

Ethnography in Pandemic Times

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Some months before the Covid-19 pandemic brought the world to a halt I last visited my research site in Zambia, where, a few hours' drive from the capital Lusaka, I have been following a European agricultural (land) investment since 2015. Until the pandemic, I had been conducting research there every year. This offered me the chance to obtain a good understanding of how such a large-scale investment develops over time, and the impact it has on rural residents (see Salverda 2019a; 2019b; 2021; Salverda and Nkonde 2021). Since my last visit in 2019, however, I have not been able to return to Zambia. Covid-19 restrictions have prevented me from travelling, both because travel options have dwindled and because employers (the University of Vienna in my case) have prohibited employees from travelling to countries within a certain (Covid-19) risk category. As with many other cases, Zambia's risk level has fluctuated (as seen from an Austrian perspective).

A perpetual concern with respect to long-distance travelling is that even when restrictions are lifted, there remains the possibility that travel bans could suddenly be reintroduced – as the latest spread of the Omicron variant evidently demonstrates. When the pandemic first spread globally, I could follow colleagues (online) who initially decided to stay in their fieldwork sites in Africa, but when uncertainties mounted, they quickly returned to Europe; probably understandably, as neither the impact of the virus itself was clear, nor the question of how long flight

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bans would last. Over the course of the pandemic, though, it seems that things cool off relatively quickly. The Omicron-related ban on travel from Southern Africa, for instance, could be circumvented, and has also been lifted in many instances already. That notwithstanding, a rushed travel ban could both entail financial costs (i.e. significantly higher airfares) and personal costs (e.g. two weeks of uncertainty regarding whether one can return may not be good for one's nerves).

The pandemic, accordingly, severely affected my ability to gather empirical data on the European investment. Even before the pandemic I had experienced that I really needed to be on the ground in Zambia in order to obtain insights about the impact of the investment. Some aspects can be traced in (online) news sources, while phone calls with contacts in Zambia also provide updates, but these have always been too limited or sporadic to really obtain data suitable for empirical and theoretical analyses. For over two years now this has remained the situation. What came closest to providing me with helpful insights during this time was when a PhD candidate travelled from Austria to Zambia in late 2021; during this time, I could unfortunately not travel myself due to teaching obligations. But in the end, she too was subject to the 'need' to travel to Zambia to obtain data, and was also confronted with the sudden impact of the Omicron variant.

What Covid-19 restrictions may tell us about possible futures in anthropology

In reflection upon how the pandemic has impacted on the possibility of conducting research in Zambia, it becomes evidently clear that the main quality of ethnographic research cannot easily be 'circumvented'. A quality, moreover, that also requires consideration in the face of climate change. In essence, an anthropologist is his or her own methodological tool.¹ Conducting ethnographic research cannot be outsourced easily, as more standardised research often can. Anthropology is certainly not completely unique in this, as, for example, historians often also depend on their being physically present in archives. Besides, even in the case of outsourcing research tasks, one needs good collaborators on the ground. With such collaborators, though, it is more straightforward to continue the research, even if one is not present – concerns about 'ownership' of the data left aside.

As many anthropologists will most likely confirm, anthropological arguments tend to develop because of ethnographic experiences on the ground. In an article published in *The Journal of Business Anthropology* (Salverda 2019a), for example, I discuss how an aspect that initially appeared to only facilitate the research process, i.e., a research agreement

¹ See also: <https://blogterrain.hypotheses.org/17497> [accessed 12 January 2022]

with a European agribusiness, eventually became a relevant focus of analysis. This, though, resulted from my own experiences (over time) and could not possibly have been ‘outsourced’. What makes anthropological research and theory so exciting is that it results from a continuous reflection upon data gathered and related theory. Outcomes, accordingly, are often very different than what was initially planned. Hence, to further develop theory based on the respective case study, it is pertinent to visit Zambia again – hopefully later in 2022.

The anthropologist’s role as her or his own methodological tool not only presents a challenge in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, but should also open up a discussion about the future of anthropology in times of climate change. Were international travel to become increasingly more difficult, for example as a result of increasing prices or ‘flight shame’, we may have to reconsider the ways we conduct research in distant places. I am still sceptical that outsourcing research will become part of the anthropologist’s palette. But instead of frequent (shorter) visits, extended periods of fieldwork may (once again) become the sole means of gathering data. In addition, one could consider a stronger focus on appointing PhDs in the countries of research. Supervising research from afar is certainly not perfect, but it is easier than conducting research over a long distance. To a certain extent, it also allows the continuation of the production of anthropological knowledge through the unique practice of ethnographic research. Besides, it will contribute to a much-needed knowledge transfer from, in the case discussed here, Europe to Africa. At the same time, however, we should be wary that conducting research in one’s own society does not become the norm; after all, the uniqueness of anthropology equally lies in conducting research in foreign settings, in discovering patterns that locals may take for granted. Rather, we should have more researchers from Africa coming to Europe – or to the USA. Pandemic or not, holding up a mirror to Europeans and Americans is not such a bad idea – always, of course, through long-term ethnographic engagement.

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