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Reflexive Ethnography as a Tool in Researching Hungarian Krishna Devotees Reflections on the Margin of a Long-term Fieldwork Among the Hungarian Community of Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Math

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Abstract

The paper deals with some aspects of reflexive fieldwork by analysing the author's Couchsurfing experience in Brno during the workshop „Towards a Symmetrical Approach: The Study of Religions after Postmodern and Postcolonial Criticism”. The experience is interpreted as a field situation and the author is regarded as an ethnographer. The author's modes and codes of behaviour are being scrutinized in a reflexive way. The situation and its reflexive analysis can throw light upon certain modes of fieldwork practices which stayed unnoticed during real field situations among a certain group of Hungarian Krishna devotees; the Hungarian Community of Sri Chaitnya Saraswat Math. Making these actions of the researcher conscious may help producing more honest and sensitive ethnographies and may offer a deeper insight into the complex nature of ethnographic fieldwork. In addition, the experience can be useful in my research among Krishna devotees.

Keywords

Krishna devotees, reflexive ethnography, fieldwork, postmodern, cultural anthropology

1. Couchsurfing, Reflexive Ethnography, Krishna Devotees

Couchsurfing is an international network of people who are ready to host each other, travel with each other, share cultural experiences and time together. It is a service offered to travellers who, during their travels, prefer to stay with other members of the Couchsurfing community over renting a hotel room. „Surfing isn't just about a place to sleep. It's about exchange” – as it is stated on the community's website (Couchsurfing, 2013). An experience in Couchsurfing may, to a certain degree, also serve as an experience in ethnographic fieldwork. In both cases a subject dives into a culture which is different from his/her own, spends time with locals and lives with them for a certain time. Though the time spent together between hosts and guests is quite limited (usually lasts up to three or four nights), the resemblances to a field situation make an experience with Couchsurfing an exciting theme for analysis. As postmodern cultural anthropology pointed out many times, composing an ethnographic text about „enigmatical others” (Geertz, 1988: 130) can hardly be valid without the researcher's reflections on his/her own role and position in the process of fieldwork (Clifford & Marcus, 1988, Rosaldo, 1993, Crapanzano, 1980), Couchsurfing can be an exercise in reflexive ethnography. It might shed light upon certain modes of the researcher's behaviour which otherwise could have remained undetected.

I used Couchsurfing in December 2012 when I took part in the workshop „Towards a Symmetrical Approach: The Study of Religions After Postmodern and Postcolonial Criticism” at Masaryk University, Brno. During my three-day stay I discovered several modes and codes of behaviour I was unconsciously implementing in field settings. In Hungary I carry out a long-term fieldwork among a small Krishna devotee community, now called the Hungarian Community of Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Math¹. I have by now spent nine years with them and as my status in the group has been solid and unchanged in the last couple of years, being with them has become somewhat natural to both me and them. We slowly got used to each other. This, however, resulted in a gradual loss of awareness of my own behaviour and how it may change the interpretations I construct about the community. This essay about my Couchsurfing experience aims to reflect on my own actions among unknown people in whose life I took part as both a participant and an observer. This time I got engrossed in my own role as a researcher. Normally in my ethnographic texts I try to balance between reflexivity and the knowledge I gather about the community I'm researching. I aim to focus on the way I become part of my informants' social and religious reality and how the knowledge I acquire about them during fieldwork is affected and filtered by my position, personality, education, preconceptions, etc. However, regarding the polyvocal nature of ethnographic meta-narratives², sharpening one's skills in reflexivity in an exercise like my Couchsurfing experience can be beneficial for ethnographic research as well. In the article, I shall link Couchsurfing to my field

¹ Some of my works on the community in English: Kocsis, 2004: 329–337, Kocsis, 2006: 105–117.

² Ethnographic texts can be regarded as meta-narratives as they are constructed from various voices and stories in the field. (Davies, 1999: 214–225).

experiences among Krishna devotees and see how the insights I gained could be useful in my fieldwork.

In my text, I shall first focus on the preparations I made before the actual surfing, then on the knowledge I acquired during my stay and last I shall make some final remarks and ask further questions.

2. Departures

As fieldwork usually starts before going to the field, I also started preparing for my three days of Couchsurfing about a month before it was due to begin. The first issue was finding a host. Taking part in Couchsurfing begins with signing up for the community's website and creating one's own profile. After that one can browse among many profiles of possible hosts and can send *couch requests* to people asking them directly to host him/her. I thought I would leave it to chance and send a *couch request* to the first person whose profile I liked. I was lucky as my request was accepted almost immediately. Then I realized that my *likes* were actually not random, they had certain characteristics: the host whose profile I *liked* was of similar age, was a PhD student as well (so could probably understand my motivations for taking part in a workshop abroad), had some common interests with me and had many positive feedback from guests he hosted on his site. This made me remember that at the beginning of my fieldwork among Krishna devotees I developed closer ties to those devotees with whom we had some common features: I have spent more time in their company than with others. I'm not certain if this can (or should) be avoided during fieldwork, but it certainly effects the researcher's gaze on the community; the interpretations he/she constructs will be positioned by these closer relationships.

The next step was preparing *theoretically* for the surfing. This included reading some suggestions and asking friends who had some experience with Couchsurfing for advice. I found some articles on Couchsurfing on the Internet which constructed a code concerning the behaviour of a guest explicitly, stating do's and don'ts. I also read some blog posts on the website about surfers' experiences. I learnt that, for instance, it's nice to bring a gift from my own country. My friends told me more about what I should expect: how a host would probably behave, what codes are valid for hosts: I grasped that it is likely from a host to take his/her guest to a sightseeing tour or to a pub or to some other Couchsurfing programs in town. Thus I had some preconceptions about what I would be doing before the sequence of events started. However, in real life, although the above mentioned codes were more or less followed, things turned out differently, not quite according to the *theories* I read and constructed beforehand. Just like the way it happened during my field experiences. Before beginning my field research among different groups of Hungarian Krishna devotees³, I had a great deal of theoretical knowledge about different fieldwork methods and about the nature of fieldwork itself based on the Geertzian hermeneutic paradigm which interpreted the anthropologist as a reader

³ At the beginning the Hungarian Community of Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Math was just one among some other Krishna devotee communities in which I carried out fieldwork, however soon they became my major concern.

and the field as a text⁴. However as soon as I started fieldwork these preconceptions were all blurred; nothing turned out the way I expected.

3. Reflections

I divided this part of my paper, which deals with the reflections I gained through my three days of Couchsurfing, into two parts: my behaviour with my host and my host as a key informant.

3.1 Being There: at Home with my Host

Concerning my behaviour in H's (H=Host)⁵ apartment, his personal sphere which he shared with me as a stranger for three days, I had an important observation: I caught myself that I was trying to act as if I wasn't there. I kept adjusting to H's behaviour, to his habits, I was trying to construct some rules according to which he lived and aimed at following them. I was completely unaware of this until an episode on the second evening of my stay. That evening I got engaged into a conversation with one of H's flatmates in the kitchen. First we were three, H was there too, his flatmate and I picked up a topic which we both found exciting. H was a bit outsider in it and was just sitting silently by the kitchen table. Some time had passed, H was looking at us, then stood up and said that he would go to sleep and left the kitchen. All of a sudden I realized that my presence makes a difference and felt that I had to return to my guest place as well. I stood up, said good night to the flatmate and left the kitchen too. On the corridor I found H, who overheard the conversation, he was smiling and saying: „You don't have to return to your place just because I quit.” Suddenly I understood my behaviour and the motivation behind it. I wanted to stay unseen, wanted H and his flatmate to live their lives the way they usually do. However, that was just false. I was there and that made a difference. I should have accepted that. H agreed with my presence and accepted that it would make a difference. I acted like this many times during my fieldwork as well, especially at the beginning. Trying to act as if I wasn't there, scared of violating any rule which I didn't notice and let them do things the way they usually do. During my fieldwork I wasn't aware of this behaviour of mine, maybe I even thought this is how fieldwork is supposed to be done. This preconception, which influenced me unconsciously during my field experiences, may stem from an old fashioned code of field research. According to this code the researcher should conceal his/her identity during fieldwork as much as he/she can in order to let things happen naturally in the field (Davies, 1999: 70).

An instance from my early field research amongst the Hungarian Community of Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Math (at that time still called the Hungarian Bráhmána Mission) might illustrate this problem further. It happened at a very early stage of my research, it was maybe the first or second occasion I took part in an *insider's*

⁴ It can be described by the notion of „thick description” (Geertz, 1973: 3–30).

⁵ I asked my host's permission to write about the time we spent together in Brno and he had no objections.

*program*⁶. I wrote this experience down in my fieldnotes and its memory is still vivid. It's probably because I felt the same embarrassment as with H. The *insider's program* was held in one of the devotees' home. I already knew the apartment as I had been there several times before, I also got used to the sight of the Radha-Krishna altar in the middle of the room. We were usually just passing the altar, but this time something changed. It took me a while to notice the change. A small candle was burning on the altar which meant that Krishna was present. While I just passed the altar everyone else knelt down and bowed before it. I was terribly embarrassed as I thought that I stood out: I didn't act like they did, I wasn't invisible. The devotees didn't seem to mind my behaviour, nobody mentioned the bowing, they knew that I was different and accepted my presence there, they agreed to it previously. Just like H in Brno. I finally decided to perform a little bowing without kneeling down, I saw that some devotees acted like this and I followed them. I wanted to adjust to their customs. It's funny that I caught myself operating according to this code of field research in both cases as I was educated in the spirit of postmodernity. In Brno I understood that this mode of behaviour is not necessarily right: my presence in the field always makes a difference and I should be aware of that.

3.2 Whose Gaze Is It? H as a Key Informant

Ethnographic researches rely on information conveyed by other individuals. Beyond (participant) observation, one gathers information through interviews, questions and conversation with the members of the researched group. It is essential for the researcher to build connections in the field. Some connections may be close, while others are more distant. Having a key informant, who's a source of the majority of information gathered, is a commonplace in ethnographic researches (Davies, 1999: 71, 78–82). This however, sheds light upon the positioned nature of ethnographic knowledge. Through whose interpretation do I see the community? Whose perspective do I accept and interpret? These questions evolved in me during my stay in Brno as I observed some parts of my relationship to H.

During my fieldwork among Krishna devotees I so had a key informant too. When I started fieldwork nine years ago, after a couple of weeks I found that there was someone in the group whom I began referring to in my notes as my „key informant”. It didn't really happen on purpose, I wasn't consciously looking for a key informant, but as I was quite new to the community and I found myself sticking to one of the members more than the others. Let's call this person R. R was the first devotee I met from the religious group when I made a life history interview with him about how he became a devotee of Krishna. Later on he introduced me to other devotees and organized more interviews for me. Other members of the community identified me by him: „you are the girl, R talked about, who does some research on us.” At the beginning of my field research R was my guide in the group: he explained philosophical concepts of bhakti yoga, organized meetings with other devotees and helped me transcribe Sanskrit words to English. Having a key informant made me

⁶ The community's programs were of concentric origin at that time, which meant that there were public lectures which could be attended by everybody and so called *insider's programs* which were religious rituals. It took me almost a year to be invited to an *insider's program*.

feel more secure. R helped me shape my first gaze on the community and I relied on him in many ways.

My host in Brno was also my guide in an unknown place just like R. „You’re the ‘native’ here, you know best, so I trust you.” I told H while going home from a party of his friends in snowy Brno. After getting off the night bus H was uncertain for a moment which way to go to get home sooner. He shared his dilemma with me and my reply was the sentence above. I trusted him. Just like I trusted R during my fieldwork. I wasn’t reflexive about the information I got from him – at the beginning, most information was from him and even later it was always him I turned to for explanations and clarifications in spite of my good relationship with other members and knowing some of their perspectives as well⁷. In my fieldwork among Hungarian Krishna devotees, I was able to broaden my horizon later, but the process took me some years. I still catch myself sometimes unconsciously seeing or judging things through R’s interpretations. My possible solution to this problem is just partial: being honest about it. I should be aware of the positioned nature of my knowledge and reflect on it in my ethnographic texts.

4. Arrivals

The reflections I made here on my behaviour as a social scientist are definitely not new or unknown to many other social scientists. Most of my insights gather around the positioned and scattered nature of ethnographic knowledge which has been an issue in cultural anthropology since the 1970s (Clifford & Marcus, 1988). As postmodernism was the most influential paradigm during my university studies, these meditations were not unfamiliar to me on a theoretical level. The positioned, partial nature of ethnographic knowledge was a fact to me which I referred to many times in my texts, claiming that I can’t possess an objective truth about my researched community. Experiencing these concepts empirically means however a deeper level of understanding and maybe a chance too to carry out more sensitive researches.

The chance to carry out more sensitive and honest fieldwork with the help of reflexive ethnography and the insights I gained during my Couchsurfing experience in Brno is given to me in my further research among the Hungarian Community of Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Math. This community is the theme of my doctoral thesis. I have long been interested in the dynamics of relationship between the researcher and his/her informants and how its multilayered nature could be represented in my texts. Being more reflexive, representing the circumstances of the ethnographic knowledge I gathered may help me to (re)present the interpretation of the polyvocal reality I constructed while being in the field. The exercise in Brno was good tool for that.

Beyond the concerns of my own fieldwork among Hungarian Krishna devotees, I have also been meditating on the nature of ethnographic knowledge in general. As I was waiting for my train to Budapest at the railway station in Brno, watching the snowflakes whirling in the air, I was ruminating on my experiences and on

⁷ It was merely because R turned out to be the most willing to help me for a longer period of time and put up with my frequent questions and queries with patience.

the nature of ethnographic researches. As a field of study where researchers try to learn about, listen to and understand other (groups of) people with the help of direct contact, what are the boundaries between which one has room to construct meanings? Reflexivity is a great tool for any fieldworker: it's a self-control which helps them to be more honest in their writings. Concerning honesty and the endless negotiation, balancing and interpretation of the many different voices in the field (including the researcher's own voice too) which form a seemingly meaningful patchwork in ethnographic texts, one cannot escape the questions: how much are we able to know about other people's reality during fieldwork? How much are we able to know about ourselves? How much knowledge may we gain about the fusion of these two? Finally, beyond research possibilities, what is our deepest motivation for conducting ethnographic fieldwork?

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