

Introduction

A PERSONAL OVERVIEW



Based on a lifelong ethnographer's career, one that included diverse fieldwork projects conducted in Israel and the United States, this monograph offers a repertoire of subjective and professional experiences: fragments from my own ethnographic chronicle that, I expect, might evoke shared feelings and experiences among colleagues and other readers.

Considering anthropologists' published autobiographies (e.g., Malinowski 1967; Rabinow 1977; Okley and Calaway 1992; Geertz 1995), I relate particularly to Clifford Geertz's renowned memoir, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*. I met Geertz during his stay in Jerusalem while writing and presenting parts of that exceptional life chronicle, including his review of the changing research circumstances and theoretical foundations of the anthropological endeavor. In addition to describing his professional training, the selection of field sites, and launching fieldwork, he was also exploring the changes in social regimes affecting his major ethnographic investigation sites. My own biographical notes have a more limited scope: I do not challenge theoretical ideas, old or new. My records are directly embedded in the ethnographic present; indeed, they can be considered in the category of "public anthropology" (e.g., Fassin 2018). Nevertheless, I feel a sort of deep comradeship with Geertz's analytical perspective and personal experiences, and with his commitment to share intimate aspects of his professional engagements with our community of anthropologists and beyond.

I started my academic education and professional vocation in sociology, training at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem headed by S. N. Eisenstadt, who followed the Harvard School orientation, led by Talcott Parsons. I went on to earn a degree in anthropology from the University of Manchester, led by Max Gluckman, and from there went on to link with numerous US institutions of

anthropology. A varied panorama of ethnographic field sites, research scenes, and diverse personal engagements has given me a wide perspective on the complex craft of anthropology. At the same time, it has sometimes placed me in unexpected situations that challenged not only accepted modes of civil conduct but also ethnographic research norms and paradigms. Such challenges presented the opportunity to expand my comprehension of the anthropological project, and even of the task of recording ethnographic work. This semi-ethnographic memoir represents a kind of condensed autobiography, revealing some notable and sensitive moments that erupted through the record of past research projects and collegial relationships.

This retrospective reaches beyond the accounts already presented in ethnographies, journal articles, and various public engagements, professional discourses, and academic dissensions. It draws on the accounts of events as recorded in my original research files, as well as on my memories of personal encounters that were never made part of any academic reporting. This experiential account perhaps widens the scope of reflexivity, beyond the by now accepted ethnographers' personal accounts. Although not a biography, the present narrative offers a glimpse into the "sweet and sour" dimensions of the anthropological calling as experienced by a practitioner located in a somewhat peripheral spot in world anthropology.

The first experience that introduced me to the challenge of anthropological research occurred during my MA studies in Jerusalem. I joined a team of rural sociologists employed by the Jewish Agency Land Settlement Department who were tasked to advise the agency about social problems arising in the farming villages newly established to absorb Jewish immigrants arriving primarily from Middle Eastern countries. I encountered a community of newcomers from the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, who resisted taking on farming and who were deeply engaged in feuds between family groups. This experience convinced me that the sociological training and research methods—based on statistics, questionnaires, formal interviews, and abstract theories—did little to help me comprehend the actualities of daily life and the conflictual relationships that seemed to govern the lives of the newly arrived immigrants.

Apart from this work with the Land Settlement Department, I also served in the Israeli Water Planning Company (TAHAL) in a survey delegation appointed to prepare a development program to reconstruct and modernize the Qazvin province (in Iran) destroyed by the massive earthquake of 1962. Those few months observing Iranian villages seemed to me to resemble the anthropological fieldwork experience I had read about in an undergraduate course. Our daily visits to the rebuilt communities concentrated on their unique irrigation system of underground canals that was about to disappear with the modernized system of water supply. I focused on the potential impact of that tremendous transformation on the social structure of Iranian communities, together with

changes affecting crops, livestock, and agricultural technology (Shokeid [Minkowitz] 1963). The impetus for me to seek a new path in sociological approach and research methods now seemed inevitable.

As I was completing my MA studies, I had the opportunity to join Professor Max Gluckman's team of PhD candidates studying the post-statehood mass immigration to Israel of Jewish Diaspora communities. I spent a year at Manchester "ordained" to become an anthropologist trained in the Manchester school's research methodology (e.g., "extended case method" and "situational analysis"). There I became acquainted with the history and major ethnographic products of British anthropology. I cannot forget Gluckman's friendly "command" to his students departing for their field studies: "Have your data *right*."

The PhD fieldwork gave me eighteen months of research in the community of immigrants from the Atlas Mountains, the same Moroccan community I had encountered a few years earlier working with the Jewish Agency Land Settlement Department. I adopted the celebrated British anthropological research approach, practiced since the days of Bronislaw Malinowski: producing a detailed ethnographic account of the material, family, communal, religious, and cultural life of a "remote" and "exceptional" community. Naturally, I followed the Manchester school's distinctive research techniques in data construction, interpretation, and presentation, implementing the "extended case method" in particular (Shokeid [1971] 1985).

My next ethnographic research took place in an urban Israeli environment, studying the Arab minority who remained in Jaffa after the 1948 war (the *Nakba*). I had planned to repeat the community-study method, staying in the field site as a full-time resident; I rented a studio apartment in one informant's family compound. But I soon realized that this was a false strategy, considering that the site was just a twenty-minute drive from my own home in Tel Aviv. Moreover, my research began to focus not on the general community but on a group of young Arab men who were protesting the corrupt local Arab leadership supported by the Israeli authorities. I gave up the idea of "living" in Jaffa and instead met regularly with my informants in the late afternoons and evenings, spending many hours in coffee shops and other venues as they conducted their political, social, and leisure activities. That fieldwork endeavor occupied me for about two years in the early 1970s (Shokeid and Deshen 1982).

I soon understood that my own ethnographic interests and personal disposition tended in a different direction from the kinds of field sites and social issues that had defined the founders' ethnographic mission. My Manchester teachers and many of their students were primarily identified as "Africanists" throughout their careers. My next project, in the early 1980s, took me to New York looking for the "Israelis"—mostly Israeli-born citizens—who had left their country in search of new opportunities. This group, widely condemned at home for a move that was seen as betrayal, was stigmatized as *Yordim* (those who go down).

For two years I relocated, with my family, to a neighborhood in the Borough of Queens inhabited by many Israeli migrants. My “full time” stay in Queens resembled an ordinary fieldwork arrangement. I became affiliated with Queens College and my family became immersed with the Israeli-American community. Our children went to school with other Israeli children, we utilized Israeli service providers and professionals, and most of our social relationships were with Israelis. In this case, however, I was studying my “own” people—an ethnographer who shared in the culture and life experiences of his subjects, a research situation uncommon in the ethnographic tradition (Shokeid 1988).

My next project, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, presented a completely different type of research condition. I was living in Manhattan and studying CBST (Congregation Beth Simchat Torah), the gay synagogue in New York City. This project presented new issues regarding field-site space, methodological strategy, sociological and ideological interpretation. My observations focused mainly on the regular Friday, Sabbath, and holiday religious services held in a downtown building. I also participated in the synagogue’s organizational activities (e.g., various committees and special classes), and I developed friendly relationships with close informants, both males and females (Shokeid [1995] 2003).

My next long-term ethnographic project, conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s, also took place in New York: studying the LGBTQ Services Center in Chelsea. This fieldwork location, similarly concentrated in one downtown building (a former school), comprised a wide variety of gay associations representing a panorama of gender identity, sexual orientation, social interests, and activities. In effect, this was a multisited ethnographic research project. I focused on a few groups with whom I associated regularly—including Gay Seniors, Sexual Compulsives Anonymous, Bisexuals, Interracial, the Gentle Men, the Gay Bears, and the Radical Fairies—attending weekly discussion sessions and other activities and developing friendly social ties with some close informants. With each group I found that I had to develop a distinctive entry strategy in keeping with its membership characteristics and its visitor acceptance norms (Shokeid 2015).

Finally, my last extensive ethnographic project took me thirty years back to revisit a past engagement that was not part of a fieldwork study. That late writing project entailed a review of the ethnographic data that could be gleaned from my files and my own memories of participating in a protest movement on the Tel Aviv University campus called AD KAN (No more) that was active during the Palestinians’ first intifada uprising (1988–93). I supplemented these recollections with interviews with several veteran participants. Having at one time become a leading participant in that organization, I thus, many years later, took on the role of the ethnographer’s leading informant. The ethnographer in effect turned his own past existential reality, and that of some close colleagues, into a fieldwork site, becoming the subjects of an ethnographic text (Shokeid 2020).

In addition to these major ethnographic projects, along the way I undertook some less demanding ventures, including (for example) the observation of Jewish missionaries and an account of the changing circumstances of run-down and lately gentrified city neighborhoods.

The history of my ethnographic engagements reveals some critical changes the profession has undergone during recent decades: expanding the types of research subjects and fieldwork sites, especially moving away from concentrating on “postcolonial” and remote sites; moving away from the bounded fieldwork space and the model of “community studies”; freeing the ethnographer from the totality of daily life commitment to the subject of research; and addressing issues relevant to contemporary life circumstances, culture, and politics. That process has also involved some crucial changes in the ethnographer’s presentation of self, the methodology of data gathering, and its textual representation. The ten chapters of this monograph are not linked by a theoretical or research theme, but rather they offer testimony of the anthropological significance of observed incidents and interactions that fall well outside the “normative” boundaries of ethnographic research and reporting. This wide vista of professional and personal engagements also reveals sometimes poignant features of academic discourse. The complex reality captured in this text, seen through the life-work experiences of a veteran anthropologist, may pose some challenges to the assumptions of an “innocent” practitioner, offering a particular and personal insight into the intricacies of the anthropological enterprise.

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