some employees, disturbed some company personnel. After presiding at the liturgy, I brought the collected money to Ettok. The managers assured me that the money did not come from the company but from the Catholic employees themselves. The gesture was to save me from possible rumors.

At another instance, Beting and I decided to approach the manager of Oxbow, the Canadian company constructing the power plant for the PNO. The Canadian manager twice visited me in the parish church and I remembered that he offered to help the tribal people in the area. Beting knew that the opposition groups, her sister included, would not have approved of asking help from the "enemy". But the donation of the Oxbow manager—who said he had 25 percent Indian blood—supplied Ettok's medicine for a precious few days.

Ettok's importance to the new cultural movement could not be measured. Although he would not normally be considered a movement entrepreneur, his attitude towards his sickness, not to mention his artistic gift itself, inspired its leaders. Beting, for example, almost left the Tuddok movement during one of her deliberations on the value of their cultural struggle. "Was it worth her sacrifice of personal search for a stable relationship?" During one telephone conversation, she confessed that the sight of Ettok sketching Manobo scenes in the Davao hospital energized her. Ettok once borrowed a wheelchair and started roaming around the hospital, talking to fellow patients and their nurses. People flocked to his drawings. Among his drawings stood out Manobo old folks playing the traditional musical instruments. Beting realized "how silly of her to brood over petty things". There was Ettok, the supposedly lame man, arousing in people new reasons to go on.

Ettok's hospitalization had certainly sharpened the Manobos' sense of financial poverty, but at the same time it dramatized their capacity for cultural integrity.

I had scanty notes on these episodes because I was not certain during fieldwork whether they were just time-consuming, altruistic, emotionally-draining distractions from the "real" research (Gardner & Lewis 1996; Gledhill 1994, 218). I include these details, however, to point that social movements or, better still, cultural struggles in face of development, involve not only big mass rallies, but also minute practices and processes of almost invisible self-assertion, improvisation and production of meanings (Melucci 1989; Escobar 1992). In these micro-processes and

micro-spaces, even the "non-entrepreneurs" (cf. Hilhorst, forthcoming) of the movement play significant roles. They also reveal that neither disciplinary distancing nor principled militancy suffice to explain the formation of the research relationship or the direction, meaning, intensity or pacing of a movement. Strategies and principles, agency and passivity, objectivity and militancy are all constantly renegotiated in face of unforeseen episodes.

3. Rootworks and Paperworks . The more visible struggle of claiming ancestral domain made Tuddok busy during most of the succeeding months. In claiming a portion of Mt. Apo National Park, Tuddok, and later Apao, had to contend with a rival Manobo claimant from a neighboring village. The contest on the rightful land claim required Tuddok to present a more convincing local history and ethnographic evidence that had been submitted by the other datu. The rudimentary history and fragmentary genealogy of the resident clan taken so far from individual interviews had many "gaps". They were worried that the stories of the elders would not be coherent when the time for public hearing came.

Remembering what I had picked up from the *Obo-Manobo Phrasebook* published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, I explored the use of the word *kodpotongkooy* (SIL 1994, 30-31). *Kodpotongkooy* simply means talking to one another. This informal discussion could range from visiting kin to sharing *itulan* (history which is true) to *ponguman* (legends and therefore not necessarily true) and to *kalivungan*. I asked whether it could also be used to check genealogies and collate historical accounts. That discussion itself became a *kodpotongkooy*. They then thought of gathering all the elders who have been interviewed already, plus others who have not been consulted. But to attract as many participants as possible, they called Apo Salumay, via the provincial radio station public service, to lead their series of *kodpotongkooy*. Apo Salumay, a highly respected former village chieftain of Sayaban, but who had been away for the past 27 years, became the primary historian of the group.

It had since then become customary to call *kodpotongkooy* whenever the group wanted to discuss a problem or make any decision. This to my mind was one of the most important sequences during the research-movement partnership. Not that *kodpotongkooy* was not there before. As a matter of fact, this informal way of discussion constituted the most common way of exchanging views and making collective decisions. But its new application in what could be called a 'discourse formation' was, according to Datu Atawan, a source of *konokkaan* or strength. From the

casual conversations with people on the road, to visiting relatives and feeling deeply for them, to very formal caucus of elders, people could get strength. They can speak, they can discuss, they can debate, they can argue. Somehow the planning for family reunion and the listing down of the genealogy paved the way for the formation of a local discourse, an alternative to the government rhetoric and especially to the silent transcripts of the tribal people themselves.

In kodpotongkooy, as in other oral history exercise (e.g., Mace 1998), speaking out and talking together, in opening spaces for a new discourse to develop, the tribe comes to life again. This is where the old men are given importance. This is where dreams are accepted as a source of knowledge. This is where plans are made real. This is also occasion for bodily performances as well as the school for audienceship. This is where the tribe is very much itself (Racelis 1999).

In contrast, so much in the process of development conspires to silence them. Authentic assistance, it appears to me now, will have to touch on the multiplication of space for the blossoming of their local discourse "facilitating in finding their voices, rather than speaking on behalf of them" (Gardner & Lewis 1996, 47-48). To some extent, this ethnography shares in the search for *konokkan* (strength, energy) by entering into intimate kodpotongkooy with the actors in the field as well as in this text.

This upbeat assessment of collective discourse formation, however, should be tempered by the complexity of local politics. When the Tuddok land claim was gaining momentum, some local managers of the power company called the village officials to a secret meeting on village leadership in ancestral domain claim. As a result, a local leader took some of our documents without permission. Tuddok had to send a formal complaint to the PNOC office in Manila to stop the secret company intervention in the legal process.

4. Towards an Alternative to the Alternative Movement . Tuddok's assertion of self-determination was put to the test when it expanded in numbers as well as in activities. Their meager finances, reinforced only by my tight research budget, could not cope with their growing needs, even just to provide coffee for meetings which have become more frequent. I broached the idea of opening their movement to some potential supporters. Their initial vehemence to the idea made me feel guilty for introducing the topic. They did not want to have anything to do with NGOs and other funding agencies.

Beting explained this stance in an abridged article sarcastically entitled "Our Simple Story," which she published ironically in the newsletter of the protest. "We were considered and looked upon as powerless beings. The people in the alternative movements, therefore, saw that we were in need of their liberating development plans, strategies and projects. Ironically, in this move, we were not viewed as partners but plain 'beneficiaries.'...We may want to correct the misrepresentation of our voices but how can we offend our saviors?" (Colmo, cited in Alejo 2000).

These sharp words find kindred spirit in contemporary literature articulating similar sentiments both at home (cf. Tauli-Corpuz 1993) and abroad (cf. Warren 1997, Benda-Beckmann 1997). Upon serious consideration of the actual predicament, however, the group picked up the suggestion of accepting assistance from outsiders, but only under certain conditions. I summarize these conditions here based on Tuddok documents and practice:

First, donors should not give huge amounts of money. Tribal leaders had been corrupted by money. They believed they were not exempt from this weakness.

Second, donors should not visit them in the area unless they are formally invited. The presence of outside donors in the area triggers the suspicion that the leaders of the movement are getting a lot of money.

Third, donors should not give them seminars. The Tuddok leaders insisted that they were yet trying to discover what they know. Seminars generally created the impression that the speakers knew what was best for the group. It would be difficult to reject the teachings of the seminar teachers if they happened to be their aid-givers, too.

Fourth, donors should not invite them to join coalition groups. These big coalitions generally tended to be dominated by strong groups with political or ideological agenda. The whole network then would be forced to agree to big statements which the likes of Tuddok could not maintain or understand.

Fifth, Tuddok did not want to use or be used by media. They wanted to have control of the representations made of them. Since the media had its own priorities, they refused to accept being objects of advocacy using TV or radio broadcast, or even print media. Along this line, Tuddok also harbored deep suspicion against researchers who needed the people only for data-gathering but had no place for them in doing analysis.

They admitted that these were extremely stringent rules. They beg, however, for a genuine trust in their capacity to discern what they could do by themselves with some help from friends.

Fortunately, an enterprising NGO accepted the challenge. A friend of mine, working for a research NGO, came for a visit. Her visit coincided with celebration for the return of the tribal culture through their newly bought agong. When she returned to the city, she recommended to her NGO to consider assisting Tuddok in its continuing cultural movement and research, but under Tuddok's own terms. Her NGO, the Alternate Forum for Research in Mindanao (AFRIM), adjusted its policies and practices to absorb the conditions of the Tuddok movement seriously. In time, Tuddok also appreciated AFRIM's assistance and formally welcomed it in the community through a simple ritual.

From January 1997 up to the present, AFRIM and Tuddok have been experimenting on this new type of relationship between an extremely sensitive people's movement and an understanding NGO. The result seems good so far. In November 1997, Tuddok, in the name of Apao, filed its petition for their ancestral domain claim covering some 20,000 hectares of forest and farmlands within the Mt. Apo National Park and including the 701 hectares already occupied by the PNOC. While the PNOC project remains in the area, Tuddok now has achieved, in less than three years, a better bargaining position for the people most directly affected by the project—something the protest intervention never quite achieved in a decade.

5. Fieldwork and The Uneasiness Of Research Practice. The following sequence reveals other aspects of the researcher's positionality in the field and how learning from the field could be applied to fieldwork itself.

The geothermal company, in its desire to understand the indigenous culture around the project and its future sites, commissioned a multi-disciplinary sociocultural study of ten indigenous cultural communities around Mt. Apo (Gloria 1997). A group of consultants from different universities gathered together, but the contract was signed by the president of the Davao University run by my fellow Jesuits. The research team leader invited me to attend the presentation of the initial result. The venue was the most luxurious island resort in Davao City. I was grateful for being asked to join the privileged group of government policy makers and academic consultants. But I also had to ask whether they invited any one from the ten communities who were the subject of the multimillion-peso study. They did not. I was told that the research result was strictly for those who would make use of it in policy and planning. The consequent plans would be echoed to the communities later.

Beting and Tano did all they could to be given a place during the consultation. They even sent a fax message to the Manila office of the PNOC. Frustrated, they just had to rely on me to tell them about the controversial conclusions and methodology of the commissioned research. The controversy reached the formal and informal forums of the National Association of Anthropologists in the Philippines (UGAT). The ironic twist was that Tuddok leaders also implicated me in the PNOC research because I was associated with the Jesuit university that conducted the research.

Several months later, in October 1996, it was my turn to present a paper about my ongoing fieldwork to the annual conference of UGAT. Learning from the PNOC experience, I requested the conference organizer to allow Beting and Tano to attend the discussion which was focused, propitiously, on *Indigenous Peoples: Knowledge, Power and Struggles*. At the very opening session, Beting grabbed the microphone, and after introducing herself she said, "I come here to study how you study us." From then on, almost no discussion was closed without Beting's views being heard. Beting stayed behind after the conference to visit the northern tribes. That experience and exposure led to future contacts and networking which proved useful to the succeeding steps undertaken by Tuddok (cf. Tauli-Corpuz 1993; Warren 1997).

More than a year after I left the field, I felt a consultation session with Tuddok was in order. In April-May 1998, I went back to the Philippines aiming to meet not only the Tuddok leaders but also those who initially had problems with my stay in Mt. Apo. Contrary to my expectations, my Tuddok partners felt very awkward with my presence. They also had to meet me in Davao City and not in Mt. Apo because the old accusation of a priest being behind their movement reemerged together with the formation of a new faction within the village. The NGO partner, however, was already accepted in the village. It would not be helpful to the movement if the NGO becomes associated with the priest. The group also had serious division within. I came out of the whole exercise with a more pragmatic, but still realistically hopeful view of the ethics and politics of social research on social movements.

### Between and Beyond Objectivity and Militancy

In the beginning of this essay, I referred to the researchers in the field as fieldworkers. The "largely ignored," "overstretched and under-resourced" field worker, Eric Dudley observes, "must juggle the issues

and strike pragmatic compromises between policies which tend to come to the field in the form of contradictory messages" (1993, 11). To see the researcher in the field not just as ethnographer but also as *de facto* "field worker" might help us understand more fully the significance of focusing on fieldwork practice in its own right.

As such, fieldworkers play different roles, including some not often associated with professional practice. They shift positions at the risk of being haunted by "methodological anxieties" in producing knowledge based on "varying intensities and qualities" (Marcus 1995, 100; cf. Clifford 1997, 219n3; Gupta & Ferguson 1997, 37).

So it is not a matter of choosing between being objective or being militant. To say that we should as much as possible eschew conflictive situations is untenable. This leaves anthropology superficial, not able to confront the basic human predicament that includes hunger, suffering as well as struggle and hope (Hastrup 1993; Kleinman 1997; Gledhill 1994, 217). On the other hand, "too much engagement could be problematic as too little" (Gledhill 1994, 221).<sup>4</sup>

As already noted, it could be time-consuming and emotionally draining such that as Hobart wisely notes, "students who forgot their disciplinary background for a moment and actually got on with the people studied often have terrible trouble textualizing what happened" (1996, 22).

I hasten to iterate some clarificatory points. First, it is important not to reduce this line of action purely as a work of *advocacy*. One temptation is to steal the show from the movement actors (cf. Gledhill 1994, 219). Another temptation is to be fixated with addressing only the outsiders when conveying the result of the research. "What these approaches fail to explore", Burdick laments "is the extent to which certain kinds of claims to ethnographic knowledge may be able to help refine debates and self-critiques within social movements" (Burdick 1995, 363). Even reflexivity could be fruitfully shared between the researcher and the researched (Rudie 1993). Fieldwork should have some internal, both critical and creative, function to the host community.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, this thrust should not be associated necessarily with political or ethical *militantism*. Marcus calls it circumstantial activism (1995). But Bruce Albert (1997) supplies a more experiential clarification. In the process of studying the people's struggle for *ethnogenesis* and access to resources, the researchers also get recruited to serve in various other activities like mediation, documentation, action-oriented research, and didactic ethnography. In this context, the anthropologist's "observation" is no longer merely "participant"; his social participation has become both

the condition and the framework of his field research. (Albert 1997, 57-58). That is how they could go on doing their research especially within a community that has grown more sensitive to the politics and ethics of being researched.

Both Burdick and Albert are careful enough not to totally conflate the project of the researcher and that of people they study. Burdick stresses the critical function of the fieldworker within the movement. He also includes in the practice the "relativization of the ethnographers' voice" (Burdick 1995, 374). Albert advocates a kind of "critical solidarity" that does not limit professional practice to "a mere reproduction" of the host's "ethnic discourse" (Albert 1997, 58-59). Overlapping of projects does not mean a total congruence of concerns and interests.

What most of these discussions miss, I believe, is the glaring reality that the personality of the researcher matters a lot during fieldwork. I do not mean to talk about gender or class or geopolitical origin, hybridity of identity, threshold for trauma, sexual orientation, technical skills, wealth, and political or religious affiliation *per se*. While they may all be potential sources of tension, creativity, and involvement, it remains to be discovered and negotiated which of these aspects of the fieldworker's subjectivity would be *contextually relevant* within a particular research situation.

I was supposed to be going smoothly in my fieldwork because I was "at home" in my country. But I was not allowed to reside in that Protestant tribal village partly because of my being a Catholic priest. "Wherever there is a priest, there is conflict," many would say. The fact that I was also a Christian or that I was born in the same island did not matter in that particular milieu. My positionality as a priest, however, provided my "host family" with external contacts which facilitated the hospitalization of a young tribal artist who, in turn, inspired the depressed leaders of the new social movement by the way he produced painting, poetry, and pottery despite his sickness.

This sensitivity to the ground level complexity of the fieldwork identity of the researcher challenges the traditional notion of professional anthropological practice. In the field, professional anthropologists cannot and are not only professional anthropologists. Robert Paine realizes its importance to the discipline. "It surely matters personally to most of us what 'they' think of us (and that likely influences our research and its 'objectivity')" (Paine 1998, 134).

Once in a while, too, anthropologists are called to respond to life situations according to their temper and even passion. This is not bad news to the discipline. Being human in the field should not be considered

as a hazard to the study of fellow human beings. In fact anthropology should include in its ragbag repertoire even the human failings of the researcher. Rosaldo argues, quite passionately, that “human feelings and human failings provide as much insight for social analysis as subjecting oneself to the ‘manly’ ordeals of self-discipline that constitute science as a vocation...Why not use a wider spectrum of less heroic, but equally insightful, analytical positions?” (1989, 173).

My title “What are we in fieldwork for?” alludes to a common idiom “What are we in power for?” I assume here that doing fieldwork is, to some extent, an exercise of power. The ethnographer *qua* ethnographer is *not* a powerful political actor. But it remains true that in some cases, in the field, prior to the packaging of the research result, the fieldworker might have some power—if only the capacity to do harm. It remains equally true, however, that we can take the opportunity of fieldwork to give due recognition of each other as persons, that is, as non-unitary and complex beings, who are each grappling with very different life circumstances’ and dislocations (Hobart 1996, 32). Hobart, however, should expand the notion of recognition to include the actual practices of fieldwork which he tends to lump into the penal gerund “disciplining”. But “seeing, listening, recording,” as Scheper-Hughes (1992) asserts, “can be, if done with care and sensitivity, acts of fraternity and sisterhood, acts of solidarity. Above all, they are the work of recognition. Not to look, not to touch, not to record, can be the hostile act of indifference”.

To this struggle for mutuality and solidarity, anthropology itself as a discipline is called upon to participate and its practice changed. As Dell Hymes appealed a couple of decades ago, “anthropology must lose itself to find itself, must become as fully as possible a possession of the people of the world” for otherwise, “our work will drift backward into the service of domination” (Hymes 1974, 54).

This witnessing is not without critical function. But its practice of criticism is not so much to denounce but to announce the emergence of what Foucault calls new signs of existence. Far from the narrowly conceived deconstructive criticism that he had been associated with, Foucault’s dream is for the generation of life:

*I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would not try to judge, but bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea-foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply, not judgements, but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. (Foucault 1988, 326)*

In the same vein, I can’t help but wish—perhaps dreamt also by Medha Patkar, Virgilio Enriquez, Alting von Geusau, and my Tuddok friends—a kind of fieldwork practice that would not try to manipulate people just to prove, improve, disprove or develop a theory or fill a gap in academic narratives; one that would not aim simply at constructing or deconstructing a discourse; one that does not reserve flexibility and reflexivity only for future textualization of experience; one that would not be tightly trapped within the demands of mutual disciplining and self-disciplining of researcher and researched, but would co-create new spaces from which new practices of freedom could emerge. I dream of a fieldwork practice that, though not without opportunistic pretensions, recognizes persons and generates energies. This obviously would involve an “ethics of thought,” as well as action, that is accompanied by “a trembling that is contained only with difficulty.”<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>A number of the changes in this paper are in response to the invaluable comments by the participants to the Eidos conference, especially Phillip Quarles van Ufford, Ananta Kumar Giri, David Herold, David Mills, Peter Pels and Sue Phillips. The original fieldwork for this research was supported partially by the University of London Central Research Fund.

<sup>2</sup>Enriquez represents the attempt to achieve an interface between academic psychology and fieldwork. Parallel initiatives are being done by environmental scientists for social justice (Walpole 1994) and by theatre artists working with indigenous peoples (KALIWAT 1996).

<sup>3</sup>A number of these issues are not new in Philippine anthropological discussions. See for example Zamora’s *Anthropological research: Perspectives and fieldwork* (1986), especially the contributions of Salamone, Kloos, and Lopez-Gonzaga.

<sup>4</sup>E.g. D’Andrade (1995) and Scheper-Hughes (1995) and reactions, Robins 1996, Ramphele 1996.

<sup>5</sup>The question of how to manage this function within a social movement is complex. See for example Melucci (1989).

<sup>6</sup>I am borrowing this phrase from Foucault’s preface to an exhibit by a French painter, a description which an early Foucauldian scholar uses as key to Foucault’s ‘ethics of thought’. The fuller quote runs: “Rebeyrole’s work is ‘concerned less

with a form than an energy; less with a presence than an intensity; less with a movement and an attitude than with an agitation, of a trembling that is contained only with difficulty" (Bernauer 1990, 1)

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