

## Multi-Sited Ethnography Workshop – Sussex June 27-28 2005

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### Problems and Issues Facing Anthropology Postgraduate Students Engaged in Multisited Research: Reflections on Researching Indigenous Rights Processes in Venezuela

The purpose of this paper is to share some of my PhD fieldwork experiences with you, and to pose some of the questions that have been preoccupying me over the last few years of my doctorate, and in particular over the last six months. As an anthropology postgraduate student, whose thesis was referred during my viva last December, the question of my topic and methodological focus has proved to be a tricky and thorny issue that has given me constant anxiety throughout the PhD process. These anxieties initially surfaced in the first year of my PhD, during my first encounters in Venezuela, my fieldwork site, with Venezuelan anthropologists, who I had sought out in the hope of constructing an academic collaboration. My research project involved investigating indigenous rights processes in a multi-sited and multi-methodological manner. However, I soon found that the Venezuelan anthropologists I encountered were clearly baffled by my project, which they found methodologically dubious and focussed on the wrong kind of object. One anthropologist in particular felt that no ‘serious’ anthropology could be carried out with only one year’s fieldwork. As I tried to explain that it was now the norm in the UK to only be funded for one year fieldwork, she told me that this wasn’t acceptable and that I should go back to the UK and renegotiate my funding.

These encounters made me think about what it meant to ‘do’ ‘serious’ anthropology and from then on, I could not shake off the unease that, despite the backing and encouragement of my supervisors, many in the anthropology community would not consider my project to be anthropological enough. After coming back from the field, I had many discussions with other doctoral students who had carried out multi-sited

research and found that many had the same kind of anxieties as I did. As my examiners last December discussed the various ways I could remedy what they saw as the apparent 'thinness' of my thesis, whilst at the same time hinting that it was unlikely that my research project could count as 'ethnography' in any shape or form anyway, I felt that I had come full circle and that truly my anxieties, that my supervisors here at Sussex, had spent many years trying to convince me to pay no heed to, had really taken a life of their own. Anyway this is to give you some of the slightly uncomfortable context of my thinking on these issues, and to raise the questions I have on the multi-sited ethnography and that I want to discuss during this workshop.

It seems to me that the ideas of 'depthness' and intensity of interaction that are still generally associated with ethnography of any kind, raise serious questions about how multi-sited ethnography should be carried out during anthropological doctoral research. I have heard it mentioned several times that though multi-sited ethnography is a valid form of anthropological fieldwork, it is actually very hard to carry out in practice. These kinds of comments betray a wider unease about this kind of methodology and what it means for the discipline and its boundaries. Though there may be on the surface wide support for multi-sited anthropological projects focusing on globalising processes, who exactly should carry out this kind of research is perhaps rarely addressed. Doctoral research is considered to be the training ground of anthropologists, and there is still a wide held belief that students need to cut their teeth on ethnography before they can truly become anthropologists. If doctoral students carry out research, which still holds a question mark over whether it is anthropological enough, they may face a continued questioning, particularly during the years where they are seeking to establish themselves professionally, over their true anthropological credentials. Though many in the anthropological community may on the surface support multi-sited research, they perhaps find it more acceptable as a 'second' project carried out by an anthropologist who has already proved herself/himself in a traditional ethnographic manner.

Notwithstanding, these important questions, I wish now to turn to my doctoral research project and start to discuss some of the problems and issues I encountered in researching indigenous rights processes. The main difficulties that I came across in

carrying out multi-sited fieldwork were the problems in gaining access to informants from many different and often conflicting social worlds, as well as acquiring their confidence, and the ethical dilemmas of carrying out research on such a highly politicised topic. The loss of depth of interaction that can come with multi-sited research is particularly problematic in a conflicting fieldwork setting where there is so much distrust.

The prime aim of my thesis was to come to an understanding of how indigenous rights both shape political struggles over access to land and natural resources, and how these rights are understood and re-appropriated by the actors involved in these struggles. My research focused on a conflict that took place in Venezuela over the building of an electrical power line and what processes of rights shaped and in turn were shaped by this conflict, its outcome and its aftermath. The power line conflict, as it became known, was one of the most significant confrontations between the state and indigenous peoples in recent history. Indigenous groups, in alliance with national and international environmental and human rights NGOs, rose up in protest against a government-backed power line project. Partly motivated by the anticipated profits from supplying northern Brazil with electricity from Venezuelan hydroelectric dams, the project required the building of a 700km electricity power line across southern Venezuela, through a forest reserve and national park, and over the border to the Brazilian city of Boa Vista. The justifications for the project were geopolitical – to strengthen Venezuelan/Brazilian relations within the context of MERCOSUR – and economic – to aid the development of the frontier regions. However, the power line construction was impeded from the start, as opposition from indigenous communities situated near the path of the line, environmentalists and NGOs mounted. The ensuing conflict lasted over four and half years, manifesting itself through protests, marches, national and international NGO campaigns, court cases, the pulling down of the electrical pylons and violent confrontations. The indigenous protestors condemned the power line for violating their ‘ancestral’ territorial rights and for constituting a grave threat to their culture and way of life. They demanded that the government recognise their indigenous land rights before carrying out any large-scale development project on these lands. Spanning two Venezuelan administrations, the power line conflict invigorated the national indigenous rights movement, which led the ongoing reform of the Venezuelan constitution to include indigenous rights

provisions, and brought international and national attention to the plight of Venezuelan indigenous peoples. Since the conflict ended, the main focus in relation to indigenous affairs in Venezuela has been around the issue of how to apply the constitutional indigenous land rights, and various national and regional demarcation projects are still in process.

My thesis explored the unfolding events of the power line conflict and its aftermath, and considers the effects of the campaign for indigenous land rights and their codification into the national constitution. I examined how many of the actors actively involved in the power line conflict saw and understood these indigenous rights processes. I arrived in Venezuela two weeks before the power line was inaugurated, and several months after the more violent manifestations of the conflict had ceased. Based on one year's fieldwork in Venezuela, during which I interviewed a range of actors involved in the power line conflict and the subsequent land demarcation process, my aim was to carry out an empirically-grounded, contextual analysis of a specific rights struggle and its aftermath, in order to understand what are the practical consequences of campaigning for and implementing indigenous collective land rights in Venezuela.

I spent the initial months of my fieldwork in Caracas identifying the various networks of actors involved in the power line conflict and carrying out an archival media search on the power line conflict. Uncovering these different networks took time and patience, as people tended to be reluctant to talk to me unless we had a mutual contact I could cite at the beginning of a conversation. Once meetings were set up, however, I found that people were usually prepared to speak at length and with minimum intervention on my part. Throughout the fieldwork I engaged in formal and informal interviews with anthropologists, environmentalists, government representatives, students, indigenous representatives, and company and state agencies' employees, usually in their workplaces, and sometimes in their homes. My multi-sited fieldwork took me from the capital Caracas (the site of NGOs, central government, the national indigenous leadership and the electricity companies' head-offices), to regional cities of Ciudad Bolívar and Puerto Ordaz (the site of the *Federación Indígena del Estado Bolívar*, regional offices of the electricity company EDELCA, and hydroelectric dams), then on to those areas bordering the path of the

power line (the site of indigenous Pemón communities, mining communities, tourist sites, a national park and its authorities), and finally to the border mining town of Santa Elena de Uairén (the site of regional indigenous government, the electricity company's local offices and a regional hub for indigenous leaders and environmentalists). I gathered information through formal and informal interviews with the various actors and groups, observation in some demarcation workshops and a sustainable development project, and a media archival search, and by searching for unpublished grey literature on the conflict. Unpublished letters, email communiqués, legal court case documents, NGO and government reports.

Throughout the fieldwork I aimed to gather a wide range of perspectives on the power line conflict and its aftermath. Though I did visit and stay for short periods with indigenous communities in the Gran Sabana, I chose to focus my research on their representatives, as I realised that the indigenous power line campaign had been – and continued to be – steered by a number of specific leaders. I realised that while carrying out in-depth research amongst one or a few of the communities would have generated important understandings of how the conflict was experienced from the perspective of one or a few localities, it was not an appropriate method for my research project which sought a wider view of the conflict, comprised of multiple actors speaking from their various social, political and geographical locations.

Throughout the period of my fieldwork I regularly encountered distrust and suspicion. This was related to a number of factors. First of all, the power line conflict had left a general feeling of resentment amongst a variety of actors. The sheer scale and passion of the opposition to the power line, as well as the unusual public presence of indigenous groups, made the power line controversy, over its construction period, a regular topic in the national (and sometimes international) media. This highlights the importance of the controversy in a country where the national media rarely pays much attention to indigenous people, who are normally more or less invisible to the majority of the Venezuelan population. Though 'officially' the conflict was over, there was still much enmity over its result. Furthermore, the national political background to my fieldwork was extremely tense and volatile. Verbal battles raged daily between Hugo Chávez and his political opponents. While, all was rather quiet and calm in the Gran Sabana, in Caracas there were constant protests. Both opponents and supporters

of Chávez carried out marches. Chávez would frequently appear on television denouncing the those he felt were working against him, while his opponents throughout the capital would bang their pots and pans in order to drown his voice. In April of my fieldwork year, there was a brief coup, in which Chávez was deposed and then reinstated two days later after his supporters took to the streets to clamour for his return. During the final months of my fieldwork, there was a general dissection of the coup events, in which conspiracy theories abounded and people wondered about the possible involvement of the United States.

Not surprising, the image of ‘interested foreigners’ was contentious. This stemmed from the political situation during my fieldwork, as well as from previous factors. For one thing, throughout the conflict there was a prevalent nationalistic rhetoric of ‘meddling outsiders’ exacerbating tensions. In addition, more specifically, the image of the foreign anthropologist had recently been tarnished with the publication of Patrick Tierney’s book *Darkness in El Dorado*. The ‘Chagnon controversy’, as it has come to be known, coupled with the recent enshrinement of indigenous rights in the new constitution, had led to a considerable tightening of research permits in indigenous areas, as well as to a significant politicisation of anthropological fieldwork.

Once I started talking to FIB representatives and Pemón *capitanes* I also encountered a significant amount of wariness (and sometimes outright hostility), coupled with tales of anthropologists and various students who had come to the communities and never given anything back, did not communicate their research results as they promised, or wrote “bad” things about them. Under these circumstances, I chose to tread carefully, formalising my research by handing out research outlines to my informants. I was usually ‘interrogated’ about my intentions at the beginning of each interview and I opted early on to be frank about the aims of my research and about who I intended to speak to. The principle demand made by my informants was that I communicate the final products of my research with them.

The question of the politics and ethics of anthropological engagement with indigenous groups has been much debated in anthropology over recent years,

particularly in relation to the Americas<sup>1</sup>. Focusing on the role of anthropology and anthropologists in such highly politicised situations raises issues of representation, reciprocity and accountability. Are we accountable for any or all political consequences of what we write? And if so, to whom are we accountable? What role, if any, should anthropologists have with regards to indigenous rights political movements? In my own experience, these are questions that I continuously asked myself during my field work and in the writing up process and that I am still exploring. I am aware that in facing these dilemmas I need to continue to explore my own agendas. In a highly politicised situation, where all sides have their own story and where even *within* a 'side' there are cross-currents of opinion and power, the question of accountability is a tricky one. Does my accountability lie with the indigenous leaders, government and company employees, or the environmental activists who shared information with me? If I believe it to be the indigenous leaders, then which ones? For the moment, I can only hope that I have done my informants and their words justice, and that, as the AAA urges, I have treated their stories "carefully, with the utmost attention to balance, to the full complexity and contradiction and ambiguity and variability of human life" (AAA, 2002a: 40).

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<sup>1</sup> See the debate in the Journal *Identities*, 1999, Vol.6, Issue 2/3, featuring Jackson, 1999; Brosius, 1999; Hodgson, 1999; as well as Warren and Jackson, 2002; Hodgson, 2002; and Field, 1999. In addition see the AAA debates (2002a and 2002b) around Patrick Tierney's *Darkness in El Dorado* (2001).