

COMMENTS
ON KATJA UUSIHAKALA'S
"KEEPING THE FLAME ALIVE"
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The purported aim of a conference held recently at Rutgers University on "The Future of White Africa" was to explore "how different groups of *white Africans* have responded to the challenge of finding a *place* for themselves in the rapidly shifting social landscape that is Africa today" (my emphasis).¹ It is a theme which corresponds well with the paper Katja Uusihakala presented during this seminar. The first part of my comment develops this idea in the direction of doing ethnography, raising issues which are certainly complex but which we can discuss. How, for example, do white anthropologists find a place for themselves and their research in this—"rapidly shifting social landscape?" The second part of my comment flows on from that to deal with the intimate relationship between two such *seemingly* different things as memory and place.

In the mid 1990s the Tanzanian scholar T. Y. S. Sengo stayed at the Helsinki Institute of Development Studies for a month or two as a visiting researcher. He was acquainted with the work of European anthropologists in Africa, more specifically, in Tanzania. At that time I was working as a researcher and archivist in a national archive to which Mr. Sengo paid a visit to view its huge collection of documented folkloristic and ethnological material. More specifically, he was interested in rituals or feasts connected to the life cycle and in how the empirical material had been collected, for example. Two women folklorists were assigned to guide Sengo in the archives; neither had experience of doing research outside Finland.

This might have been no more than straightforward communication between colleagues. However, the Finnish archivists, embarrassed and laughing, hurried into my workroom after Mr. Sengo had left the building. "Can you imagine," they exclaimed. "He asked us whether there were any celebrations in connection with our first menstruation and at which age!" The two women were embarrassed.

Perhaps this literally multidimensional episode speaks more about ignorant researchers than embarrassed informants. However, at that time the episode embodied and evoked my previous imaginations of reverse situations and roles in the anthropological field—and I am sure, at this very moment, also those of other anthropologists. While *colour* was probably one, but perhaps not the key, factor in this anecdote above, my comment deals with the specificity of the researcher, the fieldworker in a narrow sense. Let us imagine that a black Zimbabwean anthropologist had commenced doing the research Uusihakala has done. What implications are we dealing with here?

Speaking about realist ethnography in reference to context, Elisabeth Tonkin produced a pithy expression in a workshop discussion in 2004²: "The context is inside our data, not outside." This raises some questions beyond the history and development of the political and economic circumstances in which identities and belongings are formed, like those of former Rhodesians in South Africa. The life experience of informants and the researcher's approach and personality, for example, depend on a variety of complex contexts.

Tonkin's remark implies, among other things, that the anthropologist should confront her/his specificity in knowledge production. Like many other anthropologists I find this argument very pertinent (see for example Okely 1992, 2007).³ Michael Herzfeld also emphasizes that both informants' and researchers' practices have histories that are embedded in actions and attitudes (2006 [2001]: 49). Thus the researcher's own society and the complex moral relationship of the researcher and the informant bring to the fore a number of questions. George E. Marcus (1998: 75) maintains that, in an ethical sense, these concerns are never resolved in any ethnography.

However, with reference to 'our histories and their histories' I would like to return to Tonkin who clarifies her standpoint by saying that anthropology deals with others and ethnography deals with us (ibid.). The aim should be to exploit yourself, as it were, to make use of insights which spring not from your fieldwork but from your personal experience. In one of the famous 'key debates' in anthropology at Manchester (Ingold [ed.] 1996: 239), Gillian Feeley-Harnik formulates one of "our basic problems" as a question:

How do we apprehend things that are *not* ourselves while recognizing that we have no way of doing this except *through* ourselves? How can we understand what they are, while acknowledging that it is *we* who are looking at *them*? For they *do* exist out there; they *can* be documented.

What Feeley-Harnik argues about or argues for is the existence of plural knowledges. Acknowledging these signifies that the researcher shoulders empirical responsibility. So, depending on who we are and our different contexts, whatever they are, we cannot all have the same perspective. This is something we have to accept and discuss, I think. Reflexivity, and more specifically conceptual reflexivity, is an issue in all fieldwork. Shared terms and symbols which may potentially encompass clashing considerations, are at stake. In Uusi-hakala's case reflexivity takes on a number of specific dimensions related to anthropology carried out in an African society where the majority of the population is black and the minority is white and the focus of her research is considered an elite.

Her long-term immersion through fieldwork was a total experience demanding not only intellectual and physical resources but also emotional and political. As with her informants, much of her data has come through perception and embodied experience on the basis of the methodological principle that it is through participation that one acquires the material upon which all empirical research must primarily be based. What kind of implications does this have for the construction of categories, such as the concept of community, which are shared by researcher and informants? The impressive depth of Uusi-hakala's ethnography supports the position outlined by John Middleton when he said: "(...) you can do utterly nothing without people telling you what they want to tell you. People tell you what they want you to learn. Why should they tell you anything?" (Fellow 1999: 224) Thus, from this perspective, it is the researcher who is obliged to accept and explore the categories of those doing the telling. At the same time, while it would appear that the researcher chooses her informants, it can be argued that ultimately the informants choose the researcher, or choose to collaborate with the researcher. The dynamics of the relationships undergo constant change during the different phases of the research process.

My own research on social memory in a transnational context involving continuity and ruptures of social practices and cultural forms has convinced me that what is most relevant in ethnographic research is that which people themselves find important, and that, notably,

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this cannot be identified in advance. The researcher has to follow the leads of her informants. This is perhaps Uusihakala's answer to those who query why she does not address race relations in her work: why are Black Africans invisible or hidden? 'Belonging' was expressed by her informants in reminiscence which was lodged firmly in notions of place and past; it *could* have been expressed through narratives about some sort of 'other', a Black African other, perhaps—but it was not.⁴

Memory is constantly involved in the production of ethnography. As Andrew Irving (2007) has done in a totally different context, Uusihakala also attempts to inscribe this theoretical dilemma of the anthropology of memory directly in the field, by exploring how memory is related to the environment in a chapter of her recent dissertation (2008). Some of you will be familiar with her illustration and analysis of the created context of Rhodesianaland which brings the past to life and provides it with an interpretation. In this process, the lived body has a central role as an agent in the intimate relationship between two such seemingly different things as memory and place. The participants' reactions to the artefacts, foods, ceremonies and symbols disclose emotions and embodied memories. In other words, memory is performed and reinterpreted and at the same time it evolves into the reproduction of myth. The processual nature of memory is obvious, and moreover it defends its position as an activity in the present. Memorywork in social practices is a communication between the past and present but memory is also oriented towards the future. While I felt that the future is something not much addressed in this paper, after presenting my comments during the seminar Uusihakala reminded me that its title, *Keeping the Flame Alive*, ingeniously invalidates my objection. This resonates with the flag ceremony reminiscences which she describes in her dissertation, and which continue to point to the future: "the flag should always be raised by a direct descendant of the original pioneers" (Uusihakala 2008: 207).

Memory is strongly supported by place. Place has a capacity to hold together dispersed things as this ethnography shows (it holds together memories) and also, to draw together different spaces. This can be compared with human remembering—quite apart from memory of place as such—it draws together diverse moments of time or many times (cf. Casey 2002). Based on my own research among Russians in Finland and their perceptions of belonging I suggest that memory and place can be said to accomplish similar tasks (Jermain 2008). Edward Casey (2000: 202) puts it succinctly: both aim at "congealing *the disparate into a provisional unity*".

NOTES

¹ http://ruafrica.rutgers.edu/events/media/0708_media/white_africa_abstracts.pdf

² The workshop "Ethnography—the Costs of Success" at the 8th Biennial EASA Conference in Vienna, September 8–12, 2004.

³ Cf. George E. Marcus (1998: 57–78) who elaborates extensively on contextualization and comparison in modernist Ethnography.

⁴ Of course, 'forgetting' is in a dialectical relationship with 'remembering'—it is fundamental to how we think of the past, present and future—but I will not go into this now.

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