

SILESIAN MEMORIES
On recognizing contemporary African culture*

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ETHNOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Not long ago I heard Michel Serres, the eminent philosopher and *académicien*, speak at a workshop on *la francophonie* – which could be defined a bit maliciously as ‘French spoken by others’.¹ He probably surprised the audience by insisting on his qualifications as ‘one of them’ having grown up as a speaker of Gascon at a time and in a place where the local people felt that standard French was a language imposed on them from outside and above.

I was reminded of Serres’s reminiscences when I thought about contributing to a conference that took me back to the country where I was born and spent much of my childhood. Was there something in my Silesian origins that prepared me – or ‘qualified’ me – to become an anthropologist and ethnographer of popular culture in Africa? Much has been thought and written about ethnography and autobiography. Before I try to give some shape to ideas that came to me when I began to ponder answers to that question, I would like to assure you that I will not merely indulge in stories and anecdotes that, interesting and entertaining though they may be, would hardly be appropriate as a contribution to ‘perspectives de l’étude des mondes contemporains’. Autobiography is relevant to ethnography as an epistemological issue; it is a literary mode, but more so, a resource for the production of ethnographic knowledge.

If epistemology is the issue then the connection between autobiography and the study of contemporary worlds is not difficult to make. Let me put it this way: what makes of a ‘monde contemporain’ an object of ethnographic study is not the fact that it exists now but that it is recognized as contemporary. Recognizing, I have been arguing for some time, is – not only but also – remembering. And remembering is one of the ways in which ethnographic knowledge is personally mediated. I say ‘personally mediated’ rather than ‘personal’ or ‘subjective’ because I want to focus attention on the historicity of ethnographic inquiry. To assert in general terms that anthropologists are representing the West when they produce knowledge of the Rest (to use, once again, Marshall Sahlins’s memorable phrase) is easy. But exactly what kind of West was

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¹ “Empire lost: France and its other worlds”, organized by Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi and Frank Edelstein, Stanford University, April 14–15, 2006.

it that became part of our intellectual and existential outlook, often long before we were trained as anthropologists? Could answers to that question be influenced by what we learn as ethnographers? Should our ethnographies be read backwards as so many studies of the West? More concretely what was there in my work on popular culture in Zaire/Congo that makes me want to return to my origins and understand them?

Once one has understood recognition as re-cognition, equating recognizing and remembering comes easy. I have done this often in recent writings. The task I set myself here, however, gives me pause. When I say I recognized what I saw in Africa because I remembered it, I may be taking a short-cut in order to avoid difficult conceptual terrain. First, recognition was seldom if ever instantaneous; like memory it required work, that is, working through the dialectics of remembering and forgetting. Second, recognition often was, I am tempted to say, unconscious: a sort of remembering without remembering what I remembered, a kind of familiarity impossible to explain except much later. Third, by the time this delayed recognition turns into understanding, the cognitive operation involved is no longer one of matching experience with memory: Africa with Silesia, as it were. What I know about Africa and what I know about Silesia (it being understood that the 'Silesia' is a figure of speech for part of my biography) is by now both memory and the capacity of remembering which leads to recognition that now works both ways (or moves in a hermeneutic circle).

Before I take you through a short list of connections or instances of recognizing/remembering what I encountered in the course of fieldwork, I should give you some information on my Silesian background. I was born in Glogau/Głogów in Lower Silesia from where my parents moved soon afterwards to Breslau/Wrocław where we lived until I was six years old. By then, around the middle of 1943, my father was away in the war as an employee of the railways. To get away from the bombing raids in Wrocław, my mother took my sister and myself to my parents' home village in Upper Silesia, Pietrowice Wielkie,² where we stayed until the end of 1944. After that we were reunited with my father and followed him first to his new posting in Bohemia, and then back to Silesia, near Kamenz/Kamieniec where, after the German capitulation in May 1945, he found work at a railway station, now under Polish administration. About a year later we left Silesia and after several stays in camps and assigned lodgings mid-way arrived in West Germany. Much is hidden beneath these bare facts and will come to the surface only later but one thing should be stated right now. If I have to locate my remembered Silesian origins in time and place I would put them in the short period of intensive exposure to life in the native village of my parents (all the more intensive because of the contrast with life in the city) Pietrowice Wielkie, which was to become a *lieu de mémoire*, a point of crystallization for what I call my Silesian origins. 'Pietrowice' was a point of departure and return in countless stories I heard from my parents and other relatives.

² See www.pietrowicewielkie.pl.

It is of course impossible to isolate strictly personal from family memories (and even they are part of wider contexts of recollection), except, perhaps, in the case of sights, smells, tastes, and feelings that could only have been personal experiences.

For an anthropologist beginning his fieldwork in the Congo of the mid-1960s, it was impossible to ignore the history of colonization and imperial domination as facts that conditioned ethnographic research in every respect. As a cultural anthropologist I had come to study processes of change as they could be inferred from the emergence of religious movements. It took years before I began to think of culture, not so much as an abstract system of symbols, orientations, and values (as I had been taught), but as practices of survival under adverse conditions (I called this 'popular culture'). Only then was I able to recognize the similarities among the social and political predicaments of life in Katanga and in Pietrowice Wielkie. In Katanga as well as in Silesia, people had lived under imperial regimes and, albeit in very different ways, had been subjected to colonization. In both cases peasants had become workers and for many of them this entailed migration to urban-industrial regions. Also in both cases, the Roman Catholic Church played an important role not only as a source of religious identity, but also, through its missionary institutions, as a conduit of social advancement.³

POPULAR LANGUAGE: MEDIUM AND MESSAGE

I started out with casual childhood reminiscences, but now find myself embroiled in a vast array of historical connections of the kind that are attributed to 'globalization'. But on this occasion, globalization is not what I want to reflect on. The question I put on the table is whether and how personal experience in my Silesian childhood has influenced my work in Africa and how my understanding of these origins may have in turn been shaped by what I learned as an ethnographer. One way to give this potentially elusive issue a concrete focus – at any rate, the one to which I decided to limit myself here – is to concentrate on language.

Whenever I am asked to state what kind of ethnography and anthropology I practice, I call it language-centred. My work in the towns of the mining region of Katanga was carried out through Swahili, recorded, transcribed and translated exchanges in that language constitute my archive, and I have defended the thesis that the particular variety of that language was the medium, not just the vehicle, of a distinctive contemporary culture. Katanga Swahili is to Swahili purists a degenerate up-country variety. The people who speak it, by now many as their only African language, often called it Kikwetu.

³ Especially through the overseas missions, there were links between the European colonization of Africa and the modernization of rural Europe, links that tended to be obscured in the one-way perspective of Western historiography.

This expression is most elegantly translated by the name my parents gave to their native language: *Po našem*.⁴ They belonged to the Moravian-speaking population that lived in the multi-ethnic border region, first of Poland, Austria, and Prussia, later of Germany and Czechoslovakia. Like the Africans I met later, I was born into a multilingual family whereby multilingual does not refer to multilinguistic competence (of the kind that members of the educated elite acquire in many parts of the world) but to multilinguistic performance, that is, to the fact that ordinary people conducted their lives, often their daily lives, in more than one language.

This is still fairly general. Resemblances – hence the chances for recognition – turn out to have been even closer when one compares certain sociolinguistic characteristics of Kikwetu and *Po našem*. Both were fundamentally oral. Many of the speakers in Africa and probably most in Silesia were literate, but they had learned to read or write only in school and then in other languages, French and German respectively. African friends told me how they were punished if they continued to speak Swahili in the school yard and I remember now that I recognized these stories as basically the same I had heard from my parents. In both cases there were a few exceptions to orality: Czech/Moravian and Swahili texts were used in church services (especially hymnals), meaning that most adults were at least passively literate in these languages.⁵

As oral modes of communication, these varieties of Kiswahili and Moravian did not face a literate standard, neither as an ideal to look up to, nor as a regime to suffer under. Both languages therefore opened up spaces of freedom not only for the forms but also for the contents of speech; both could serve as ‘weapons of the poor’ (cf. James Scott), that is, as practices of resistance and survival under colonial and imperial domination.

In positive terms, Kikwetu and *Po našem* mediated and articulated personal and cultural identity in situations where old traditions had to be transformed into contemporary popular culture (more about social and political challenges later).

Among common traits that are striking but defy simple explanation, there is a high degree of language-consciousness (or self-consciousness) and reflexivity among speakers of Kikwetu and *Po našem*. This often shows up in a deprecatory attitude toward these dialects as ‘not real languages’ or as languages lacking respect (that is, not capable of expressing respect or finesse, hence not worthy of respect). This negative linguistic self-image is contradicted implicitly (how could a language in which an entire population conduct their work and private lives, pray and joke, reason and express their

⁴ I assume that in *Po našem* the reference to ‘us’ or ‘our’ includes more than the language. The Swahili prefix *ki-* designates language(s) as well as ‘ways of life’. ‘Kizungu’ (world of the *wazungu*), can mean a European language but also life in the (post)colonial towns.

⁵ Regarding the question how different Moravian would have been from Bohemian hymnals and to what extent Czech had become the standard for religious texts destined for popular use I must plead ignorance. Nor am I able to verify the impression I got from my family’s stories that the public use of Moravian in church services was prohibited after 1933.

sentiments, sing and tell stories not count as a real language?) and explicitly by the zest and ingenuity with which Kikwetu and Po našemu are mined by their speakers for linguistic jokes and made the target of self-mockery.

In both cases, one of the effects of identifying a language with an 'us' is to mark speakers of Kikwetu and Po našemu as insiders and to give to communication a certain informality, even intimacy. As a child living in a German-speaking city, I remember many occasions when my parents would switch to Po našemu, not just to hide something from us children but to discuss affairs that were 'theirs' (including matters that were politically sensitive). As an ethnographer I had ample opportunity to learn that Kikwetu was anything but a neutral code. With many of my interlocutors I could have conversed in French just as easily, but never as meaningfully or productively (nor, sometimes, as safely).⁶

A common element to the resemblances I have just listed appears to be the capacity of the two languages to create and articulate identity or, at least, strong identification with other speakers. While this is the case, another match between my childhood memories in Silesia and later work with Swahili should be noted because it adds subtlety to the idea of identity. What I have in mind is not easy to express but was probably crucial in my research on popular culture, where the theoretical challenge has been to use that concept as a theoretical strategy against the established ('culturalist') notion of culture *tout court*, with its emphasis on identity, homogeneity, normativity, and so forth. Identity created by Po našemu and Kikwetu may be strong, but it is also somehow precarious and – no better term comes to mind – unpretentious. It is unlike the kind of fateful identity ascribed to national or quasi-national (ethnic, tribal, autochthonous) languages; it needs no standards of purity or homogeneity. Its linguistic codes are what I called permeable (to interference from other languages), and although in certain political and historical constellations they may serve as 'weapons' of resistance, they do not promote among their speakers tendencies toward closure against change or toward exclusiveness.

Finally, I am also convinced that the language-based cultural identity I am trying to sketch is at the root of certain attitudes or character traits I remembered from my Upper-Silesian relatives and acquaintances and therefore recognized when I met them again among the people I studied. Among them was a certain disdain for bourgeois social graces, a cultivated boorishness, an earthy and pugnacious sense of humour, and a kind of instinctive anti-elitism, especially among those who, by objective standards, had become members of the intellectual elite. In negative terms, all of these traits and attitudes were perhaps symptoms of deep-seated cultural and social insecurity, but they can equally well be regarded as qualities that promoted a critical outlook.

⁶ In the case of Po našemu my observations are based on personal and shared memories that may be vivid but remain general in the sense that I cannot back them up with actual examples of language use. As regards Katanga Swahili I can draw on remembered but also on documented instances.

As ethnographers are wont to do I have reported most of my observations on Po našemu and Kikwetu in the present tense, and this may pose a problem. I have no information about the actual state of Po našemu, but I think it would be an interesting sociolinguistic research project to find out whether it is still alive (perhaps already carried out?). In the Congo, developments after the demise of the Mobutu regime and the rise of powers linked to East African spheres of influence, the spread of non-standard Swahili westward – to the Kasai and to Kinshasa (in the latter case in tandem with English against French) – seems to have been remarkable. If the thesis that the ‘medium is the message’ is valid, this expansion is likely to play a role in future cultural and political developments.

STORIES AND REALITIES: LIMITS OF MEMORY

I chose to concentrate on language – understood as ‘ways of speaking’ or communicative practices – because this allowed me to connect memories of my childhood in Silesia with ethnographic inquiry into contemporary African culture and to raise some theoretical issues with the help of concrete and, I think, rather striking examples. Other links and convergences were alluded to (among them shared political and also certain cultural predicaments), but there is no space to explore them further on this occasion, with one exception that should be of interest in a debate about research in ‘contemporary worlds’.

Much though it seems impossible to think of modernity without opposing it to tradition – while it is evident that neither could be adequately conceptualized without the other – recognition of contemporaneity does not come as an observation of fact, but as the result of a struggle with obstacles and challenges. The history of our discipline does not dispose us to think of its object as co-temporal. This insight made me coin the awkward term ‘coevalness’ and posit that the sharing of time (in this case, as a condition of communicative ethnography) is an act, not a fact; it is not found but must be made. Let me try to make this thought more concrete with the help of one more piece of autobiography.

Pietrowice Wielkie was locked in my memory as a village, as were my parents and grandparents as peasants. This image was reinforced by a sort of rural or peasant cosmology that underlay countless stories and conversations (who was related to whom, whose fields bordered on whose fields...) I overheard in my family, probably already when we lived in Wrocław, but certainly after we had moved to West Germany.⁷ On

⁷ Aside from diffuse memories, if I ever get around to deepening this account, I can draw on two precious documents. Both are taped conversations, the first with my maternal grandfather's brother (Paul Schebesta, also my first teacher in anthropology), recorded when I was nineteen or twenty, the second with my parents, mainly with my mother, a few years before they died in the early 1980s.

both sides, maternal and paternal, my relatives owned and worked some farm land and kept livestock; their 'lifestyle' (housing, food, clothing, religious and ritual practices, divisions of time, and so forth) was largely that of peasants. But my paternal grandfather was a master-mason, my maternal grandmother a factory worker and her husband a tailor. For Pietrowice Wielkie this was not an exception. The village was said to count 'one thousand tailors', that is, in a large portion of households, probably a majority, at least one adult male, almost always assisted by women and children, laboured as home-workers for the garment industry and the army. Pietrowice Wielkie, a village in the minds of its inhabitants, was a kind of factory and company town in socio-economic reality.

This did not become clear to me until long after I had had my initiatory research experience in a company town in the strict sense, a miners' settlement at Musonoi near Kolwezi in southwestern Katanga. I am not about to force the two places, the Silesian worker-village with its medieval origins and the African labour camp organized by European colonizers a generation or so before my arrival, into the same mould, except figuratively. But there are points of comparison that make such figuring possible. Had I known more social history, European and African, I would have understood much earlier what was 'wrong' with my memories of peasant origins which may in turn have helped give me a better comprehension of the predicament of African workers most of whom had, at the time of my first fieldwork (1966–1967), been recruited in rural areas outside the mining region at a time, I should remind you, when it was still commonly posited that modernity or contemporaneity were inflicted on, rather than produced in, Africa. To put this provocatively: I now realize that my Silesian 'peasant' family were no peasants and that my African interlocutors were no 'Africans'. Their objective predicaments were defined by historical and social realities that were not the same, or that clashed with, the imagined identities I had formed in my personal memory and my professional expectations as an Africanist. Both notions, authentic peasants and authentic Africans, are projections onto social-historical reality made from ideological positions in which personal and professional determinants are difficult to disentangle.

I may be out of tune with the prevailing intellectual climate in invoking reality and ideology as critical concepts. Preachers of postmodernity tell us that all anthropology can offer is representation or story, and that every view we take is personal, partial, and biased. Without wanting to deny the merits of scepticism regarding the exaggerated claims our discipline may have made in the past, I find reasons to be sceptical about such all-encompassing scepticism. We may be free to indulge in deconstruction and assert that questions of truth and reality are irrelevant because all we can do is tell stories, but only as long as we manage to keep other cultures and other stories at a safe distance. When we let our knowledge of them confront our own conceptions, including our memories, we stop playing games. As ethnographers we face serious work demanding skills, competences, and imagination.

CONCLUSION: FROM ASSOCIATION TO CONSOCIATION

These reflections on a childhood in Silesia and ethnographic research on a *monde contemporain* in Africa were offered in support of a theoretical argument: contemporaneity, as I put it earlier, is not a fact but an act. Producing knowledge of contemporary worlds requires not only cognition but recognition, that is, intellectual operations that cannot be reduced to, but must include, remembering. Remembering, like other acts such as knowing, understanding, interpreting, and explaining, is subjectively mediated, only, I am tempted to say, more so. In this particular, epistemological sense autobiography is at the core of ethnography.

If this is accepted, one may still ask whether the particular matching of personal memories and ethnographic research attempted here can be conceptualized in a more general way. What was actually involved in the operation I just called ‘matching’? Among technical terms that come to mind are *comparison* and *correlation*. I compared recollections and research findings and pointed to correlations between ways of speaking and constructions of identity. But what I did was comparison and correlation only in the general and trivial meaning of these words. Comparison and correlation have a history as clearly defined methodological terms, but both require exclusion (or at least ‘control’) of subjective-historical mediation – the opposite of what I have tried to argue when I considered the links between autobiography and ethnography.

Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that I had, or made, *association(s)*, also an expression with a history as a technical term (in cognitive psychology), although not committed to the elimination of subjectivity and historicity. I was thinking about the potential of ‘association’ to bring together cognitive and existential aspects of knowledge production (‘existential’ because involving and possibly changing the identity of the knower) when another idea began to take shape. Leaning on a neologism coined long ago by the sociologist and phenomenologist Alfred Schütz – he spoke of ‘consociates’ (closely related to ‘coevals’) – I would like to end my reflections by proposing for further discussion *consociation* as a term that describes the potential results of communicative and commemorative ethnography, without which the recognition and study of contemporary worlds are inconceivable.