

When the field talks back

On the power of ethnographers¹ and ethnographised

Frans Kamsteeg²
fh.kamsteeg@fsw.vu.nl

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Both religion and development are supposed to bring good for mankind and religious development organizations spread their own version of this message. This paper tells the story of an ethnographer (the author) studying the beneficence of a Chilean Pentecostal development organization and its Dutch sponsor. It describes the way he constructed his text, reconstructed the narratives and interpreted the participants' behavior. The book presented the organization's limited results and the sometimes unintended outcomes of development efforts made in a context that was full of human tragedy and political maneuvering. After the book's appearance the management of the 'ethnographised' organization challenged both the empirical basis of the case study and the conduct of the ethnographer - who was charged to be politically incorrect. What follows is the story of the ethnographer reflecting on his journey with the Chilean organization, his choices made in the field, and during the subsequent writing process. This process was a delicate act of balancing between scientific and moral obligations, affected by a complex network of power relations and demonstrating the complications of ethnographic complicity.

The text recounting this journey positions itself in the debate over representation and legitimation that pervaded the social sciences in the 1980s (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In the anthropological realm Marcus & Fischer (1986) problematized verification issues relating to methods and representation, and put to question the complete range of methodological cornerstones (validity, reliability and objectivity) with regard to the writing practices of qualitative

¹ Although I do not aspire at becoming a marketers' ethnographer, it is Mariampolski's chapter on the power of ethnography (2005) that inspired me to choose this title.

² Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Culture, Organization & Management, VU University Amsterdam.

social science researchers. This critical approach to ethnographic writing not only became common practice among social scientists themselves; with the 'emancipation of the commons,' those being subject of research have increasingly started to demand feedback, and even a say in the presentation of research results³. Postmodernists even turned this position into a proper standard, thus limiting the researcher's role to that of the spokesman or voice of those among whom research was done. In *Writing Culture* Clifford & Marcus (1986) argue that ethnography no longer possesses the authority to portray non-Western peoples – or any people for that matter – with unchallenged authority. Consequently they proposed to “rethink the poetics and politics of cultural invention” and developed a fully dialectical ethnography.

Accepting this paradigmatic shift means that ethnographers to a large part give up their exclusive authority over the texts they produce and limit themselves to co-constructing re-presentations of social reality together with those whom they have invited to tell their stories in the first place. Sharing textual authority suggests that the power struggle between researcher and researched over representation can be resolved satisfactorily. Contrarily to Neyland's suggestion that organizational ethnographers are moving towards doing research “with the organisation” (2008: 159ff), I argue in this paper that this shared authority and authorship is illusory, and that ethnographic writing will always intervene in the power game that characterizes any research arena.

I shall support this argument by an account of fieldwork and post-fieldwork experiences among Chilean Pentecostals between its start in 1989, the production of the PhD text in 1995, and finally the book edition in 1998. In this paper I do not claim to be the innocent ethnographer who only later realizes the effects of his work. It was clear to me almost from the beginning of the fieldwork that the final results were never going to satisfy all parties involved. I portrayed church leaders who told a message they knew their followers considered inadequate (spiritually); NGO managers who invented projects they judged their foreign sponsors would support for political reasons; Dutch development specialists who needed to allocate money and choosing destinations that were politically correct rather than for their promising results; and finally believers who participated in church services because of the material benefits in terms of food aid and jobs in church-linked NGO projects.

All parties had their reasons to be unhappy and disagree with my descriptions and interpretations. But not all of the players in the field have the means to talk back. Yet I do consider that “talking back” is a fairly normal thing (cf. Down and Down, 2009 forthcoming). The book – like most dissertations – remained out of

³ This pressure is particularly felt by organizational ethnographers, who generally have to negotiate the utility of their research results with (the management of) the organizations in which they do their research (see Neyland 2008).

reach of the majority of people it deals with. Thus the less powerful simply did not speak back. Those who did speak back (those in leadership positions) particularly commented on the way their position was represented. However, is consensus over the research design, process and representation of findings indeed desirable? In view of the access problem a certain commonality between researcher and researched is reasonable and inevitable, but that to a large part excludes the reporting and concluding part. At least that would my position in defence of the ethnographic approach. Good ethnography is never perfect, but not the product of consensus either, as meaning is always contested. When the debate over meaning ceases, it loses much of its importance. Talking back is healthy and inevitable. Silence would feed the illusion that ethnography can be done 'power free', and because of its very nature that cannot be the case. Here comes my story of "a friendly letter from the field" (Gabriel 2000).

Research among Chilean Pentecostals and their organizations

My Chilean journey in Pentecostalism actually started with the discussion on the importance of Pentecostalism from the perspective of social and economic development (Lalive d'Épinay 1969, Martin 1990, Stoll 1990, Tennekes 1985, Willems 1967).⁴ This was a discussion that hardly took place among Pentecostals themselves, but rather among church and development agencies in the Western world, with some input from related university scholars. Between the early 1970s and the late 1990s, Western European Protestant development agencies sponsored local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Latin America that maintained close links with Pentecostal churches. In the Netherlands, the Protestant development organization OKKI for fifteen years supported the Chilean EDAPES⁵, which was one of the leading NGOs denouncing the Pinochet regime during the 1980s. It largely depended on the support of (the leadership of) one small Pentecostal church (the IPR – Iglesia Pentecostal Revolucionaria, Revolutionary Pentecostal Church), whereas the vast majority of Chilean Pentecostal churches supported the militaries. The common goal of OKKI, EDAPES and its mother church IPR was to contribute to the social development of Chile's lower-class people in general and raise political consciousness of Pentecostal church people in particular. Studying the case of a politically active Pentecostal church running an NGO of its own was a promising challenge, because it gave the opportunity to link the themes of religion, development (policy) and politics. This meant a new perspective on Latin American

⁴ The importance and social impact of religion is a hot topic today, in public debates as well as among social scientists (add some references). The growth of Pentecostalism is responsible for a great deal of the growing interest into the social, political and cultural aspects of the phenomenon of religious affiliation. Whereas mainstream Christianity seems to lose adherence, spiritual variants such as Pentecostalism, become increasingly attractive. Pentecostals particularly practice emotional worshipping, faith healing, and leave ample room for lay participation and leadership, unlike traditional Christian churches, and most other religious traditions attracting public attention.

⁵ For EDAPES's present range of activities, see www.edapes.cl. All agencies mentioned in this paper have been anonymized.

Pentecostalism, the study of which had that far strongly focused on its spiritual characteristics. In addition, such a study was to make a contribution to the political debate on policy efficiency in development aid, which was rather vehement in the late 1980s in the Netherlands and elsewhere. Moreover, both themes fitted well into the research policy of the anthropological research programme of the VU University Amsterdam with its incipient tradition of studying Pentecostalism from a development perspective. The university project also suited the interest of OKKI's Latin America desk that was curious to have an insightful background story of the field it had been sponsoring for more than 15 years.

With this perspective in mind I arrived in Santiago in August 1991. I had a research question that was formulated keeping the university's research programme on religion and development in mind, but it also had the consent of OKKI's management. I also received an extensive letter from EDAPES's director, telling that his organization would gladly orient me in the Chilean Pentecostal community, however without much reference to the research design I had sent him. During the first few weeks of my one-year stay I was indeed excellently briefed on the local Pentecostal landscape. As I learned quickly, leaders from a range of smaller Pentecostal churches were involved in the many church-related projects executed by EDAPES, but little was known on the involvement of common church members and the extent to which these projects affected their religious worldview. From the perspective of religion and development I started to prepare fieldwork among the Pentecostal members of the IPR church. With hindsight, it was here that my ethnographic research interest started to diverge from what my hosts (from EDAPES) had in mind. I had narrowed down a rather general question on religion and development to a question that was to link the Pentecostal preaching and practising of a church, the IPR, whose leaders tried to apply the religious and political thinking from the (inter)national community to the life of its Pentecostal communities.

With this move the research subject had become sufficiently focused for my anthropological supervisors. As anthropologist, I felt comfortable having reduced the ethnographic task to a manageable size. I was not sure about what my Dutch conversations partners would think of it, but at least I was to study several of the projects OKKI had wholeheartedly supported. The least satisfied seemed my EDAPES hosts, since my research was in their view hardly aiming beyond what was not already known, nor was it thought to be very representative of Chilean Pentecostalism. Still they were willing to cooperate when I proposed an in-depth study of some of the IPR congregations in the Santiago lower-class neighbourhoods, and their involvement in the various EDAPES projects, as it differed from a more rurally oriented research project

conducted by EDAPES itself.⁶ It was agreed that I would compare IPR members' experiences with those from other, more mainstream Pentecostal churches that had no links with EDAPES's political consciousness-raising efforts.

Among Chilean Pentecostals

Reading back my dissertation after 14 years I notice that it contains the classical elements of the anthropological monograph (literature overview, methodology, description of the community under study), but that it expresses a clear desire to give voice to what 'ordinary believers' think⁷. This attitude to 'take sides with the weak' is common in much anthropological work, and it has only become more noticeable since anthropologists have discovered the world of organization and management as a relevant field of study. Critical management studies and organizational ethnography share the view that their task is to show what 'really happens in organizations', that is, behind the curtains, backstage in the organizational 'underlife' (Goffman 1959). At the time I finished the book I was hardly aware of the fact it could be considered a piece of organizational ethnography however. With detailed accounts of church services, Bible studies, NGO project meetings, life histories, and discourse analyses of sermons, policy documents, magazine articles and interview fragments I built an argument to appraise what I call "Pentecostal politics" as "a clear illustration of the cultural change at which most development work explicitly or implicitly aims" (Kamsteeg 1995: 240). In this politics church and NGO work converged and met the sponsor's expectations, but on the basis of a one year among stay among those who were the target of this politics, I concluded that the project's results were limited, both in terms of concrete outcomes as well as in the cultural impact on the people involved.

As I read my book now, I have looked around in a particular Pentecostal subfield in Chile's Santiago to let common Pentecostals speak back to the messages they were exposed to by church leaders and NGO representatives. Chapters 4 and 5 of my book are full of quotes in which ordinary believers speak out freely, such as the following:

"My ideas of how to be a good Christian were purely spiritual; social work did not fit in. Slowly, through the use of the Sunday school textbooks, I learned, first as a pupil and then as a teacher, that the work of a Christian was not limited to the church alone, but went far beyond the walls of the temple. In fact, I understood that there the real work was to be done. But it was not easy; it took an effort to acquire this way of thinking. I had to learn a lot, ask a lot of questions until I finally was able to think otherwise and reach my own conclusions, which meant that I could let go of the traditional views on those people who are said to be of the world, that is, not of my kind. Very slowly I learned to consider them as my equals, although they had indeed not known Jesus, but for that very reason deserved that I mixed with them. Thus my inquisitiveness was born, and I

⁶ EDAPES's director had edited a partly ethnographic book on Chilean Pentecostalism, in which the experience of his own IPR church was presented extensively, and positively (Canales a.o 1991).

⁷ In the methodological part this partisan role is to some extent acknowledged, however without reflecting much on the consequences for the production of the text (Kamsteeg 1995: 37–57).

tried to learn more about this through passionately throwing myself into the church Bible courses on Friday. Every Friday evening I was the first to arrive (.....) ”

This ‘testimony’ is part of a five pages life story presented in a chapter on the central IPR community in the book. I chose to let this layman tell how his IPR church and the EDAPES organization induced him to change his Pentecostal identity during the Pinochet regime. In the first part of this life story (from which the quote is taken), the story is in line with church and the NGO goals and mission statement of fostering a more complete, and less simply spiritual kind of religious belief. But the story is taken further in the second part when the man comes back to this same point and where he deplors the fact that the social and political involvement following his identity change in fact “depentecostalized” him, which is indeed a rather strong statement Pentecostal environments where conversion is considered pivotal for the quality of someone’s faith.

In the books next chapter, focusing on the EDAPES NGO programmes, the argument takes a similar course. I use some thirty pages to explain the effort of the NGO supporting the development of what its promoters themselves labelled “prophetic Pentecostalism”.⁸ This part of the story is based on talks with the management and other personnel of the agency next to an extensive document analysis that already started when I first visited the Dutch OKKI archives preparing the fieldwork in 1988. It must be stressed that I do not describe the discourse only in terms of organizational rhetoric, but also give detailed accounts of practical results and genuinely shared feelings of renewed spiritual fervour coinciding with political and social action. I then add a section on “critical voices”, with accounts on the political (and religious) opportunism that tends to come with developments project involving material sponsoring. The main ‘critique’ that I present, however, is that the religious renewal efforts left the majority of church members unaffected, or even caused them to withdraw. This conclusion was well founded on the many talks and observations among church members, on top of the services I frequently participated in, and the interviews with (ex-) EDAPES and (ex) IPR members.

As I still see it today, spending my time for a large part in the vicinities of a few Pentecostal congregations of the large Pentecostal community of Santiago, provided me with a more diverse, multi-coloured, nuanced, and therefore rich image of Pentecostal life and the organizations working there than I could have pictured on the basis of what leaders and managers, if that would have been my main source of information. I may not have been fully aware of it at the time of writing, but this richness in (organizational) ethnographic detail contained the inevitable ammunition for a political interpretation. I will now further explain

⁸ I chose to include this term in the title of my dissertation as it was an outstanding label to describe the political purposes of the Pentecostals I studied. As argued in my introduction with ample reference to the work of Max Weber, the term also well addressed the usually small-scale effects of revolutionary religious movements.

how my findings were disputed and interpreted as part of a political power game. I do so by recounting the aftermath of the publication of the book, after presenting the main conclusions I gave in the book itself.

The researcher and his conclusions

Particularly in the chapter on the NGO EDAPES I showed myself aware of the critical notes my analysis contained, and tried to put these in context. Some years before the publication of the thesis the public debate in the Netherlands on development cooperation had taken a quite negative turn when several evaluations stressed the difficulty of proving positive, and lasting, outcomes. In a 'prospects' section in the chapter I underline that not only in the West the bias towards development opportunities had become negative, but that also in Chile this turn had become quite dramatic with the end of the military regime. Moreover, since it had become common practice to view development agencies as development bureaucracies predominantly serving their only interests, these very agencies had become extremely sensitive to any report that made only the slightest suggestion in that direction. In Chile, EDAPES was known as "the gang of three families" – a fact I mention in my book –, which had made the NGO vulnerable to accusations of nepotism. The fact that it had been spreading a message that was strongly fed by a Protestant version of 'liberation theology' (by and large sympathetic to leftist political parties and strongly anti-military) made the self-proclaimed prophetic Pentecostals suspect of being elitist, particular in a religious field where spiritual experience by far outweighed theological arguments

In the same 'prospects' section I emphasize that development sponsors in the West had turned business-like in the treatment of their core business, i.e. reducing economic poverty. Supporting anti-military, social (including socio-religious) movements was no longer given the priority it had received during the 1970s and 1980. In Chile, Pinochet's unexpected retreat in 1990 nicely coincided with the new donor strategy documents that noticed that Chile was no longer among the poorest countries deserving development aid. By writing all this, I think I showed myself reasonably context sensitive, and if I permitted myself to 'predict' that the OKKI-EDAPES relationship was about to change substantially, inevitably to be followed by an expenditure cut. However, I do not think that it was this pre-conclusion that caused the strong reaction I finally received from my Chilean EDAPES hosts. After all, they themselves already foresaw a reorientation in which they were to turn into a government-sponsored consultancy firm, with special expertise in the field of religion and development.

To allow an interpretation of the negative reactions to the publication of my book I further elaborate on the conclusions drawn on the basis of the detailed description of the church and NGO life. To start with, in no part of the book I expressed negative opinions on the church or on the NGO work. In fact I largely

sympathized with the intentions of most of the efforts made, if only because they were undertaken with considerable personal risks under a military regime. Yet the stories of participants brought to the fore that the social and political engagement the IPR church went through, resulted in a serious reduction of the number of church adherents, whereas those supporting the new line quite often chose other routes to become socially and politically active, which alienated them from church life proper, and often even made them leave the church. Within the church polarization between Pentecostal (that is, spiritual) hardliners and 'prophetic' activists was strongly felt. Particularly the younger church members took testimony of this. I realise that this 'darker' side somewhat spoiled the bright coin of a strong and effective public role of the NGO EDAPES and its relatively small founding Pentecostal church during the tumultuous 1980s. Yet, I do not speak out on the extent to which the organizations' efforts effectively contributed to the democratic turn of the early 1990. The NGO has certainly been an important player in the civil society network of internationally supported organizations that focused on social and politically consciousness-raising of the Chilean population under Pinochet. It is generally acknowledged that the joint character of this coalition has helped to destabilize the regime, but the story in my book gives little ground to believe that this social and political turmoil has had a major impact on people's *religious* lives, including the life of the Pentecostals of one of the church that was most involved in the struggle. In this respect the position of IPR/EDAPES leaders has been very much in line with the prominent and visible role the Roman Catholic Church has traditionally played in the public affairs of the Latin American continent, a behaviour that hardly ever affected the daily religious experiences of the Catholic masses.

I have always realized that this conclusion was not exactly the ideal message for creating enthusiasm among those being researched, particularly not among the university trained employees of the EDAPES, which, moreover, belonged to the worldwide network of progressive Protestant churches receiving ample support from the World Council of Churches. Demonstrating the complexity and especially the limitations of managing cultural and religious change - the core of EDAPES's work -, must have felt like a stab in the back. This may have been more so since this conclusion was reached by a researcher who had links with the NGO's principal donor, that was about to reduce its financial support considerably as appeared soon after the fieldwork period. The fact that the book was later to appear in a serious theological series, called *Studies in Evangelicalism*, and edited by a North American Baptist theologian sympathizing with EDAPES' work, was not much appreciated either. Thus, on the eve of publication of my dissertation I received an extensive letter from EDAPES' director. In the next sections I will deal with this 'friendly letter story' of talk-back.

The field comes to conclusions: the story of a "friendly letter".

Ordinary Chilean Believers.

As in most ethnographic research the text that followed the fieldwork has remained largely invisible to the many believers among whom the data for the book have been collected. I consulted some of them over specific (factual) issues, but it appeared that the distance between daily life in a Santiago neighbourhood and a Dutch university was simply too large to be bridged. Conclusions may have been read by some of them, but no comments ever reached me. It seems to be the common fate of ethnographers that communication with whom is most intense during fieldwork generally disappears at the moment of leaving the field. This is of course most clearly the case with far away fields, and in case of huge language barriers, but even in much organizational ethnography done 'around the corner' prolonged post-fieldwork contacts at shop floor level are seldom reported (see for a clear example Kunda 1992). In conclusion, believers did speak back to me, but only when I was among them.

The Dutch (OKKI) disappointed.

Dutch churches and development organizations tend to hold strong opinions on the activities of Pentecostal churches and other 'sects'. Around 1990, the rapid growth of these movements in the Third World was generally viewed as spiritual escapism, since their religious behaviour was thought to take the place of the necessary struggle against oppressive structures and social injustice. This was a major reason to welcome my study of a group of Pentecostals that seemed able to support political and social change inspired by a proper Pentecostal worldview, as it was hoped that the IPR and EDAPES case would show that Pentecostals were indeed capable of sharing the ideals defended by international development agencies. If churches like the IPR, with the help of its NGO EDAPES, could bring about a change of attitude among Pentecostals, this would strongly support OKKI's policy to sponsor its many other culture change and consciousness-raising projects in Latin American. A detailed success story would come at the right moment given the growing critique the development sector received since the late 1980s.

Although I gave my book the promising title *Prophetic Pentecostalism in Chile*, the story itself was a mixed message, in which the manageability of political and cultural change in the Chilean Pentecostal field was seriously questioned. In doing so, I showed doubts on one of central pillars of OKKI's policy. Particularly the many examples of frustrated change efforts at the grassroots level were considered unnecessarily negative with regard to the long-lasting development relationship between the Dutch and Chilean counterparts. In the various talks we had, the head OKKI's Latin America desk was prepared to accept that support for progressive forces among Pentecostals was not massive, but he maintained that EDAPES's activities and the ideas behind them did link up with the way many Chileans had experienced the problems of everyday life. He was

disappointed that my book had now even 'disqualified' the support by church members whose leaders went in front during the public struggle against the regime. He accepted my conclusion that the 'return on (development) investment' in Chile was hard to measure and probably even quite limited, but my registration of the frustrated efforts to bring about the desired change in the minds of ordinary Pentecostals was still hard for him to digest. It not only shocked the genuine belief among developers that the course of development could be consciously given direction, it also affected the role of NGO's as agents of political awakening and cultural change - that had been the rationale which the Dutch government had adopted to co-finance development programmes presented by OKKI and likewise organizations. My ethnographic "debunking" of the symbiotic and fruitful relation between religion and development policy was read as a stone in the pond that could further disturb the waters of established (financial) development contracts, for example with the Dutch government.

The Chilean EDAPES and IPR betrayed

While my conclusion on the limited effects of church and NGO politics of culture change produced only disappointment at OKKI, it really provoked a reaction of indignation among my Chilean counterparts. My intention to publish a book that contained what they considered an 'unannounced policy evaluation' with a befriended editor proved that I must have had side-intentions from the beginning. This reaction came to me in a "friendly letter" from EDAPES' director - a letter I received after sending a draft of the thesis two years after I left Chile - which really surprised me, because I had seriously taken into account the comments received on an earlier draft of the chapter. Moreover, I had given a preview of my conclusions at the end of my fieldwork stay, and I had gladly received the positive though at times critical feedback. In the book I show also my gratitude towards the organization and its leadership and I express my overall sympathies with the work the organization had been doing. At the moment of almost finishing the book I was convinced that I would receive at least a similar reaction to the one I got when giving my first impressions at the moment of leaving the field, for in the final book I gave a far more balanced view.

So I had not expected the comment of EDAPES's director, himself a U.S. graduated sociologist, who accused me of having written an at times even dishonest, evaluation report. His reaction reached me well before the book was published, but only just after it had been defended as a PhD thesis in 1995. His argument is that the thesis is written following the logic of policy assessment, which apparently had been my hidden agenda. When this would have been known beforehand, he and his institution would have "set stricter rules for interaction, communication, intersubjectivity and intervision". Particularly the parts on the NGO would have received a stricter and more detailed reaction - although what type of reaction is not further specified. Prior feedback, he writes,

had remained limited given the idea that the research was to produce a social scientific text.

The text itself is said to be one-sided in its limited treatment of EDAPES's church programme, and occasionally even incorrect or at least incorrectly formulated. In the book I would have suggested that the church programme was financed with money earmarked for development projects. I supposedly suggest that EDAPES and the churches backing its activities pretended to be more representative than they really were. I would have accused a conspiracy between donor (OKKI) and receiver (EDAPES) consisting of the shrewd application of rhetorical devices in order to obtain government subsidies. By giving disproportionate attention to unimportant details - apparently the result of my anthropological training (*sic*) - I am reproached of having joined the choir of EDAPES's many competitors and enemies in Chile.

The main elements of this critique were led down in a ten-page letter which I first read with surprise and soon even anger. I immediately reread my chapter on EDAPES a few times and finally decided that accepting the critique could only mean that I should totally rewrite the chapter, which would almost destroy the book's main argument. I decided I was not prepared to do so. In the final version of the book (that appeared in 1998 at Scarecrow Press) I included some remarks emphasizing that my conclusions concerning the limited effects in terms of culture change of the EDAPES/IPR endeavour did not mean to disqualify the importance of both organizations as public actors during the Pinochet regime, but I kept the backstage story I told in my thesis largely intact. In the conclusion I also paid attention to the fact that EDAPES's management did not share my interpretations. I decided not to try to interpret the critique in the book itself, but I will do that now.

To start with, I think the most important issue that triggered the director's vehement reaction was the fact that - although I had not presented my study as a formal assessment - I had stated that "such evaluations should pay more attention to in-depth studies like mine". Apart from that remark I had used the term 'evaluation' a few times, which I might probably have better avoided. Reading back my conclusion now, there is indeed the suggestion that ethnography was "the better way of assessing policy (outcomes)". At a more general level, however, I can only interpret the reaction as the result of diverging interests. My account, presented in vivid ethnographic detail, to a large extent demystifies the story of the noble poor and oppressed who are ready to receive the message of their benefactors. This ideology has been challenged far more often, but I believe that precisely one of ethnography's qualities, richness in detail (see Bate 1997), gave my book its strong impact on the researched. Both EDAPES and OKKI (though the latter less than the former) feared that such stories would further affect the legitimacy of the then current development aid policies, and

probably even the *raison d'être* of their organizations. OKKI indeed stopped financing a Chile programme in 1998, but it would be far too big an honour to claim that to be the result of what was written in my ethnography.

I believe there is a more contextual explanation for the strong way in which EDAPES spoke back on my book, and that is the increasing post-Pinochet frustration of most Chilean grassroots' organizations and NGOs that were active during the military regime. The (inter)national relief that one of Latin America's last dictators had finally abdicated, was followed by a general rush to get back to normal as soon as possible and forget about the past. The memory of the struggle and sacrifices of those who stood in the frontline threatened to evaporate rapidly. The materialism and apolitical tone that came to dominate Chile's public debate (in fact in Latin America as a whole) were experienced as bitter fruits given the long struggle for democracy. My detailed and at times critical study on certain aspects of this struggle must have hit a nerve. Even if this interpretation is correct - and I effectively pay attention in my book to the fact that my study was done with this kind of hindsight - it could (and still cannot) bring me to considering substantial changes in the analyses.

Reflection: the illusion of power free ethnography

In the following I want to reflect on my ethnographic experience and its outcomes as a kind "objectivation of the objectivation" (Bourdieu 1992). With my research on the network of relationships between Dutch and Chilean NGO's and churches, I have worked in a field where the power balance between the various actors has always been highly delicate and vulnerable to change (see Lewis and Mosse 2006). I was well aware of this insight during the research process, but it became only really clear to me when it came to publishing results. Before and during the research I was highly dependant on the organizations that allowed access to the field. Although I did my best to keep the position of the independent ethnographer, I think in retrospect that my effort to keep my independence led me to the decision to take the organizations themselves, their products and their clients as serious objects of study, with the consequence that my book indeed got traits of an evaluation report, without the explicit intention of doing so. To a certain extent the EDAPES director's complaint was correct then. Yet even if my work were an evaluation, it has certainly and with reason been an atypical one, since it has "tested" development policies at the grassroots level, something that even according to the Dutch Minister only rarely happens (IOV 1993: 22). More of this 'ethnography of development' is probably needed, because ethnographers are capable of penetrating the field at a level that traditional evaluations hardly ever reach since they predominantly concentrate on testing missions, goals and (financial) procedures (efficiency) without bothering too much about the effects of these policies. David Mosse has made a similar plea for in depth ethnographic research on development policies and practices (Lewis and Mosse 2006).

Ethnography as the craft of studying everyday life as it takes places behind front stage appearances and official discourses enables uncovering daily human virtues and vices. In everyday life people have the faculty to produce meaning in very diverse situations, but they also deploy their power to direct the meaning-giving of others. Ethnographers are professionally interested in, and dedicated to describing these processes, including the power play. By producing analyses and texts on the ordinary life of ordinary people – within and outside organizations – they inevitably get involved in the struggle over meaning that always involves power.

Even when the ethnographer tries to behave as the proverbial fly on the wall, observing and registering what s/he sees happening before his/her eyes, the moment comes that data have to be written down, selected, rearranged, analyzed, interpreted, and presented – in (scientific) journals and books. Among scientist this re-presentation of what has presented itself to him/her as an observer in the first place, becomes subject of interpretation and academic debate. Traditionally ethnographers, particularly the anthropologists, have not bothered too much about the effects their studies might have on those they studied, directly or indirectly. Very rarely people from the researched population had access to what was written on them, even if they were prepared to take the trouble reading it. Today this is no longer the case (see for example Marcus 1998, Westbrook 2008). Since most of the social sciences stay close to home while doing their studies, and they have to account for their societal relevance [a crucial issue for research funding organizations today – called valorisation now]. Often (groups of) people, and particularly organizations, demand insight in the research design and a preview of the results. Evidently, ethnographers are no longer viewed as the harmless and innocent travellers who come and go into the fields they select, wander freely through them, and finally produce detailed pictures of what they decide is important to represent. With the emancipation of society well under way, researched communities have come to realize that what the ethnographer writes and presents may not only diverge from how they look at themselves, but that it directly or indirectly refers back to their lives, and may not always suit their own interests. Hence they decide to speak back, and enter the debate over the meaning and consequences of interpretations that had hitherto been reserved to the community of fellow scientists.

Organizations as communities striving for specific goals and performing specific tasks on the basis of a set division of labour are keen to keep close to this mission and show distrust of everything that might go against their interests. So, when the scientist – or the ethnographer for that matter – notices that it has become the standard that his/her voice and interpretation have become subject of debate, s/he may at first sight feel flattered: “finally the results of social science research are considered important enough to discuss and contradict!” Yet, the realization

that in organizations the researcher is no longer almighty, and that the passive community of researched has become an active power player over meaning, this poses new dilemmas and challenges to the ethnographer whose identity consists in demystifying and unravelling the complexity of daily human practice.

In this paper I have described how I operated in a particular area of the complex field of religion and development. Preachers and developers presented me their views, explained their choices, and invited me in their world to see it with my own eyes. Walking around in the IPR churches and visiting EDAPES projects I discovered a world that – at least partly – differed from the tales being told in front stage situations. One could say there is nothing new in that; we know the world is not perfect, not even the world of those who claim to work on improving it – which is often the case in churches and development organizations. Yet, writing this story down in a book changed the situation. I became a politically and ethically incorrect researcher whose re-presentation was judged as if it were a standard evaluation protocol. Since I did not meet the criteria of such a protocol – because I never meant it to be one – interpretations and conclusions were questioned because they would produce a distorted view of the church and NGO activities. What I described as the unintended outcomes and by-products of intended behaviour – which for ethnographers is the natural way of looking at the social world – was to the EDAPES management a statement with potentially undesirable political consequences, and thus something that had to be avoided.

In this paper I do not want to play the innocent ethnographer who only later realized the effects of his work. It was clear to me almost from the beginning of the fieldwork that the final results would never satisfy totally all parties involved. I portrayed church leaders who tell a message they know their followers consider inadequate; NGO managers who invent projects they know their foreign sponsors will support for political reasons, and church members who only join for the material benefits; Dutch development specialists who need to allocate money and chose destinations that are politically correct whereas presumed results are doubtful; and finally believers who come to church because of the material benefits in terms of food aid or jobs in NGO projects linked to the church. Consequently all parties had their reasons to be unhappy and disagree with these descriptions and interpretations. But this is not all I wrote on my informants' behaviours: I describe IPR church leaders who accepted great personal risks by publicly defending their ideals under a military regime. The same holds for NGO employees who unselfishly dedicated themselves to working for the benefit of others. Ordinary church members took the prophetic message of their Pentecostal church to the heart and showed great courage when taking the practical consequences.

An analysis of the field in terms of power relations would stress that the extent to which the players in the field talk and talk back highly depends on the means – or in Bourdieu’s terms modes of capital – they have at their disposal. Yet “talking back” has become almost standard practice in the multi-sited ethnography of the late 20th century (post)modernity (cf. Marcus 1998), despite the fact that a book in English remains out of reach of people (informants) for whom English not their first language. If we assume that today’s organizational ethnography is applied in situations where the players involved have more opportunities to react on research findings the question remains what consequences that should have for ethnography. As this case shows, it was the organization’s leadership that spoke back, the less powerful simply did not (nor could have done so). Organization leaders particularly commented on the way their position was represented in the text; less trouble was made on the representation of common believers’ views. Even if one would agree that consensus over the research design, process and representation of findings is desirable, the question remains with whom to reach such consensus. Organizations are layered entities, inhabited by people sharing different interests, most probably also with regard to research and research outcomes.

In view of the access problem a certain commonality between researcher and researched is necessary, but usually agreements are made with managers, not with those who lack management power. That would mean that even the best ethnography will never be perfect, nor will its products be the fruit of consensus. Meaning is and always will be contested, but some meanings are easier accepted than others. Even the healthiest talk-back cannot mask that ethnographers do not work in ‘power free’ zones, where it is difficult to remain friends, as my ‘friendly letter’ story proves. Apparently one of the consequences of ethnographic publishing is that friendships are broken (cf. Fine and Shulman. 2009).

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