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# Project “Ethnography as a personal experience”. History of anthropology in Poland from the researchers’ point of view

## Abstract

The text concerns the author’s project “Ethnography as a personal experience. Generational transformations in methodology and research practices”. It reveals a problematic, and partly unstable character of the strategy of constructing the identity of an anthropologist professional group. In the author’s opinion a Polish young anthropologist shows a disruption of knowledge transmission between generations as well as a discontinuity in the Polish ethnology tradition. As a result, there is a tendency in not only borrowing the theory and authority from the tradition of foreign national anthropologies, but also an uncritical transfer of discursive forms, authorizing national anthropology. In his opinion it is the most important question about contemporary shape of national anthropologies, especially Polish ethnology.

**Keywords:** experience, history, fieldwork, tradition, identity

Being a participant of PhD studies, I prepared a dissertation based on the research project “Ethnography as a personal experience. Generational transformations in methodology and research practices” (2011–2013) financed by Polish National Science Centre (NCN)<sup>1</sup>, which I am conducting. The mentioned topic is devoted to the history of transformations in this discipline and the process development of methodological reflective. I fulfilled this achievement in large research conducted with interviews (questionnaires, biographical and narrative interviews), and long term participant observation among representatives of the

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<sup>1</sup> Project was financed by The National Science Centre (Pol. Narodowe Centrum Nauki) on the granted decision number DEC2011/01/N/HS3/03273.

ethnological society from entire Poland (retired ethnographers, and active employees of anthropological institutes, museums and other research units belong to the examined group; partly some of them are also working in other professions than anthropology, they are employed in public administration, education, private corporations or NGO's). So far I have spoken to almost one hundred anthropologists in different age.

Structurally, a test group consisted of a few (about five) persons born before the II World War (the oldest), whereas for every next decade, depending on the possibility of reaching interviewed persons, the probe fluctuated between 8–15 persons. I also talked to a few young PhD studies graduates, listeners of PhD studies and participant of bachelor's and master's studies. Omitting formalized research situations, I am drawing my knowledge from the systematic complicity in the academic life, of participation in national scientific conferences, of the social contact in anthropology, numerous social interactions. A lot of information and conclusions about condition of this discipline, or the awareness of anthropology entrants, can be gained from observation of interactions or conversations which. This is also obtained by the attentive reading of texts of young anthropologists writing.

The idea of accomplishment of such undertaking stemmed from observation that dozens and dozens of young ethnology graduates have a scarce knowledge about achievements of their predecessors. Additionally, they do not have a foggiest notion of the character of Polish concepts about culture and way of researching it. Most of them do not know Polish methodological schools and their legacies (for example: social science methodological school from Łódź, compare sociology and ethnology departments), as well as they know – for example – American or British anthropological conceptions. Term “ethnography” sounds outmoded, it is an out-of-date word, definitely oldfashioned. Than asexual “ethnology”, they prefer more attractive “anthropology”, what perfectly explains their aspiration and horizon of interests. I will risk claiming that – in Polish conditions – current generations of young ethnologists know less about the national or local legacy of this discipline, than about worldwide anthropological achievements.

In this context, not only does a popularization of native, national ethnologies gain importance, but also, and it is most significant, large-scale documentary action. Probably, in a few years the shown trend will be reversed because of the generation change which is already taking place. In the future, again it will be essential to determine the identity and the way of practising ethnology, or define the understanding of the science, with reference to predecessors. From here, if it is still possible, we need documentation of memories concerning the work of elder colleagues and their experience. It is valid on account of omitting in old ethnographical narrations (written in the 50s, whether 60s and 70s of the last century) conditions accompanying the research conduct, and ignoring context of constructing anthropological knowledge. After *literacy turn* and George Marcus' and James Clifford's *Writing culture*, we know what significance that kind of information has. Only appropriately profiled conversations can make up for

this deficiency. Thanks to this, we are getting knowledge about the character of research projects conducted at that time, personal fieldwork experience, degree of the reflectiveness of all the researchers, and their ethical endowment and finally methodological preparing. It is a priceless knowledge which is not used to search in old reports, monographers and theoretical books. Simultaneously, such conversations are giving the sectional, personalized view of ethnographers society, and it's becoming a type of oral history all at the same time.

The conducted research revealed a problematic, and partly unstable character of the strategy of constructing the identity of this professional group. While discussing the data I obtained, I would like to concentrate on two issues.

Firstly, as I said earlier, talks with anthropologists show a disruption of knowledge transmission between generation, as well as a discontinuity in the Polish ethnology tradition. As a result, there is a tendency in not only borrowing the theory and authority from the tradition of foreign national anthropologies (particularly Anglo-American), but also an uncritical transfer of discursive authorizing forms to national anthropology. Michał Buchowski summarized this tendency:

many Polish ethnologists are willingly invoking ideas developed by their western friends. It has nothing reprehensible in it, of course provided that they want to use those ideas as inspiration for their own interpretations of materials. Meanwhile it is necessary to say that in great measure presenting the idea is a purpose in itself (Buchowski 2008: 172–173).

Buchowski is not the only one who notices nonequivalent and preferential treatment of the relation between anthropologists from the East and from West. A representative of a younger generation of the Polish ethnologists – Karolina Koziura, conducting the field research in Ukraine since 2009, drew attention to the mutual ignorance of individual achievements of national ethnologies in the region of Central and Eastern Europe (Koziura 2012).

If such emphatically formulated judgments aren't enough, it is worthwhile for making aware the scale of the phenomenon examining more carefully the way of using Western anthropologists concepts. They are not only used as quotations, or general summaries used to report another person's theoretical constructs. It is also an attempt of diversion from the lack of innovation of one's own way of thinking – it is an excuse. Additionally, using such references is becoming part of a strategy of the innovation, has having much greater power of authorizing the argument than calling to vernacular authors. It is possible to find examples of this problem in many articles written by Polish ethnologists (compare: Morozow, Radziszewska 2011; Pieńczak, Diakowska 2012; Wróblewski *et al.* 2010). It is meaningful practice because – in my opinion – we have many conceptions developed by Polish ethnographers and later ethnologists, which can compete with mainstream Anglo-American theories (form example Stefan Czarnowski's conceptions of space, or folk religiousness). Unfortunately, a diagnosis made by Mikołaj Rej comes true, as for Polish mentality: you glorify the foreign, you don't appreciate your own.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This dictum is similar to English „the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”.

This reflections show a degree of internalization subaltern relation to foreign anthropology, rated as much more valuable. This is not only a complex resulting from many years of isolation caused by political considerations, but also the colonial mentality which cannot free itself from discursive dominance of mainstream anthropology. Zbigniew Jasiewicz writes more about the reasons for this state of affairs:

Because of the ideological restriction placed on critical theorizing during the forty years of communist rule, it would be naive to imagine that ethnology can simply take up again where it was before the Second World War. Despite the return of social and cultural anthropology to ethnology in the seventies, Polish ethnology maintained a nature that was almost exclusively ethnographic despite notable exceptions. These exceptions included moderate theories which were always created on an empirical base: for instance, the concept of cultural adaptation and integration; cultural changes in folk culture or traditional society under the influence of industrialization or modernization; the role of tradition in culture; the relation between folk and national culture; the distance between family culture and the culture of Polish public life. However, ethnology remained dominated by a descriptive ethnography that was low on theoretical assumptions (Jasiewicz, Slattery 1995: 196).

Evaluated professional oblivion isn't a secluded phenomenon. It is rather the result of a wider process of change the nature of the anthropology in Poland. Conducting research on how the ways of practicing ethnography change in the twentieth century, promotes general reflection on the possibilities to determine the state of that discipline, as well as the direction of development of particular representative institutions. It is especially worthwhile to pay attention to the most recent period falling on the years after 1980, when it came to publishing of two texts: of manifesto *The Culture Anthropology in Poland* (Benedyktowicz *et al.* 1980), and responses to the survey *Ethnography – ethnology – anthropology of the culture – ethnography. What are they? Where are they go?* (Etnografia 1981). They became a symbolic expression of transformations, in particular the scope of the reorientation of the discipline, which is slowly replacing the materialistic paradigm in the study of cultural phenomena (Buchowski 2011), by structuralism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, or semiology (semiotics).

It seems that the situation in which national ethnology was in the last decade of the last century was analogous to the majority of the countries of the post-Communist Bloc. The more or less violent social movements led to the overthrow of the various socialist systems, and further, to take the path of economic and political change generally intended to capitalism and the democratic organization of the state.

It should be stressed that these dramatic, covering a period of the last two decades, profound transformations have left their mark on the model of doing science. The period from the 50s by the end of the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was subject to transitional Stalinism; it was fudging then between the programme primacy of the Soviet ethnography interested in the history of material culture. 80s became a training ground of experimental attempts to decipher cultures according to the newly formulated program of “young ethnography”, also called “new Polish ethnology” (Barański 2010; Sokolewicz 2010).

One of the founders of this sense direction underlined that here "an explaining power of the paradigm is running out about the traditional folk culture and prospects of anthropology as the reinterpretation appears" (Robotycki 1995: 227). This one "determining oneself through the negation of the ethnographic version of the description of the culture, is making the demythologization of long-existing views" (Robotycki 1995: 233). It should also be remind that around the founders of the specified orientation, a group of young anthropologists is gaining importance (Buchowski 1995). They accepted a proposed model of cultivating anthropological reflection, developing it a lot it in the 90s of the last century, in an era of institutional problems and heated debates about the status and direction of development of ethnology. However, it involved a radical break from connections with achievements and legacy of predecessors whom practised science according to the old paradigm (Sokolewicz 2010). This was illustrated by the voices expressing anxiety about the directions in which the discipline is heading, both in terms of subject and connections with related sciences (Burszta 1993; Czachowski 2005; Jasiewicz 1996; Jasiewicz 2003). In this regard the publication of the volume under the characteristic title: *Polish Ethnology between ethnography and anthropology* (Posern-Zieliński 1995) is very telling. It shows classical between and betwixt complexity.

This period is aptly illustrated by Konrad Górny, who writes that the 90s:

could be sometimes defined as inventing Polish ethnology anew, building current theoretical bases corresponding to the latest trend in anthropology, at that time connected among others with the widely discussed crisis of the concept of representation. I will risk claiming that since that time, at least partly, going in for ethnology Has begun to resemble copying books. According to the postmodernist model of practising anthropology, ethnographical texts are becoming material from which the object field of anthropology is being molded at most, a relation is stopping counting between ethnography, but empirical facts, however a relation linking ethnographical texts with other cultural texts is acquiring significance (Górny 2006: 95).

In other words, transitory period necessary to stay, corresponding to the next over the last two centuries discipline transformation, it is multifactorial transformation not only coincided with processes of geopolitical and public diversifying, but also corresponded to a general process of revising convictions appropriate to the objectivity of academic recognition, as well as possibility showing and interpreting reality. In part it contributed to the break in the continuity of the tradition of national ethnology.

Finally, it's also leads to a certain kind of ignorance and lack of awareness among the younger generation of anthropologists as to the achievements and legacies of their predecessors. To test my intuition I had been repeatedly asking my fellow PhD students about quite obvious historical facts related to the Polish ethnology after 1945, as well as about theoretical issues related to the development and evolution of theoretical thought in this discipline. These issues were well described and summarized on the pages of the handbook *The theoretical thought in ethnography and ethnology in the postwar period* (Damrosz 1996), obligatory coursebook in the basic introductory courses in history of Polish ethnol-

ogy taught in all the academic departments educating Polish trainees (Jasiewicz, Posern-Zieliński 2003; Kaniowska 2006). I asked a friend:

- Do you know what MOE were?
- I don't.
- Seriously? Think about it for a moment. Try. This acronym has a little relationship with the history of the survey and fieldwork in ethnography.
- Nothing – I said. Why are you asking me?
- No reason. MOE (Międzyuczelniane Obozy Etnograficzne), that are Inter-Institutional Ethnography Fieldwork Camps. Still nothing?
- Unfortunately.
- Warsaw organized them since the early 1950s until the mid-1980s. These were yearly fieldwork research camps for all students of the first and second year of ethnography, from all departments of all universities leading courses in ethnography (Warsaw, Cracow, Poznań, Łódź, Wrocław, Toruń). Thanks to the fact people like us knew better each other and refined research workshop (Wróblewski fieldnotes 12.10.2011).

Another proof of specific professional ignorance, or at least of amnesia, can be a discussion conducted among Polish ethnologists of the younger generation about the model of anthropology which would be dealt with (Wróblewski 2012; Jasiewicz 2006; Penkala-Gawęcka 2006), which they believe will give them the opportunity to work in the changing market conditions (Wojtarowicz 2005), and which, according to the older generation of academics, is very “activism infected”. We are talking about engagement and applied anthropology (discussion summary see: Wróblewski 2010). Since 2003, with the changeable frequency there has been a debate about the place of applied anthropology in the research practice and the academic teaching; its market complications and ethical issues arising from attempts of scientific reflection to follow a policy of neutrality with regard to specific social problems that require diagnosis and solutions, or commercial research continually proposed by various corporations and business entities. What was interesting was that the majority of debaters almost automatically referred to in English publications, seeing no need to use the native literature. In the early stage of the discussion only concepts of leading American anthropologists were reported, and when this trend continued even text translation of the programme for this paradigm was prepared (Červinková, Gołębniak 2010), presenting the articles of Sol Taxa, Donna Haraway, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Luke Lassiter. If carefully check the source literature, conducting reliable preliminary research, it would turn out that On the ground of a debate on the place and applications of anthropology in social life entered ethnological discussions as early as in 1979 (Jasiewicz 1979). Obviously a reflection made at that time was determined by conditions of science functioning in the communist system, that is defining its role as an servitude in the light of the particular demand policy. However, this example demonstrates the selectivity with which the subject matter is presented and the gradual disappearance of the need to examine these foreign theoretical models in relation to the local conditions or local solutions adapted to these conditions.

On the other hand, as I said earlier, students and graduates know less about local methodological schools than British or American. If ask them about the methodological school of Łódź or the methodological school of Poznań, probably there would be few who could determine what they were, who created them, on whom they exerted influence or between what years they functioned. Given the growing interest in the methodology of qualitative research within the social sciences, the increase in translation of texts and instructional manuals on conducting field research, the inhibition or the devaluation of ethnologists' own achievements in this regard is an extremely sore point for the anthropological practice. Since it is translation into Polish in 1995, *Ethnography. Principles in practice* written by Martynas Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, it was the most popular handbook about doing fieldwork, now more famous – *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* edited by Denzin Norman Kent and Yvonna Sessions Lincoln, and others books belong to The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit series are also translated. This is extremely important as once again on the Polish ground reevaluation of research is being made (Górny, Brocki 2010), in the 90s limited due to problems with the identity of the discipline (Posern-Zieliński 1995).

However, inability to call for new solutions has been functioning for a long time. And so young ethnologists forget not only about outdated, albeit still useful, and, in addition, the only complete research handbook formulated by Poles: *Methodology of ethnographical field researches* (Kopczyńska-Jaworska 1971). They are also ignoring the intellectual background which was behind writing this book. And which on one hand was formed by achievements of the French methodological thought, whereas on the other formed by activity and teachings of ethnographer Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska, and sociologist Jan Lutyński (as evidenced by filiations between Łódź sociology and anthropology: Lutyńska, Wejland 1983; Wejland 1977).

Principles formulated in the 70s are not suitable for examining the Internet or the extended discourse analysis, nonetheless knowledge of them allows contextualization of genesis of specific methods and research techniques. That kind of knowledge also considerably affects the methodological awareness. Without it, it is hard to understand and to explain an interest in the globalization, neo-liberalism or postsocialism as a part of contemporary anthropologists concepts on the part of Wojciech Burszta or Michał Buchowski. Topically, they fall within reflections covered by Poznań as part of Poznań methodological school (the most famous person representing this school is Józef Kmita) orientated to the redefinition Marxist thought.

From a different perspective, it is difficult to explain vicissitudes of the development of national research methodology and it is ossification on the issues of the study of material culture, without the knowledge of institutional and personal connections. To Bronisława Kopczyńska-Jaworska, and, indirectly, to the textbook written by her, Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska had a fund, who was a member of the team Polish Ethnographical Atlas team. Zawistowicz-Adamska, consulting arrangement of questionnaires for the purposes of research, contributed to the

standardization of not only this tool, but also of techniques of acting in the field-work. It is important to mention that it was this team within which principles of the research work applicable in a scale of the entire country were formulated (in the form of instruction, questionnaires, system of developed trainings these principles were next the object of the academic didacticism. “Inventing” appropriate procedures, their standardization and popularizing in 1947–1958 when the nationwide research net worked – under the communist system trying to maintain science fragmented – can be compared only with the phenomenon of six-time published British *Notes and queries on anthropology* (1951; Urry 1972).

As I said before, and what constitutes the conclusion of my research, sustaining the continuity of the transmission is important for the duration of the discipline and it is optimal intergenerational development. Consequence of this process results not only from transmission of the useful professional knowledge, but also from building the cohesive identity and pride based on one’s own ethnology legacy. Only taken together, these two factors allow for maintaining the partnership position during the cross-cultural contact. Here an exchange of ideas within the scientific discipline of anthropology must be also included.

Correct understanding of anthropology’s essence is dependent on understanding the nature of research. The depth of experiencing primary data at fieldwork seems to influence directly the way of understanding anthropology as a way of thinking. In this regard, instead of talking about one homogeneous discipline, it is possible to talk about anthropology as three disciplines, or three dimensions of it: a theoretical-speculative anthropology, light-anthropology (for example: anthropology at home), and high-anthropology (abroad research). The possible effect of this coexistence of “levels” leads to misunderstandings in the course of discussions between particular anthropologist groups.

For example the current list of stories from the field work, compared with those induced in the conduct of my research, shows the drastic difference in the degree of understanding of the rights and responsibilities of the researcher and the treatment of his informants. Tracing gradual changes of the way of understanding and being excited about a performed work – which absorbs both the personality and the body – shows not only a gap in the ways of experiencing field, but also fundamental cognitive consequences. As far as the ethnographical practice is considered – in conditions of socialist states, at limited possibilities of trips abroad – it was formerly strongly unified, as the diversity of strategies accessible today to researchers and research topics is hampering mutual understanding. Experience involving individuals, are strange to the other, and vice versa. After all, this habit underpinned with the practice, or the routine, leading to the emergence of a particular way of understanding the duties and scope of anthropology, often contrary to other paradigms. On account of my own experience, the researcher dealing with issues of postcolonial Africa, repeatedly staying on the other continent, will differently understand the notion of *the field* or anthropology itself than his friend conducting research in the city. Conditions in which they both are challenged involve different practical strategies, different kinds of action are required,



they are differently absorbing intellectually and emotionally. And so there is not one anthropology, many of them are hidden under the same name.

The conducted research revealed a problematic, and partly unstable character of the strategy of constructing the identity of this professional group. As I said, Polish young anthropologists show a disruption of the knowledge transmission between generations, as well as a discontinuity in the Polish ethnology tradition. As a result, there is a tendency not only to borrow the theory and authority from the tradition of foreign national anthropologies, but also the uncritical transfer of the native forms of discursive forms authorizing national anthropology. It is some kind of ignorance and oblivion for the achievements and legacy of their predecessors. In my opinion it is the most important question about contemporary shape of national anthropologies, especially Polish ethnology. The second important thing, is the essence of understanding the nature of research. The depth of experiencing primary data at fieldwork seems to influence directly the way of understanding anthropology as a way of thinking. In this regard, instead of talking about one homogeneous discipline, it is possible to talk about anthropology as plenty of disciplines. The possible effect of this coexistence of "levels" leads to misunderstandings in the course of discussions between particular anthropologist groups.

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