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Reflections on Thirty Years of Fieldwork with Indigenous People

STEPHEN L. DAVIS

INTRODUCTION

The conduct of fieldwork is an adventure, a voyage into the unknown. How will the local Indigenous people receive me? What will I say I am doing? What will I say is my purpose? How will I introduce myself? I have several times had the opportunity to reflect on my fieldwork, which was most often conducted among remote Indigenous groups, initially in Australia and then wider afield in Thailand, the Philippines, and Africa. I am struck by the significant amount of time, effort, and resources lost as I discovered how to conduct fieldwork efficiently. Although my experiences during that initial learning period may have been character building, it is clear that much time and expense of field support could have been saved had I been well versed in fieldwork prior to venturing into the field for an extended period. My purpose in reviewing the manner in which I undertook fieldwork over the last thirty years is not to justify the information I obtained or the analyses I undertook but to provide an overview about how I conducted fieldwork in the hope that researchers venturing into the field for the first time might better understand and be prepared to conduct fieldwork. In undertaking this task let me start by relating my introduction to fieldwork.

Having finally arrived in a remote Indigenous community that was to be our family's home for some years to come, it was time to meet the local people. My first foray into the camp where the local Indigenous people lived was a case of a stroll along a path that wound its way between the family encampments of the various clan groups situated along the low ridge behind the beach. It was late afternoon when the women and children had returned

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from gathering bush food and the men had returned from hunting. With a limited vocabulary of greetings in one of the local languages I strolled with my wife through the camps. Mange-ridden dogs rushed at us as we neared each successive camp, their owners looking on with detached interest. Not a word in our defense was raised by anyone in the camps. After fending off several such attacks we retreated. The next day we made another attempt to walk through the camps. We penetrated a little farther until again being beaten back by the dogs. This process continued each afternoon for several more days until one elderly woman threw a large stick at the snarling dogs and scattered them. She then invited us to sit with her in her camp. Thus began a long, pleasant, and fruitful friendship that lasted many years and enabled fieldwork that yielded much information that was put to good use for both the local clans and me.

I am not alone in being bereft of guidance in the conduct of my initial fieldwork. Fifty years before I confronted packs of dogs baring their teeth at me, Malinowski had struggled to find a strategy that would direct his fieldwork: "I well remember the long visits I paid to the villages during the first weeks; the feeling of hopelessness and despair after many obstinate but futile attempts had entirely failed to bring me into touch with the real natives, or supply me with any material."[1] Roger Sanjek may seem a little more fortunate in that before he set out on fieldwork in 1965 in Brazil he was able to attend a field-training seminar. However, as Sanjek records, "In Brazil I took no fieldnotes; I tried, but had no idea of what to write."[2]

Surely these voyages of discovery across the uncharted seas of fieldwork, and more so without practical experience, would have been made less daunting and more productive if the novice field-worker had been better versed in the various aspects of fieldwork. Hopefully by documenting the fieldwork process, both the successes and failures, those wishing to engage in fieldwork will go to the field better prepared than I was on my first field trip.

WHAT IS FIELDWORK?

Fieldwork has become synonymous with accounts of the lives of Indigenous people throughout the world. The view of Indigenous people was initially distilled using a compilation of observations from explorers, travelers, and trappers. It then moved to firsthand accounts of past practices in field interviews conducted by experts within areas where no appropriate disciplines had been established. Such experts were often geographers or geologists with an emphasis on the past. "The result was a description of native cultures that focused on recording rules and ideal situations rather than observing how life was actually lived."[3]

The critical breakthrough in establishing a fieldwork process was achieved by Franz Boas who, as a geographer, conducted extensive fieldwork among the Inuit on Baffin Island from 1883 to 1884.[4] Boas's fieldwork focuses on the relationship between the Inuit and their territory, shortly after geography had emerged as an academic discipline in the 1870s. In total, during the five field trips that Boas made to British Columbia from 1888 to 1894, he spent 352 days

in the field.[5] In so doing, and with the resultant publications, Boas established fieldwork as a major tool of research among Indigenous peoples and brought the study of Indigenous peoples into the present by doing more than merely interviewing to obtain their recollections of past customs and traditions by observing and recording their current behaviors.

My early fieldwork was conducted among various Aboriginal groups in Australia where my family and I lived with remote coastal groups in the tropical north of Australia. Some years later fieldwork extended into the arid central region and desert areas of Australia among people who could still vividly remember their first contact with white people exploring and settling the land. Much later my fieldwork extended to the southern Philippines with first-contact groups and to the northern section of the Thai-Myanmar border with some of the Hill tribes. In more recent years, work in sub-Sahara Africa provided opportunities for work among peoples of the arid areas and among coastal groups of the tropical jungles.

The field settings for my work fit with Hughes's description of fieldwork as the "observation of people in situ; finding them where they are, staying with them in some role which, while acceptable to them, will allow both intimate observation of certain parts of their behaviour, and reporting it in ways useful to social science but not harmful to those observed."[6]

However, many would presume fieldwork as described by Hughes to refer only to the context of social science, whereas fieldwork is conducted by several disciplines. Moreover, the information collected through fieldwork may have value beyond one's own discipline. The fieldwork I have conducted has yielded information specifically valuable to marine biologists, anthropologists, political geographers, lawyers, herpetologists, linguists, historians, and plant biologists.

My field notes were generally made during fieldwork with Indigenous people most often in remote locations such as tropical rainforests, deserts, bush lands, and remote islands. This seems to be the type of situation to which Hughes refers. However, psychologists, psychiatrists, and medical doctors also make notes of structured encounters with informants, although it is less typical in cross-cultural situations.[7] Are these any the less field notes? A field-worker writes field notes primarily as a record of situations that the field-worker observed, participated in, or heard from an informant. Bond observes that field notes have the appearance of immutability but require contexts. In this respect Bond sees his field notes as *aides-memoire*, such that when "we review our notes, we fill in the gaps; we give order to the immutable text."[8] The field notes provide the hooks that allow the field-worker, when reviewing the field notes, to reconstruct historically the earlier observed and recorded situation.

AN EVOLVING PROCESS

I constantly learned from my field experiences, and thereby I learned more not just about my practices but also about the people with whom I dealt and their views of me. Most often I made adjustments to my practices without a

structured review of my previous performance. Learning was, in this manner, informal and unsystematic. It is unrealistic to expect fieldwork to be planned to account for all the various permutations of the situation into which the researcher is about to enter. How often has a field-worker reflected on a field trip and thought, "Yes, the work met all my expectations, and I obtained all the information in all the matters of interest to me?" Rarely, I expect, has this been the field-worker's response.

Opportunities arise in the course of fieldwork and, if the field-worker has sufficient time available, a diversion can prove to be interesting and rewarding. For example, in the course of establishing the key hunting and fishing locations of the various Aboriginal groups in the Crocodile Islands, I found that I had to identify the species of fish that were caught in each locality. Fish identification quickly indicated that local lexical labels for color were quite limited. A brief foray into local color encoding by using a Munsell color chart changed the way I subsequently sought information from the local groups and constructed questions.[9] In this case, a willingness to modify my research strategy changed my understanding of the local Indigenous group's worldview and taught me a valuable lesson in the conduct of fieldwork and cross-cultural research.

Fieldwork throws up new questions and avenues of investigation that sometimes cause the researcher to divert or expand the field of study. These unexpected opportunities can blossom as fieldwork develops.[10] A robust yet flexible field strategy will allow the researcher to modify or, if necessary, abandon the field strategy as researcher and subjects interact. If we could precisely predict the parameters of the study and conduct it exactly to plan, then it is clear that we probably had a good idea of what we would find, and that possibly there was little to be learned. We should not therefore be unduly concerned that we see a need to change direction of the fieldwork or change the emphasis of the research. "The fact that the participant observer constantly redesigns his study as he uncovers new data indicates that he engages in analytic activity most of the time that he is in the field."[11] Quite simply, we learn about fieldwork by conducting fieldwork.

Researchers who have conducted a significant volume of field research often return to their field notes to examine new dimensions of questions they previously pursued or subjects that were unfamiliar or of little interest to them at the time of the original fieldwork. Therefore a field-worker is wise to record as much as possible, within reason, and particularly the context in which the observed event occurs. That which seems peripheral at the time of the fieldwork may provide critical information or the missing link in a chain of information in subsequent years. Sometimes an informant who later turns out to have been the last custodian of such knowledge gives a unique and seemingly unrelated piece of information. Returning to obtain information from such a person has, on some occasions, proven for me to be fatal to the collection of the information. In some instances I have returned to find that the sole surviving knowledgeable person has since died.

What then did I expect when I first conducted fieldwork? No one had taught me field techniques or methodologies. Observation, participation,

questioning, and debriefing were not part of undergraduate courses when I undertook my university study. Methods were practiced in the field, and the results of findings were communicated in written reports to supervisors. Comment on such written reports supposedly gave the student necessary feedback. The feedback related to the material findings and not the techniques or methodologies used. The use of cameras, tape recorders, notebooks; the general etiquette and behavior one should expect in the culture; and areas to avoid such as improper gestures and subjects that were culturally sensitive to discuss with particular people were not part of my formal training. The conduct of fieldwork was a case of learning by experience.

However, it should be said that what worked for me may not have worked for other researchers in the same situation. Equally, what worked for me thirty years ago may not work for me now in the same community. Communities change; their structure, values, political awareness, and experience of the outside world all change. The advent of the 1993 Native Title Act in Australia made some Aboriginal communities suspicious of researchers to the degree that communities that were open to research up until the early 1990s may now generally be closed to any independent research. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century the Aboriginal peoples being studied rarely questioned such research in Australia. This situation began to change in the 1970s with social and political attention brought to bear on Aboriginal rights. The passage of the Native Title Act in 1993 threw research among Aboriginal groups in Australia into the legal spotlight as researchers were called to give expert evidence in land claims. Increasingly, Aboriginal people viewed researchers with suspicion as their field notes were presumed either to support or weaken Aboriginal claims to land and sea. Thus, the researcher needs to define his or her purpose in conducting research and to be able to explain clearly to the community not only that purpose but also the functions to which the recorded data and the results may be put.

My purpose in working with Indigenous groups has been, first, to observe and record aspects of cultural practices and, second, to understand the functions of these practices within their culture. Sometimes in the conduct of fieldwork I have observed and recorded aspects of the Indigenous groups' cultural practices without understanding the function. Sometimes the understanding of the function has occurred many years later when I have accumulated other information, and hence my earlier point about recording all one sees or at least as much of the context as may be practical.

The failures can sometimes be more valuable learning experiences than the successes. In the course of mapping the extant oral knowledge of traditional territories among Aboriginal people in Australia, there were days when I failed to document any useful knowledge about the extent of the traditional territory of a particular Aboriginal group. Although this may have seemed a failure, invariably I was able to define better the status of the knowledge among that group and always managed to record some genealogical information and obtain a lead about whom I should talk to next.

In making contact with people in communities I needed to explain what I was doing and why I was doing it. Most often elderly Aboriginal people in

Australia did not ask me what I was doing or why but were prepared to accept my presence and answer my questions. This was also true of my fieldwork among remote Indigenous groups in other countries such as the Philippines and northern Thailand. Younger people were more inclined to question my presence and my motives. I soon made a practice of explaining my purpose to people when I met them and particularly the office bearers in situations where there was some form of community administration. It is important to seek the cooperation and support of community officials before meeting with community members.

In some cases a field-worker's presence and purpose can create a difficult situation, particularly if it is perceived as a threat by a contemporary administrative structure that oversees the conduct of life of preliterate Indigenous groups who were formerly hunter-gatherers (such as among Aboriginal groups in remote areas of Australia or nomadic slash-and-burn agriculturalists as in the case of the Bla'an of southern Mindanao). "The field worker must explain his or her presence and purpose to others, gain their confidence and co-operation, and develop and maintain mutually acceptable relationships. These requirements create dilemmas, produce confrontations, demand clarifications and compromises, and evoke reflections and introspection that one can neither fully anticipate nor prepare for in advance."[12]

When asked what I did in the course of fieldwork in Australia my general reply was that "I record traditional aboriginal knowledge while there are still people alive who have such knowledge." This referred to knowledge of cultural practices such as fishing, behavior of various fauna, natural environment, extent of traditional territory, and ceremonies. When asked what I intended to do with the material that I collected, I told people clearly if the information was to be published either in a map or a book. I found it important for people to understand that the information they gave me might be made public. If a researcher finds that information is in any way restricted in Indigenous tradition, then it is important to record in the field notes the restrictions on the information.

In my early years of fieldwork among Australian aboriginal groups I did not understand that the use to which my field notes may be put was not always my decision. It is my view that a field-worker cannot give an unequivocal assurance to the people with whom he or she works that the knowledge collected will never be made public. Questions always arise about the legal status of information collected and the ability of third parties to compel the use of that information in legal proceedings or the possible access to field notes and use of the subsequent information after the researcher is deceased.

PLANNING FIELDWORK

In my early fieldwork in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia I focused on one remote Aboriginal community where I lived for several years. My initial research goal for this community was to understand the Aboriginal perspective on the natural environment. I soon became aware that this was far too complex, and therefore I broke down my goal into a more achievable aim,

which was to document the Aboriginal names of all fauna and flora known to Aboriginal people in their immediate environment. I then found that to reach this goal I had to obtain a basic facility in the local Aboriginal language. As I stumbled on my way to gaining conversational facility in the local language, grateful for the patience of local Aboriginal people, I found that a more basic goal was to be generally accepted by the Aboriginal community as a member of that community. Hence my immediate goal became acceptance into the community.

In gaining community acceptance I had to ensure that Aboriginal people understood my purpose for being in the community. It therefore became important to undertake some work that was a contribution to the community, which could serve as a reason acceptable by the vast majority of the community for me to be there and live among them. With acceptance in the community came a willingness of Aboriginal people to teach me the local language, which I then used to converse and learn about the identification of fauna and flora. Armed with local Aboriginal names for fauna and flora, and their place within an Aboriginal taxonomy, I was able to research the significance of each species in the daily life of the local clan groups and in the ritual life of the community.

In later work on the subject of territoriality, which involved continuous travel to Aboriginal groups throughout Australia, my initial goal each day was to identify Aboriginal people who were associated with the local area. From those people I would identify those who were generally accepted as being knowledgeable about the area and I would speak to them about their familiarity with the geography of that area and then their knowledge of the surrounding traditional territories. It was important thereafter to identify the name of the Aboriginal group traditionally associated as having territorial interests over the local area. Next was to identify any remaining members of that group and, in particular, those who had knowledge of the territory. Those members of the group who had knowledge of the territory may not necessarily have been custodians of the territory, and therefore it was important to identify those persons who were seen to be custodians of the traditional territory and to identify the type of their custodial interests. In doing this I reached another goal, which was to record genealogical information about the identity and relationship of people with the local territory as it had been maintained in their oral history.

MAKING CONTACT AND RECORDING

In the introduction I discussed the desirability of briefing community officials about the purpose of the fieldwork and enlisting their support. My observations here on contacting Aboriginal groups do not negate my earlier comments in regard to informing the community administration. Making initial contact with remote Aboriginal groups in Australia was extremely simple and, equally, extremely complex. In some areas of Australia a nonaboriginal person requires a permit to enter the area. In the Northern Territory of Australia the permit must be obtained from one of the Aboriginal land councils. To obtain a permit it is necessary to explain to the land council in practical terms the

purpose for which you wish to enter the area. The land council will decide whether to accept your reasons, support your work, and give you a permit. In such a situation, politics becomes a major factor. If the land councils assume that the information you record possibly may be used by yourself or another party against Aboriginal people in subsequent land claims or any other legal matters, they may refuse to grant a permit to enter the area. In other instances where permits are not required to enter land where Aboriginal people reside, it may be as simple as going to a house where the Aboriginal person you are looking for lives, knocking on the door, introducing yourself, and making his or her acquaintance.

The 1988 bicentennial celebration of European settlement in Australia was accompanied by an expectation of a national treaty between the federal government and Aboriginal people. The failure to conclude a treaty escalated the politics of Aboriginal issues in Australia, resulting in the strengthening of Aboriginal representative bodies. Subsequently, making the initial contact through a representative office of Aboriginal people, such as the local land council or the local office of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, was often a long-winded process, fraught with political overtones.

In the early years of fieldwork I most often made contact with specific Aboriginal people through a referral from an Aboriginal person in another community. That referral often gave me not only the specific contact details that enabled me to find their residence but also informed me about the type of knowledge that the person I was looking for may have had. It also told me how the person was regarded by other members of the Aboriginal community with respect to their knowledge of the matter that interested me.

When I had been referred to a specific Aboriginal person and had his or her contact details, I often did not give notice that I was coming. In most cases it was not practical to give written notice because the older Aboriginal people with whom I worked were often not able to read or write and lived in a remote location either not serviced by a postal service or that received mail infrequently. Although turning up on their doorstep may seem an affront to some people, out of the hundreds of times that I did turn up unannounced on the doorstep I cannot remember any occasion on which I was refused an opportunity to sit down and discuss matters with the relevant Aboriginal people.

There were some occasions when I had absolutely no lead as to whom it was I should speak to in a particular community because either the community was isolated or knowledge about Indigenous traditions in that area had dissipated, and it was not a matter that was spoken of generally among Aboriginal people. In such situations I was forced to cold canvass whereby I simply made contact with the first Aboriginal persons I saw and asked them the general question, “Who are the old people who speak for this country?” Most often I was given a name of a person and contact information. I then had my referral.

In communities that were not predominantly Aboriginal, if Aboriginal people were not readily evident around the community or the township, then going to the post office or the local police station was a fallback that usually provided a reasonable result. The local police officer in most small outback

areas, for example, has a good general knowledge of the identity of most people in the nearby communities and pastoral properties. Similarly, when staying in a hotel in an outback town the publican was an excellent source of information.[13] The Birdsville Hotel in one of the most remote outback towns in Australia was able to direct me to senior Aboriginal people in the area. Colin Flash, a senior Aboriginal man with a good knowledge of the Aboriginal traditions of the area, was not only a well-known figure to the publican, but also the publican had an oil painting of Colin prominently displayed on the wall behind the bar. It was a simple matter to speak to Colin and his brother, and I did not have to wait long before they came in for their regular drink that evening. The ensuing conversation was the first of several enjoyable encounters over the following years in which I recorded the extent of local traditional Aboriginal territory known to the Flash brothers.

In Australian outback towns I always found that it was regarded as good manners and it was well received if I brought along some cakes for morning or afternoon tea. This was an immediate signal to Aboriginal people that I understood the etiquette of visiting with people and was seen as a nice gesture that I can never recall having been refused. Inevitably, where interviews involved morning or afternoon tea, the sessions went on for several hours as people who may have initially indicated they had little time available, enjoyed a cup of tea and a good yarn over some cakes. The hospitality of providing cakes was reciprocated with a pot of tea that often spun out to several pots of tea. In outlying Aboriginal communities I usually came well supplied with cooked chickens and loaves of fresh bread from the nearest town. This was a means of showing hospitality and also appreciation in some measure for the time they had been willing to spend with me.

I did not make a practice of paying people for the time they spent in discussions with me. Particularly in recording knowledge of Aboriginal territories I found that the offer of payment in some situations was seen to debase the act of sharing knowledge and friendship or seemed to be an affront to the people who were willing to share the information with me. The payment of funds to informants created added difficulties in accounting for how much information was the product of the money as distinct from traditional knowledge. Simply put, it raised the question of whether information was being manufactured for payment. Therefore, there were fewer questions about the integrity of the information being provided if payment was not a consideration. I found that without offering payment for the information I was able to build some strong personal relationships with Aboriginal people that have continued for many years. In some instances, people had foregone paid employment to work with me. In such cases I reimbursed the lost wages generally after the work was complete, but provided a means of meeting the daily needs of family during the fieldwork if the person working with me was the breadwinner. In all cases of fieldwork I provided all the required support by way of transport, food, bedding, and accommodation.

In northern Thailand my approach was a little different. I was working in the area under the auspices of the Thai royal family so my authority among local people went unquestioned. However, this did not ensure that I dealt with

informants who had the knowledge and authority to speak for the village and of their customs. In the course of working with the senior men of the Akha and Lahu tribes in each of the twenty-six villages in the Doi Tung area in northern Thailand I applied a simple test whereby a senior man would detail the genealogical descent through which he inherited his authority. Incredibly, some Akha men could recite, or, more correctly, could chant, an unbroken patrilineage from sixty-five generations ago to the present generation.

Field Notes

I was not taught about the conduct of fieldwork or how to make field notes. My first detailed field notes recorded the conduct of a mortuary ceremony among an Aboriginal group in northern Australia. In those notes I wrote a brief description of the postmortuary cleansing ceremony and sketched and colored the body painting on the performers and the ritual objects. These first field notes were made on loose-leaf sheets of paper, a practice I did not repeat.

The initial contact to record the information can be somewhat off-putting to the informants if they are faced with cameras, video equipment, maps, books, and an array of recording tools. My initial contact was always made with a small, hard-covered notebook lodged out of general sight in my belt in the back of my jeans.[14] As we started to talk, I usually introduced the idea that I would like to write down some of this information because it was important, and I would be hard-pressed to remember it all. Only in circumstances when the information was extremely restricted within the ritual life of the community was I cautioned about writing such information down. If such a reservation was expressed, I immediately refrained from recording the information, put the notebook away, and told the informant that I did not need to write any of this down, but I was pleased that they felt they could tell me this information. Field trips with informants often provided older Aboriginal people with an opportunity to visit country they may not have seen for many years and to educate younger people about their traditional territory. These were invariably most enjoyable occasions.

Deciding what is relevant to record is critical. This is a product of how one constructs the situation and manages the conversation. Familiarity with the cultural protocols can have a significant effect. For example, recording information about a specific location, such as the names of physical features and the associated cultural stories, without the presence of the traditional owner of that clan estate will likely lead to a reluctance of locals to volunteer information. Among Australian Aboriginal groups, speaking about another person's territory can be tantamount to claiming an affiliation and therefore certain rights in that location. Discussing the extent of territory was always best done with traditional owners from both of the contiguous territories and invariably more reliable when conducted on site at the interface of the contiguous territories.

Recording notes on the extent of territory during the conduct of fieldwork with the Bla'an in the Mindanao highlands of the southern Philippines was seen by some Bla'an who had had some prior contact with municipal officials as according official or legal status to Bla'an traditional territory,

which had no standing within Philippines civil law. The Bla'an in the lowlands were being driven off their traditional lands through the clearing of forests and cultivation by wealthy landowners who had migrated from Luzon Island. Thus, there was an intensity among the Bla'an when it came to providing information about the surrounding landscape and an expectation that as a written record was now being made of the extent of traditional Bla'an territory that Bla'an affiliation to territory would be accorded legal status under Philippine law and protected from encroachment by lowland settlers.

Maps

When locations were mentioned, I was able to produce 1:100,000 scale topographic maps of the area in most cases. Sometimes, if the 1:100,000 maps of the area were not available or had not been produced, I used 1:250,000 scale maps. On other occasions, pastoral maps that showed the names of pastoral homesteads were valuable as Aboriginal people in the outback often referred to an area by using the name of pastoral property within which the area of interest fell. Topographic maps that showed the names of hills and rivers were also important. In some locations high-relief topography tourist maps were more informative than the government-produced topographic maps. This was particularly so in the Kuranda area and the general area around Cairns in northern Queensland, a major tourist destination.

Introductions

When introducing myself I carried a small pocket-sized photo album with ten or twelve pictures of my family and the area from which I came. I found that Aboriginal people and Indigenous groups were particularly interested in seeing the animal life, Indigenous people, and general terrain in other areas. In getting to know me they needed to get some idea of my family and my homeland. This simple tool was most useful in almost all situations both in Australia and with Indigenous groups elsewhere to bring a significant level of comfort to the interview. Among the Hill tribes of northern Thailand I found the best method of establishing my identity was to recite my patrilineage. For most Europeans, citing five generations of forebears is outstanding. I had conducted some research into my heritage and drafted a genealogy twelve generations deep. My twelve generations was a modest effort but made an instant connection with all senior people in the villages. Hence, wherever possible, understanding the criteria used locally to establish identity is an important tool not only to establish the identity and *bona fides* of the people with whom one may conduct fieldwork but also to establish a connection by casting one's own identity in local terms.

SALVAGE

Older Aboriginal people in Australia were often keen that I should record their knowledge about the identity and extent of their traditional territory. This

occurred in situations where Aboriginal people felt that the younger people were no longer interested in the information or didn't have the sufficient cultural background to accept the information and fulfill traditional custodial roles appropriately. The fieldwork was seen therefore as an attempt to salvage the last of the information and record it for a time when younger Aboriginal custodians might mature and possibly in future generations seek the information. In such a situation it is important to record the manner in which the information is traditionally passed on. This includes recording the category of person(s) to whom the information would be passed and the genealogies of the wider group that would enable such person(s) to be identified.

SPREADING THE KNOWLEDGE

On most occasions when working with older Aboriginal people I would explain the purpose of my visit to other members of the informant's family. I encouraged other members of the family to sit in on the interview for two reasons. First, on many occasions the information that I was given had never been heard by other members of the family and was in danger of disappearing because it was not being communicated to anybody else. This was a case of salvaging cultural knowledge, and if the informant agreed, we would invite other particular members of the family together to hear the information that I was recording, depending on any prohibitions within Aboriginal tradition. Second, the presence of other members of the family or community during the interview ensured a greater understanding of my intentions and inquiries. This reduced the opportunity for any accusations to arise that I may have acted improperly or asked improper questions.

When I interviewed an Indigenous woman it was always appropriate to have some other person present so that there could be no question of impropriety. Most often in the case of older interviewees, the spouse or a friend would be present who could also to jog the memory of the key informant, and I found that key words or recollections sparked a further recollection from the other person, and the interaction provided much more detailed and fruitful information than interviewing one person alone.

MAINTAINING INTEGRITY WITH DATA MANAGEMENT

In recording information in the field it is important to document observations and to separate comments. As a field-worker soon discovers, comments made early in the field-worker's experience can be found to be misleading after greater experience is gained or further information becomes available. It is important therefore not to compromise the collected data but rather to guarantee the integrity of data by making a distinction between the observations and interpretations.

The maximum amount of contextual information possible should be recorded: the surrounding situation, the identity of the actors, and their relationship to other actors. In cultural practices the time of day, time of year, phase of the moon, and disposition of certain stars may be important. The

presence of particular people may significantly influence the information given by an informant. Information about ritual cycles or the performance of ceremonies may be totally withheld if persons not permitted to hear that information within Aboriginal tradition are present. At such times it may be necessary to reconvene the interview remote from the family or the household. In such an instance, the subsequent meeting should take place in the view of the rest of the community where possible and culturally acceptable. If the interview does not take place in the view of other members of the community, then other community members may impute the worst scenario. If interviews are to be conducted privately (for instance, in a house or a remote location in the bush), it must be at the instigation of the informants and be in keeping with local Indigenous traditions. On many occasions I was taken to a remote location where I was shown sacred objects and had sacred designs explained. No women, children, or uninitiated males were permitted to be present.

When an interview commenced one of my first actions was to establish whether I could record the information I was about to be given. Sometimes a written narrative was permitted but not drawings, photographs, films, or sound recordings. I have listed the principal methods I used to record field data, from those associated with the most restricted information to that associated with the most public information. Cases in which elders revealed certain sacred and restricted information to me, but forbade me to record it in any way, I have classified as "memorized information" and listed it as number one. The most "open" information I classified as film recordings, which recorded information that could be seen by women, children, and uninitiated males.

1. Memorized information
2. Written narrative
3. Drawings in a field book
4. Information recorded on official maps
5. Photographs
6. Sound recordings
7. Film recordings

This list may be simplistic but does make the point that not all information is of equal cultural value, and that the field-worker should be mindful to make distinctions in the way cultural information is disseminated.

INTEGRITY OF FIELD NOTES

I have made it a practice to record information in the field and not to change or edit it in any way. Where possible I record the exact words that people use on key concepts they communicate to me. Sometimes the flow of information is so quick this cannot occur. On such occasions I might consider asking if the informant is comfortable for me to record the information on a small tape recorder or video camera. When I use a small tape recorder in a field situation I have found it appropriate to use a micro tape recorder, which I put in the pocket of the informants with a small microphone clipped to their shirt or sometimes even to the beard of an older Indigenous man (particularly

where western clothing with pockets isn't the usual attire of the informant). The tape recorder is voice-activated, and I have found that Indigenous people often feel much more comfortable having control of the machine than having to speak toward a machine sitting on a table or on the ground. When I record information I then replay it to the informant so he or she can hear that what has been recorded is exactly what has been said. Similarly, when I make video recordings I replay the material through the camera or on a television if available in order to confirm to the informants that what is on tape is exactly what they said in their situation. This certainly provides considerably more comfort to the informants.

When I am recording field notes and people are not literate then I read back the field notes where I have quoted them so that they can hear that I have accurately recorded their knowledge. Sometimes when informants describe an object or a place I give the field book to them with a pen and allow them to draw the object or draw a map. Hence in my field books I have information recorded by the informants that I then notate with their name and the date. Thus did Majon Malid, the most senior leader among the highland Bla'an in the southern Philippines, draw the star map in my field book. These actions give the informants a considerable measure of confidence that I am faithfully recording their knowledge.

Photographs

When I lived in an Aboriginal community in Arnhem Land for several years with my family, I did not take any photographs for the first several months. Aboriginal people were suspicious of cameras and sometimes were offended by photographs. Their first reaction on seeing photographs of themselves was that part of their spirit had been stolen. This feeling was more common with some of the older people. Therefore I carried a camera on my back for several months as I went about my daily activities around the community without using the camera to take any photographs. After many months I was invited to take some photographs, which I did reluctantly. Those photographs were taken on transparency film from which I had prints taken. I then gave those prints to the Aboriginal people who had requested the photographs to be taken. From this flowed a number of requests from other Aboriginal people to have photographs taken. In this manner I obtained some excellent quality photographs of important events from which I took the next step to stage a picture night on a regular basis in the community. I discussed the proposal of a picture night with leaders in the community whereby I used a slide projector to screen on the side of a house the slides I had taken around the community in the previous month or two. A large number of people in the community came to see the pictures I had taken of them, and all had a joyful night. From this developed a situation in which I was often invited to take photographs at major community events and ceremonies.

My reluctance to take photographs of restricted rituals was encountered when Aboriginal people asked me to come to initiation ceremonies and take photographs of the most restricted parts of the ceremony. On one particular

occasion, when the senior ritual leaders asked me why I had not brought my camera I explained that I understood that this was restricted ritual business and should not be photographed. The senior leaders explained to me that they were happy that I should take photographs. I replied that I felt uncomfortable, as this was restricted, but that I was grateful to witness the event and did not feel I needed to take photographs. It was explained to me that I did not understand the purpose of my invitation, and that purpose was to take photographs for the father of the boy who was about to be initiated. The initiate's father was elderly and felt that he would die soon after the initiation ceremony. He wanted photographs of the initiation taken and instructed me to use those photographs to explain to Europeans why initiation was so important to Aboriginal people and how the Aboriginal relationship with land was embedded in the initiation ceremony. I felt this was in many ways an onerous task that had been cast on me, but I did take the photographs. When the transparencies were developed and returned to me we then had a restricted "men's slide night" where I showed the transparencies on a slide projector inside a house with only the senior Aboriginal men. This was a great success, and the instructions to me to use the information to educate Europeans about Aboriginal association and the significance of land to Aboriginal people were repeated.

In the collection of information about plants and animals, Aboriginal people often brought animals to me to have them photographed; this presented an opportunity to record local knowledge of the animal and its name, habits, and significance to Aboriginal people. It must be noted that informants may incorrectly identify some animals when the identification does not occur *in situ*. Further, some animals may change their color when not *in situ* and mislead identification. On several occasions the identification of a plant species was an important component of mapping of a tribe's territory, which was synonymous with the occurrence of the plant species in question.

Maps

Drafting maps of Indigenous traditional territory was another matter that necessitated the close involvement of elders and senior custodians. Where possible the fieldwork involved field trips across the traditional territory of the Indigenous group and also involved people of the contiguous Indigenous group so that the interface between the territories could be mapped. Sometimes there was a clear boundary; other times there was a frontier over which both groups shared economic responsibilities. I marked locations at which there was a change in responsibilities. I then also recorded the terms that Indigenous people used to note the location. Sometimes they talked about a ridgeline where the water separated as the feature that denoted the change in affiliation between groups for the particular territory either side of the watershed. Where possible I traveled with the informants to such points of separation and recorded the information *in situ*.

In the course of such interviews I drafted a map by using topographic maps and, in the case of marine areas, charts of the local area as a base. When the map of the territory concerned had been drafted with the senior

custodians I then went through and described the territory that was both inside and outside the area mapped and noted the locations and features given to me by the informants as marking their prime responsibility for their traditional territory. It was not until the map so drawn had the full support of the senior custodians that the work of defining the extent of traditional responsibilities for territory was complete. This process proved appropriate and valid with all Indigenous groups with whom I have worked.

In the case of my extensive mapping of Aboriginal groups in Australia and Indigenous groups in the Torres Strait, my practice then was to have a cartographer redraw the map by using the 1:100,000 or 1:250,000 national mapping topographic series and label the name of the group inside its territory. The map was then laminated and returned to the senior custodian nominated by the group to receive and hold the map. In this manner the Indigenous custodians had a copy of the spatial information, which recorded their traditional association with territory that I had documented with them. The maps so recorded are best read in conjunction with the field notes. Similarly, the notes recorded in field books often require reference to the associated maps in order to gain their fuller meaning.

Data Integrity

In returning to an earlier point regarding the integrity of information recorded I found that it was not practical to switch between field notes and maps on some occasions as the field situation simply did not allow this to occur. Therefore, some maps list the identity of the custodians or certain statements by the custodians. At other times, genealogical data was recorded on the back of the map as I connected families associated with the territory being mapped.

I found that most Indigenous people felt more comfortable seeing the whole family tree in one snapshot. This was not possible where I recorded parts of each family on separate pages in the notebook so a master copy was sometimes drawn on the back of a map such as the work with the Southern Arranda group near New Crown Station in the Northern Territory of Australia. From the constructed genealogy I was able to read back to the group an array of relationships between people, and the custodians were delighted to find that I had correctly recorded and interpreted the social relationships between not only the people present but also those who were not present and had been named by the informants.

On some occasions Indigenous people gave me genealogical data because they wanted me to record the relationship of their family members. In these cases genealogies were recorded and their relationships read back to the informants until they were satisfied that each relationship had been recorded accurately. Again I had genealogies drafted and returned on a large sheet to the custodians. Sometimes the information about the location of frontiers and boundaries of the traditional territory was seen as information that should not be readily made available in general or was information to be preserved, and therefore it was returned in a plastic tube with a screw-on cap. The plastic tube

with the map enclosed was given to the senior custodian. Sometimes a set of genealogies was also enclosed. The senior custodian then had custody of the information in a paper format and was able to exercise his custodial responsibilities by having possession of the information and being in control of the dissemination of the information within Aboriginal tradition. This again gave a great deal of comfort to informants.

Maintaining the integrity of the information meant that field notes were never to be changed, altered, or amended after the field situation was completed. A practice by Norman Tindale that I found useful was to record comments and my perceptions at a later stage on the page facing the field notes.[15] Field notes could either be recorded on the right-hand page with the left-hand page left for later comments, or the field notes could be recorded and then copied. Binding a copy of the field notes allowed the original field notes to be stored in a safe location to prevent loss or damage while the copy could be annotated without compromising the integrity of the original notes. I found it useful to record the annotations in different color ink so that they would be readily discernible from the original notes.

With information that was related to me, but that I was not permitted to record in any way, I was tempted to write up field notes after the *in situ* field situation. Would this be a breach of confidence, a betrayal of trust? Such situations can pose a dilemma to the field-worker. Where does one's allegiance lay? With the local Indigenous people who have taken one into their confidence or with the "greater good" that may be served in collecting such knowledge? In a not dissimilar situation the most senior men of a small tribe asked me to record the extent of their traditional territory and what might be considered their "proofs of ownership." These proofs included song cycles, sacred designs, and ceremonies. I explained my reluctance, as I could not guarantee that the information would remain restricted. We settled on a solution whereby I recorded all the information plus a complete set of genealogies of the group. The culturally restricted information was lodged in the state museum with the genealogy of the group and a covering explanation stipulating which categories of descendants would be permitted access to the information. The state museum agreed to the conditions and became custodian of the information.

CHOOSING A ROLE

I presumed when I commenced my first fieldwork that I would merely be cast in the role of observer and my principal function would be to make a record of behaviors I observed and knowledge accumulated. When I was recording Aboriginal knowledge of fauna and flora in northeast Arnhem Land it was simply a case of having Aboriginal people identify species of fauna and flora by their particular Aboriginal name and matching that with a taxonomic list of available species that I had earlier constructed. Where I commenced such work by using photographs of the known species I soon found that the photographic material limited the work in that the photograph may have been of a juvenile of the species or of a reptile such as a mangrove snake that displayed

some polymorphism. Hence the color in the photograph was sometimes different from that which the local species displayed. It soon became necessary to obtain live specimens of the species in question and have Aboriginal people provide a name for the specimen. The only practical avenue to achieve this outcome was to collect the specimens locally, and this was only realistically achievable with the help of local Aboriginal people.

I found that information on the natural environment was often time-dependent. For example, sharks are generically named *bultmandji* and considered nonedible, as they are a totemic creature associated with major myths and ceremonies. However, in the middle dry season when other edible seafood in the inshore area is scarce, newborn sharks, which are common in the shallow waters, are classified with stingrays as *marandjalk*, an edible class of sea creatures. By the time the young sharks have attained a length of a little more than sixty centimeters, large fish around the reefs and offshore islands provide a plentiful food source and the focus of life moves away from the inshore area. At this time the young sharks are no longer sought as a food source and change their classification from *marandjalk* (stingrays) to *bultmandji* (sharks). Hence, collecting information in the wet season revealed that all sharks were classified as *bultmandji.* Similarly, identifying sharks from photographs of the adult species again classified all sharks as *bultmandji.* The change in taxonomic classification of sharks to stingrays during their early stage of life only became evident through the course of participating with Aboriginal people in the daily fishing activities in the middle dry season. Hence it soon became necessary to become not only an observer but also a participant in the daily life of hunting and fishing. When one becomes a participant-observer and thereby gathers information by participating in the daily life of the local Indigenous group, a difficulty immediately arises as to how to maintain an objective view of issues. Some supervisors ensure that they regularly debrief the field-worker whom they are supervising in order to bring them back to the outside frame of reference that the researcher requires. I found that it was necessary to review my field notes daily, to ensure that I never went to sleep at night without having written up my field notes for the day, and, where necessary, to record my comments as distinct from my observations.

In recording the knowledge and association with the natural environment that Aboriginal communities have, I found that I lived as a participant observer in Aboriginal communities that still maintained a significant dependence on their surrounding natural environment. This was the case where I lived with my family in an Aboriginal community for three years in northeast Arnhem Land. In contrast, recording knowledge of the identity of Indigenous groups and the extent of their traditional territory did not require living with a group throughout the entire annual or seasonal cycle. Visits to Aboriginal people to obtain such information may have entailed working with a group for a week or two. Sometimes a visit was relatively brief when it was clear that the Aboriginal person concerned had little knowledge of the area or did not have the right within Aboriginal tradition to impart such knowledge and referred me to another Aboriginal person.

In some cases it was simply not possible to observe Indigenous people in their traditional territory. Often, the surviving Aboriginal people who knew the extent of traditional territory and the identity of the group who had primary traditional responsibility over the area were elderly and incapable of traversing the sometimes-rough terrain. In such cases it was a matter of interviewing the senior custodian with the assistance of family members and other older Aboriginal people to ensure that I was correctly interpreting the information I was given and correctly identifying locations on the map that were related orally. For example, the name of a pastoral property, when used by older Aboriginal people, usually referred to the homestead where there was often a camp for Aboriginal people who worked on the pastoral property. The homestead and its name may be shown on a current topographic map of the area, but the name given by the Aboriginal informant referred to a former location of the homestead. It is not unusual that homesteads on remote pastoral properties have been relocated as rivers have changed course or access to the homestead has changed over the years, for example, to locate it next to a flat area that can be used as a landing strip for a light plane. Local knowledge required to interpret the information given by the Aboriginal custodian is most often a necessity, and the need for this may be overcome by having other people present during the course of the interview who know the area and are familiar with local history and identities.

FIELD EQUIPMENT

I found it important to minimize the amount of equipment that I would use. The more equipment available and visible, the less freedom to volunteer information there seemed to be among participants. When taking photographs I made it a practice of asking permission first. I avoided using a flash wherever possible, but when necessary, I explained how the flash would work and its effect on the eyes. It is important to let people know how equipment such as a flash unit might work so they will understand the effect when it takes place.

To make people comfortable with the presence of a still camera or a video camera I often set the camera on a tripod and left it unattended, pointing at the group. For a still camera I would first ensure that I was in the picture with the informant when the photograph was taken on a time delay. The informants felt more at ease about being photographed when they saw that I was prepared to have my photograph taken with them. I most often found that any photograph I wished to take would be approved. Similarly, in using a video camera, setting the camera up and allowing people to see others through the eyepiece of the camera, and in more recent years on the digital display, gave them an understanding of how the video camera worked. I used a remote activating switch on the video camera so that after the camera had been standing there for some time and people had become comfortable with it, it was a simple matter to switch the camera on remotely and record information without signaling that I was switching the camera on by standing up and turning the button on manually. Walking to the camera and turning the machine on often led to a change and stiffness in behavior and reluctance to

speak on the part of the informants. The remote activation unit is an essential tool when a single operator is conducting fieldwork. After I was finished using a video camera I rewound the video footage and allowed the informants to see what had been recorded of them on the camera.

I found that when photographing Indigenous people with a still camera the family of the informant generally appreciated it if I took a family photograph. I ensured that the extended family was in such photographs and a wide-angle lens was extremely useful on such occasions. It is important to fulfill the obligation by ensuring that when the film is developed several prints of the family portrait are returned to the informant. It is important not to send the photographs to other people in the group but to allow the informant to distribute the photographs as may be appropriate within local Indigenous tradition.

Where I had recorded a sound track on a cassette recorder I made it a practice to transcribe the information myself soon after the recording was made. The original tape was then stored, and I thereafter worked from the transcription of the tape.

CONCLUSION

Although many of the field practices I have noted herein were a consequence of my work with remote Indigenous groups in Australia and the Torres Strait Islands, during later years the vast majority of these same fieldwork practices proved valid among other Indigenous groups in Asia, Africa, and America.

I have found it of particular interest that some of these fieldwork insights have proven most useful when working with other local groups. For example, although fieldwork with Indigenous hunter-gatherers or nomadic slash-and-burn agriculturalists may evoke images of the traditional field situation with structured encounters with Indigenous informants, the processes and techniques that I have learned I have applied to other situations where the group in question has a common identity, often synonymous with a territory, as in the case of militia groups armed with modern military weapons. They too have social and political structures, defined territories, rules of interaction, and communication.

Fieldwork that is well planned, thoughtfully conducted, and recorded in detail will stand the test of time and provide a rich resource of reliable information to a range of disciplines and generations of researchers.

NOTES

1. Bronislaw Malinowski, "Method and Scope of Anthropological Fieldwork," in *Ethnographic Fieldwork*, ed. A. C. Robben and J. A. Sluka (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 46.

2. Roger Sanjek, ed., *Field Notes: The Makings of Anthropology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), xiv.

3. Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers, Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 18.

4. Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1985), 102–03.

5. Douglas Cole, "The Origins of Canadian Anthropology, 1850–1910," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 8, no. 1 (1973): 41.

6. E. C. Hughes, "Introduction: The Place of Field Work in Social Science," in *Fieldwork: An Introduction to the Social Sciences*, ed. B. H. Junker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), v.

7. By *informant* I mean a person who gives information in response to a question. Some writings use the term *interviewee* as an equivalent, but this implies the interviewer was not present at the event being discussed. On many occasions I was documenting the informant's perception of events that I was observing with the informant. Often the informant gave me a commentary of the event we were observing in common or in which we were participating.

8. George Bond, "Field Notes: Research in Past Occurrences," in Sanjek, *Field Notes*, 276.

9. Albert Munsell developed the Munsell Color Chart in the late nineteenth century as a means of scientifically discussing color. Munsell defined color in terms of the three separate dimensions of hue, value, and chroma and was the first to systematically illustrate the colors in three-dimensional space. Hue is defined as the actual color (red, blue, green, etc.); value is defined as how light or dark a color is; and chroma is defined as how strong or weak a color is. Munsell subsequently published *A Color Notation* in 1905 as a standard color atlas defining the Munsell Color Standard, which continues to be in widespread use today.

10. R. A. Georges and M. O. Jones, *People Studying People: The Human Element in Fieldwork* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

11. H. Becker and B. Greer, "Participant Observation: The Analysis of Qualitative Field Data," in *Fieldwork*, ed. B. Jackson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 4.

12. Georges and Jones, *People Studying People*, 2.

13. A publican is the proprietor or licensee of a hotel or, as is locally referred to in Australia, a "pub" (public house).

14. An A4-size, faint-ruled notebook, bound on the left margin became my standard notebook. A black, permanent-ink pen guards against loss of notes from humidity, sweat, or rain.

15. Norman B. Tindale began fieldwork among Aboriginal groups in Australia in 1921 and continued his work over the following two decades. This resulted in his first published map of Aboriginal tribes in 1940, which he revised and which was published by the University of California Press in 1974 as a set of maps and the companion volume, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia.*