

## Using Tribal Researchers: A Vital and Necessary Development

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### INTRODUCTION

It is necessary to accept that tribal societies have the same intellectual capacities as any other part of the macro-cultures in which they exist. To consider tribal societies as 'backward' in relation to national standards would seem to suggest an all-encompassing biased approach by those who make such assertions. Leaving aside personal and political biases, 'backwardness' as a classification cannot be applied to social systems with complex organisations and languages and in this sense the Muria or Mishmi are no more backward than a Parsi community of diamond merchants in Mumbai. The only issues in which such a classification could be applied is their widespread non-literacy, not illiteracy and their inability to dominate other cultures through the manipulation of money, political power and the use of gunpowder.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that an important way in which the knowledge of tribal peoples can enable them to become part of the international intellectual repertoire of complex alternative ways of living, is to increase this knowledge through the use of locally based tribal intellectuals who are proportionately just as numerous there as in any other society. The importance of such more local understandings has been commented on long ago (Maruyama, 1974).

### Considerations in Tribal Community Fieldwork

The value and availability of theoretical and field-work based knowledge of tribal communities is correlated to the shortage of university posts which are primarily tied to teaching and administrative obligations; this means that distant research work has to be fitted in as a low priority to overfull personal programmes and domestic commitments. Research into tribal societies is inevitably part-time, discontinuous and possibly not having the research potential as other more convenient areas of research within the university environment.

The governments of developing nations are not interested in financing theoretical work on

tribal societies thus drawing attention to their 'backwardness' and will usually only provide funds in support of development planning often in circumstances involving the immediate dislocation of tribal communities. It may be that the data necessary for providing applicable advice can be found without any need for lengthy fieldwork linking into some wider theoretical social science ideas already known or being personally initiated by concerned professional researchers.

The length and amount of field-work is usually correlated to the amount of money available, sponsorship, controllable domestic obligations, career needs and academic leaves of absence. If research cannot be done 'in-house', it is always handicapped by factors over which the potential researcher has little or no control.

There is perhaps another handicap in the well-developed aura of professionalism which surrounds field-work and it may be that the basic understandings of how to collect primary data are relatively simple requiring dedication and persistence; it is the writing up which takes the time and professionalism.

If social scientists are to advance academically there can be no sharing of the credit for their work which has to be shown as being under their own intellectual direction. An additional author(s) or the attribution of help to research assistants reduces the credit and such joint works are listed separately in career summaries. Academic ideas may well be as jealously guarded as the protection of copyrightable inventions.

Right from the start of field-work there have been a series of renowned social scientists who have been totally dependent on local informants, some of whom might have been better described as assistants (Sanjek, 1993). It is not often that the contribution of these non-literate long-term informants has been given the status to which they should be entitled. My own initial work on the Sukuma of Tanzania (Tanner, 1967) would not have been possible without the intellectual stimulus and help of my office messenger, Juma Ndamulo, an alcoholic half-and-half Muslim traditionally minded Sukuma who had only primary education; perhaps half of the hours I spent in the field were in his company. The extent

to which this may have led to bias is not the issue in the context of this paper but that the subsequent academic publications were based on the foundations which he provided. In fact the introduction to this book gives acknowledgments to him and four other Sukuma who provided the structures from which I somewhat optimistically reached conclusions about the religious behaviour of three million other Sukuma.

It may be that in the earlier career stages the professional researcher has difficulty in giving full credit to the local tribal people who have played such major parts in their successful work as it might be seen as diminishing their professional abilities. It may be that those who have achieved academic status can afford to personalise the contributions which these 'assistants' have made to their work. In most tribal societies such competent people have always existed.

The point must be that much more use could be made of such people, not because they have been 'assistants' to existing or recent professional field-workers, but that they are capable of collecting data on their own communities with perhaps rather more encouragement than supervision. Once they have received the necessary encouragement and got the point of providing information about the importance of their own cultures, they are then in a position to produce much original material; key words can produce examples of their use and they can just as easily produce lists of the disputes which have occurred in their communities since the last harvest. A retired medical worker in Mombasa once he had got the point that the genealogies of his fellow Swahili had to show both the matrilineal as well as the patrilineal lines, produced family trees of virtually the whole Swahili population from which it was possible to calculate the proportions of single and double cousin marriages (Tanner, 1964).

If tribal cultures are going to be adequately recorded there is a need for networks of ongoing informants who can in the absence of any professional field-workers, provide acceptable primary data on which others may or may not subsequently work. The real point is the accumulation of data on tribal micro-cultures which are changing just as fast as the surrounding macro-cultures.

### **The Pragmatics of Fieldwork**

It is necessary to look pragmatically at anthropological field-work in tribal environments which

have significant social and economic handicaps before any long-term research can become established which has professional objectives.

There is firstly geographical distance as professional field researchers have to travel long distances before they start or renew their research; this is a costly process and one moreover which separates the researchers from the researched. Then there are the social distance factors since few if any come from tribal environments and even if they did, they would have long ago lost any close personal connections with their natal communities; they will always be one of 'them' rather than one of 'us'.

It is almost inevitable that these researchers will not be using their natal languages or dialects and probably their data collection will be through a secondary major international language, national language or interpreters. Most national researchers as they have risen in their academic status, will probably have had to become competent in at least three languages.

The demographic pattern of fieldworkers is that of predominantly young men rather than women with few more mature researchers who have other professional and domestic obligations combined with a disinclination to endure the discomforts and separations which field-work entails. This would suggest that the framework of observation may well be a biased one from the characteristics of those who do this work. However much they may think that they have created close links with those they are researching, they have very few connections which are not based on bilateral material self-interest.

Much depends on informants who have their own reasons for attaching themselves to fieldworkers so that both parties are motivated by their own interests. Little is known about even invaluable informants except that they have formed relationships with outsiders who filter this information through their own outsider cognitive systems and interests.

These all have expensive time and motion implications which correlate with anthropology as a profession which itself is closely linked to the need to test hypotheses and the creation of theories. Through these factors part professional and part personal, anthropology has in fact rationed the amount of knowledge which can be obtained about tribal communities. In comparison to the amount of data which is available for Western and American social groups particularly

university students, drug addicts and the underprivileged, very little is known of tribal communities. So these are handicaps as well as expensive standards to set field-workers.

Unless the anthropologist is required to investigate a previously defined project from which he/she cannot deviate and for which specific training is a necessity, what is required for the gathering of primary data from tribal communities. Professor Evans-Pritchard perhaps with his tongue in his cheek after many years field-work in Cyrenaica and the Sudan, suggested that almost anyone other than a complete idiot could be a field-worker. It is in fact not difficult to get information about how any community functions if the researchers have sympathetic personalities and have not decided in advance what information they want.

To what extent does it require professional training to gather information on any topic other than the personal interest and intuition of the fieldworker. He/she has to have the personality and persistence to elicit information without appearing to be ostentatiously curious and intrusive. The point surely is to collect primary data on matters for which they have not already committed themselves; the satisfying of curiosity rather than the support for hypotheses .

My own introduction to trying to find out the behaviour of the Sukuma was to put every heading in the index of Evans-Pritchard's book on the Azande (Evans-Pritchard, 1937) onto separate sheets of paper and to ask knowledgeable but not necessarily literate Sukuma to write or discuss with me their own explanations of what these terms meant to them; the results were not so much a 'yes' or 'no' answers but that 'we' deal with this behaviour in this way, or this term means nothing to us so that information was provided in their own words. I was no influence on what they provided except that we mutually enjoyed the situation and this itself is an important factor; this type of enquiry places the informants into a status of equality with the seemingly ignorant outsider who is being taught.

On another occasion I wrote the Sukuma word for God on the school blackboard and asked the students to make up sentences using that word; this distinguished at once between those who produced stereotypical phrases and the minority who had more individual ideas (Tanner, 1956). It is perhaps an exaggeration to suggest that such collections of data involving only a few hours

field-work could be the basis of a wide range of subsequent research

A final example occurred when I was researching convict behaviour in a Kenyan prison (Tanner, 1970). I asked several interested prisoners to record for me on lavatory paper the details of any incidents in which they heard angry voices. On subsequent visits to the prison and the provision of a few cigarettes, ball-point pens and paper, each incident was discussed. My only stipulation was 'raised voices'. Of course they could make up incidents in order to get the cigarettes, but to lie consistently and within a general pattern from other informants, would have been difficult but also anthropologically useful.

The point here is not my ingenuity but to show that in any community there are those with higher than average intelligence who are able with encouragement to provide primary data which would probably be very difficult or expensive in time and motion terms for temporary outsider visitors to collect themselves. I used 'them' in many parallel ways without 'us' being all that involved. The professionalism of anthropology came into consideration much latter with its constantly varying multi-dimensional theories.

### **The Existing Knowledge of Tribal Societies**

What is the situation as regards our knowledge of tribal societies. Certainly the available knowledge on North American Indians is as comprehensive as it is ever likely to be when it is said that every Indian community usually includes an anthropologist even if it is only a university student doing some field-work under supervision. Every United States state has at least one American Indian Reserve not too far from a Department of Anthropology.

Elsewhere there have been some concentration of studies as for example among Papuans in the Mount Hagan area of Papua New Guinea, Australian Aborigines around the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Todas of the Indian Nilgiri Hills. Thus the knowledge of tribal communities is patchy at best and tied to the work of individual anthropologists such as Verrier Elwin's work among the Muria (Elwin, 1947).

The conclusion must be that in proportion to the numbers of people classifiable as living in tribal communities, there is very little comprehensive knowledge. Yet by any standards of evaluation they are under pressure to change and

are changing significantly often at an almost visible rate.

Leaving aside the importance of theory which surely has somewhat limited functions in terms of the needs of developing societies, those concerned with the long-term welfare of tribal communities related to their on-going identities and special characteristics, are faced with a situation of some immediacy. It may be that the rate of multi-faceted change in tribal societies is higher than in expanding urban-industrial ones in which there have been found to be some longer-term cross-cultural uniformities and some concentration of research on an international level.

For most researchers prepared to do field-work in tribal communities whether non-nationals, 'half and half' nationals who are now citizens of another country and nationals are quite clearly the 'other'; the tribals are distinct and nationally recognised as such whether in Brazil, India or in the tribal balances in cabinet posts in such states as Tanzania and Kenya. Their retention and support as distinct communities gives a democratic tinge to nationalism.

This categorisation of tribal people as the 'other' may be correlated to the fact that those who research them are highly educated, expensive to train, maintain and retain. The leakage of potential researchers into other professions is high; the prestige and economic returns are low when weighed against the isolation and celibate nature of fieldwork.

There is nevertheless not so much gaps in our knowledge of these tribal communities but areas of ignorance into which large amounts of contemporary life slip unnoticed. It may be that much of this is due to the professionalism required of field-workers, while the problem may rather be the failure to collect primary data which may or may not be used latter by professionals; they cannot work on data which has not been collected in the first place.

Surely what we want to find out is what existing members of tribal communities do and think about their contemporary lives particularly without being too closely filtered to fit the theoretical frames provided by social science field-workers.

### **The Reservoir of Informants in Tribal Communities**

We can assume that in any community of any

size and at any stage of economic development, there are many individuals of high intellectual capacity regardless of their standards of literacy or non-literacy which should never be confused with illiteracy. As a rule of thumb it might be that any community has five percent of their population capable of being educated up to university standards. If this is so then a Mishmi or Naga village of five hundred adults would have twenty- five persons of higher than average intelligence who might be useful for the collection of data.

Indeed there are numerous examples of anthropologists who have profitably used the same informants for years and these men and women have in the course of this association picked up the methodologies and the terms used in their mentors' research. It is possible that they are a self-selected group of people with higher than average intelligence who are attracted to outsider researchers who have the same intellectual and social characteristics.

There can be no question that there are potential indigenous researchers in all tribal communities who are certainly capable of collecting primary data which will not have been initially filtered through the biases which come from inputs of higher education and prolonged domestic socialisations. Of course they may be and indeed will be biased in what they think and are prepared to disclose, just as anthropologists in their thinking will reflect their own domestic socialisation and the intellectual attractions of particular university teachers and texts which they are required to read.

In my own fieldwork which started from the advantages of being bilingual in kiSwahili, the national lingua franca of Tanzania as I had passed the Government's Higher Standard Examinations in both written and spoken kiSwahili, field-workers have always the handicap of having to spend much time learning the simplicities of the local languages or have their data filtered through the inadequacies of interpreters. Thus there was always the use of informants on their own terms for providing data. Much of the collected data did not come as responses to questioning which is as impolite in Tanzanian society as it is in most if not all other societies. and which may be characteristic of field-workers who are usually under the pressures of limited money, dated visas and time to get results.

This taught me a valuable lesson that intelligent but 'uneducated' tribal people were

quite capable of knowing the functions of their own society under the heading that this was what they had always done. Latter in the university setting this data was woven into webs of some comparative complexity. It was not a bad rule of thumb that if such people could not understand a theoretical point put to them in their own language, then it could not rationally be applied to them. They could understand joking relationships, mother-in-law avoidance and so on with no problems at all while they thought that the Oedipus complex was either my idea of a joke or some sort of western stupidity. The effort spent to find data to support a theory which they had no conscious experience of, might seem a waste of time or at best idiosyncratic. Their own intellects provided an adequate tool for them to be cooperating rather than to be cooperative.

There was another underlying factor to this method of doing fieldwork without on many occasions being in that particular field which was seemingly successful in terms of published work. I always had another job which had to take up most of my time firstly as an administrative officer in Tanzania, then as a lecturer in adult education in Kenya and finally as Chairman of the East African Institute of Social Research in Uganda. There had to be a way round the fact that I had jobs with specific obligations tying me to time and space restrictions if I wanted to do research. The need to take advantage of opportunities and local informants even if the topic did not at once appear to be anything of which I had prior knowledge.

Hearing gunfire in Kampala which suggested that a coup was being attempted, it seemed an opportunity too good to miss so I used four students to collect coffee-shop gossip of what was going on; neither I nor they had any knowledge about what constituted gossip (Tanner, 1978). These local informants provided primary data in an area of study of which nothing was known.

It is also a fact that even in the least developed communities there are some records written down which can be salvaged such as baptismal records in Ngara which disclosed the proportion of twins born in a community and records of births in a maternity clinic which had been kept by the same midwife for over a decade.

More importantly it may also be that there are always tribal intellectuals who will welcome the opportunity to give their views to outsiders as

Victor Turner describes his relationship with the Ndembu diviner Muchona the Hornet (Turner, 1967), even describing the sense of loss which that man might have experienced when he left the area. Just as the Sukuma chief Lupembe of Massanza who described the fraudulent behaviour of his local diviners which he would never have done with his Sukuma neighbours and constituents.

What may be the drawbacks to the cooperation of such people. They may not know a major language which would link their understandings to the social frameworks of surrounding macro-societies but paraphrasing is always possible as often these people switch from one language to another in mid-sentence particularly for key nouns and verbs as few if any tribal people are any longer monolingual. The key nouns and verbs would always be in the tribal language.

Secondly as members of their own communities their views will be tied to their roles there; built-in primary biases connected to age, age-grades, sex, lineage, status, location and date but they will certainly be aware that they are expressing their own views from easily detectable backgrounds. In this context it is salutary to remember that outsider researchers carry into their work their own cognitive biases created by education, religion, class, age, sex, nationality, ethnicity and physique. The difference between the two forms of bias may be that the former are more easily identifiable and acceptable.

### **Ways of Using Tribal Intellectuals in Contemporary Situations**

It might be possible for social science departments of universities to 'adopt' local tribal communities with their students making some visits there as part of their courses. This adoption would ensure that data is collected independently of particular projects and thus would involve some sharing of data between departments of psychology, sociology and anthropology, even history and this would be in line with modern thinking on overlapping disciplines. It would not be too difficult for such visits to get data on household compositions and birth and death dates and many other aspects of daily life.

The tribal communities will always have some people who are to some extent literate and who might be talked into contributing to the understanding of their own communities; primary

school teachers, those who run rural dispensaries, police constables and inspectors, catechists, agricultural advisers, forest guards; there is quite a large pool of potential informants. Some title might be created to testify to their on-going connection with a university department and quite a lot of goodwill can be created with tea, biscuits and the demonstrating of shared interests and enthusiasm.

Departments could produce shared lists of key nouns and verbs which these people might be asked to explain which would provide the basis for cross-cultural comparisons, just by listing sentences in which these key words are used. The point must always be the accumulation of information for which there is not necessarily any immediate need to write up. A series of pages on which an Angami Naga may have written the meanings of important words in 2005 might be a gold mine to a researcher in 2025 just as pages collected by myself on tribal vernacular understandings in 1960s remain as valuable data for whichever university or body or particular researcher inherits them; the fact that I collected them is rally an irrelevancy as only their writers, date and location are significant.

There is another essential factor to recognise in the collection of data. Whereas in the past literacy was regarded as essential for the collection of any data, modern electronics has jumped over this necessity. A tribal collector can handle a small inexpensive tape-recorder as efficiently as the most highly qualified social scientists; beyond writing some details on the label such a person can record whatever interests them; in fact the previously considered essential hurdle of literacy may well disappear as a factor.

Modern electronics has made possible the collection of a wider range of data within which there are interesting developments as the use of such recordings of spirit possession ceremonies as part of latter memorial ceremonies in Bali.

It is essential for the ongoing understanding of tribal social systems that the collection of data and its retention should be fitted into institutions of higher learning and preserved there and so become independent of intermittent individual research interests. Much data can be collected at low cost in terms of time and money by taking advantage of existing tribal intellectuals and the opportunities they present.

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**KEYWORDS** Data Accumulation. Potential Informants. Affiliation to University

**ABSTRACT** There is an urgent need to organise an on-going system of collecting data from rapidly changing tribal societies in order to create banks of information which can be used latter for yet unknown research purposes. It should be possible to do this by using the core of clever tribal people working independently of academic researchers and without the need for high standards of formal education or expensive subsidies.

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