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Different Perspectives Subjective Reflections on Ethnological Research

Studying ethnology at university means getting prepared for doing cultural research. This research, according to general conception, means the investigation of an alien culture different both in time and space from our own culture. For an urban student, for instance, a disappearing rural, peasant culture is fundamentally unfamiliar, different in its way of life, scale of values and mentality. One of the basic questions of ethnological research is confrontation with another culture. This could produce a number of misconceptions. It demands the interpretation of conceptions, phenomena and involves a kind of 'reconstructional compulsion' (i.e. to reconstruct a once existed world on the basis of incomplete information).

The researcher depending on their relation to the subject can take up different roles. Raymond Gold differentiates between four possible roles. The researcher who is an completely involved in the observed culture without the others being aware of his research work is considered to be fully participant. This way of doing research can give an authentic picture, however, it also raises serious ethical questions (e.g. do we abuse others confidence?). The observer participant also takes part in the life of the investigated group while openly doing research at the same time. The participant observer considers himself a researcher and does not even try to pretend being a real participant. Finally the observer researches a social event without taking part in it. Different situations lay different roles on the researcher, choosing between them can be very difficult, sometimes the chosen role itself can limit the research work.

During ethnological researches participant observation (i.e. the third role) is the most frequent role. Students mostly face this type while studying at university. Researchers can get used to this kind of role so much that they can easily forget about all the other alternatives. The situation may turn out to be more complicated when the observer and their subject are coming closer to each other.

I had my first experience with this special case when I chose my own community, the Franciscans of Szeged-Alsóváros as a research subject for the methodology seminar at my university. According to Gold's categorisation I tried to act as fully observer as I was sitting in the kitchen of the monastery with a pen and recorder without my brothers knowing what I was doing. Thus I intended to record

as many details as possible during a period of 15 minutes. I had not told anybody about my task beforehand in order not to influence the current of events. However, in a community where the researcher is a member and is very well known, this problem is not easily overcome. Several strange sentences of my records prove this statement: 'Kelemen, are you crazy? What are you writing in that corner?' 'I am said to be abnormal because I am talking to myself...' 'Arnold enters the kitchen smiling at me in a strange way. He does not understand what is wrong with me...' This was the first time realised that it is not an easy job to do research on our own community where we also live our everyday life.

This came to my mind again when I got to know about the planned topic of the traditional summer seminar of our department. It was to be the annual feast of Our Lady of the Snow at Szeged-Alsóváros. My first question to be answered was where my own place and role would be in this research project. Should I act as a Franciscan monk or rather as an ethnologist? Can these two be made consistent or do they exclude each other? Among the believers of Alsóváros I am known as a Franciscan. What would they say if I carried out my research work in plain clothes, and what would my friar brothers say? Besides I would surely have a lot of work to arrange during the feast. Being a Franciscan is more important for me as this is the mission I am to carry out during my life. Although working as an ethnologist can also be a kind of calling in one's life. Finally I decided to take part as a Franciscan monk in the first place and help the research work as a liaison, as an 'undercover man'. However, after these thoughts came the questions of my Franciscan brothers. Ethnologists are coming here? Why? What are they doing here? There is nothing interesting here to see. Why do they not go to the pilgrimage place of Csík-somlyó or Mátraverebély-Szentkút? Are they interested in the life of our community? There is nothing special about it. From their questions I understood that for them ethnology means doing research on traditional peasant culture based on the reflections of older people taking the viewpoint of peculiarity and not a science investigating existing group-cultures in a qualitative way.

My friar brothers noticed first the young researchers taking photos and making interviews all around the place. They realised that the participants tried to record all the details of the church feast but also that of cloistered life. During the interviews made with us we understood that there were several students of ethnology from abroad who came from a Protestant community and found our cultural environment completely different to theirs. Perhaps they had never thought about monastic life as a possible life model, which is known - though not in all details - for those living in Central-Europe.

The questions raised in the beginning stayed with me during the days of the feast. I recall one event. On Sunday morning after the procession I was talking to some of the ethnologists on the corridor near the church when an elderly lady passing by stopped in front of the crucifix of a man's height, looked up at the carved image of Jesus and after a short devout silence the woman touched Jesus' foot and left. One of the students immediately ran after the lady, asked her a few questions

and came back to us saying: 'It is always so hard to ask about people's most intimate feelings, but I could not miss the opportunity as it seemed like superstition'. I was astonished since it came to my mind how many times I had touched the crucifix only out of my love towards Jesus Christ without thinking about it as being a form of superstition from ethnological point of view.

After the church feast we organised an interesting meeting: we invited the ethnologists to the Franciscan community in order to share our experience.

We, Franciscan brothers (including myself, a Franciscan ethnologist) realised, that we had not noticed many facets of our life until an outsider drew our attention to them. We are not aware of all the traditions, customs regulating our everyday life unless being questioned about their reason, origin.

I would mention another event when I faced the same problems. At the village of Gyöngyöspüspöki carrying out research on a local confraternity I tried to mix the two different roles. At the end of the holy mass, before the blessing I introduced myself (wearing the Franciscan habit) as a student of ethnology and asked the believers' help for my work. Now I am uncertain as to whether I was right or wrong. Although as a Franciscan friar I could obtain the people's confidence with greater ease, at the same time I was always seen as the representative of the official church. Thus the information I got was limited and filtered, and mainly concerned the possible conflicts between believers and clergy.

In the course of my research on religious-ethnology theoretically I would have the possibility to take up three different roles: I could act as an ethnologist, a Franciscan or a Franciscan-ethnologist. In my opinion in each case the information I receive would be fragmentary, so there is no escaping from this 'conflict of roles'. Because there is not a perfect solution, we have to choose the best one out of these possibilities.