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First Steps, First Encounters. Teaching Field Research Through Excursions

Ethnologists – and ethnomusicologists – can tell stories about what it was like "the first time". When, after long preparations, they finally arrived in the "field" and came face to face with their first informants. For many, it was probably a nail-biter as they were very unsure of what to expect. Of course, they had read the literature on the subject, had taken courses in interviewing techniques, done exercises on operating equipment, and more, and yet there was a great deal of uncertainty as to how everything would turn out. Fieldwork is a term that can evoke feelings of anxiety. Because, unlike many other skills that can be acquired, fieldwork seems to be something that, at least in part, cannot really be learned.

When I set out on my first field trip to Madagascar in 1986, I kept my plans secret. I told everyone that I was traveling to the beaches of this large island in the Indian Ocean as a tourist. That way, I wouldn't be embarrassed if I returned home without any results. I was relieved to finally realize that it wasn't all that difficult.

Actually, most field trips, like mine, are somehow successful, at least from the perspective of those who made them. From my more than 30 years at university, I know of only one case of total failure: a student who went to the Caribbean and had to admit on his return that he had not been able to make any contact with informants. So what's the story behind this fear, which seems to be largely unwarranted?

Travel to distant lands for the purpose of exploration dates back to antiquity, while the more recent Western tradition can be traced back at least as far as James Cook's voyages in the second half of the 18th century. The first of these journeys were big multidisciplinary undertakings that took place in a colonial context. Personal contact at eye level with the research subjects was not an issue; conflicts were sometimes even carried out with weapons. Cook himself was killed in an armed conflict with natives in Hawaii in 1779.

The superficial collection of data and objects according to the motto "a bit of everything from everywhere", which it was at the beginning, gradually gave way to a more intensive study of selected cultures. The German ethnographer Augustin Krämer, for example, spent nine months in Palau in 1908–10 and subsequently published a five-volume work on these islands in Micronesia, which were in German possession at the time. His methodological approach was stationary field research and informant-oriented investigation. A good relationship with the informants was crucial, and Krämer seems to have had a special talent in dealing with them, as a remark by Felix von Luschan of the Berlin Ethnological Museum testifies: "Love for the natives, [...] absolute mastery of the technique of travel and his unusual skill in communicating with dark and light people make Krämer one of the most talented explorers of our time (von Luschan, 1907, p. 778)"[1].

Over 40 years earlier, another explorer had already been working in this region: the Polish ethnographer and biologist Jan Stanisław Kubary. Kubary represents a very early example of total immersion in a foreign culture. At the age of 22, he moved to Oceania and lived there until his death in 1896. He spoke local languages and was married to a local woman (Howes, 2019).

While Kubary did not make much of a fuss about his research style, it was another Polish researcher whose reflections were of paramount importance to later generations of field researchers: Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski's famous three and a half years of field research on the Trobriand Islands east of New Guinea came about by chance. At the time of the outbreak of the First World War, Malinowski was in the region and was detained by the British as a citizen of Austria-Hungary. He was free to move around the Trobriand Islands, but was not allowed to leave. This gave him plenty of time for fieldwork and reflection.

With Malinowski, the meaning of field research changed in terms of a process of understanding.[2] He described field research as something difficult and complex, as a learning process over a long period of time, during which the researcher lives with the people in the research area and participates in their daily lives, thus undergoing a process of enculturation[3]. Field research became a kind of initiation rite or rite de passage that a future ethnologist had to go through and pass. The myth of fieldwork began with Malinowski and continues to this day.

In ethnomusicology, the discussion of field research in the sense of Malinowski did not take place until somewhat later; Alan P. Merriam's *Anthropology of music* (1964) is generally associated with the "anthropological turn" in ethnomusicology, although fieldwork-based ethnomusicology had already existed in America as well as in Europe[4] before that.

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[1] Original text in German language: "Liebe zu den Eingeborenen, [...] absolutes Beherrschen der Technik des Reisens und ein ungewöhnliches Geschick im Verkehr mit dunklen und hellen Menschen machen Krämer zu einem der berufensten Forschungsreisenden der Gegenwart."

[2] See the chapter "Introduction" in Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (New York, 1922).

[3] The difficulties Malinowski himself had in the field only became known after his death, when his widow published her late husband's diaries.

[4] Cf. Morgenstern & Nussbaumer 2024.

Still today, field research is a kind of "must" in ethnomusicology. There is hardly a job advertisement for an ethnomusicologist that does not mention fieldwork. This presents universities with the task of preparing future field workers. However, a look at university curricula and courses reveals that field research is only sporadic and has only emerged recently. This may be due to the belief that field research cannot be taught because, as Myers (1992, p. 22) writes, it relies primarily on "intuition, personal charm, happenstance and luck."

The idea of professors and students going out into the field together began with individual university teachers taking students on their own research to look over their shoulders and see how it was done. A very early example for this is Łucjan Kamieński, professor of musicology at Poznań University.[5] As early as the 1930s, Kamieński regularly took students with him on field research trips in Poland (Muszkalska, 2012, p. 108). He describes his relationship with his students as one of benevolence and friendship, comparing it with his relationship with his own son.[6] Some of his students subsequently carried out their own field research (Muszkalska 2012, 108).

However, this example is an isolated one. In other places, similar undertakings occurred much later. With the rise of ethnomusicology and especially with the introduction of ethnomusicological master's studies, field trips, often called "excursions", increasingly appeared in course catalogs, for example at the University of Vienna from 1994. Today, it is not unusual for excursions to serve as the starting point for further research or even for writing a master's thesis. Excursions undoubtedly make ethnomusicology a more attractive field of study within musicology.

The goals of excursions are many and varied. First and foremost, they give students an idea of what fieldwork might be like. Students can test their aptitude in the safety of the group and under the guidance of an experienced teacher. An excursion includes aspects of supervision, where the teacher observes the students' activities and discusses problems, strategies and further procedures with them. No less important is intervision, which refers to the exchange of experiences among the students themselves.

Students are usually encouraged to keep a diary during the excursion. This stimulates them to reflect on what happened, how they were involved and how they felt. The excursion is an opportunity to address the important question of whether one is comfortable with field research and can imagine doing such research independently. Field research, especially if it lasts longer and takes place in a foreign culture, requires a mentally stable personality. Participation in an excursion can provide insights into one's own psychological fitness for field research.

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[5] Łucjan Kamieński was also the first to use the term "ethnomusicology" in 1934, long before Jaap Kunst, who is usually credited with its first use. See Stęszewski, Jan: "On the history of the term 'ethnomusicology'." *Translingual Discourse in Ethnomusicology* 6 (2020): 128–135. doi:10.17440/tde034. Originally published as "Zur Geschichte des Terminus 'Ethnomusicology'". In: *Von der Vielfalt musikalischer Kultur. Festschrift für Josef Kuckertz zur Vollendung des 60. Lebensjahres*, ed. by Rüdiger Schumacher, 527–534. Anif, Salzburg: Müller-Speiser, 1992.

[6] Letter from Łucjan Kamieński to his son Jan Jakub, published in Muszkalska 2012: 100.

Another important point is, that students should try to gain clarity about what their motivation for field research is. It can turn out to be problematic if field research is used as a pretext for a journey of self-awareness, although this aspect cannot and should not be completely negated. It is quite natural that the experience of a foreign way of life leads to reflections on one's own values. However, this can lead to becoming enthusiastic very quickly. It is the excursion leader's task to draw attention to critical empathy, which is characterized by a balance of immersion and critical distance.

At the same time, any potential "othering" or "exotization" must be counteracted from the outset. Ethnomusicologist and cultural anthropologist Gerhard Kubik writes that he did not go into the field to encounter "the other", and that his African friends did not represent a "different culture", a fundamental difference from himself (Kubik, 2010, 48)[7]. "Nothing is really foreign to us"(Kubik 2007b, p. 27)[8], "... the 'foreign' as a construct is based on a projection of unaccepted contents of one's own unconscious." (Kubik, 2009, p. 209)[9] Dealing with other cultures also requires dealing with oneself in order to avoid succumbing to processes of projection.

An excursion is the place where fundamental questions of subjectivity and objectivity can be reflected upon. The methods that one has learned during the studies and that are now to be applied must be tested for suitability against this background. The participants have certainly prepared a list of questions about what they want to observe in the field and address in interviews. Such checklists are important so that nothing is forgotten, but they can also have a limiting effect in that only what is known is ticked off. Communication is an open system. We cannot always predict what will happen, the outcome is open. Questions and focusses brought from home can close the eyes to new discoveries. An excursion often offers the opportunity to try out what Gerhard Kubik (2007a) calls "floating", i.e. simply letting oneself drift without immediately framing observations in prepared research questions. Floating is a means of inspiration, discovery and also of self-knowledge.

Ideally, an excursion is a place for experimentation, critical questioning, interaction, collaboration, and the discovery of personal interests and skills. Undoubtedly, in some cases, an excursion was a defining event in an anthropologist's early career; in others, it was at least a university highlight.

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[7] "In meinen Freunden in Afrika erblickte ich keine 'andere Kultur', keine grundsätzliche Verschiedenheit von mir."

[8] Original text in German language: "[...] nichts ist uns eigentlich fremd.".

[9] Original text in German language: "Psychoanalytisch orientierte Forschungen über Kulturkontakt haben ergeben, daß das 'Fremde' als Konstrukt auf einer Projektion von nicht akzeptierten Inhalten des eigenen Unbewußten beruht."

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