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ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Abstract: This article is a draft for a personal training in reflexivity. New tendencies in Macedonian ethnology and anthropology, among other things, turn attention to certain aspects of cognition. Field research (understood as action), as well as observation, deliberation, dealing with one's own field work (contemplation), are perceived as an opportunity for facing oneself and for self improvement.

Key words: field research, reflexive ethnography, Macedonia, anthropology.

Starting from the '60-ties of the 20th century, anthropological science starts to focus upon the personal character of ethnographic research. It is a matter of descriptions and conclusions that the anthropologist makes after critical observation and analysis of one's own work, especially his field research of sensitive topics. One needs to deliberate how and how much does the researcher, having in mind his cultural background, influences the subjects of his field research, as well as the analysis and the presentation of the results. Also, a reversible character of this process has been noted, and this includes the influence that is exercised upon the researcher by his interlocutors, through the relations established during the research. Such contemplation of the ethnographer in regards to the used strategies, to one's own dilemmas, the solutions of certain problems, especially when it comes to his ethical attitudes and acts during the research, as well as the presented results, is called reflexivity.

During the early 70-ties, Nash and Winthrob (Nash and Winthrob 1972) published an analysis of the anthropological trend – a “self-awareness turn” towards the ways in which they construct the subject of examination, in which they define research problems, gather data and interpret them. During the 1990ties reflexivity has been adopted at a level of regular praxis, and its main axiom is that the good contemporary anthropological book or article should contain a confession-like introduction. Personal histories of the researchers, their identities, theoretical interests, the influence of the mentor, colleagues and the notions of the public to whom the ethnographer is addressing, the types of inter-human relations – all these individual topics are categorized in the class of “anthropological reflexivity”, that becomes a legitimate/indispensable element of the researches according to Milenković 2006: 165).

Favorite elements of anthropological reflexivity include: the influence of the anthropologist upon the examined subjects, the choice of a topic and space, the transformative character of the field work upon the anthropologist himself, and accordingly to this, the differences that arise in the descriptions of reality by different anthropologists and other social actors (Milenković 2006: 164).

The reflexive approach has initiated a number of polemics among authors that belong to different sciences and schools of thought. All of them, through their pro and contra arguments, enriched the theoretical and methodological aspects of cognition. Anthropological articles treat reflexivity along with hermeneutics (Milenković 2006: 169), and even more often with ethics (Zebec 2009).

Reflexivity in Macedonian ethnology and anthropology still has a status of a potential. I hope that the articles in this issue of the journal will initiate a wave of reactions and constructive discussion and will present an affirmation of the reflexive practices in our environment.

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Since I am not really into the numerous theories, schools and conventions regarding reflexivity, I will try to give my contribution to the establishment of the reflexive method in Macedonian ethnological/ anthropological science through sharing few examples of reflexive thoughts that stem from my personal experience, related to research of ethnic identity. My primary idea was to conduct a research on the feeling of ethnic affiliation of people that live in Skopje, but originate from ethnically mixed marriages. Basic questions referred to what is their essential, personal ethnic i.e. national identity versus the formal, declarative one; which factors influence the creation and the changing of the expected multiple identities; how do the subjects balance between the one and the other.

Since Skopje is a multi-ethnic environment, I counted on the big number of persons whose parents belong to different ethnic groups. This proved to be true, but it was my first mistake. The high number of members of different ethnic groups created an even higher number of “combinations” of ethnically mixed marriages. Without taking into account the first mistake (typical for beginners), and that is the huge scope of the research topic, I entered a second mistake. It consisted of a selection of a wrong, anthropologically inappropriate method – a poll (!?). Although the poll questionnaire was detailed, voluminous, with a possibility to note personal attitudes, it could not give satisfying answers to the questions raised. The knot that I tied myself was solved through 1. Scaling down the scope of the research, through choosing to test the hypothesis of the multiple ethnic identity via statements of the descendants of the refugees from Aegean

Macedonia and 2. Using as a technique a detailed, semi-structured interview. These changes enabled me to realize the field research according to the plan (Павковиќ 2005).

I also made interviews with descendants of former children-refugees, that were victims of the exodus of the Civil war in Greece. Informants were 35-45 years old, and living in Skopje. They originate from ethnically mixed marriages – one parent is a Macedonian from Aegean Macedonia, while the other is from the country where the refugees were taken (Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, USSR, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria). All of them were born in these countries and have spent their childhood or their youth there. This enabled to conduct the talks in a friendly atmosphere and to gain mutual trust in the general communication. The openness was additionally induced by the note that their statements will be published as anonymous. Most of the interviews were done at the informants' homes, and a smaller part at their working places. Five male and five female informants were included, but women were more eager and more competent interlocutors. They were pleased to be talked to, concerning a topic that they liked and that refers to the "Aegean question". They also expressed satisfaction that through the conversations, through re-telling their lives and the stories of their parents, in a way they succeeded to articulate certain previously non-defined thoughts and unclear feelings regarding their own identity.

These statements pleased me, since I experienced them as a proof of the good choice of the topic, the concept and the interlocutors, which after the lousy start of the research was inspiring. The pleasure was even greater since the researches confirmed that it is "normal" to have a fluctuating ethnic identity, and that this could be experienced as an advantage, which was in fact an intimate question of knowing myself, since my personal origin is from an ethnically mixed marriage. Almost at the same time I was disappointed by the refusal by few persons to participate in the research. Probably I felt their refusal as mistrust regarding my responsibility, ethics and competency. However, all these episodes, the pleasant and not so pleasant ones, are invaluable experiences in building the research profile of each ethnologist/anthropologist. Cabinet anthropology offers greater comfort in comparison to field research that is always uncertain and demanding. Maybe the answer is in their consequent implementation and unification.

The selection of statements that are presented from a relatively small number of informants (Павковиќ 2005) is a result of my preference of individual anthropology and perception of each person as an individual story (Ковачевиќ 2006). Thus the extended statements are given due to registering and representation of the multitude of the individually created meanings of the terms: ethnicity, nationality, affiliation, origin, culture and others. Still, due to the surprising similarities of personal histories (which in a major part developed in different, distant territories), which was a reason for subsequent

similarities in perception of the key terms, I could not resist to essentialize the statements and the generalizations of the conclusions.

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Although I share the doubts of Wolf (Wolf 1992: 50 and further on) regarding objectivity of reflexive ethnography (1. it is original only in relation to traditional ethnography; 2. it is not clear which is the target group; 3. personal character of ethnographic experiences does not fit academic standards and 4. experimental texts are valued more due experimentation itself than due to the new and different insight into the researched cultures), still I think that the practice of our discipline should walk its evolutionary path (even if it takes short cuts) due to continuity and gaining maturity.

I am skeptical about reflexivity due to general human vanity, and thus the vanity of the ethnographer/ethnologist/anthropologist. I think that the offered reflexive insight could be dosed and could be manipulated.

The biggest advantage of the usage of the reflexive method is gaining awareness on the modification of the cultural personality of the researcher after the field research, since each interlocutor/informant that enters our orbit carries a different and more complex world from any other that we can imagine. Hearing the details and subtleties of their experiences, their opinions and perceptions, we include a part of their world into ours. This is probably the biggest value and importance of reflexivity in field research.

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