

# Ethnography at the Turn of the Third Decade: Privilege and Challenge

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The article analyzes the situation in which ethnographic studies found themselves at the turn of the third decade of the 21st century. The historical background, rooted in the past century, as well as the situation that developed by the end of the second decade, is considered at the general philosophical level, while the area that illustrates the situation was chosen taking into account the author's professional orientation—ethnomusicology. The problems are divided into three groups. The first such group is devoted to new practices and information spaces that are constantly changing the situation. The second group concerns worldview aspects related to the perception of new ethnographers by the guild elders. A critique of the “decolonization” of ethnographic research as part of an overview of institutional and disciplinary barriers concludes the topics discussed in the article.

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## Twentieth Century: Lost and Found

The 20th century has been extremely fruitful in terms of technical inventions, global connections, new ways of thinking, and social progress. However, this body of achievements was accompanied by huge human losses in wars, the likes of which humanity had not known in previous centuries. In contrast, environmental awareness and consideration for animals have resulted in relatively small “losses”, such as the ban on ivory piano keys, crocodile skin bags, and animal circus. The development of mobile phones has led to the disappearance of public payphones. The global COVID-19 pandemic has abolished the handshake that has been a sign of friendly greeting for centuries. The struggle for gender equality has practically destroyed the barely formed tradition of helping women in public places.

Today, the fight for the dignity of any person leads to the withering away of another cultural trend of the immediate past—ethnographic research. However, this is not the only problem in this branch of science, but rather a problem that accompanies its other internal and external problems, which in themselves can lead to the same result. Being a consequence of technical and sociocultural developments in the end of the 20th century, which in the first decades of the 21st century led to a change in the traditional form of documentation of local cultures, these problems will be considered a factor that to some extent helps the ethnographer, but at the same time changes the ethnographic reality right before our eyes...

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## Historical Reference

### Terminology and Pioneers of the Field

Most researchers agree that the term “ethnography” today is associated either with the descriptive *study* of society, or with the *process* of conducting such study, or with the *method* of its implementation. To this day, ethnography is unthinkable without field research. Moreover, it is assumed that the ethnographer will be immersed in the daily life and cultural utterances of the people who are the object of his/her study. However, given that an ethnographer cannot help but be preconceived, his/her observations and descriptions will be comparative, at least to some extent. This is why, according to various sources (for example, Dewan, 2018), ethnography also takes into account the meaning that members of the investigated group assign to their group behavior in various social situations. This helps balance the research towards greater objectivity.

Encyclopedic sources and dictionaries (first of all, Britannica) refer to some confusion regarding the terms “ethnography” and “ethnology”. Thus, the latter term, which encompasses the comparative study of cultures *in general*, has a predominantly European circulation and is often regarded as synonymous with the British concept of social anthropology. In America, this academic field is more known as cultural anthropology. Another related term is “folkloristics” sometimes referred to as “folklore studies”. The term, according to Dundes (2005, p. 286), had spread by the 1950s to refer to academic research on *folklore artifacts* themselves.

Probably the first person who, in terms of what would be called ethnography today, conducted research in the 5th century BC was Herodotus, a Greek historian and traveler, who wrote about some 50 different peoples he heard of or met, describing their appearance, customs, laws, and religion. In the course of further history, up to the early 20th century, European missionaries, merchants, and other travelers, including officers of the colonial administrations, wrote detailed descriptions of non-European peoples. One of the most reliable sources of this documentary work is perhaps the book of Joseph-François Lafitau, a French Jesuit missionary who spent almost six years with the Iroquois in what is now Canada. Lafitau later published a two-volume work on American Indian customs, based on his experience with the Iroquois (see Lafitau, [1724] 2013).

The establishment of ethnography as a professional field of research is associated with the pioneering work of the Polish-born British anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands in 1914. Malinowski implemented the method of participant-observation, which was different from earlier observers with the fact that he got familiarized with the life of the inhabitants of the island, without being endowed with administrative or other functions (such as officer or missionary), but this was his primary goal. “At the outbreak of WWI”, Ugwu states,

...Malinowski was in Australia to attend a conference with his supervisor, C. G. Seligman. Being from Poland, he was therefore an Austrian subject and so was on enemy territory because Australia was a British colony at the time, and Britain and Austria were in opposing alliances. Short of being taken prisoner, his suggestion to be allowed to go and take up his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands was granted by the authorities. (Ugwu, 2017, p. 79)

Being a kind of applied socio-cultural anthropology, and on the other hand, a derivative of the comparative wing of musicology, *ethnomusicology* initially developed in two directions: folkloristics (preservation of traditional musical cultures) and socio-cultural interpretation of musical expressions. Of the two global organizations that unite researchers-ethnomusicologists—ICTM (International Council for Traditional Music) and SEM (Society for Ethnomusicology)—one is more in favor of preserving musical cultures, while the other

is moving in the direction of interpreting the findings from a social analysis perspective. Each of the two institutions has published a periodical, which followed the chosen direction. In the last decade, however, there has been a tendency to merge between the two paths of the discipline in light of the emergence of the critical issues affecting the whole field, regardless of the internal division.

### **Emergence of Critical Issues**

One of the first sources that points to the problematic nature of research on the culture of the other is Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Edward Wadi Said, a native of Jerusalem, saw Orientalism as a form of academic research on the East, or rather, on what is now known as the Middle East. Initially, academic world accepted this interpretation as a description of an epistemological trend rather than an artistic experience, and although about three decades later Varisco (2007) and Ibn Warraq (2007) criticized this point of view, *Orientalism* questioned the very validity of studying the culture of the other as an interpretation from the standpoint of the researcher.

Socio-political development in the postcolonial world has in recent years brought up the issue of disputes over historical ethnographic recordings. Thus, Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Weintraub (2012) provide a vivid example of such a controversy when discussing the experience of transferring a sound archive collected in Uganda in the late 1940s by the German ethnographer K. Wachsmann back to the community of origin. This story raises many ethical and practical questions:

What is the community of origin, especially in cases where a tradition has died out? What are the criteria for selecting (and excluding) particular individuals to receive recordings? What are the criteria for selecting (and excluding) musical items to be taken back to the communities? What about those musical items that were restricted from being made accessible to the general public? (Nannyonga-Tamusuza & Weintraub, 2012, p. 216)

Discussing the polemics surrounding this article (Cooke, 2015; Nannyonga-Tamusuza & Weintraub, 2015) in the same journal *Ethnomusicology* that published the original article, Rosenblatt (2018) notes how vulnerable to criticism and sometimes ungrateful is field research. Furthermore, the author raises a series of wider issues:

[W]hose property is (1) an indigenous song and (2) a recording of this song made by the "other"? [...] If, for example, during the 1980s, Russian ethnographers recorded some 400 wedding songs in 20 villages of, say, Astrakhan region, no question would arise as to who the songs and the recordings belong to, or whether they would have to be "repatriated" back to the villages. However, in the case of Wachsmann's sound archive, the question does arise, if the collection of recorded indigenous songs should be returned to the Ugandans who meanwhile became Christians... Thus, *who* made a particular recording appears to be one of the key issues when considering the return of a recording to the community of origin. (Rosenblatt, 2018, p. 26)

The last issue in this row would be research ethics, a set of rules inherent in medical research, which in recent years have spread to anthropology and its derivatives, primarily ethnography, including ethnomusicology. Beginning with the standardization of communication rules with the human factor, inherent in many branches of human-oriented studies, research ethics quickly became overly bureaucratic and shifted to the formal way of all sorts of barriers and obstacles in the ethnographer's path to the target community. The impact of this problem on the ethnographic studies will be discussed later in the article.

### **Current Context**

This section will outline the impact of recent sociocultural, political, and technological developments around the world that are changing the nature of ethnographic study, enriching its practices, and at the same

time challenging the researcher in many ways. Problems will be divided into three groups: (a) new practices and information spaces, (b) worldview issues and disciplinary filters, and (c) institutional and disciplinary barriers.

### **New Practices and Information Spaces**

Towards the end of the second decade of the century, the growing availability of digital equipment and communication technologies led to phenomena previously unknown to ethnographers.

One of such phenomena is the self-documenting of former “groups under study”, which is distributed through Internet resources (for example, YouTube). Being a kind of group communication, or rather a cultural exchange between communities, this documentation is in fact ethnography, which does not require an ethnographer. Another phenomenon of this kind is the documentation of various ethnographic events by tourists who share such materials through the resources of social groups (for example, Instagram). Travelers’ notes of distant tribes have existed before, but the form of video documentation gives today’s travel reports a form of an open access ethnographic material.

The professionalization of folk practices and the preparation of students for a stage career (while people who are not associated with the tradition by birth study it for true reproduction) is a kind of artificial crystallization of tradition, which, in its natural form, is rather flexible, “imperfect”, and non-dogmatic. The incorporation of folk practices (both authentic and reproduced) into films and classical musical compositions, blended with modern and postmodern Western practices, has been commonplace for several decades (and even earlier) and continues to be common today. The mass production of “world music”, which is nothing but a mixture of Western-style pop-rock music with local exotics around the world, influences folk customs, which themselves become a kind of this mixture.

The presence of digitized historical ethnography, collected by the first generations of ethnographers at a time when the tradition was truly original, is of great interest to ethnographers today, who can then trace the dynamics of the tradition. However, such accessibility for representatives of the communities themselves serves as a reference to tradition in its classical, crystallized form, which in itself affects the possible development, which otherwise could have gone a different way.

Expanding the volume and forms of available information about local cultures, including the rarest, gives the ethnographer new tools, which is an indisputable advantage over researchers of the past. On the other hand, the aforementioned phenomena challenge current fieldwork, which is not the only documented evidence of traditional practices today.

### **Worldview Questions and Disciplinary Filters**

In recent years, many researchers have joined the field of ethnomusicology and become members of the ICTM. Most of them come from countries whose socio-political apparatus is different from the Western world. Here we are faced with a new situation in which cultural phenomena are sometimes presented through the vision different from that of Western scholar.

Here is a vivid example. During the ICTM World Conference in Bangkok, Thailand (2019), one of the presenters showed a video of the song praising the leader of his country. The video was causing a stir among some veteran researchers who have tried to disqualify the presentation based on “praise to the dictator”. I felt the need to stand up and explain my vision on the subject: I suggested that we respect the material presented, as well as what the speaker thinks about it (in this case, the presenter’s explanation of how good the leader is).

After the presentation ended, in a behind-the-scenes discussion, I stressed that later on each of us could express a different attitude to both the material and the speaker's interpretation of it, but after the conference committee accepted the paper, we had to respect the speaker, as that was probably the only way to present the material.

As ethnographers and anthropologists, we must study the phenomena along with the meanings imparted to them by the speakers, before writing them down to pre-determined categories. It is just a matter of the "filters" we must learn to adjust.

### **Institutional and Disciplinary Barriers**

For some time now, the ethnographic approach to target communities has faced obstacles on the part of research ethics committees, although the situation varies from place to place. For example, Israeli universities welcome field studies on the culture of local Arab-Christian communities and believe that this is a way of better understanding among the peoples inhabiting the country. However, universities in North America are showing the opposite trend: One can see how in real time last opportunities for ethnographic contacts with indigenous communities are being closed. As explained by the officials, the reason lies in the reluctance of the indigenous peoples to be considered a "group under study" (although, in the author's experience, this may simply reflect the position of speakers on their behalf). Either way, the unique culture of native Christians in North America remains largely unexplored.

In addition to institutional barriers to fieldwork, the idea of "decolonization" of the humanities in general and ethnography in particular is gaining ground in Western academia. In July 2020, there was a heated discussion on the ICTM mailing list, dedicated to this issue. The discussion was led by American researchers and their European and Israeli colleagues. All the others simply ignored participation in the discussion, which most clearly demonstrates the irrelevance of the "decolonial" approach to ethnographic research at the global level.

Following the new reality of limited access to unique cultures, advances in interpersonal communication and social networks, researchers related to this field are gradually moving to the digital environment that is still available (and not prohibited) as a source of ethnographic research. While this study of society is less related to the original meaning of the word "ethnography", it fits with the new reality of interpersonal communication in the pre-pandemic era and especially in the current moment.

### **Conclusion**

This article was aimed at an overview of various events in the world that have led to a significant change in the nature of field research and questioned its traditional methods. As the reader may have already concluded, ethnography today seems to stand the test of the liberal era and seeks new ways to meet new conditions.

The profession of ethnographer began in the colonial era and, as such, uses methods associated with its period of origin, whether we like it or not. Apparently, any attempt to forcibly "decolonize" this line of research will simply lead to its disappearance, just as the professions associated with the processing of ivory and crocodile skin or working with the linotype have disappeared in due time. And yet, the author expresses the hope to witness the renewal and prosperity of this direction of academic research, which can happen with a new generation of ethnographers who are not burdened with "colonial" practices or "decolonial" statements, but are simply interested in studying different cultures and know how to find language with representatives of various communities without the need for an ethical protocol.

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