'What do you call the heathen these days?'
The policy field and other matters of the heart in the Norwegian Mission Society

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Abstract

The paper will explore policy in a Norwegian Christian church and development NGO, the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS), from a multi-sited perspective. Most importantly, I think, this brings out associations that tell us something about (1) the people under study in NMS, their own continuous 'site and system awareness', and their attempts – not dissimilar to mine – to sort out their policy field; (2) me as ethnographer and my attempts to site myself and my discipline in relation to the non-heathen policymakers of NMS; and (3) the nature of development policy itself: from such a multi-sited perspective, policy, clearly, is shown to be important – but not for the reasons one would think.

Introduction

I've just finished my PhD at SOAS. So my thinking about what multi-sited ethnography means started last year, when I was on fieldwork in a Norwegian Christian mission and development organisation, the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS), and was struggling to define my 'field' (Hovland 2004). The organisation has a head office in Stavanger, Norway; 8 regional offices in other towns throughout Norway; around 2,500 so-called 'mission groups' throughout Norway that donate funds to the organisation; 11 field offices in 11 countries around the world; and staff in each of these countries who are not just based at the field office but throughout the country. In sum, the organisation is typical of international development organisations: it is a disparate set of points spread out over the world map.

Last year I started to think of my field as a web of connections and associations between these points. But the most important thing I learnt in this respect is that the significance of the web does not lie in whatever geographic lines of connections I can make. Instead, the significance lies in whatever connections and associations that exist in people's heads.

And this is the entrypoint into what I want to say about development policy and multi-sited ethnography. I think that at its most fruitful and provocative and promising, multi-site ethnography is not a question of carrying out fieldwork in 2 or 3 or 4 sites instead of one. Multi-site ethnography is not simply something that helps us to *add* perspectives (1 site + 1 site + 1 site = multi-site ethnography) but instead it forces us to *change* perspective. Multi-site ethnography is about the very question of what a 'site' *is* in anthropology. It does not just give us two or three categories to compare instead of one; it questions our ways of constructing categories in the first place. And in the case of development policy, it gives us a better

understanding of what international development policy is '*from the native's point of view*' – the native in this case being the policymakers.

I shall have to limit my comments here to the issue of what I might loosely call '*policy awareness*' rather than what is more frequently done, and which would also have been interesting, namely to compare policy formulation with *policy implementation*, or to address *policy evaluation*. But by focusing only on policy awareness this time, I aim to show something of what policy is for the people who live off it, so to speak – in this case, for the people in NMS.

I'll use the example of a broad policy issue that is alive in NMS, namely the question of what to call one of their target groups: the heathen. One of the overarching aims of NMS is to bring the church and development projects to the heathen, but for reasons of political correctness, the heathen are no longer called the heathen. The term 'heathen' was in fact taken out of the organisation's set of bylaws and policy documents as early as the mid-1960s, and replaced by the term 'peoples of the world', but the shift away from using the term 'heathen' *informally* within NMS did not seem to come about until the late 1980s or 1990s.

This raises interesting questions of *site awareness*. Let me use just 3 brief episodes from my fieldwork year to illustrate what I mean by this.

Site and system awareness

First episode.
At their staff retreat in October 2003, NMS had hired in a management consultant to talk about the nature of organisations. In his talk he was making a point about an organisation's consumers, and he asked the assembled staff: 'What do *you* call your consumers?' The room was quiet. He tried again, and then, hoping to provoke an answer from the audience, he asked: 'What do you call the heathen these days?' Still nobody answered. It was a funny moment because I'm sure everyone in the room knew the group that he was talking about, and was able to conceptualise it for themselves, since this is a very important group for them – and yet nobody dared throw out a label for this group in front of all the other staff. Finally, one man, in something of a cop-out, answered that: 'We now call them "the target group".'

Second episode.
A few months after this, I went to Madagascar to interview the NMS staff there – the missionaries themselves. They were aware that I had come straight from the NMS head office in Stavanger and that I would be going straight back there. They knew that I was not employed by NMS, and from my questions to them, they quickly gathered that I was aware that there might be a disjuncture between how the world looked from the head office, and how it looked for them in the field. In their answers to me they played on all this awareness – their *system awareness*, if you like, or their attempts and ability to quickly situate *me* in these systems. So they would, for example, sometimes answer my questions about head office policy in either a very pointedly positive manner, or in a pointedly critical manner – as a means to situate themselves in relation to me, perhaps indirectly hoping to use me to influence the head office in some way, or simply as a means to communicate their unspoken site and system awareness – because this is important to them.

Thus I asked one missionary, in our interview, what she would do if she could make all policy decisions in NMS. She said she would have employed more missionaries. She explained that the Malagasy say: 'We are only heathen, we need more missionaries' – and she looked at me pointedly and said: 'I use the word *heathen*, because they use it about themselves'.

At one level, this missionary was very obviously using the word 'heathen' because she knew that I knew that she was not supposed to use it. Through this, I think she was using it because it expressed something significant about what she saw as the heart of her development work. She felt that she was closer to the Malagasies than the head office in Stavanger, and she was able to express this by subtly and indirectly commenting on the official policy – and thus situating herself in relation both to Stavanger and to the Malagasy and to me.

Third episode.
When I returned to the head office in Stavanger, after my trip to Madagascar, I had a conversation with one of the high-level policy staff there. I said I had been surprised to find that the term heathen was still used by missionaries. He did not seem surprised, but he – just like the missionary in Madagascar – had placed me in his system awareness, and, just like her, knew fairly exactly what I was expecting to hear from him. So he shook his head and commented in his best laconic mode: 'And it's been strictly forbidden for ten years now!' And then he added: 'We do see that as a challenge from here. Not to say a problem.'

This shows another side of policy: Policy enables policymakers to *locate* (to *site*) problematic elements within their organisation, and to call these elements problematic. If we were to be Foucauldian about it for a moment, we could say that if people aren't following the policy, then you're allowed to see them as 'a problem'.

In other words, multi-sited ethnography doesn't just add together different perspectives on the policy on heathen. Rather, it challenges our very understanding of what a policy is, how it is given significance, and how we can examine it. Policy is a tool for siting people from the head office, and, conversely, it is a tool for staff to site themselves in relation to their organisation. It is both a tool for defining problems within the organisation and also a tool for staff to conceptualise the very *meaning* of the work that is being done.

What does this tell us about policy as a phenomenon of the human condition?

Policy may not be good to do – but it's very good to think

In order to address this question, let me say something about the most important book to have come out recently on development policy, namely David Mosse's (2005a) *Cultivating Development*. Mosse presents a multi-sited and provocative ethnography of a DFID development project in India. He argues that in this project, development policy did not serve as a guide for implementation. On the contrary; whatever was implemented served as a guide for policy, which from time to time was formulated in form and language that was deemed an appropriate system of representations for DFID London, and which would successfully act as an exchange commodity in return for further funding to the project.

I find Mosse's analysis convincing – and I have a hunch that if I had been able to include fieldwork on policy implementation in NMS, I would have ended up with some of the same conclusions. But I also think that in some ways David Mosse hasn't taken his critique far enough. What he is saying is, in effect, that policy is not good to *do*, but that it is a good set of representations and necessary in order to secure funding. But is policy primarily important because it secures cash? I think that he could have added another aspect here as well: policy is important to people because it's surprisingly good to *think*.

In fact, as the controversy over Mosse's book shows – in the attempts to have it substantially changed and to delay and hinder its publication (Mosse 2005b) – policy is deeply important to the people concerned, in a way that goes beyond the issue of a system of representations or an exchange commodity. Development policy is, even though we are not used to thinking about it in this way, *personally* important to development staff. Not because it tells them what to do;

often, in fact, it may be distinctly difficult for them to do what policy says they should do, and at other times policy may be important precisely because it gives them the opportunity to register what the official policy is and then demonstratively *not* to do it. But above all, I think policy is important because it enables people to think who they are – through their siting of themselves in relation to the policy system, or the policy field, of their organisation. Like me, they too continuously try to find out what the policy field *is*. And multi-sited ethnography in turn enables us as anthropologists to get at this site and system awareness that people live within.

When we are examining other people's system awareness in this way, what does it do to *us*?

Us

At one point this year, as I was writing up and found myself having to defend the notion at SOAS that my project was anthropological *enough*, one of my fellow students jokingly suggested to me that my problems stemmed from the fact that the people I was studying were too Christian; if I had only studied the heathen themselves, I would not have had any trouble. In some way my project had hit too close to home. And indeed at one of our post-fieldwork seminars at SOAS this semester, the issue briefly emerged. I must add that it was the last research seminar of the semester – and so everyone was in remarkably uplifted spirits. The seminar was on historical religious trends in Ghana, and someone described early twentieth-century Accra as 'a bastion of heathenism'. 'Bastion of heathenism!' Dr X immediately responded enthusiastically: 'Bastion of heathenism! I like that!', and, much to the amusement of the PhD students present, Dr Y punched the air in agreement: 'Heathen – and proud of it!'. Dr X nodded appreciatively again: 'Let's send *them* some money.'

This is admittedly a rather tangential example (– and perhaps more than anything simply a telling insight into what goes on in that fine colonial, radical institution that is SOAS –) but I have included it simply to say that it is indeed challenging when anthropological analysis suddenly makes us, anthropologists, in some way a part of the picture that is analysed. When we use multi-site ethnography to draw up connections between sites that have hitherto been seen as unconnected, our exploration can always, unexpectedly, lead back to us. What do the heathen have to do with us? In multi-sited ethnography, we are not 'worlds apart' any longer (Marcus 1995:102). We suddenly have to site ourselves.

This can be a particularly sensitive and serious matter when we are studying development policy. What do people living with HIV/AIDS, for example, have to do with us? How do we think of ourselves, as persons, studying these other people? Multi-site ethnography does not just put into question the cultural patterns we are examining; it also puts into question the *distance* that we think enables us to do the examining. Suddenly we may have to do research without that distance. This can be unnerving. But it does open up the story of what it means to be human in a new way (Hovland 2005).

Conclusion

I've spoken about the connections and associations that multi-sited ethnography makes visible. Multi-sited ethnography enables us to rethink the relationship between places, projects, and sources of knowledge (Des Chene 1997:81). It opens up spaces that may otherwise be invisible from the single site.

I am not going to address here the problem of whether it provides enough depth to the research at every 'site' (however defined). I think this is a problem we should consider seriously; I did not have time within my fieldwork year to spend enough time at NMS'

development projects to also gain an understanding of how policy *implementation* works in NMS, for example. But this problem has been addressed elsewhere (e.g. Marcus 1998).

I am simply going to state, in conclusion, that in many other ways multi-sited ethnography actually gives research on policy *more* depth than it would otherwise have. I certainly think it gives us a *deeper* understanding of what policy is 'from the native's point of view'. What makes me say this? Well, *policy awareness* is part of the *unspoken* and the *everyday* across all sites of a development organisation. And some of the distinctive marks of ethnography is precisely to capture the unspoken and the everyday, and to attempt to see this from people's own point of view.

This leads me to two concluding points.

First: on method.
We should not emphasise the '*multi*' of 'multi-sited ethnography' too much. If you ask any anthropology PhD student what multi-sited ethnography is, the chances are that they will say that it's about doing fieldwork in several places. This is a pity, because it reduces the method to a weak shadow of what it can potentially be. If we see multi-sited ethnography simply as a collection of multiple sites (1 site + 1 site + 1 site = multi-sited ethnography), then it is easy to slip into a situation where we examine connections that we've constructed but which are not important to the people we are studying, and which are not a part of their unspoken everyday. If on the other hand we place the emphasis on '*sited*', and see multi-sited ethnography as an examination of people's *own* site and system awareness, then we are much closer to gaining a deep ethnographic – and both rewarding and provocative – interpretation of development policy than we have ever been before. Multi-sited ethnography gives us a method that both makes us recognise our own site awareness, and that makes us more able to explore the site awareness of those we're writing about.

Second: on policy.
Multi-sited ethnography shows us that development staff need to have an official organisational policy in order to have something to disagree with, something to site themselves in relation to, within their system, something which allows them to articulate what for them is at the heart of the matter. Multi-sited ethnography brings out the shifting sensibilities within an organisation that always desires to do the impossible. It shows us that development policy is important because it helps development staff to find ways of relating to impossibilities – and of understanding themselves.

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