

RETURNS TO THE FIELD

MULTITEMPORAL RESEARCH
AND CONTEMPORARY
ANTHROPOLOGY

Edited by
SIGNE HOWELL AND
AUD TALLE

AFTERWORD BY
BRUCE KNAUFT

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"This book demonstrates the extraordinarily powerful bonds that can grow between long-term ethnographers and the people they study. In doing so, it offers a penetrating vision of the resilience and vulnerability inherent in people's creative efforts to remain true to their core cultural values."

—**SHARON HUTCHINSON,**
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Many anthropologists return to their original fieldwork sites a number of times during their careers, but this experience has seldom been subjected to analytic and theoretical scrutiny. The contributors to *Returns to the Field* have all undertaken multitemporal fieldwork—repeated visits to the same place—over periods ranging from 20 to 40 years among minority groups in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Melanesia. Over the years of contact, these anthropologists have witnessed dramatic changes, but also the perseverance of the people they have worked with. In vivid and personal essays, the authors examine the ramifications of this type of fieldwork practice—the kind of knowledge it produces, what methodological tools are appropriate, and how relationships with people in the fieldsite change over time.

"Filled with insights on how long-term, or multitemporal, fieldwork has both deepened and complicated the reflexive processes through which anthropologists and their interlocutors produce new understandings."

—**JONATHAN HILL,**
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Contributors are Alan Barnard, David Holmberg, Signe Howell, Edvard Hviding, Bruce Knauff, Peter Metcalf, Frances Morphy, Howard Morphy, Aud Talle, Terence Turner, and Piers Vitebsky.

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Afterword

Reflecting on Returns to the Field

BRUCE KNAUFT

As commentator, I begin with a pang of humility with respect to these essays by long-term fieldworkers. I have spent just two and a half years stretched over three decades among the Gebusi people of Papua New Guinea, who have been my primary focus of ethnographic fieldwork. This is paltry compared to the many trips and longer periods of time that most presenters in the current volume have spent conducting fieldwork. Indeed, the combined duration of ethnographic returns represented in this book are something on the order of three centuries. So compared to the present company my own experience of long-term fieldwork is limited. Partly as a way out of this limitation, I begin with a few general remarks about time and temporality in relation to fieldwork and in relation to modernity.

As has often been noted, and as Reinhart Koselleck (1985) has stressed, modernity, since the late eighteenth century in Europe and the United States—and increasingly in other nations as well—has championed a distinct relationship to time. On the one hand, in contrast to many other worldviews, modernity emphasizes knowledge of and learning from the past not for its own sake but to shed light on the present and improve upon it in the future. The *bildungsroman* of accumulated personal and collective enlightenment is key to modernity, not just drawing on the past but auguring the potentials of

new time ahead, a *neuzeit*, a never-before-experienced and potentially better future. This notion is distinctive to Euro-American and now global varieties of modernism.

Such modern temporality also informs the willful destruction and sweeping away of the past in favor of hoped-for progress in the future. In modernity, these are linked; the modern emphasis on the newer and ever-new, not on the repetition of the past, links to the transcendence of previous ways of life—much as Haussmann leveled the rabbit warrens of nineteenth-century Parisian communities to make way for broad new modern boulevards. In modernity, as Marshall Berman (1982) has emphasized, destructive creation and creative destruction are fundamentally linked.

This working of modern time is evident in both the object and the method of the chapters in this volume. As they aptly illustrate, larger forces and agents sweep away or threaten to sweep away customs and traditions in favor of the newer and more modern, however these are locally or regionally defined. What is more, being modern her- or himself, the ethnographer tries to use personally observed history to build up increasing knowledge and wisdom that can gain greater purchase not only on processes of change but on how local experiences and sensibilities are or may be refractory to plans or ideologies of wider modernity. As the chapters of this volume underscore, destruction seldom produces the desired progress.

In a larger sense, then, an ironic relationship often pertains in the long term of repeated field visits—between the hoped-for progress of increasing knowledge and greater understanding of destructive tendencies, and the uncovering if not critique of overblown hopes or expectations or ideologies of progress among the people we study with.

It is perhaps revealing that almost all the chapters in this volume pertain to decentralized rural populations and now-marginalized peoples—groups that in our older anthropology were labeled foragers, tribes, or perhaps, in Edvard Hviding's case, chiefdoms. This is significant not just topically but in terms of our sociology of long-term ethnographic knowledge. Longitudinal ethnography dates itself self-consciously by the general location and communities of its

founding fieldwork decades before. To assess the future trajectory and potentials of long-term field returns, then, one needs to take the current locational and topical trends of social and cultural anthropology and project them into the future. A newer generation of fieldworkers is now engaging sites of ethnographic research that include international governance and humanitarian aid agencies, the ethnography of myriad institutions and of public culture, and, in the mix, highly urban experience—from cyberspace to business and unemployment, widespread migration, and a wide range of security, health-related, educational, governmental, commercial, and environmental forms and formations. These are the tip of the iceberg of new topical and location venues. How will or could or should these communities or networks look longitudinally in twenty or thirty years, in 2030 or 2040? Are such restudies possible or likely? Are they thinkable? I anticipate that they are—and that this is not just a curious speculation but an important possibility to cultivate. The peoples studied in projects undertaken by new generations of anthropologists will ramify in their own distinct ways and with their own networks over time, as those of erstwhile tribal or chiefly or forager populations have done. In the process, the terms used to describe and conceptualize these communities will probably change; present notions may seem diluted or outdated within a decade or two. Both of these changes—in the communities we study and in how we conceive of and understand them—are important not just to mark but to emphasize and reflect on over time. For these reasons, longitudinal studies are likely to be highly important in the future for anthropology's own developing notions of time and space as well as its relation to changing world circumstances and contexts. This importance echoes Alan Barnard's trenchant comments in his chapter concerning the use of repeated fieldwork to increase our comparative understanding of continuities and variations across geographic, social, and cultural space.

Arguably, the search for the ever-new that is the hallmark of modernity has intensified in anthropology itself during the past three decades. During the 1980s and '90s, much of this development traveled under the signs of postmodernity, postcolonialism, reflexivity,



With a senior Gebusi man, 1981. PHOTOGRAPH BY EILEEN KNAUFT.

cultural studies, and/or experimental ethnography (see Knauft 1996). These emphases intensified the anthropological search for and expression of not the long-standing, the depth of history, or the privilege of temporal wisdom, but pastiche, hybridity, the multisitedness of the new, and the appearance of change in the present—along with new genres of ethnographic writing and presentation.

Against this, earlier emphases in anthropology and specifically American ethnography, from at least Boas through Kroeber, emphasized long-term research commitment through repeated seasons of return fieldwork. During the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, however, this emphasis became less important and, eventually, deprivileged amid greater emphasis on the ever-new in culture and in representation. As Signe Howell notes in her introduction, this trend is thrown into relief by the fact that despite much reflexivity in ethnography and ethnographic writing during the last quarter-century, there have been very few considerations of fieldwork in longer duration—of repeated returns to the field.

In national terms, this volume includes a significant Norwegian emphasis, represented by the editors and three of its ethnographic chapters. This reflects the contributing importance of long-term field research facilitated by Norwegian anthropology programs at universities such as Oslo and Bergen. In much of continental Europe, including Germany and France, emphasis on repeated seasons of anthropological field research, extending over many years or decades,

is arguably more frequent in relative terms than in American anthropology. This tendency is worth noting amid the growing understanding of and emphasis on the complementary contribution of different anthropologies in different world areas (see Ribeiro and Escobar 2006).

At one level and on *prima facie* grounds, repeated returns to the field provide greatly increased ability to appreciate and understand dynamics and parameters of social and cultural change. From the chapters of the present volume, this awareness of change seems especially pertinent in two seemingly different but complementary ways.

On one hand is the *structural* worsening plight of marginal peoples in many places. Peter Metcalf emphasizes this: many of the chapters document and underscore the increasing subordination of the people we study to outside agents, organizations, and policies. Vitebsky (this volume) writes that “since the British conquest of their area in 1866, the Sora have lived under a system of governance that puts them at the bottom of every pile, ethnically, economically and ecologically.” More generally, in comparing his long-term understanding of the forest-dwelling Sora of tropical India with his decades of research with the Eveny of Russian Siberia, he writes:

The role of colonialism and the state, as well as the specific cosmologies of the Communist, Baptist and Hindu evangelisms, may be different, but we can recognize a similar centralizing, totalizing thrust: where the local community’s frame of reference is local it must be made universal, where their time is cyclical or non-destinational it must be made future-oriented, where their sense of morality comes from within it must be structured and validated by an outside source.

Increasingly, however, such disempowerment is not so much in spite of but in direct relation to people’s increasing interconnection with—and positive valuation of—regional, national, and international actors and agencies. Persons like Vincent Vaguni, in Edvard Hviding’s account, have themselves been provincial politicians, environmental activists, liaison officers to mining companies, director of landowners’ corporations, officers of powerful church organizations, and active travelers to international conferences—as well as

right-hand men to customary chiefs—and yet living, in many ways, “a conventional rural family life, with the weekly highlight being the Saturday hunt for feral pigs with a pack of dogs and a spear.” But for all this engagement and partial success and in many ways because of it, there often grows an increased sense of *relative* deprivation vis-à-vis actors and agents of a larger world.

At the same time, as Edvard Hviding’s chapter also suggests, the personal resilience, adaptability, and potential of persons as individuals is profound and striking across almost all of the contributors’ descriptions. Against either a dismal view of the life of marginal peoples going downhill in a global handbasket, or a modernity-at-large view of increasing interconnection, progress, and benefit, the presentations of this volume provide a more nuanced and richer view. In some cases, including those in the chapters by Turner and by Morphy and Morphy, both relative subordination and creative response increase at the same time, as if in direct or dialectical relation. On the one hand, structural disempowerment of marginalized peoples grows relative to larger economic, national, and international pressures and forces. But at the same time and sometimes for this very reason, people’s engagement with these forces can be surprisingly strong, adaptable, and creative.

The various chapters of this volume play across both ends of this spectrum and combine them. Terence Turner’s contribution is perhaps the most positive, documenting the ability of Kayapo to engage effectively with outside intrusion in the Amazon on and through their own terms. Turner has played a role not only in documenting but as an activist in their resistance against state pressure and outside forces. Peter Metcalf, at the other extreme, is more pessimistic, with little apparent hope for increasingly marginalized and peripheral peoples, or for helping them. But to the extent that the chapters bring the experiences and practical engagement of actual persons and friends to light, these dynamics are often significantly intertwined.

Alan Barnard’s chapter speaks of how Khoisan are a disparaged minority and yet ideological embodiments of then-President Mbeki’s new South Africa. Signe Howell describes how even with the increase

of a money economy, Chewong sociality is still embedded in punén moral exchange. Terence Turner suggests how longstanding connections of kinship and domestic organization continue to inform moral suasion amid a host of changes in Kayapo politics and economy—at the same time that new and more modern forms of internal as well as external status differentiation and exploitation also increase.

In the mix, unanticipated or unintended consequences both complicate and accentuate features of change—and of tradition. A prime case in point are the Yolngu mortuary rituals described over decades by Morphy and Morphy. On the one hand, a time traveler from seventy years ago would find the sounds of a Yolngu burial ceremony very familiar, as if little had changed. As the Morphys put it, the guiding spiritual objective—to ensure that the person's spirit returns to the ancestral dimension—has never altered. On the other hand, one now finds refrigerated morgue units being bought and Yolngu bodies transported in them at great and in some cases exorbitant expense, including by air, for highly protracted funerary journeys and rites. The large nearby bauxite mine and Australian welfare payments have both greatly increased the Yolngu death rate from injury, accident, suicide, and illness associated with alcohol and substance abuse—while also significantly increasing the funds available for funerals, in one case even the planting of giant aluminum flag poles around the grave. Yolngu increasingly spend much of their lives as well as their resources going from funeral to funeral to funeral. This is poignantly traditional/modern and modern/traditional at one and the same time. Both disempowerment vis-à-vis outside forces and creative responses from within increase.

Many of the chapters focus quite aptly on the specific implications of long-term returns to the field, both for the ethnographic encounter and for the ethnographer—as well as for the people with whom the ethnographer is studying. Often, over time, our subjects become friends and deeper parts of our ongoing lives, and vice versa.

This perspective provides a distinctive vantage point on ethnographic fieldwork more generally. Most primary ethnography provides the life-position perspective of a twenty-something (or early-

thirty-something) researcher, often single and sometimes newly married, usually without children (or at least ones who are grown). The strength of this ethnographic subject position is also its weakness; it provides a narrow life cycle window from which to view alternative peoples and cultures. As young adults, first fieldworkers often take on the childlike status of often not knowing the local language, not to mention the culture, at the same time that they are often perceived in local terms to be quite wealthy if not powerful. A complement to and counterbalance against this bias in ethnographer-subject positioning is the perspective of older anthropologists who return over years and decades, time and again. The understanding gained from this longer perspective is important to cultivate if anthropology is to provide a rounded view of changes, not just over time but from different points in our own life cycles, and as accumulated over the professional life course. With time, most ethnographers are afforded new and sometimes more intimate cultural status as a mature person or elder. As Vitebsky recounts concerning his decades of contact with the Sora, "I have graduated from *ubbang* (little brother) to *jojo* (grandfather or ancestor)."

Often, if not typically, as these chapters reveal, this maturity is accompanied by increased expectations the local community placed on the returning ethnographer. In some ways, long-returning ethnographers become like the growing number of diasporic returnees around the world who come home sporadically from points distant. Like such long-term émigrés, returning anthropologists are often expected to bring back and share their wealth; the returning ethnographer becomes a distinctive kind of a long-lost relative. Long-term returns to the field are thus easily associated both with joy, appreciation, and intimacy, and with high expectations and costs. Aud Talle shows us the strange and in some ways wonderful twists of this process as they reciprocate and complement each other in fieldwork over time. The woman she knows from the late 1970s as only a nameless girl who screamed and fought mightily to avoid being genitally cut, becomes, years later, a mother with children of her own. Met later by Talle, the woman seems neither shy about, enamored of, nor

psychologically scarred by her former apparent act of gendered resistance or by the process of being genitally cut itself. Professor Talle is forced to put her own earlier categories of understanding about the significance of genital cutting into question. And yet, this same woman has now joined a Christian church to “handle the problems [she] faced due to the husband’s excessive drinking and squandering of livestock property on alcohol and other women.” Along with her sons, she has made a concerted effort to pray to God for her husband’s misbehavior, which has started to improve. When Talle asked the woman what she had thought of the long-lost ethnographer when she had initially returned to the field, she said, “I prayed and prayed for help and you came along as my helper . . . you are my ‘angel.’” In this case, it could be said, gendered support in the face of patriarchy appears, at least in our own terms, to be confirmed after all and in cross-cultural perspective. This illustrates how the wheel of anthropological perception changes over time, turning in newly surprising, enriching, and also humbling ways.

As these chapters reveal, the long-term ethnographer often accumulates not just increasing status as an aficionado or historian of the people she or he studies among, but increasing potentials for friendship and for supporting local communities. At turns loving, moral, humanitarian, stressful, and demanding, these ties are often both very rich and refractory to comparative assessment. They go beyond being professional connections, within-culture friendships, humanitarian interventions, or even familial, much less contractual, obligations. Often, our relations with our long-term friends in the field tie several of these features together. The chapters by Turner and Talle reveal these long-term personal relations with particular care and nuance. As Signe Howell suggests, with benefit of time and contextual understanding, tacit understanding even silences in fieldwork can speak volumes.

This brings me finally to Piers Vitebsky’s chapter, which is pertinent in relation to these issues. His long-term nuance and understanding in the field—both among the Eveny in Siberia and the forest-dwelling Sora in India—has made him a sounding board and



With friends at a Gebusi garden hamlet, 1998.

facilitator if not a target for some of the deepest expressions of local people's search for meaning in both societies. The very inarticulacy of their selected moments of poignant remembering of their longer-term past—Paranto's remembering his dead father, Taranti's remembering the spirit familiar of her previous shamanic experience, and Tolya's becoming a PhD and Siberian anthropologist in reverence to the lost past of his mother—reveals the deep power of personal and cultural meaning across years and decades of change. In these cases, expressions of meaning are catalyzed not only for us but for selected persons in these societies themselves by means of the ethnographer's long association and supportive personal relationship. In addition to being an aficionado, a repository, and even a personal icon of tradition, the mature returning ethnographer is easily, and sometimes inadvertently, a sounding board or lightning rod for the transduction of meaning between the present and the past. I have experienced this myself, for instance, when I inadvertently revealed secrets of male-male sexuality and insemination to young Gebusi men who did not know of these customary practices (Knauff 2010, ch. 10).

Lest I close with a view of ethnographic maturity that is too beneficent or hagiographic, I must also note the final stages and ultimate personal insignificance of returns to the field. As Vitebsky suggests for the Sora and the bygone Eveny, the aging elders easily

pine for acknowledgment—and the same goes for long-standing ethnographers. Eventually, as Vitebsky describes elsewhere (2008), Sora ancestors eventually stop visiting those they have been associated with, lose their voice, and become inarticulate. Eventually they take the form of silent butterflies. For the Sora, butterflies are the lonely residue of persons who are beyond the reach of dialogue. Often it is the fate of long-term ethnographers to go back and forth between being at turns lovingly ancestor-like, on the one hand, and beyond dialogue, on the other. Ultimately, of course, the latter holds sway. As Vitebsky says of Sora butterflies, when there are fewer and fewer people to remember them, they ultimately become memories without rememberers. This is the fate of most, if not all, ethnography and ethnographers.

This is ultimately also the fate of all books, and indeed of all people. But in the bargain, and even more so because of impermanence, is the enduring importance of understanding the challenge and sometimes the beauty of human connections over time, passing on as much as we can from our generation to the next.

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