

WHY CIRCULATE ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE?

Fernando N. Zialcita

What is anthropological knowledge?

Like other social sciences, anthropologists develop *factual knowledge* that is consumable by the public. For instance, anthropologists can tell you what kinship system prevails in a particular culture and what the probable implications are for inheritance, gender and social organization. However, there is a type of anthropological knowledge that is not easily consumable but is important nonetheless. I refer to *ethnographic insight*. Wanting to re-create and interpret the world of meanings in a community, the anthropologist creates a narrative that recounts a segment of the everyday life of that community. This could be a ritual, a livelihood practice, a political contest or whatever. Thick description, which may seem irrelevant from a purely positivistic view of science, is used because the narrative seeks to locate meaningfulness at its very center. Such a narrative may either reinforce an existing paradigm in current scientific discourse, or question it. In either case, such a narrative is important because it draws a portrait of how fellow humans make sense of their dreams in a particular milieu.

To give an example: the question of poverty reduction in Ifugao. As outsiders it is all too easy for us to imagine that to solve the limited livelihood opportunities in Ifugao and the resulting out-migration of its residents to the lowlands we need only to popularize fast-growing, high-yielding rice varieties from the lowlands. For the traditional rice variety, the *tinawon*, matures only once a year and takes around five months to grow. Yet to de-emphasize the traditional rice variety is to threaten the very fabric of the Ifugao world. Ethnographies on Ifugao concur that the fat-grained tinawon is esteemed because of its flavor and aroma, and that it is the hub of both ritual practices and the status system. As against a cold, technocratic model of development that espouses predictable, accelerating growth, an ethnography may show the need for a warm, community-centered model of

development where meaningfulness is at the center. But how to do so while reducing poverty? There are no easy answers.

We come to the term “public”.

“Public” can mean either: 1) an *audience* or 2) the *government* which, in a democratic state like ours, supposedly embodies the aspirations of all. We use both senses in this paper. My focus here is to encourage all of us anthropologists to reflect on why anthropological knowledge seems to have limited impact on discourse outside specific domains such as museums for instance. In the world of museums, anthropological knowledge is highly valued because of the description it gives about lifeways of particular societies. It is indispensable for the setting up of exhibits in a museum. But anthropologists have been involved in a wide range of other domains, from medicine to education to development to governance. How much difference has anthropology made in each of these domains.

In this introduction, I propose the following areas for exploring how anthropological knowledge is circulating within the Philippines.

Notions of anthropology and its contribution

The image of “anthropology” as a discipline. Anthropology as the study of culture is not well known even in universities. The stereotype of anthropology as the science of bones, stones and tribal peoples seems to persist. Hence it is seen as irrelevant to everyday concerns in a society that seeks “modernization.” Also problematic is the tendency to confuse anthropology with sociology—even in Ateneo de Manila. From personal experience, I can attest that, despite my publicly stating that I am an anthropologist, my studies on aspects of urban culture keeps getting referred to as “sociology.” Hence achievements that are properly anthropological are attributed to a sister discipline, further reinforcing ignorance about what anthropology is. The situation would be even worse in other universities where neither sociology nor anthropology are given much importance as specializations. In one famous university, where teaching assignments are reshuffled during every school year, one anthropology course was assigned to a lawyer with no training in the field.

Admittedly the faithfulness of anthropology to “truth” in its complexity puts it at a distinct disadvantage vis-à-vis other human sciences. Its objective seems less clear, less easy to package and promote. In contrast, I think of psychology which is more popular among students both here and abroad

because of its seemingly clear focus and applicability. Because of its focus on the individual, many think knowing psychology will help them understand themselves better and that the course could be a bridge to a job in human relations in a corporate settings. Moreover, psychology has a tool kit which does enable the individual to attain self-understanding. However, we in anthropology, and sociology for that matter, know that individual problems are socially and culturally located. Stresses undergone individually are also caused contextually. For instance, parents may be overly demanding. Or the work environment is cruel. But many people tend to brush this aside because the “individual” seems easy to define, whereas “social system” and “culture” seem vague. Hence the persistent tendency to equate anthropology with the esoteric and the tribal. The image of seeking the “exotic” haunts even those anthropologists who study relationships within contemporary corporate settings (Suchman 2007:6).

Or, even if we tell people that we do our studies in a contemporary urban setting, many will still lump us under sociology. Our brand image should be addressed. At the same time, we should be wary of merely accepting the existing status quo with its inequities. As Suchman (2007:14) notes, “As anthropologists and as consumers, our problem is to find the spaces that allow us to refigure the projects of those who purchase our services and from whom we buy, rather than merely to be incorporated passively within them.” Yes, we should be concerned with our brand image, we should project ourselves as being equally concerned with issues in contemporary urban settings. But we should not give up our quest to, not only narrate, but likewise to interrogate, society.

A problem indeed is the notion that “culture” can be taught by whomsoever. Internationally, an achievement of anthropology during the second half of the twentieth century is to have popularized “culture.” During the nineteenth century, “race” was used to explain differences between peoples and their achievements. Edward Tylor’s contribution was to show that these differences were not due to biological inheritance but due to learnings as a member of a “culture.” A review of writings on the Philippines by both foreigners and Filipinos down to the middle of the twentieth century will show it has not been easy for “culture” to supplant “race” to explain differences in behavior. A notorious example is the common use of “Filipino race” (*lahing Pilipino*). On the other hand the notion of “culture” as a way of thinking and behaving has become widespread, albeit misunderstood. Now it has become fashionable to speak of “corporate culture.”

And yet even the concept of “culture” itself is not always attributed to anthropology. Many think that anyone can speak and write on it. Hence we hear of a course on “comparative business cultures” taught by professors of management. Or of a course on Philippine culture and values taught by philosophers with no formation in anthropology. What the sociologist Anthony Giddens said about sociological knowledge versus knowledge in the natural sciences is relevant to our discussion. He noted that because the knowledge generated by the natural sciences is highly technical, it is valued as knowledge that only experts can give. But this is less true of sociological knowledge which seems to be about the obvious, for people know of their society and comment on it. Expert understanding offered by the sociologist seems superfluous (Giddens 1986, 2006). I believe that this situation may be even more true of cultural anthropology whose topic is “culture” which, because it is encompassing and often qualitative, seems to be banal, everyday knowledge that anyone can talk about. On the other hand this situation would not at all be true of a highly technical field such as biological anthropology which requires a knowledge of anatomy and genetics. In a positivist-oriented world that values the “technical”, our ethnographic findings, at times tentative and highly qualitative, may not seem useful at all.

It would be fruitful for UGAT to look into the images people have about anthropology and its contribution in different sectors. It could begin with the academic setting itself where perceptions of the nature of anthropology vary according to department and according to the exposure of individual teachers. It could then look into how anthropology is viewed in specific types of organizations: 1) non-governmental organizations, 2) business companies 3) government institutions. But to do so, it is important to take stock of the nature of each of these types of organizations. Since each type has its own particular goals and its own internal mechanisms, each would see differently the value of anthropological knowledge.

Understanding the nature of the receiving agent

Our reports may be given to different types of agencies. Examples would be: 1) non-governmental organizations, 2) business organizations, 3) government offices. Each of these has its own type of goal.

Another audience is civil society, meaning organized groups either advocating social change or offering services not readily available, especially to the poor. Being focused on action, understandably some in civil society have doubts about the usefulness of ethnographic insight which does not

always come with a handy solution to a problem. For instance, NGOs are not for profit; they work for an altruistic goal often on the basis of a chosen ideology. An anthropological report that asks them to question their own assumptions might be met with hostility. A student of mine did fieldwork on property relations among a *Lumad* people. His research was funded by an NGO which was very much of the Left in its ideology. But my student questioned the assumption that the land tilled by swiddeners was “communally owned.” His conclusion was more nuanced. He pointed out that, as swiddeners, they had *no* interest in owning a garden that had to be abandoned after a given number of years of cultivation without irrigation. Instead what they valued was the right to *usufruct*, that is to claim the fruits of their labor in their gardens. Likewise what they valued was giving preferential treatment to their close kin in accessing the area they were presently tilling. I am told this was not well-received by the funders. And yet, from our discipline’s perspective, it was valuable knowledge that enables us to better understand cultivator – land – output relations in a swiddening context. Hence there may be a clash between our quest for knowledge for its sake and the ideology of a funding NGO.

Anthropological knowledge now has a better chance of getting appreciated by the business community. Within recent years, a sector within the business world has come to appreciate the ethnography as complimentary to the survey because an ethnography reveals the customer as a thinking and acting individual reacting to a product (Marrewijk 2014, Guang & Tan 2014). However, I point out two caveats. One is that the quest for knowledge for its sake may clash with the concerns of the owners which is to earn profits using a favored strategy. For instance, a student of mine did a study on how the ideology of the owner-managers of a business organization clashed with everyday practice in their organization. They stated at meetings with employees that they treated the company as “family.” But that meant extra hours of work without pay, and being willing to do tasks that had nothing to do with company work or even with one’s supposed training. Another caveat is this. Anthropology has much to contribute to marketing studies because of our dual focus on both people and the materiality of things. It can come out with studies that may be deeper than those using other disciplinary approaches. However, what is the propriety of doing studies that may contribute to consumerism?

The “public” refers above all to the government. Those of who have worked with government on particular projects, have by turns been elated or

dejected. Elated when our ideas are put into practice and can be seen to improve the lives of others. Dejected, when that master plan that we thought would finally transform the community is received but merely archived. We have also seen how many a socially-relevant law is never implemented. Let us reflect on how to improve our partnership with sectors in government in two ways: 1) by paying attention to its organization, and 2) by trying to understand the life-world of our officials.

Josiah Heyman's overview of how anthropology (2012:1269) can contribute to a deepening of our understanding of the government bureaucracy sets directions. There are three possible trajectories:

- 1) Examine the bureaucracy in the deep history of centralized and unequal societies.
- 2) Compare bureaucracies across cultural, social and political contexts with attention to similarities and differences
- 3) Offer fieldwork information on the workings of actual bureaucracies.

To pursue the first could mean an ambitious project such as examining the history of bureaucracy in the Philippines from the Spanish period to the American to the present and seeing if there are recurring themes over the course of generations. We may find, for instance, that patron-clientelism centering around the value of *utang na loob* is often invoked by patrons and clients alike to create personal bonds within a large organization. At the same time we may find that impersonal relations based solely on existing rules and regulations may in fact be gaining ground. Or a less ambitious diachronic study could be made. One could examine the history of bureaucracy in a government office since independence in 1946. We all have a tendency to generalize about certain features Philippine bureaucracy, such as incompetence and corruption. We tend to essentialize. Looking at this bureaucracy over several generations can either correct or reinforce these stereotypes. For instance, looking back to the 1960s, one recalls policemen and public school teachers who seemed more committed to their jobs. Was this because of better pay? Was this because of better esteem by the local community? These are variables that could be looked into.

The second trajectory Heynman cites accords well with anthropology's cross-cultural perspective. A contrasting study helps highlight features in a phenomenon that we may take for granted because they are part of our everyday world. A comparison between the Philippine bureaucracy and that

of its more dynamic neighbors in Southeast Asia can help us better understand why our country after having been in the lead during the 1950s-1960s has been since the 1970s faltering behind Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam. Paul Hutchcroft (1998), political scientist, claims that the bureaucracy in China, Thailand is much stronger than in the Philippines where oligarchic interests are able to prevail over plans by the bureaucracy. Anthropologists could look into these questions: Is the bureaucracy of, say Indonesia, Thailand or Malaysia better organized and with better incentives? How is it able to resist pressure from powerful interests such as business groups, the military or powerful politicians? Do the bureaucrats there keep in touch with the general public and its sentiments? Does using a commonly used and easy to understand vernacular facilitate better communication within the bureaucracy?

By the way, at a future date, anthropology could very well combine the two contributions cited by Heynman. It could do a cross-cultural comparison between the Philippine bureaucracy and its counterparts in Southeast Asia and do as well a deep history of the bureaucracy. It may be that the fact that the State, and therefore the bureaucracy, is much younger in the Philippines compared to the state in other Southeast Asian countries, signifies that our bureaucrats' corporate sense or their sense of belonging to or representing an organization that is national may be weaker. There may be a difference between a bureaucrat whose organization's institutional memory does not go back beyond fifty years and a bureaucrat whose organization's institutional memory spans centuries and has both records and ceremonials as handy supports. This needs research.

The third trajectory proposed by Heynman should encourage us to want document how our government offices actually do operate. One possibility is to examine the journey of bureaucratic documents as they go from office to the other and the various inscriptions that officials may or may not affix to them (Heynman 2012:1270). Such a social history of the life of bureaucratic documents could help explain why even the best plans do not get implemented despite all the meetings. We could also try to understand the life-world of our officials. We anthropologists value rational, empirically-grounded inquiry that yields both data and insights that will hopefully redound to the good of all. Moreover, we wish to promote respect for Philippine cultures. This valuation is not necessarily shared by all – and they may have their own reasons. There are pressures from kin and friends, or from colleagues, or from other institutions in government. I had always

wondered why the Department of Foreign Affairs was not pro-active in promoting our cultural achievements abroad. After all, cultural diplomacy creates a persuasive influence that can help us in our political relations and economic exchanges. But some diplomats told me that a problem may be the attitude of the Department of Budget and Management. For the latter, the task of the Department of Foreign Affairs is clearly cut out: focus on economic and political diplomacy, on the concerns of Overseas Filipino Workers, and on the issuance of passports and visas. Supposedly cultural diplomacy is icing on the cake. Listening to the voices of our officials reveals perspectives we outsiders would never have suspected.

It may help to realize that a government bureaucracy, like many other organizations, is not monolithic. To use a metaphor: while the planets in a solar system revolve around the sun, the individual planets are themselves the hub of revolving moons. Moreover, there are rivers of asteroids wandering about. While some departments may be focused on rational planning, others may be enmeshed in a web of patron-clientelism reaching from ordinary employees to high-ranking government officials. Moreover, even within an institution like a city, while the planning office may adhere to a rationally conceived master-plan, some members of the city council may prefer pursuing private gain. How then can we hope to see our carefully researched ideas on community concerns be integrated in whatever plans the city may have for its constituents?

A bureaucracy may not be the stable machine that Max Weber imagined it to be (Kirsch n.d.). Indeed the boundary between charisma and routinization, which Weber emphasized, may be blurred. An executive's charisma may consist precisely in a constant re-doing, re-tooling of the office or offices under him. While the context described by Kirsch is an African one, we should reflect on the implications for our own context. Looking at events that accompany transitions from one executive to the next, it seems that change for its sake is valued. Along with this is a distrust of work done by the predecessor. A consequence is that officials from the previous administration – from undersecretaries to heads of particular agencies are replaced by appointees trusted by the new executive. Institutional continuity is endangered. Similarly, projects initiated by the previous executive may be discarded for the shallowest of reasons. Hence a report an anthropologist has submitted and approved in principle is in danger of being rejected by the new administration.

How anthropological knowledge is actually used

Recent studies in the anthropology of bureaucracy point out two seemingly contradictory topics of relevance to our topic: 1) a document trail is central to the constitution of a bureaucracy, 2) affect or people's feelings have a bearing on the bureaucracy.

“Bureaucracy” comes from the French “*bureaucratie*” which combines “*bureau*”, meaning ‘desk’, with a Greek-derived word “*krasis*”, meaning ‘rule’. Bureaucracy is indeed rule by people who sit at desks to generate paper documents, and now e-documents, that circulate within an institution (Mathur 2017). The product of a consultancy is a project report. The questions to look into would be: What is the life-history of such project reports? Appadurai (1992) wrote on the social life of objects. We should look into the social life of project reports. How do they get approved, rather than shelved? What is needed for them to be approved? Does approval translate into implementation? How does implementation take place? We should also look into what happens to project reports that are either approved or disapproved and are filed in the organization's archives. What happens to the project report? Is it made accessible to the public? Under what conditions? Having worked on projects for the government, I am painfully aware that approval by the chief executive does not mean implementation. There is another word that is of relevance to us. “Secretary” comes from two French words meaning: 1) a ‘confidant’, and 2) a “*secrétairie*” – a desk with cabinets that can be locked (CNRTL 2012). In other words, a ‘desk with secrets.’ Anthropological reports can be waylaid and kept as hidden documents, thereby subverting the anthropologist's original intent in creating knowledge that is useful.

Mathur (2017) takes a more radical step by urging anthropologists to look into the relationship between anthropology itself and the bureaucracy of organizations that fund research grants. What goes on within the fund-granting organization? How is the decision to fund a proposal arrived at? Is there a tendency to fund only proposals that seem “safe”? How about proposals that are creative and original – what are the institutional hindrances to their acceptance? In brief we should be reflexive about our own discipline and its involvement in a necessary bureaucracy that can either give life to or extinguish new ways of interpreting society.

There is another insight in Mathur (2017) that is very relevant. Anthropologists now look into how ordinary people feel about the

bureaucrats they deal with instead of merely analyzing formal structures of power. I raise this question: Why not look at the other side of the desk: i.e. the bureaucrat? We should look into what our recipients think and feel about our reports. Let us not assume that they are that keen to receive our reports. Their reaction may range from enthusiasm to indifference to hostility. Any report has to be read and then shelved. Hence going through our report is one more obligation for the bureaucrat. Moreover, it may either confirm or question preconceptions they have. We should look into not only what they “think” but also how they “feel” about our reports. Anthropologists are now realizing that affect is a dimension that needs to be examined. It has tended to be downplayed vis-à-vis the mind. But the self is a totality – it is sensuous (Vanini et al. 2012). Rationality is only one dimension. Feelings matter too – especially in the Philippines. While an American or Englishman will say “I think...”, a Frenchman “*Je pense...*”, a Spaniard “*Yo pienso...*”, we Filipinos will say “*Palagay ko*” (‘I feel that...’) rather than “*Naisip ko na...*” (‘I think that...’). Hence to understand the natural history of an anthropological report, we should consider as well how it is received by a bureaucrat holistically.

Reflecting on the public image of our discipline, the nature of the organizations with which we share our knowledge, and the uses to which they are given may enable us to better circulate anthropological knowledge.

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Fernando N. Zialcita is Professor of Anthropology at the Ateneo de Manila University.

Email: fzialcita@ateneo.edu



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- FERNANDO N. ZIALCITA
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