

## **REFLEXIVITY - A TOOL FOR THE ANTHROPOLOGIST. An example: the fieldwork of a French PhD student**

Elise GUILLERMET  
University of LYON II.

### INTRODUCTION

Anthropology and sociology are organized around two main paradigms: holism and methodological individualism. In France, the first one was dominant since Marcel Mauss until the critique of the structuralism of Levi-Strauss. Thirty years ago Anglophone “postmodernists”, like Clifford Geertz, were translated into French. They pointed to the influence of experience and social characteristics of the researcher on his or her analysis. Since this moment new epistemological discussions have started and are still continuing in France about the researcher’s implication (Favret Saada 1977, Agier (dir.) 1997), the construction of “empathy” (Kiss 2001, Gallenga & Martinelli 2008), the heuristical effect of “reflexivity” (Althabe & Hernandez 1998-1999, Bourdieu 2001, Leservoisier 2005) and new debates about “ethics”. Workshops and conferences about these subjects are popular in France (January of 2007 : “L’anthropologie face à ses objets : nouveaux contextes ethnographiques”, workshop of 2006-2007 organized by the CRECSS University of Aix-Marseille about “ethics”...).

In this perspective the anthropologist is considered to be a social actor who like his or her informants influences the social reality. Empathy is now considered like a construction of both: the researcher and social actors (Gallenga 2008). Methodological interactionism (Goffman 1956, 1967) introduces the observation of micro social interactions. Within this framework social life appears like a game. Individuals are seen as actors playing a game, negotiating, attributing, and defending their social status, their social “identity”. How can the anthropologist be different from these actors? How can he or she be unbiased, without interests, without negotiating, without sympathy or antipathy? How can people accept a stranger without considering his characteristics: nationality, gender, age, economic power...when it is the normal way of meeting and relating to people in everyday life?

It poses a problem for the anthropologist who learned at university that the best way of becoming a good researcher is to be unbiased, discreet, and modest. A student of anthropology is taught that he has to speak the languages, learn and respect the codes and norms of the local society. But in reality, when you are doing a fieldwork, you need to work with the status people give you. There is no one way of life, no one homogeneous perception of reality as anthropology traditionally searched for. Rather there are different groups, different networks, conflicts, hierarchies that you need to be aware of. As an anthropologist you have to explain this complexity because our work is first and foremost to describe and analyse the social reality. And when you appear in this complex reality, people give you a status, they are seeking to find out who you are, what you want, what they can gain with you at the same time as you are searching for information.

It is undoubtedly not possible to be unbiased to people in the fieldwork! What are the consequences of this? It is an epistemological and methodological problem. Why it is not easy to understand reality as we learned? We can conclude that it is impossible to understand social reality because we can access to it only by our eyes, our body, our experience. Or we could use these insights for methodological and epistemological ends through a 'reflexive' approach.

Adopting a "reflexive approach" means considering what is happening during the research process in which you are implicated: during the choice of subject, during the fieldwork and finally during the analysis. This communication is about the influence of a fieldwork and my experience -as a young French PhD student- on the construction of my object of study. It is about particular moments and interactions which led me to rethink my research's questions.

## CONSTRUCTION OF THE OBJECT OF STUDY

### Theoretical approach

Since 2005 I have carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Niger about a construction of the status of orphans in the context of HIV/AIDS. The aim is to understand how a status of orphans is constructed and negotiated at the local level (in the everyday life of children, relatives, state workers, development actors in the field...) which is distinct from the "universal" status adopted by international conventions at the macro level (political level, development level, Orphans and Vulnerable Children level).

This ongoing research is situated in the paradigm of the anthropology of social change and development, as defined by Jean Pierre Olivier de Sardan, adopted by LASDEL's[1] researchers, and APAD's researchers (*Association des Africanistes Pour une Anthropologie du changement social et du Développement*) despite their diversity. This framework's characteristics are the same as our final object of study (Olivier de Sardan, 1995: 47) :

- heterogeneity
- recognition of the transversality of social relations which means that social structures are not static and frozen. Actors can move in and between different networks and relations depending on the context and issues at hand
- sensitivity to the diachronic characteristic of social and development processes as social phenomenon are constructed and changing,
- focus on the interface between micro and macro levels, between obligations and actors' strategies, and between methodological individualism and holism.

Studies of cultural constructions of childhood are current in French Anthropology. Saying that French authors have privileged the research of cultural fragments assumed to be shared, frozen, common, is just a little bit cartooning. The heterogeneity of points of view and factors is not studied whereas in reality there is not so, many boundaries as in the academic world.

We have to look for the pluralism of codes and norms which influence the social reality we want to understand and describe. In the case that will be described below, firstly, the developmental anthropological configuration is all-present in the everyday life of social actors and secondly, people give the status of a development actor to the white researcher.

-  
-  
-  
How the fieldwork influences the construction of the object

This choice of framework was influenced by my fieldwork experience. In discussing my own experience I don't want to be narcissistic. I'm not the subject of my PhD thesis and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between egocentrism and reflexivity, which is a heuristic tool. But I will try here to explain how the methodological and ethical issues in the fieldwork led me to development anthropology. It is just an example of how the field influences the construction of the object of study (Vidal 2004[2] ; Leservoisier 2005 ; Agier 1997, Favret-Saada 1977...), because the anthropological approach is inductive.

The first part of the fieldwork[3] was focused on the study of the emic definitions of orphans and on the network constituted by actors taking care of children. Islam, the Koran, is the reference for people in Zinder, the place of my research. Some talk shows on the local radio give the word to religious representatives. One of them accepted to meet us[4] in order to explain the Moslem definition and rules about orphans and their protection. It was a good interview. The religious leader described a situation of his neighbourhood and relatives, whose names were written in the Arabic alphabet on a piece of paper. We made an appointment in order to meet widows and orphans. We would thus be able to understand practices of solidarity, distinct of rules.

Leaving the carpets and putting on our shoes, the religious leader asked, for the second time, which NGO we came from. For me, it was a disappointment because I thought that it was clear that I was not a development actor. Before starting the interview, I had explained my neutral status, inherent in the status of the anthropologist, as we learn at university. But it was not clear. Nonetheless I had a symbolic debt. The religious leader had accepted to have a conversation with me, even if it was during the Ramadan period. With his question, he made explicit the incongruity of the approach of a white person who wants to be neutral in a context of action and solidarity.

So I needed a solution to stay in a good relation with the religious leader. I was not able to explain again that I can do nothing for orphans and that I just want to understand how they are living. So, quickly, I found another answer.

During my preliminary investigation in Niamey, I had identified a Nigerian NGO founded by female civil servant. A woman represented this organisation in Zinder as a regional president. I met her. She explained me that for the moment the occupation of NGO's members was to take inventory of orphans. They prepared lists designated for state services specialized in the protection of children. But Mme F, the president, deplored a lack of motivation. The lists were poorly done.

Confronted with the question of the religious leader, I thought that maybe Mme F. would be happy to meet the leader and to take his list of widows. I explained it to him and we confirmed the appointment.

Mme F. was very enthusiastic. The day of the meeting arrived. The religious leader, dexterous with his cell phone tried to call us. Near his place, we met a lot of people. Hundred of women and children were in front of his door. They were waiting for food distribution, because of my status as white. The religious leader asked us jokingly « you are not coming with trucks of food? ».

This interaction is played out in October of 2005 during which rice, millet and sorgho distributions were organized by humanitarian actors because of a food crisis, denounced by

mass media. NGOs (Médecins Sans Frontières Suisse, la Croix Rouge Française, Goal...) came to the area with a lot of white aid workers. Some Europeans were already living in Zinder but they were just a few (a French cultural administrator, German development workers, catholic religious and some Cuban doctors). The majority of the new arrivals were specialized in children's health. An arrival of a new white woman interested in orphans was logical in this context.

It was also the Ramadan period. During this moment, certain categories of people, and especially orphans, receive help and money from Muslim people. When the religious leader accepted to meet me it was because of my subject.

« We can't refuse to participate in your work for orphans. We are Muslims and it is our job to help poor children without father ». (A disciple of the religious leader)

At this moment, my subject appeared to me as being situated at the intersection of two systems of solidarity: the Muslim one and the occidental one. And I was considered like a representative of the last one. Nobody, during my two years in Niger, contested my research interest, because it is a common preoccupation for different actors, even if they are thinking with different system of meanings. I was welcomed because talking about orphans is obligatory linked with action, with development aid. I was not really aware about it before a Nigerian colleague after a difficult interview with a policeman told to me<sup>[5]</sup> :

« I told him that you are working on orphans because someone who is interested in this subject is inevitably a good person. »

Consequently, I understood that a status of neutral researcher was refused to me, because of my status as a white person which linked me to the developmental configuration and because of my subject. It was really useful for me to try to understand these boundaries and I started to reconsider my object of study and my approach.

Confronted with the impossibility of being unbiased researcher I had three possibilities of solution:

- Leave the fieldwork. In this case, dropping my subject would not be a solution because the status given to me was also constructed with a perception of a white researcher,
- Judge the development world. Conclude that it is a terrible world which has destroyed African reality and the good relations between researchers and their traditional interlocutors...In fact the risk is to think that the development configuration is external to reality and that people are not in social dynamics and movements.
- Accept that a social reality is composed of interactions between development actors and other people (relatives, children, state workers, traditional authorities...). I chose this way. The context is composed of heterogeneity, a plurality of actors including the researcher. Maybe it is more heuristic to consider this complexity in the construction of the object of study.

When I started my research I was aware of a complexity of reality and a plurality of actors. But it was not so easy to recognize and I thought that micro and macro levels were not linked. But in the real life, they were (Laurent Vidal 2004). And in the fieldwork I was in the middle of this heterogeneity, I was "taken" by it (Favret Saada 1977). Hence, I was obliged to negotiate my status. It was a methodological obligation. How could I keep my unbiased

position while interacting with people? I was not a development actor and I presented myself as a student in anthropology who wants to “understand”. But, constantly, people accorded me the “wrong” status. It was a methodological and an ethical problem.

I decided to take a place as member in the NGO of Mme F. I participated in the census of widows and orphans. Mme F. after a while gave me the status of her daughter as I was a student and I was not married. So inch by inch, I simply became a member of the NGO. During this time, I understood some aspects of the life of widows and some issues of the ‘development game’ such as the usurpation of the orphan’s status or dissimulation. The time I spent with Mme F., highlighted the complexity of links between interest and sincerity and how they are premitted by the pluralism of norms (Winter 2001).

To be sure, my involvement in the NGO was useful, but I was preoccupied.

Even if I was involved, I felt that it was a methodological game. Some women living in the same district as I was present at the religious leader’s residence, knew where I lived. Everyday, some of them came to be counted. So for me it was not difficult to find true and false orphans. Can you imagine? You don’t have to move, people are coming to meet you! But these women thought that I was a development actor with a lot of money and food. But it was not the case. I wanted to talk to them about their life, but it was not possible. Of course, they didn’t want to speak about their life with a stranger[6]. Thus these interactions were disappointing.

One day a very old woman came with the same goal. But she started to talk about the situation of her daughter who was mentally ill and her grand-children. Dribs and drabs, I realized that she was the grand-mother of children given to a person wishing to adopt. I was really happy because when the new tutor of orphans described the situation of her well-protected children, I thought I would not meet the grand-mother and heard her version. But at home I was meeting this grand-mother. It was a good moment for me. But for the grand-mother it was not. She wanted to find something to eat. It was her issue.

So I made a resolution. Continuing to play this game - pretending to be an active member of a NGO but being a unbiased researcher was not ethical, from my point of view. I adopted another status.

I was in the obligation to plunge in the debate of applied or fundamental anthropology. NGOs and state workers accepted to talk to me because they thought that the anthropologist was obligatorily involved in action. Anthropologists working for NGOs as consultants were numerous in Zinder. State workers, might have children, nephews or nieces who are students in sociology and plan to integrate international institutions with their diplomas. Therefore, the French academic debate was really foreign in this context. It doesn’t mean anything for the people I met. Neutrality in the sense of staying out of political or public debates is not possible. The anthropological expression « participant observation » is not only about practices of everyday life, it is about the participation in the social play. And in this one, the anthropologist is a “culture translator”. Finally, I accepted the status people gave to me.

The status of « culture translator » is one goal of anthropology. The issue is to permit the understanding of peoples thinking and different systems of norms. With this role I became able to move in different social fragments. For people it was normal to see me with their friends-enemies because they asked me to be a mediator. “Encliquage” was thus not a problem.

Now, I am concerned with ethical ways of writing. What can I describe? I understood strategies, conflicts, frauds... I can explain how the status of orphans is constructed in the interactions of different actors around a plurality of goals. The complexity of reality was accessed with triangulation is not the same that people can see and imagine at their different levels. And maybe they will find that my account is not honest with their truths or views. But I hope that they will bear in mind what I said to them, that I am trying to understand what is really happening in the life of orphans.

### Bibliography

- Agier, M., 1997, *Anthropologues en danger, l'engagement sur le terrain*. Paris, Jean-Michel Place.
- Althabe, G., & Hernandez A., V., 2004, « Implication et réflexivité en anthropologie », in *Journal des anthropologues*, 98-99 : 15-35
- Bourdieu, P., 2001, *Science de la science et réflexivité*. Paris, Raisons d'agir.
- Favret Saada, J., 1977, *Les mots, la mort, les sorts*. Paris, Gallimard.
- Gallenga, G., & Martinelli, B., à paraître début 2008, « L'empathie en anthropologie », numéro thématique du *Journal des Anthropologues*.
- Goffman, E., 1956, *The presentation of Self in Everyday life*. Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh.
- Goffman, E., 1967, *Interaction ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face behavior*. New York, Doubleday Anchor.
- Kiss, A.(ed.), 2001, *L'empathie et la rencontre interculturelle*. Paris, l'Harmattan, 2001.
- Leservoisière, O.(ed.), 2005, *Terrains ethnographiques et hiérarchies sociales. Retour réflexif sur la situation d'entretien*. Paris, Karthala.
- Vidal L. (ed.), 2004, *Les objets de la santé*, Autrepart N29.
- Winter G.(ed.), 2001, *Inégalités et politiques publiques en Afrique. Pluralité des normes et jeux d'acteurs*. Paris, Karthala.

---

[1] Lasdel's researchers welcomed me during two years. I thank them warmly, as Marc-Eric Gruénais (UR002, IRD) who enabled me this stay.

[2] About the construction of object of study in Anthropology of health.

[3] From September 2005 to December 2005.

[4] « We » are the phd student and the translator.

[5] During a collective investigation focused on the decentralization in Niger.

[6] The status of stranger was useful in interviews about HIV/aids.