

Haphazard knowledge production: Thoughts on ethnography and mess in the urbanising Ecuadorian Amazon

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Haphazard knowledge production:

Thoughts on ethnography and mess in the urbanising Ecuadorian Amazon

Nina Isabella Moeller

Abstract

Using a series of examples taken from fieldwork on socio-ecological change in the Ecuadorian Amazon, this chapter argues that, alongside its more conventional aims of data collection, textual representation and theoretical framing, ethnographic work also leads to a messy and collective generation of visceral, embodied knowledge in a spontaneous making of relations and connections. Usually disregarded, this kind of knowledge ought instead to be emphasised, valued and explored as integral to social research.

By focussing attention on field relations, it is made visible how the purposeful generation of superabundant ‘empirical data’ in fieldwork allows the flourishing of ‘another’ kind of knowledge, in unplanned conjunction with the researchers’ attempts at achieving their research objectives. Noting this knowledge overflow is also noting the way in which ethnography contributes, and not merely extracts from the world(s) encountered. How valuable such a contribution ultimately is depends on ‘whose side we are on’.

Keywords

Ethnography, Amazon, Ecuador, IKIAM, post-representational methods, knowledge production, green transition

Of canopies, tiles, and new life: an ethnographic setting

One of the first things most people notice when they enter a tropical rainforest is that it is surprisingly cool and dry. The high forest canopy shelters its visitors from the scorching sun and heavy rain. The thickly thatched palm leaf roofs of traditional dwellings in the Amazon region similarly catch the sun and divert the rain, making such homes agreeably temperate.

One of the first things people notice when they enter IKIAM, a new flagship university in the Ecuadorian Amazon, are its white tiles, utterly blinding in the sun, and dangerously slippery in the

rain. One member of staff has referred to their effect as “grievous bodily harm”, as students and staff have already sustained injuries. Offices and other enclosed spaces on campus are, unsurprisingly, artificially cooled: “It would be unbearably hot otherwise”, “It is too hot to work without it” commented students and staff¹. No-one pondered the environmental consequences of conditioning the indoor air, the cultural and physical dependence created, or the psycho-social implications of purposeful disconnection from one’s immediate surroundings, let alone the ways in which this might influence the knowledge created in such insulated conditions.

Financed by Chinese capital in return for oil futures², IKIAM University has been explicitly conceived as a catalyst for a lasting transition to a ‘green and knowledge-based economy’ in Ecuador, based in particular on the development of ‘Amazonian green wealth’ (Villavicencio, 2014; Wilson & Bayón, 2017). It is thereby a key component of the government’s overall ‘post-neoliberal’ development strategy promising widespread socio-economic change, an overcoming of the extractive paradigm centred on oil, and a new relationship with nature as expressed in the Plan for Good Living (*Plan del Buen Vivir*)³ (SENPLADES, 2009; see also Becker, 2011; Ellner, 2011; Burbach, Fox & Fuentes, 2013). It is one of four ‘emblematic’ universities founded in 2010 as part of a radical education system reform (Saltos Galarza, 2014; Milia, 2014; Villavicencio, 2014), and focuses on the study of ‘natural resources and biodiversity’.

One of the architects cried when they realised that the site chosen for construction of the university was in the middle of the forest, “where a new pole of development is least needed” (Wilson, Bayón & Diez, 2015). The campus has displaced a small indigenous community and relegated its inhabitants to a string of identical concrete buildings at the end of a road alongside which real estate prices have soared beyond the reach of anyone but relatively rich settlers, such as foreign academics. *Mushuk Kawsay*, ‘New Life’, this community is called.

Ikiam means ‘forest’ or ‘nature’ in Shuar, one of the ten indigenous languages spoken in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Proclaiming the value of indigenous knowledge of the forest in its promotional materials, and with exclusive access to a ‘living laboratory’ – a nature reserve of over 93,000 hectares, spanning several ecosystems from the Andes mountain range to the Amazon rainforest – IKIAM is presented as a university “in the Amazon, for the Amazon”. Yet this dictum obscures the variety of perspectives on what the Amazon ‘really needs’.

My current work focuses on what kind of ‘green transition’ IKIAM actually embodies and catalyses – both in the Napo region of the Ecuadorian Amazon and beyond. I am interested in the ways in which contestations over ‘what the Amazon needs’ are being silenced and contradictory perspectives homogenised. However, in this short contribution to a collective reflection on messy ethnography, I will not dwell much on the particularities of IKIAM as a new knowledge institution, or on the ways

1 All comments are, unless otherwise specified, based on interviews and notes from six months fieldwork in the Ecuadorian Amazon between November 2016 and May 2017 for a project entitled “Between planetary urbanisation and thinking forests” and financed by the Independent Social Research Foundation via the Independent Scholar Fellowship scheme at the Oxford Department of International Development.

2 In 2008, Ecuador defaulted on USD 3.2 billion of bonds. From 2010 onwards, Ecuador has received Chinese loans-for-oil and oil-backed credits for infrastructure and has thus committed a significant amount of its future oil production to China (Sanderson & Forsythe, 2012; Bräutigam & Gallagher, 2014). IKIAM University’s campus is currently being built by a Chinese company.

3 *Buen Vivir* is a Hispanification of the Quichua concept of *Sumak Kausay* which carries connotations of beauty, ethics and human harmony with the natural world and its rhythms (Acosta, 2012). The *Plan del Buen Vivir* has been prepared by the National Secretary of Planning and Development, SENPLADES.

in which it imposes in material ways a specific perspective on desirable socio-ecological change in the Amazon. The reader can find reflections and analyses of this elsewhere (Wilson & Bayón, 2017; Moeller, 2018b). Instead, I will focus here on a flurry of questions regarding ethnographic knowledge production that arose during my fieldwork. Through a series of examples, I will highlight the way in which ‘messy ethnography’ leads to the generation of a usually disregarded kind of knowledge, which, I believe, ought to be emphasised, valued and explored as an integral part of research. This short text is hence the beginning of an argument for a critical ethnographic method which values a messy and collective generation of visceral, embodied knowledge, and a spontaneous making of relations and connections, alongside its more conventional ‘aims’ of data collection, textual representation and theoretical framing.

Producing knowledge through ethnography

As “the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection” (Strathern, 2004: 5-6), ethnography is always at least partially messy, in the sense that the ethnographer collects more material than they know to be relevant, in a certain state of disorder, often devising analytical protocols for these materials after the fact (Ibid.). It is the messiness that affords ethnography its substance. The more varied activities we participate in, the more diverse actors we engage with, the more places we traverse and linger in, the more ‘the field’ swallows us up, the more chaotic our research is likely to appear. Yet it is this richness which makes the foundation for ‘good’ ethnography: for a well written text which brings alive the messy actualities and surprising intricacies of the social realities encountered, highlighting the variety of human experience – usually, of course, for an exclusively academic audience.

In their introduction to the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, HAU, Graeber and da Col (2011) have urged “to bring [ethnographic insight] back to its leading role in generating new knowledge”, through a renewed focus on “concepts lifted directly from ethnographic work”. As researchers, we are supposed to create knowledge that is somehow useful – technologically or socially. That is part of our *raison d’être*, and underlies the distinction between the researcher and, say, the poet. And while questions regarding whom this knowledge serves are of course an important aspect of critical scholarship (McClung Lee, 1976; Evan, 1987; Burawoy, 2005), they are all too often sidelined: Who can access the knowledge produced? Who can understand it? Who can use it to their ends? Even shorter shrift get questions regarding the nature of the knowledge researchers produce: What exactly counts as knowledge? Datasets, ‘materials’, thick description, conceptual innovation? A monograph? New worldviews? For whom? Who decides? What about the “visceral register” (Mahmood, 2001) that changes us as people and influences our future actions? What about the experience-as-knowledge distributed amongst all those who were touched by our work in the field?

In order to destabilise the hegemonic construction of knowledge as (interpreted) dataset, as transmissible through print or digital media, as intellectual property (see also Moeller, 2018a), let us focus our attention on the relations we build ‘in the field’ – something feminist researchers have long insisted upon (e.g. Bondi *et al.*, 2002; Moss, 2002; Hesse-Biber, 2014). More knowledge is being created in and through these relationships than is usually made visible: we do not seem to reflect on

it, write about it, or value it. I am not trying to point to the knowledge we might well recognise as co-produced in collaboration with the communities and individuals we research, yet which is meant to be captured in our monographs and peer-reviewed articles (Marcus, 2008), but to another kind of knowledge which the rich messiness of ethnographic research spawns. I am also not trying to point to the cooperative knowledge creation of the kind that participatory action research (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Reason & Bradbury, 2001), “embedded” (Lewis & Russell, 2011), “engaged” (Plows, 2008), or “collaborative” (Lassiter, 2005) ethnography aims at, which leads to effective action for social change, and where the researcher takes a kind of facilitator role of a process that is crucially community-led. The knowledge creation I want to draw into focus is much more haphazard, a corollary of human encounter, a kind of side-effect of people meeting, and, I suspect, an inevitable part of all ethnographic work.

Having considered for discussion terms like ‘theoretical’ vs. ‘practical knowledge’, ‘expert/lay’, ‘formal/informal’, ‘knowledge-for-paper/knowledge-for-action’, ‘knowing-that/knowing-how’, even ‘exchange value knowledge’ and ‘use value knowledge’, and found them wanting, I will instead present a set of examples from my time in the Amazon without aiming at conceptual innovation at this stage. These examples are meant to illustrate how the purposeful generation of superabundant ‘empirical data’ in fieldwork allows the flourishing of ‘another’ kind of knowledge to which I want to draw attention. My examples concern above all making connections between hitherto unconnected actors (human-human as well as human-non-human), thereby widening their scope of self-directed action. For reasons of space, I will discuss only the creation of knowledge and not the creation of conflict, disconnection and ignorance. It is crucial to note, however, that the latter might also be spawned by the same generative (ethnographic) process I am considering here.⁴

‘Another’ kind of knowledge as unintended consequence of doing ethnography

1. *Connecting a group of struggling women fish farmers, who have developed ways of farming native fish on natural forest produce, with a group of traditional midwives:* Freshwater fish is a staple of an Amazonian diet. However, with declining water quality and population pressures, wild fish are becoming scarcer as are the time and skill to fish. Ecologically destructive tilapias⁵ *Oreochromis spp.* (Padial *et al.*, 2017) have been farmed in the Ecuadorian Amazon region since the 1980s, and have replaced virtually all other freshwater fish on offer in urban and peri-urban markets. As invasive species, tilapias have wrought havoc in aquatic ecosystems. Needing to be fed on industrial fish feed, their meat is of low quality⁶, and tilapia farmers are dependent on purchasing external inputs. For several years now, a small NGO⁷ has been working with a group of women fish farmers on developing ways to farm cachama (*Colossoma macropomum*), a species native to the Amazon basin, which thrives on local forest produce and leftovers. Looking for a way to sell their fish beyond their own communities, they provided fish for lunch at a workshop I held as part of my research. This has resulted in a lasting relationship as they continue supplying the birthing centre run by (indigenous)

4 See for example, Greary’s subtle exploration of the effects of ethnographic practice in this volume.

5 Tilapias are invasive species, and will eat other species’ fry.

6 Healthy oil composition (ratio of omega 3) is unfavourably changed in farmed tilapia (Karapanagiotidis *et al.*, 2007) and residue toxins are high (Cole *et al.*, 2009).

7 Fundación Centro Lianas

traditional midwives where the workshop took place, and has increased collective reflection on local and traditional food and its relationship to industrial aqua- and agriculture.

2. *Kindling discussions amongst a traditional healers' association on the pitfalls of encouraging shamanic tourism*: the realisation that an ever-increasing number of tourists had become eager to participate in Amazonian healing ceremonies triggered a strong desire amongst an association of traditional healers to seize this opportunity to promote their work. The group ignored some of the potential dangers that had already occurred in other places, notably in Peru where such tourism is already established (Holman, 2010; Kavenská & Simonová, 2015). Asking some tangential questions at a meeting to which I was invited, the members of the association began to have recurring discussions on the physical and mental safety of ceremony participants; conflict and competition amongst traditional healers; fair prices; potential and limits of shamanic healing. This resulted in the association re-contacting defected members in order to learn from their experiences in this context. Previously broken relationships have begun to be rebuilt as a consequence.

3. *Starting a conversation between a grandmother and her teenage grandchildren about the spiritual importance of companion planting in a traditional horticulture plot*: The presence of a white foreigner can valorise and bring prestige to a particular event or moment.⁸ My presence in the *chakra* (traditional forest garden) of an elderly woman with whom I discussed some of her everyday practices, sparked the interest of her grandchildren. They paused to listen and learn about the ancestral understanding of the importance of planting certain plants near others. This interaction constituted a moment of knowledge transmission that might otherwise not have taken place given the widening gap between lives lived by the younger and the older generation of indigenous people at the urban-forest boundary in the Amazon.

4. *Questioning the basic assumptions of a workshop series*: observing and participating in a workshop series run by IKIAM staff members using crochet as a tool for environmental education, I had the chance to contribute to an informal conversation which provoked some change in both the content and delivery of the workshops. That it was desirable to teach indigenous communities about the importance of endangered Amazonian species from a 'scientific' point of view had been an unexamined assumption of the initiative, which taught a simple knitting technique to create toy animals. It thereby inadvertently denigrated the relevance of these animals in Napo Runa lives and cosmology⁹, and unwittingly instilled the superiority of Western science over indigenous know-how and worldview. The informal discussion on the back seat of a university vehicle contributed to a minor shift in emphasis and reinforced the project's potential to create a much-needed space for mutual learning and more equal cultural exchange. The project has since received an international award for intercultural innovation¹⁰.

8 While fortunate in this case, such a dynamic is rooted in a long history of violence and exploitation.

9 The Quichua-speaking Napo Runa (literally: people from the Napo River), with whom I work, are a tropical-forest-dwelling people. While cultural ethnographies and cosmological studies of Napo Runa life can be found elsewhere (Uzendoski, 2005; Foletti-Castegnario, 1993; Hudleson, 1981; Kohn, 2002; Macdonald, 1999; Muratorio, 1991; Reeve, 1985; Santos Ortiz de Villalba, 1993), it is worth mentioning in this context that the forest was still not so very long ago the wellspring of everything and anything in Napo Runa lives – food, medicine, shelter, artefacts, livelihood. They have (had) affective relationships to the non-human inhabitants of the forest (animals, plants, rocks, caves, watercourses) that resemble relationships people usually have with other people. For the Napo Runa, animals and plants and certain inanimate objects are not qualitatively different beings from humans: they have the same subjectivities, they experience the world from an I-point of view (see also Viveiros de Castro, 1998). For their survival and well-being human beings are dependent on making alliances with other non-human people.

10 "Knitting for Conservation" has been awarded the 2017 Intercultural Innovation Award by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and the BMW Group.

5. *Getting access to and then re-distributing and helping people understand a set of governmental maps about land use restrictions*: as a researcher, I was able to access several governmental maps straightforwardly, without being questioned or my request denied for spurious reasons. These maps were useful for a group of people working within a regional indigenous federation. Together, we were quickly able to make sense of these maps and they proved useful in the discussion of land rights issues within the organisation.

All these situations have created knowledge and relations – though not for policy makers or industry nor even particularly of any scholarly interest.

Ethnography has been criticised – alongside other social research – as an extractive intellectual exercise of the “colonial encounter” (Asad, 1973), which mostly leaves little of real value in the community on whose shoulders the researcher is taking essential steps towards her or his career (e.g. Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Stacey, 1988; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Smith, 1999). Comparatively little effort is ever put into making the fruits of our mental labouring physically and intellectually accessible beyond the peer group, whose verdict alone is deemed significant to their evaluation.¹¹ Yet in many, if not most cases in the social sciences, it is people, communities, phenomena beyond the peer group that afford the substance for our essays, theses, books and articles, that is, for the vehicles of our careers. We trade in ‘the Other’ (Smith, 1999). No matter how post/decolonial our stance, our representations of the lives, deaths, joys, sorrows, everydays and extraordinaries of other people is the currency with which we acquire a name in print, a seat at the table, and a flight and hotel booking in the pocket.

Noting the knowledge overflow which ethnographic fieldwork generates, the knowledge it incidentally creates ‘all around’, for others, in unplanned conjunction with our attempts at achieving our research objectives, by connecting people with other people, ideas, things (e.g. maps) or beings (e.g. fish¹²), is also noting the way in which ethnography contributes, and not merely extracts from the world(s) we encounter. How valuable such a contribution ultimately is, and to whom, depends on the values we hold and ‘whose side we are on’ (Becker, 1967).

The side I am on

In my recent time in the Amazon I have been working with groups of traditional healers and midwives, small producers of guayusa (a caffeine- and theobromine-containing¹³ tree leaf considered as a promising exportable forest commodity and threatening to repeat the boom-and-bust trajectory of previous agricultural exports from the area, such as coffee and cacao), and some members of the hygienic services association providing sanitary services to IKIAM University. Like all people they are knowledge practitioners: users, makers and transmitters of knowledge in everyday life. While their views and perspectives are heterogeneous, they share in common the experience of accelerated erosion of their autonomous subsistence opportunities.

¹¹ A notable exception here is the anthropologist or other ethnographic researcher who ‘reads’ their text ‘back’ to their informants in order to ensure accuracy. Informants, however, are known to lament the fact that in most cases, the research done does not tell them anything they did not already know.

¹² Admittedly, the fish in my case were often dead fish soon to be food.

¹³ Theobromine is a bitter alkaloid named after the cacao plant, of which it is a constituent.

Subsistence, the knowledge-dense practice of self-provisioning without or only with marginal reliance on the market to fulfil everyday as well as extraordinary needs and wants, is being eroded through capital expansion (Illich, 1981) and the concomitant growth of the technosphere (Zalasiewicz *et al.*, 2016). Increasingly evicted from the forest, or forced to live on ever smaller parcels of it, the people I work with are condemned to develop what they refer to as ‘the needs of the city’, a term used to highlight the desires and necessities that mysteriously exude from the consumer culture of urban spaces (Moeller, 2010), and which they are struggling to either fulfil or evade.

Given today’s global context of multiple crises, answers to fundamental questions are needed. How could we live together – with other humans as well as non-humans – in a world even more ravaged by war, extreme weather, pollution and consequent shrinking of habitable and fertile land? How would we feed, shelter, heal, enjoy? How would we raise our young? People practicing – and thriving in – subsistence lifeways have much to teach the rest of us. Forest-based subsistence is not a primitive condition to be overcome, but a legitimate, dignified and sustainable mode of being in the world, yet it is under active attack by myriad forces. No matter how illuminating and best-selling an exposition of this onslaught I would be able to produce, I do not feel confident that my written words would help the people who, with their existence, knowledge and generosity, facilitate my accumulation of cultural capital. The ‘other’ knowledge I incidentally participate in creating, however, just might – even if merely in small, messy ways.

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