The Art of Kebetu: Challenges, Rewards, and Growing Pains Associated with Open Ethnography

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In the summer of 2013, I had the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in Dakar, Senegal for five weeks. I had previously conducted research there as a component of a study abroad program in 2012, but this was my first genuinely ethnographic experience, living with a local family and untethered to the agendas of coursework and fieldtrips. I was there to study local men’s attitudes on reproductive health and sexual behavior, and I wanted my friends and family to join me for that experience. This being my second trip to Dakar in two years, I had trouble finding the same funding opportunities that I had in 2012, so I called on friends and family to donate what they could in order to fill the gap between my advisor’s research grant and the cost of the research. There was an unexpected outpouring of generosity, and though I would have done it anyway, I felt I owed them a share of my experience.

For me, blogging has always been a challenge, regardless of where I am in the world. Constantly unsure, I ask myself, “Does this blog contribute to discourse in a meaningful way?” and often my answer is, “No.” In planning to blog my experiences from Dakar, I knew I would be faced with this, and many other challenges. Would I have reliable internet access? Will I have time for this? What kind of things can I say, what is off-limits, and what demands further reflection? Dubious of whether I would be able or willing to blog regularly (and knowing I wouldn’t have cellular service on my iDevices), I upgraded this little project into full-blown “live fieldnoting” mode as Tricia Wang describes it in her excellent Ethnography Matters article, “Writing Live Fieldnotes: Towards a More Open Ethnography.” That is, rather than blogging once or twice a week, I would use a suite of social media to convey my experiences in different ways at different rates. My blog in particular, Anthropology Attacks!, would serve as the focal point from which I could write longer stories that I felt were important to share. In five weeks, I produced five blogs, but ultimately published only three, because I didn’t think that the other two were appropriate to publish. Sometimes I write things that I believe need to be read, only to get to the end and realize that all I needed was catharsis. Perhaps with some editing, I can salvage them in the coming months.

In general, the weakness of any blog is that it must be sought out by an audience — no one leaves a tab open in Google Chrome waiting for me to update. Social media, on the other hand, is always delivering new content; it is the internet’s corkboard. I employed Facebook not only to share my experiences with friends and family, but also as a way of using those experiences to connect my audience with my Dakarois contacts who had their own Facebook accounts. I used Twitter to express thoughts and so-called “micro-blogs.” Sometimes, these tweets were aimed at the audience I know on Twitter, and other times Twitter served as a bin where I could throw out ideas that I didn’t have time to develop into full-blown blog entries. One of my most rewarding experiences was being able to engage with Senegalese Twitter users while they reacted to the increased security
measures during President Obama’s visit. (The Senegalese have really taken to Twitter, so much in fact, that they renamed it #Kebetu, which literally means “to soliloquize nonstop” in Wolof.) Though I towed along a Nikon D80, if I ever found myself in a situation where I needed it and had left it at home, I had my iPhone and trusty Instagram app. I insisted on using Instagram, because I wanted my photos and captions to be delivered directly to my audience, and to appear to be lived “in the moment” (even though I was without cellular service).

What I chose to write about in a blog versus what I chose to share as a live-fieldnote was really subject to how passionately I felt for the topic, how much I wanted to say, or how accessible I wanted it to be. My first motorcycle ride through the streets of Dakar was really my very first experience testing my commitment to participant-observation, and I felt that by talking about it on my blog, I could memorialize that moment much better than if I had left it to be washed away by the tides of Twitter. (Granted, now that I’ve realized the wonders of Storify, this may not be a problem in the future.) The experience could have been shared in 140 characters, but I also wanted non-Twitter users to have access to it, to comment on it, and to be able to refer back to it. I think that live-fieldnotes, on the other hand are known by readers to be fragments of fuller, unfinished processes. Perhaps the ethnographer hasn’t fully digested the event, or perhaps the event itself is not finished. I think of live-fieldnotes as nothing more than snapshots, and while I’ve heard that there is danger in releasing these snapshots without a full ethnographic analysis, I have to disagree – they have the potential to be conversation starters, which is really the whole point of this kind of transparency in the first place.

Another challenge that I faced was simply acquiring internet access. One might think that having regularly available access could prove to be a distraction from the work that one is there to do, but to be honest, seeking it out and managing one’s data around the lack of access made things less seamless. After a few days, I bought a 3G thumb drive for my laptop that provided unlimited access, but without Wi-Fi or cellular service for my iDevices, I found myself taking photos and jotting tweets for use when I got back to my laptop or found the odd public Wi-Fi spot. In truth, much of my content was actually “live,” but much of it wasn’t.

Because of the nature of my research methods, I was also able handle content in a variety of ways. For instance, as a rule, I never named names in anything that I wrote, because my research is on men’s attitudes on reproductive health and sexual behavior. If I wanted to relay something to my audience that someone had said or done, I always identified individuals vaguely, but with consistency (e.g. “my primary interlocutor”). Anyone that was there knows who those people are, and so anonymity goes out the window, but it wouldn’t be any different if they were reading the final product in an academic journal. It was recently argued to me that if a field blogger’s ethnographic musings fall into the wrong hands, it could do someone a great deal of harm. I argued that a good rule of thumb, however, would be that if you aren’t willing to publish it in a journal, you probably shouldn’t say it online. That is, if you think that your culturally sensitive data is safe from the eyes of your host community in a journal but not on the internet, I think that you may be complicit in a very condescending form of transmitting knowledge – one that you believe requires some sort of elite privilege. I assure you that it does not. (See #icanhazpdf, for example.)

Since I returned, I’ve been digesting my experiences and analyzing my data. In hindsight, things that were initially confusing have become clearer, but that isn’t to say that I’ve discounted what I wrote online as I now
begin to conceptualize the outline of what will become my senior thesis. They are no less valuable than my own private field notes. Blogging and live-ethnography may not afford one the benefit of time to adequately evaluate their experiences, but for me, that wasn’t necessarily the point. I aim to share the excitement of fieldwork with non-anthropologists and dispel the images of pith helmets and bullwhips that are associated with our field of study, while eliciting advice and insight from professional anthropologists in my social network.

My desire to share information is rooted from long before my academic career, though. Since the rapid rise and subsequent crash of Napster, I (and my generation, the ever controversial Millennials) have been greatly concerned with the subject of information accessibility. Sure, Napster was about stealing entertainment, but it also started the conversation among my age group about the commoditization of intangible goods. In essence, part of my decision to blog from the field comes from a personal value that all information should be free and available - especially that which conveys knowledge about the world around us. (Creative information, like works of fiction, films, music and graphic design, is a different matter entirely.)

About a month before I would attend my first meeting of the American Anthropological Association, I read an article by the paleoanthropologist and blogger John Hawks in the online magazine, The Anthropologies Project. I later told Hawks that his article, titled “What’s wrong with anthropology?” was like a “battle cry” which articulated answers to the reservations that I had developed about pursuing academic anthropology as a career. For me, that article provided a clear perspective in the outlook of my academic career, a point from which I began to develop distinct objectives about the kind of anthropologist that I wanted (and still want) to be. While I may not have been his intended audience at the time (I had only three full semesters under my belt), I definitely understood the gravity he intended to convey when he charged them “to create a new anthropology that steps forward from the past and once again engages people in discovery.”

This was my second experience in blogging from the field - I had tried during my stay in Dakar in 2012, but I was only able to produce two blog entries in six weeks. If this past summer’s events were any indicator, I’m sure it will get easier as time goes on. First, my timeframes (six and five weeks, respectively) have limited my ability to produce meaningful open-ethnography while trying to ground myself in a new environment with new friends. I’m afraid that significant blogging and social media correspondence can’t truly begin until after that incipient period of time. In the future (i.e. dissertation fieldwork), I believe that I will have less trouble with output consistency. Second, I’ve only been studying anthropology for four years; I require much more time to ruminate on certain social situations and relationships than the seasoned fieldworker. Time and experience will ameliorate the quality of my blog entries. Finally, in the future, one major change that I would like to make is sharing my blogs first with my host community (in French and perhaps Wolof) to elicit their comments, annotations, and even their own blog entries, before sharing in English. Since returning from Senegal, I have become more committed to a collaborative form of ethnography; I believe that it is essential in order to reach out to all publics that share an interest – after all, ours is not the only community that should be engaged in discovery.

REFERENCES