

EDITORIAL IMPRESSIONS:  
BRICOLAGE AND THE ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD\*ART LEETE  
Editor-in-Chief

For a long time, it has been a widely accepted fact that a few key informants provide a substantial amount of information about local culture and the social environment to anthropologists and ethnologists during their ethnographic fieldwork trips. Key informants enable ethnographers to gain valuable information in a limited time. Interaction with a key informant constitutes “the strategic point of entry into a field, then, but the proper grounding of conclusive analysis” (Rapport and Overing 2003 [2000]: 204). Following this understanding, scholars consider key informants as people who are competent and willing to share their extensive cultural knowledge with ethnographers.

Although this strategy of relying on key informants is generally adequate, this approach still creates cognitive dissonance relating to the strategic involvement of only a few field partners in analysis while the rest of the community remains more marginal. If a fieldtrip lasts for an extensive period it can raise the question of the need to delve more deeply into a variety of attitudes, opinions and ways of knowing in a group (Poggie 1972: 24). One can reduce the risks of this approach by approaching these field interactions reflexively and the admitting peculiarities of knowledge production that this method involves.

Key informants provide large amounts of data and rich understandings of life in any studied community. They are observant regarding life around them and skilled in communication. Some key informants tend to communicate dominant social norms and values. The others, who appear more critical towards mainstream attitudes and views, enable us to develop a sophisticated approach to the liminal qualities of the groups explored. (Marshall 1996: 92–93; Soucy 2000: 179–181)

People who take on the role of key informant must have an appropriate position in a society (to make them suitable partners for the ethnographer) and possess access to information of sufficient amount and character. Key informants should also be willing to collaborate with an outsider, indicate adequate communicability and be more or less unbiased (meaning that they do not follow an agenda when negotiating with a researcher). At the same time, one needs to be aware that key informants could pretend to know more than they actually do, or present only data they consider correct.

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Processing the data also depends on researcher's awareness of the difference in statuses between a researcher and an informant, the degree of intimacy between them and ethical considerations regarding sensitive information gained through this friendship. (Marshall 1996: 93)

James Clifford (1988: 45–46) maintains that the way in which informants present ethnographic evidence cannot be fully measured by the scholar. Informants establish not only what we learn but also how our knowledge will be structured, as “indigenous control over knowledge gained in the field can be considerable, and even determining”. Efforts at ethnographic exposition struggle with the task of representing and manifesting informants' authority adequately. (See also Soucy 2000: 181–182)

Key informants control the ethnographer's comprehension to the highest degree. Their power relies on their ability to perform and execute their social position, gender, and education (Soucy 2000: 182). Ethnographers must trust key informants as gatekeepers after both sides have made a kind of implicit agreement that settles this special relationship. But this careful trust does not mean that scholars should accept the information provided without critique.

John Poggie (1972: 23) proposes that one important quality of the information acquired from key informants is precision. This means that responses are close “to the actual nature of the quantitative and qualitative domains on which they are reporting”. This assumption sounds rather optimistic as an ethnographer cannot expect that everything said by key informants is by definition the pure truth in the sense of classical scholarship. Key informants' and ethnographers' attitudes towards consistency and factual accuracy can be rather different.

It is easily possible that during a long-term communication experience, a key informant manages to report evidence that contradicts previous information heard from the same person. In some cases, these notions can touch upon existentially significant matters. These disputes concern seemingly fundamental problems that are supposed to facilitate ethnographers' deep understanding of the people they explore. In order to understand something of these vague discussions about core elements of local cultural experience, one needs to possess a proficiency in the vernacular tools that shape this obscure discourse.

I have been struggling over a couple of decades to establish whether my Komi<sup>1</sup> key informant is a Russian Orthodox believer or not. I am not quite sure if he is serious. Is he teasing me, or producing random arguments while switching between different standpoints, or departing from different principles while constituting his religious identity? Or does he follow the widespread postmodern existential model, which enables a person to have multiple spiritual identities simultaneously?

For example, sometimes it seems to me that my friend tends to consider himself a genuine Russian Orthodox Christian. He was baptised as a child during the Soviet period by his granny (at that time there were no churches functioning within a 200-km radius). He wears a neck cross, received from his granny, keeps a 19th-century icon in a corner of his kitchen, and had a godfather in childhood (although this man died when my friend was still a small child). These seem to be the only established signs one can detect about his spiritual identity. Sometimes, my friend also talks about his firm atheist identity, and when he becomes most intimate, confesses to the inherited animist convictions that constitute the core of his spirituality. So the task is not to pick out con-

tradictory evidence from his narratives. My friend refers directly to various ideological domains when talking about his basic spiritual perspective.

In the early 1990s, my friend turned to a priest (Orthodox clerics started to appear on the social scene around that time). My friend asked the priest's opinion about his spiritual status in the light of his granny's competence to carry out the baptism. The priest appeared to be very strict in this regard and ordered my friend to go through a real baptism, executed by a cleric. Then my friend decided that the priest was incompetent (a number of uneducated men became Orthodox priests because there were so few seminaries at which priests could obtain enough knowledge and skill to perform their role with full expertise). In addition to this, a brother of my key informant turned with the same question to another priest. That man did not care much about this possible confusion and suggested that one can act in this situation according to one's own judgement, as it may be correct in both ways.<sup>2</sup> All this supports my friend's apparent conclusion that there are all kinds of priests hanging around and one is not supposed to pay them too much attention.

However, my friend knows that baptism is just an initial step that opens up the way to becoming an Orthodox Christian. In order to achieve this, one needs to visit church services regularly and conduct home prayers. As my friend is not really a church-goer, he simply cannot consider himself a Christian. In the recent Russian Orthodox tradition, being a believer is less about one's inner conviction but more about conducting the necessary ritual minimum, especially prayer.<sup>3</sup>

It becomes much more difficult when my friend starts to discuss more complex matters of Komi life, especially hunting practice. We sometimes also struggle over his identity as a hunter (is he a regular hunter, an amateur, or whether I can label him a hunter at all), as well as how to apply hunting ethics and his style of narration. At this point, things get serious.

Sometimes he tells me that he normally communicates using lies and, in principle, all his friends do the same. He even explains in detail, how this specific Komi deception is carried out. Furthermore, he instructs me regarding skills of comprehending these lies so that truth would emerge to me despite all culture-specific obstacles.

After my fieldwork trips, I often wonder about the possibilities of dealing with these contradictory, but in general equally adequate, notions of my friend. The truth needs to be misrepresented in order to be true. However, as a scholar, I cannot just present his lies without contextualising them; furthermore, I doubt that I am able to offer totally adequate commentaries on my friend's deceptions. Despite the fact that I am informed about local narrative strategies, I do not feel confident when analysing particular episodes of narration.

Sometimes I have the feeling that one can attempt to interpret this kind of evasive discourse through the concept of *bricolage*. In anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced the idea that *bricolage* characterises intellectual effort of mythical thought. It means that the "savage mind" builds narratives by exploiting mytho-poetical ways of reasoning upon a heterogeneous repertoire, using an ambivalent set of intellectual tools stored in the memory just in case. Elements of mythical thinking, "lie half-way between percepts and concepts"; they are restricted, as the meaning of these "bricks" is constituted in advance. (Lévi-Strauss 1974 [1962]: 16–19; see also Kincheloe 2005: 326; Rogers 2012: 3) On the theoretical level, *bricolage* presumes a utilisation of metaphors, such as

quilting, montage, collage, weaving or sewing (Wibberley 2012: 5–6). Bricolage is not simply eclectic. It employs imaginative design, flexibility, and multitude of perspectives (Kincheloe 2005: 324; Rogers 2012: 1).

The poststructural perspective takes bricolage on from Lévi-Strauss, applying it also to scholarly intellectual cognition constituting a style of qualitative academic exploration since the beginning of the 20th century. The bricolage metaphor refers to a complexity of discourse and reflexive interpretation. It is intense, streaming methodology, and an art of combining various theories. Narrative bricolage means that one can never determine the meaning of a story, something that applies to the practice of both informants and researchers. Critical bricolage moves away from scholarly monologue, making scientific discourse genuinely diverse. Multiple perspectives link various fragments of data. (Kincheloe 2005: 326–327; Rogers 2012: 3–8; Wibberley 2012: 5–6)

Bricolage focuses on the networks of relationships and processes (not on phenomena in themselves). Such an approach makes the frame of investigation rather complex. This complexity involves explicit and implicit guidelines of genuineness, polysemy, actual cultural processes, understanding the nature of the interactions, as well as “intersecting contexts, multiple epistemologies, intertextuality, discursive construction, the interpretive aspect of all knowledge, the fictive dimension of research findings, the cultural assumptions within all research methods, the relationship between power and knowledge.” (Kincheloe 2005: 323, 327–330)

It seems that my Komi friend does something similar to bricolage. He uses bits of Komi cultural pattern, constantly resettling them in order to create obscure and fluid messages. His notions somehow fit the cultural framework although approaching the edges of shared indigenous knowledge and recognised ways of self-identification (as a believer and a hunter). At the same time, obscurity is a cultural imperative for him. However, it seems that bricolage is also a scholarly tool I can use to handle the data that my friend presents.

Bricolage provides tools for interpreting my key informant’s ambiguous messages. There is a multitude of analytical possibilities for handling the huge amount of data my friend has delivered to me over a couple of decades. But it is really unclear how to implement this idea of bricolage in the course of ethnographic interaction. In the ethnographic field, this lack of clarity is still connected to my immediate feelings regarding his discussions. On top of this long-term experience of the Komi culture still leaves doubts concerning my ability to comprehend these pieces of cultural knowledge immediately, in a culture-near style. Over these years, intuition has told me different things and it is complicated to decide how I could be more adequate to the situation – by believing him unconditionally or by attempting to challenge his narrative logic.

Clifford (1988: 46) proposes that one way to deal with informants’ authority is by using a Bakhtinian model of polyphonic representation (see Bakhtin 1981) that enables one to reveal a multiplicity of discourses. But which voice to choose to represent the informant’s discourse if there are many available for one person? As Lévi-Strauss (1974 [1962]: 22) mentions, nothing can be meaningless in the mythical thought of a bricoleur. Everything our field partners tell us makes some kind of sense, and we need to delve into this. Bricolage and polyphony are metaphors for ways of knowing and narrating that we still cannot really grasp. We remain hesitant even when faced with the simplest questions about the ways our informants think.

## NOTES

1 The Komi inhabit the north-eastern corner of the European part of the Russian North. According to the last official census, 228,000 Komi lived in Russia in 2010.

2 When I consulted a Russian Orthodox priest serving in a Komi village, the man said that grannies have the right to perform baptisms only when there are no religious specialists available (as was the case with my friends). In addition to this, a lay person carrying out baptisms must do so in accordance with the Church's ritual prescriptions. But as there are no ways to determine the course of these Soviet period baptisms, one really cannot decide conclusively on these cases, which are manifold in Russia. It is also not advisable to re-baptise these people in church just in case, because one can be baptised only once in a lifetime.

3 During the Soviet period, praying often became an individual practice as a result of religion being neglected in the public sphere. After 15 years of recovery in the Russian Orthodox Church, weekly attendance at church stayed low in 2006 at 3.1% (World Values Survey Wave 5) despite a much larger number of believers (27.9%) praying daily. Consequently, prayer is a viable practice in Russia and is not necessarily connected to the accomplishments of religious institutions.

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