

EDITORIAL IMPRESSIONS: ETHNOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL INTIMACY

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Knowledge and feelings connect people.* There are several ways to create intimacy between scholars and our field partners. Adequate cultural awareness enables us to become close to people in a well-founded way, involving the most intimate layers of culture.

First of all, cultural intimacy works for insiders. We cannot fully access everything our field partners know or feel. Cultural intimacy is a particular discretion of collective religious or ethnic space (Herzfeld 2016). It involves “the recognition of those aspects of cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment, but which nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (ibid.: 7). This intimacy is constituted by images and practices that people consider their exclusive group qualities that produce social integration (Povinelli 2002; Jamieson 2011: 1).

This more abstract feeling of specific cultural closeness can be tested or challenged in particular situations of ethnographic field encounter. Lynn Jamieson (2011: 2) questions the “...analytical value in giving consideration to practices of intimacy across cultures”. If two individuals with very different cultural experiences meet, how can the tool of intimacy work in favour of mutual understanding?

In the 1990s, I was conducting ethnographic field studies in Western Siberia, among the Khanty¹ people. On one trip we entered a large village, the centre of a municipality, and met an elderly Khanty man Iriko. He had a plan to visit his son’s family, who were moving somewhere in the tundra with reindeer. We travelled for several days to the tundra meeting point hitchhiking with boats and trucks (at that time it was possible to hitchhike everything – even on ferries and helicopters) and in Obskaya station (Labytnangi town) we even stayed overnight in the hotel Polar Star (the hotel manager did not want to let Iriko in because he did not officially exist, i.e. he had no passport, but as he arrived with foreigners an exception was made). At some moments on the road, Iriko simply disappeared, but after a few hours or the next morning he showed up again, keeping a silent smile, signalling that everything was just fine. He never disappeared completely, but as the days passed his

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agenda became more and more obscure. Where we were travelling and what our purpose was, was not actually too obvious. Ultimately, we never met Iriko's son (we reached an empty spot in the tundra, nobody was there) but instead had the chance to spend some splendid time with Iriko. We did not talk much and in the framework of collecting ethnographic data, it was a waste of time. Iriko was not a prototypical Khanty, at least in the sense I thought they should be – staying put in remote parts of vast Siberian forests.² What normal Khanty goes hitchhiking for hundreds of kilometres without a real reason? Anyhow, I felt that we passed a pleasant stretch of days with him.

A few years later I travelled to the same region and aimed to visit Iriko again. He was staying in a fishing camp on the shore of Ob River a few kilometres from the village. With a filmmaker, Janno, I walked a few hours downstream and found the campsite. I had advertised Iriko as my old friend, and our meeting with Iriko did indeed turn out to be overwhelming: he paid no recognisable attention to me and started to make a tea. We rested in the conical tent for a while. After a half an hour of silence, Janno said: "You claimed that Iriko was your friend, but he even doesn't know you!"

This was an act of executing cultural intimacy in Khanty style, but perhaps I had overreached myself a bit. I should have explained the Khanty rules of conduct better to Janno in advance. It is considered rather rude among the Khanty to start talking immediately after meeting somebody. Silence is not a sign of ignorance. Finally, Iriko asked: "Have I got visibly older?" After that, we were all good as the time of talking had begun.

Iriko was not my key informant and I met him only a few times. But I think we still had some moments of tacit knowledge exchange, accompanied by mutually intimate moments of existential understanding. Ethnography is not always about wisdom, sometimes you just look on the bright side of the life together.

Contact among the Khanty always starts from silence. Khanty scholar Maina Lapina (1998: 40) has written that excessive chatting is condemned among the Khanty – a randomly placed word can cause magical harm and thus the Khanty do not talk much without a tangible reason. It is also impolite to ask guests anything (and also for a guest to talk) before tea has been served. Verbal conversation (talking or singing) starts only after the meal (*ibid.*: 75).

Adequate ethnographic encounters might be the key to a privileged exchange of knowledge. The process is then maintained by a feeling of exclusive comprehension of each other, along with memories of a common history that might be articulated as well as unspoken (Jamieson 2011: 3). Sometimes, this method of intimacy can be comprehensible for an ethnographer but not for our indigenous field partners.

The idea that closeness facilitates knowledge transmission is a Western concept (Jamieson 2011: 2), an intimacy that involves notions of the autonomous self and the independent mind (Liarskaia and Dudeck 2012: 64). Anthony Giddens (1992: 45) argues that the idea of intimacy is derived from the European upper classes' emerging concept of romantic love, and that these notions (intimacy and love) appeared almost simultaneously. Later, the idea of intimacy evolved into a notion about more articulated modes of cognitive closeness. According to Giddens (1992), intimacy produces equality, among other things (see also Jamieson 2011: 2–3). But there is nevertheless no universal standard for intimacy (Povinelli 2002: 216).

In Khanty and Nenets societies, there is no exact concept that matches privacy or intimacy in the Western sense, although one can still consider that a person's familiar social surrounding produces feelings that correspond to something we can call cultural intimacy. Indigenous people apply exclusive patterns of behaviour and consider enclosing knowledge

in certain situations (Liarskaia and Dudeck 2012: 65). Looking this way, intimacy can open additional doors of comprehension and widen horizons of perception in the ethnographic field. Being intimate enables ethnographers to accept the knowledge provided. But for our field partners it is not necessary to be close friends with us in order to communicate something meaningful.

Around the same time when I went through these adventures with Iriko, I also visited a more southerly region of Western Siberia. Next to the Lake Num-to, in the village with the same name, I met another Khanty man, Stepan, who was around 55 years old at that time. Although we did not know each other in advance, he agreed to tell me a lot about Khanty mythology and ritual life. During the day there was a big collective reindeer sacrificial ceremony at the lake. In the evening, after the ritual, I knocked on Stepan's door and told him that I had the impression during the ceremony that he knew a lot about it, and I would like to talk to him. We started to drink tea and had a long conversation about the ceremony in which we had both just participated. The next morning, Stepan suddenly joined us on a helicopter to Khanty-Mansiysk, the capital of the region. It turned out that he had no particular plan about where to stay overnight or what to do in Khanty-Mansiysk. I was happy to invite him to the Khanty scholar Timofei Moldanov's apartment, where I also resided. We spent a few more days, full of documenting ethnographic stuff and enjoying each-other's company over tea. I was not able to establish whether Stepan had any specific reason to travel to Khanty-Mansiysk besides visiting me (although we had become acquainted just a day before the helicopter trip).

Apparently, Stepan was not so different from Iriko. This similarity in relaxed decision-making looked like some sort of culture-specific pattern. Perhaps this apparent carelessness has something to do with traditional human conduct among the indigenous population in Western Siberia. Or perhaps this is just my biased perception. Let's look at historical ethnographic evidence for comparison.

In 1848, Estonian-born geologist and private docent of the University of Tartu (also a Professor of Kiev and Saint-Petersburg Universities at different times) Ernst Hofmann travelled in the Siberia. On the Voikar River, Hofmann met a Nenets man who agreed to accompany him as a local guide. Hofmann was astonished by the carelessness of the man:

I agreed to pay him the salary he demanded. He sent half of it to his wife, handing the balance over to other men returning by boat to his home region. I added to this a barrel of flour that I had bought in Beryozovo but had become a needless burden to further travel. Because of this gift, he started to feel a real loyalty towards me and was later very useful for us, as he knew the surrounding areas very well. The only bad thing was that he recognised only the Samoyedic names of rivers and mountains. After we agreed upon the conditions for our collaboration, he brought from a boat his overcoat (*malitsa*) and put it on a reindeer sledge, and his preparations for a journey that took a whole summer were done. He started a long trip completely unconcerned, as though he had left home for just a few days. (Hofmann 1856: 124)

Hofmann (1856: 143–144, 147, 206) also mentions the carelessness of his Nenets companions later in his diary, confirming that "...with their characteristic ease, they let things go on their own" (ibid.: 135). Hofmann claims that the idleness of the Nenets was "unlimited", "strengthened by nomadic life that enables them to take care only of the moment" and manifested in satisfying only "their closest needs". Apart from reindeer breeding, Hofmann also considers collective hunting as evidence of the Nenets' extreme laziness. (Ibid.: 205–206)

This is a rather typical view from the time. Since the 18th century, many authors have described the indigenous peoples of Western Siberia and the Russian North as relaxed, carefree, slow, and living for the moment (for example Georgi 1776: 72–73; Pallas 1776: 39; Islavin 1847: 36–37; Vereshchagin 1849: 272–278; Abramov 1851: 18; Hartwig 1866: 139; Bartenev 1896: 80–81; Trevor-Battye 1897: 100–101). But not every ethnographic traveller or writer had such prolonged contact with the Nenets. So, we can assume that Hofmann's impressions are not superficial, he really experienced Nenets behaviour thoroughly over several months of travel. According to Hofmann, the Nenets behaved rather candidly and intimately in his presence, although they were not long-term friends.

Apparently, nothing changed in indigenous minds for 200 years, at least regarding movement and carelessness. We need to make comments on Hofmann's (1856: 206) notion of the Nenets relaxed conduct as an indicator of their mental and physical decline. If we regard Michael Herzfeld's notion about intimate cultural features as sources of external discredit, this vagueness of life planning might have something to do with a special sort of closeness. This carefree attitude and imprecision enables closeness despite a different understanding of the ways that people connect. Living for the moment enables Nenets simultaneously to mark boundaries and become close.

The forest is a space of cultural intimacy for the Khanty (Liarskaia and Dudeck 2012: 63). In common perception, this means that Khanty intimacy is best executed in familiar surroundings. At the same time, a journey that sets up a peculiar stage for cultural interaction can also reveal something about indigenous intimacy. This cognition is not new and has been exploited repeatedly by indigenous writers. In Khanty writer Yeremey Aypin's (1990) novel *The Khanty, or the Morning Star* a prominent storyline is built upon the journey of a Khanty man and a young female Russian doctor by a boat along a river. The story is very much about unexpected human closeness across cultural boundaries. Aypin later used a similar motif in the short novel *Russian Doctor: The Story of Yosef Sardakov* (1995: 124–168), a plot that resembles *Two Hunters*, published by the first Mansi writer Panteleimon Yevrin (Cheimetov) in 1940. In that story, an old Mansi hunter travels with a young Russian man. Despite initial mistrust they start to understand each other better as human beings with distinctive cultural backgrounds. (See Toulouze 1999: 74–75; 2000: 11; 2003: 105; 2005: 147)

Travelling with someone puts you into a contact you cannot escape. The situation is even more intimate than at home, where one can easily avoid extended contact situations with strangers. When an interaction occurs away from familiar surroundings, one is opened up to more direct human intimacy. Travel enables distant cultural experiences to be connected. It allows one to perceive carelessness as providing a rich cultural exchange. But how far can we conceptually expand this notion?

The elusiveness that accompanies experience of movement can induce a sort of intimacy that helps to transgress cultural boundaries by blurring them, although this unmarked closeness could also be just the imagination of the ethnographer. If this intimacy is imagined, we must return to the Western idea of intimacy. Somewhat unexpectedly, the concept of intimacy spreads within the framework of globalisation (Jamieson 2011: 8).

Benedict Anderson's (2006 [1983]) notion of nationalism as 'imagined community' facilitates an approach to intimacy as a far-reaching phenomenon. This discourse of imaginary anonymous solidarities integrates society and outlines personalities (Jamieson 2011: 5). This intention of shared intimacy could reach a cosmopolitan dimension in the concept of 'the citizen of the world' (Calhoun 2003: 93) or turn into "ghostly intimation of simultaneity across homogeneous, empty time" (Anderson 2006 [1983]: 145).

If it is so complicated to maintain intimacy within an ethnic group, how can it function across ethnic boundaries? Craig Calhoun (2003: 101) reminds us about “the tension between abstract accounts of equality and rooted accounts of difference”. A closeness of human connection is difficult, if not impossible, to prove. It feels to scholars (like me) as if carelessness facilitates ethnographic intimacy, although no hard evidence supports this argument.

General ethnographic discourses affect the perception of intimacy. This provides us a cognitive foundation to consider a friendly approach as logically grounded. But is some sort of intimacy really necessary for ethnographic understanding? Another approach that departs from a presumption that intimacy is not particularly necessary in order to comprehend, would also seem logical. The desire for intimacy reflects delicate aspects of ethnographic performance.

NOTES

1 The Khanty, Mansi and Nenets are small-numbered indigenous peoples inhabiting the northern part of Western Siberia. They speak Uralic languages, the Khanty and Mansi being closely connected by language and the Nenets having a more remote linguistic affiliation.

2 During another Siberian trip in the 1990s, I stayed in the forest camp of my Khanty friends on the Pim River with couple of other young students. Our hostess Galya said one day that the Khanty are not supposed to travel far away because it is dangerous. Nobody is able to know what spirits reside in different places and it is impossible to make sacrifices to please them.

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