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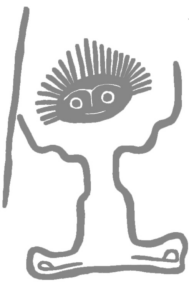

Expectations and actions in the field

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Abstract. Most if not all field ethnographers sooner or later encounter a situation in which the people they are studying hold assumptions and expectations of what constitutes correct action in a given situation that differ from their own. The situation may be trivial or a matter of life and death, and the consequences of acting (or failing to act) according to the cultural assumptions of the ethnographer or the people under study may range from amusing to mortal. I provide examples from my fieldwork with the Barí of Colombia and Venezuela. However, this problem does not end in the field. The ethnographer back home may ruminate for years about what s/he could or should have done differently. Perhaps most significantly, for purposes of this article, these ruminations, are eventually informed not only by the assumptions the ethnographer brought to the field and the different assumptions of the people s/he studied, but most interestingly by the way the ethnographer's assumptions were modified by the field experience itself.

Key words. Ethics; Values; Fieldwork; Reflection-

Expectativas y acciones en el campo

Resumen. La mayoría, si no todos, de los etnógrafos de campo, tarde o temprano se encuentran con una situación en la que las personas que están estudiando tienen suposiciones y expectativas de lo que constituye una acción correcta, en una situación dada, que difieren de las suyas propias. La situación puede ser trivial o una cuestión de vida o muerte, y las consecuencias de actuar (o dejar de actuar) de acuerdo con los supuestos culturales del etnógrafo o de las personas bajo estudio pueden variar de divertidas a mortales. Doy ejemplos de mi trabajo de campo con los Barí de Colombia y Venezuela.

Sin embargo, este problema no acaba en el campo. El etnógrafo en casa puede reflexionar durante años sobre lo que podría o debería haber hecho de manera diferente. Quizás lo más significativo, para los propósitos de este artículo, estas cavilaciones, finalmente se forman no solo por los supuestos que el etnógrafo trajo al campo y los diferentes supuestos de las personas que estudió, sino más interesante por la forma en que se modificaron los supuestos del etnógrafo. por la propia experiencia de campo.

Palabras clave. Ética; Valores; Trabajo de campo; Reflexión.

Introduction

Most if not all field ethnographers sooner or later encounter a situation in which the people they are studying, and the third parties with whom they are in contact, hold assumptions and expectations of what constitutes correct action in a given situation that differ from their own. The situation may be trivial or a matter of life and death, and the consequences of acting (or failing to act) according to the cultural assumptions of the ethnographer or the people under study may range from amusing to mortal. I offer here examples from my fieldwork with the Barí of Colombia and Venezuela, who were when I first worked with them, a recently contacted lowland South American horticultural people. However, this problem does not end in the field. The ethnographer back home may ruminate for years about what s/he could or should have done differently. Perhaps most significantly, for purposes of this article, these ruminations are eventually informed not only by the assumptions the ethnographer brought to the field and the different assumptions of the people s/he studied, and the other actors who were involved, but more interestingly by the way the ethnographer's assumptions were modified by the field experience itself.

My expectation of myself when I went to work with the Barí was that I would, when necessary, help them navigate the new social world of Colombian society just as they helped me navigate their own social world and the rainforest where it was located.

Here is a small example from my fieldwork with the Barí in the early 1970's. I was in the frontier oil drilling town of Tibú with a Barí man who was making his first trip out of traditional Barí territory. He was wearing some used clothes he had obtained at a mission station and I had promised to buy him a new outfit. In a store that catered to local peasants and oil field hands, he picked out slacks and a colorful short sleeved shirt. He also wanted shoes, sneakers. The ones he selected were bright green with contrasting flowers and stars on them. I said, "No, not those." He said, "They are pretty. Why not?". "Those are women's shoes. Many colors". He held up the shirt we had just bought. "Many colors."

I thought about launching into a discourse on the arbitrariness of fashion and the variability of gender roles, and immediately realized that my Barí language skills and his Spanish were unequal to the task. I thought about saying, "Well, if that's what you want, go ahead," and immediately realized that the local criollos would make him an object of mockery if he appeared in those sneakers. And he would not even know why. So I settled for saying something like, "People will think you are strange if you wear those sneakers." He eventually acquiesced, but not without giving me a look that suggested he thought I was being a jerk and trying to bully him.

Another time, I had an exchange with a man who had watched as a missionary wrote out a note to the owner of a small general store downriver from Barí territory. The missionary had an account with the store owner, and requested that the owner provide various goods to the bearer of the note, and put them on the missionary's account. The missionary gave the note to a Barí man who had a canoe, and he returned a day or so later with rice, panela (bricks of sugar cane) salt, a couple of knives, and so forth. Sometime later, a second man approached me in a traditional longhouse and asked:

"Do you know how to write?"

"Yes"

"Then will you write me a note to take downriver to the store? I'll bring back rice and a lot of other things to eat"

"I can't do that"

"Why not? Bruce [the missionary] does it. He write and people come back with things"

"But Bruce has an account at that store."

"What is an account?"

Again, my limited command of the Barí language and my interlocutor's limited Spanish prevented a successful explication of the situation. In both cases I had the sense I had failed the people I was studying, although in a small way.

These examples are trivial. The Barí did much better in their efforts to be decent with me.

Once on the trail with a group of Barí, I was just behind the lead man. He stopped suddenly; I started to go around him; he grabbed me. I said, "Let's keep going." He said, "There's a *cabeza de lanza*[1] [*fer-de-lance*] lying across the trail."

Then he grinned and said, "You're wearing boots; you have a machete. Go ahead if you want".

I declined.

A decade and a half later, when Barí territory was in the process of being taken over by guerrilla groups who supported themselves by kidnapping and running drugs, I crossed into Colombia from Venezuela and asked a Colombian Barí man to guide me to a traditional longhouse where I had old friends. Halfway along, we stopped at colono style Barí house and he had a chat with some other Barí men. Then he said, "We're not going to that longhouse; I'll take you to another place", I argued, but he was adamant. And I did have a good visit with other old friends at the other place, which was a more acculturated settlement.

1 *Fer-de-lance* (french), *lancehead, mapanare* (venezuelan spanish), type of *Bothrops*, a very poisonous snake.

A couple of years later, at a mission in Venezuela, I ran into a Colombian Barí man who had been at the more acculturated settlement. He mentioned, "A couple of days after you left, two men carrying AK 47s came looking for you." My guide had read the situation accurately and knew that the traditional longhouse was closer to the *guerrillas* and had if I had been there the *guerrillas* would have heard about it and arrived in time.

Those are two examples of times when they took care of me, in fact probably saved my life

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I want to talk now of times when I failed them in more serious ways than the two incidents I mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

In the early 1970's Colombia Barí territory was being invaded by poor homesteaders, land hungry peasants who took advantage of the pacification of the Barí and of roads built by oil companies to acquire tracts of land that they could then "improve" by cutting down the rainforest and planting a single crop. Having done that, they could either try to make a go of farming -often unsuccessfully- or sell the land and move on to repeat the process.

I want to emphasize that although these people were poor and uneducated, they were well aware that they were invading land that had belonged to indigenous peoples since time immemorial. To most of them, that did not matter. The spirit of the conquista still burned in them. Here were resources of value, in the hands of people -or beings who were not quite people- who did not deserve to have those resources; it was their privilege, if not their duty, to appropriate them for themselves.

I was walking to a longhouse with a group of Barí, and we had to cross a homestead, deep in Barí territory. A family emerged from their small, rough house. The wife, a loud woman of middle age, came up to me with a sort of mincing swagger. She had a smile on her face. "*Regáleme una niña, para servir*". Give me a little girl, to serve me.

We're talking about expectations here. Her expectation was that I was "the owner of the Indians", and that I could give her one, a little girl, as if I were giving her a kitten or a puppy.

I said, "*Señora*, these people are human beings, not gifts." I was scowling, of course. Her smile became fierce. She turned to her husband, and raised her voice for the whole family to hear, obviously trying to embarrass me. "Did you hear what he said? He said they are human beings."

We left. I still think I should have said or done something more, and I still don't know what.

My last example is the most painful. The first Barí longhouse I stayed

in -in 1970- was a small one, occupied by only nine people. They were a conservative splinter group that split off from a larger longhouse group that had established itself at sort of dormitory style riverside settlement founded by a missionary. One of the families in the smaller, traditional group was comprised of a man who had a harelip, his very sweet young wife, and their infant daughter. Everyone in that little longhouse was very, very nice to me and I came to be extremely fond of them.

I left Colombia at the end of 1972 and did not return to the Colombian Barí until the mid-1980's, when I slipped across the border from Venezuela to see old friends. The little longhouse was long gone, and its inhabitants has rejoined their original larger longhouse group at the riverside settlement. There was now a bustling cooperative store there, founded by the same missionary. Local homesteaders came from miles around to trade there. The dormitory style housing for the Barí was gone, and they were living in a traditional palm thatched longhouse, separated from the store by barbed wire. When I went in, I was overwhelmed to find my first Barí friends still there. We had a long, joyful visit.

Then I said I was going to cross the barbed wire and go to the cooperative to buy things for us to celebrate with. The wife of the harelip man eagerly accompanied me. I later realized she wanted to come with me because she was afraid to go to the store alone, for reasons that will shortly become clear.

In the store, with this woman beside me at the counter, I struck up a conversation with a young man who was working there. He, it turned out, was an anthropology student at the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia* (Colombia National University). He was putting in time working at the store as payment in kind for information for his thesis. I was eager to hear what he knew about the recent history and current situation of the Colombia Barí and we started an absorbing conversation across the counter.

The young woman continued standing next to me. At one point I glanced over at her and saw that a teen aged homesteader boy had planted himself next to her and was staring her up and down as if she were an exotic animal. She was obviously very embarrassed. I glared at him and motioned at him to move off. And then went back to my conversation.

A few minutes later, the conversation winding down, I realized she was no longer next to me. Humiliated by the boy's continued attention, she had moved to the back wall of the room. He had followed her. He had some pieces of paper, and was grinning and putting them, one by one, in the patch pockets of her dress, trying to provoke a reaction, as a boy might poke a stick at a wounded animal to see what he might make it do. She was mortified and terrified.

I glared at him again and took her out with me, back to the safety of the longhouse. That was decades ago. I still feel guilty.

What should I have done? I have thought about it a lot and no longer have any doubt. I should have grabbed him by the ears, dragged him out of the store, pushed his face in the dirt, and told him if he ever approached a Barí woman again I would return and kill him.

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