

ETHNOGRAPHY OR ESPIONAGE: THE PROBLEM OF ETHICS IN PHILIPPINE ANTHROPOLOGY

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The growing involvement of anthropologists in developmental programs in the Philippines has highlighted several concerns which have overbearing ethical considerations. A case in point is the prevalence of covert researches under the aegis of government agencies or transnational corporations. In this regard, there is a need for UGAT to thresh out a more detailed Code of Ethics which would be binding to all practitioners in the country.

“An anthropologist must be scientifically objective (truthful) and relevant to national and community goals; sincere to his host community and obliged to explain to them the objectives and implications of his research; to listen to criticism by his host community of the research he has conducted; and eventually to provide them a copy of his work, ideally in their language, for the host community would be the final arbiter of the validity of his research.

“An anthropologist doing research has the obligation to make available the results of his research data not only to the host community and his scientific community, but also to the larger community.

“The anthropologist has the right and the obligation to criticize unethical practices of fellow anthropologists and other individuals and institutions that affect the practice of anthropology.”

- UGAT Code of Ethics

As the Philippines gears toward modernization goals for the Year 2000, there is an increasing demand for the involvement of anthropologists in development efforts. Several government offices as well as private agencies are currently in need of anthropologists for the conduct of feasibility studies, community baseline profiling, KAP (knowledge, attitude, and practices) research, environmental impact assessments, project monitoring and evaluation, and the issuance of archeological clearances.

While the participation of anthropologists in development work is basically a positive trend, the accompanying problems related to professional ethics need to be considered. In undertaking the aforementioned activities, the anthropologist is faced with a dilemma of trying to satisfy his clients and at the same time, maintaining responsibility towards informants, in particular, and the public, in general. Because of the staggering amount involved in consultancy services, suspicions have been raised about certain anthropologists being apologists for unpopular government projects and minions of big business.

Accusations about alleged unethical practices of some anthropologists is nothing new in the discipline. We all know about the contribution of early anthropologists in the subjugation and colonization of the so-called "primitive peoples". As early as 1919, Boas accused four anthropologists of serving as spies under the guise of conducting ethnographic work. He wrote,

"A person, however, who uses science as a cover for political spying, who demeans himself to pose before a foreign government as an investigator and asks for assistance in his alleged researches in order to carry on, under this cloak, his political machinations, prostitutes science in an unpardonable way and forfeits the right to be classed as a scientist (1973: 52)."

In the recent period, one can cite the involvement of American anthropologists in counterinsurgency projects such as the Project Camelot and the Thailand Project. Project Camelot was envisioned in 1964 under the sponsorship of the Special Organizations Research Office (SORO) of the United States Army. Its avowed objectives included devising procedures for assessing the potential for internal war within national societies. The Project was to be initiated in Chile but was ultimately intended to be implemented in several countries in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe. Project Camelot was eventually shelved after the

AAA passed a resolution denouncing clandestine research and researches dealing with counterinsurgency.

The Thailand Project, on the other hand, was fully implemented during the height of the Vietnam War. Several anthropologists were hired to conduct research among the hill tribes of northern Thailand since these groups were viewed as likely candidates for subversive activities. The involvement of anthropologists in the project was condemned by the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam in 1970.

Here in the Philippines, questions concerning professional ethics have been raised several times in the past. To cite a few cases, doubts have been cast about the reliability of some ethnographic studies, the validity of supposed "megalithic" finds, and the existence of so-called "stone age tribes". There have also been accusations of antique dealing practices by a few archeologists and reports of ghost writing for the late dictator by some educators.

It must be made clear, however, that this paper is not aimed at launching a witchhunt against colleagues in the anthropological community. On the contrary, I feel that there were instances where some have been unfairly ostracized when in fact UGAT has never convened an Ethics Committee to evaluate supposed unethical behavior.

The main purpose of this paper is to highlight the key problems and issues related to professional ethics that confront the Filipino anthropologist while in pursuit of development work. I shall mainly draw from my experience in the field to expound on the context where difficulties arise. Based on these concerns, I have raised a few recommendations at the end of the paper that I hope can be a starting point for the operationalization and improvement of UGAT's Code of Ethics.

The Specter of Camelot

After finishing my bachelor's degree in 1980, I spent several years in the Cordillera region to undertake field research for my graduate studies. During that time, there was a very strong protest movement among the Kalingas and Bontoks against the planned Chico Dam. At the same time, there was a growing opposition among the Tinguians against the Cellophil Resources Corporation (CRC). In the course of events, more and more Kalingas, Bontoks, and Tinguians joined the New People's Army (NPA) to thwart government intrusion into their ancestral lands.

In the Cordilleras, I developed an academic interest in the phenomenon of a communist movement, which aims to exercise its political hegemony, existing within a traditional society, which in turn has its own indigenous political institutions. Thus, I focused my research on the communist movement in the Cordilleras as an anthropological study of a political movement.

In 1987, the Diliman Review published the preliminary findings of my research in an article entitled "The Zigzag Route to Self-Determination" Since this was my first time to have an article published, I was too eager to write every detail that I knew, including names of communist leaders, names of villages where the NPA was strong as well as internal events in the history of the communist movement in the Region. Looking back, I regret writing so much detail without consideration to the harm which may be brought to my informants.

A few weeks after the publication of my article, I was contacted by one university professor who invited me to join a research project called the "Area Studies on Insurgency and Development", otherwise referred to as the ASIA Project. This research was being undertaken under the auspices of the National Intelligence and Coordinating Agency (NICA). The project aims to understand the nature of armed conflict in selected areas of the country as a step towards the achievement of peace. I was specifically asked to do research for the Cordillera region because of my apparent knowledge of the dynamics of the communist movement in the area. The data to be collected included the following:

- structure and leadership of the communist movement;
- sectoral and multisectoral front organizations of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP);
- legal institutions controlled by the CPP; and
- areas of operation of the NPA.

The proposal was a real dilemma for me. On one hand, I honestly believed in the need to understand the roots of armed conflict in order to work for peace. On the other hand, I could not imagine myself being a traitor to people who gave their trust in providing me with information about their organization. Other factors complicated the dilemma of whether to accept the offer or not. During that time, I just got married and badly needed a job. I consulted close friends about the matter and they advised me to go on with the Project. They told me that if I would not do the research, somebody else would. They believe that I am in a

better position to screen out whatever information I could get in the field that may be detrimental to the people of the area. Again, at the opposite end, I had my fears of working with the NICA probably because of stereotype images perpetuated by films about intelligence outfits such as the CIA and the KGB.

Luckily, I was later informed by my contact that the Cordillera region was not a priority area for the ASIA Project research. The nearby region of Cagayan Valley was a top priority area so I was asked if I could do research for that area. By then, I begged off joining the Project invoking my unfamiliarity with that region as an excuse. Since then, I have not heard anything from the Project. I do not know if it has pushed through with the involvement of other social scientists.

In retrospect, I wished my action then was not limited to rejecting the offer to join the Asia Project. I could have exposed to the academic community the unethical nature of the Project, i.e., undertaking espionage work in the guise of scientific research. Unfortunately, during those years I was inactive from UGAT's activities.

The Problem of Ethical Delineation

With the way I described the nature of the Asia Project, one can easily condemn the said project for being unethical. However, in most cases, it is not that easy to delineate which is ethical and which is not. The anthropologist who was hired to do research does not necessarily know the entire picture of the Project. The research component may only be a small portion of a bigger plan the contents of which may be confidential to the researcher.

Even my experience with the ASIA Project must be subjected to further scrutiny to have a common understanding of ethical standards. Was the Project unethical because it was initiated by the NICA? Is the mere act of conducting research for the military to be considered unethical? If we say that it depends on the project, in what instances can anthropologists be allowed to do research for the military or the intelligence? Others may state that it depends on the socio-political context of the period? Does this mean that it was unethical to do research for the Marcos government while it was okay to do projects for the Aquino and Ramos administrations? To stretch the argument further, is it ethical for anthropologists to do research for the underground communist movement?

Some quarters argue that the ethical procedure is that anthropologists only accept projects that are nonpartisan in character. This concept, however, runs into conflict with the very idea of Action Anthropology. This view contradicts the discipline's commitment to the common *tao*.

What is clear to me is that the ASIA Project, the Project Camelot, the Project Thailand, and other similar endeavors are unethical because of their covert nature. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) has a clear-cut stand on this matter:

"In accordance with the Association's general position on clandestine and secret research, no reports should be provided to sponsors that are not also available to the population studied (1973: 46)."

The Trouble with Anonymity

Another major flaw of the ASIA Project is that it could bring harm to the actual informants of the research. Barangay members who were identified as supportive of the communist memento could be harassed by military elements. The anthropologist has the responsibility to protect informants from possible harm.

A usual solution to this problem is the use of fictitious names of places and persons to safeguard informants from negative action such as harassment or ostracism. Anthropologists have, therefore, invoked on the right of informants to remain anonymous. This right, however, is not recognized by law. The Philippine Congress, for example, may summon the anthropologist to reveal his informants. Unlike lawyers or priests, the law does not recognize the right of anthropologists to conceal the identities of their informants.

This poses another problem. Professional ethics requires us to state to our informants all the possibilities as to how the research would be used, including the risks involved. If we outrightly admit to our informants that we could not guarantee their safety from possible risks, how then do we expect them to cooperate with the research? It might be argued that this scenario could only happen in cases where sensitive information is involved. However, does this mean that we should veer away from "sensitive" or "controversial" topics? In the Philippine context, these "sensitive" matters are the most pressing issues of the day!

The Dilemma of the Lone Anthropologist

Unlike other professionals, it is not common to find more than one anthropologist in a certain firm involved in development work. The anthropologist usually works with a team of technical consultants, such as geologists, agronomists, statisticians, etc. The anthropologist's teammates may not necessarily share the same ethical standards as that the anthropologist in matters such as the concept of responsibility towards the people in the project area. Thus, the lone anthropologist is faced with the problem of having nobody to relate with, at the same wavelength, in terms of reflecting and analyzing the possible ethical implications of certain project inputs. As I mentioned earlier, the anthropologist may come across certain gray areas in the course of the work. Further pressured by work deadlines, the anthropologist may overlook certain factors to consider. Also, he/she may succumb to his/her subjectivity because of attachment to the employer.

This brings to fore the importance of being a member of a professional organization like UGAT. UGAT can serve as the forum where anthropologists working in different areas and attached with various agencies can share with one another the nature of their respective projects. Each one is enjoined to critique the project/research agenda to thresh out the possible ethical considerations of the project. The formation of a pool of anthropologists that would undertake certain projects also minimizes the problem of overlooking ethical concerns.

The Need to Elaborate UGAT's Code of Ethics

UGAT must be credited for framing a Code of Ethics as early as the founding of the Association. Also, we should not overlook that UGAT came up with its own ethical standards at a time when the country was under martial law — a period when ethics seemed to have no place in society and a time academicians were being coopted into the system.

As the number of anthropologists grew (and split into various factions), there is a need to reassess UGAT's Code of Ethics. There are many even among UGAT's members who do not even know that such a code exists. To add, there are many new young students of Anthropology who did not pass through the same academic formation as those of the founding members of UGAT. There is a possibility that these potential

anthropologists have a different understanding of Applied Anthropology and have a different view of ethics within the discipline. Also, there are so many new issues in the discipline that urgently need our common position. For example, there is the ongoing debate concerning intellectual property rights related to indigenous knowledge. Anthropologists who attended the Granlibakken Conference last October 1993 were widely split on the issue of whether current conceptions of property rights in the western world are adequate to protect the interests of rural communities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

There is a need, therefore, to broaden UGAT's Code of Ethics. A three-paragraph code is no longer sufficient to guide the conduct of work of Filipino anthropologists. There is a need to particularize UGAT's position on various fronts, including the specification of ethical standards in the new fields of anthropology, such as ethnopharmacology and ethnoveterinary medicine.

There are many other ethical problems in anthropology that need to be discussed. To cite a few, there is the question of recognition of the privacy of the people being studied; the need to divulge funding sources; the responsibility to withhold certain truths since its revelation may adversely affect a particular culture; and many other responsibilities towards informants, students, employers, fellow social scientists, and the public, in general. Unfortunately, I have no time to tackle all of these. These matters should be discussed continually in future fora of UGAT. It would be better if UGAT organize an Ethics Committee to spearhead these discussions, evaluate the ethical dimension of activities where anthropologists are involved, and initiate the drafting of a more specific document to tackle ethical concerns of the anthropological community. If possible, it would be better to include in these efforts anthropologists who are not within the network of UGAT and those who have been inactive from UGAT. The AAA's "Principles of Professional Responsibility" can be a starting point in the drafting of such a document.

As a word of caution, it must be emphasized that the organization of an Ethics Committee should not be transformed into a McCarthyist campaign against fellow anthropologists. The ultimate goal of such an effort is to improve professional standards within the Association. A real professional anthropologist is one who is above-board in his/her activities and is willing to subject his/her work to inquiry or criticism by others with the hope of further developing his craft.

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