Emotion and Epistemic Murkiness:
Fieldwork Under the Possibility of Fire

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Introduction

When I was about to start my long-term ethnographic fieldwork on human-environmental relations, my research area was shaken by numerous attacks ascribed to an Islamist militant group. While the area has a longstanding history of ethno-political conflicts around elections between farmers and pastoralists, such a form of violence, which consisted of attacks on vehicles and villages across the area and in the course of ten incidents left dead around a dozen locals, travellers, and security agents, was unprecedented.

Making sense of this kind of danger that was both absent and present, as the militants were neither rooted in the communities nor following known patterns, and relating it to one's individual positionality and experience proved difficult for all those affected. In consequence, 'truth', rather than being stable and shared, was always situational, partial, and relational.

In ethnographic fieldwork, validating is a continuous practice not to be separated from data production and left for analysis. To proceed in research, one is constantly and often tacitly testing and making decisions about 'reality', largely by searching for alignment, overlap, and commonality with others. And so it is especially in moments of intersubjectivity that we feel deeply and uncontradictedly connected to and knowledgeable about the world.

In this light, the present contribution seeks to examine a form of validation that might precede processes of validation in other scientific practices but is central to ethnography. In describing the attempt to make fieldwork succeed against the odds, I will trace my navigation through different (self-)perceptions of danger and my use of different methods in the search for validity and control. This endeavour turned into an epistemic and emotional borderwalk, raising questions about the limitations of ethnographic validation in personally demanding research settings.[23]

Front-line Entanglement

On a cloudy afternoon, my friend and assistant Jonas picked me up in Gatetown, and we took one of the last minibuses to Haventown, which with around 3,000 inhabitants was the biggest town in my research area. Traffic was now structured around the dusk-to-dawn curfew that had been put in place in response to the attacks. Shortly after Gatetown, we reached the first checkpoint. Whereas on the way back, we would have our bags searched, here only an identification document was needed. There were fewer restrictions entering the danger zone than leaving it.

Upon my arrival in Haventown, I was told that the curfew would surely be lifted on the proclaimed date, that 'they cannot strike here', and that the attacks occurred 'down there' or 'not in this county but in the other county' (the county border passes right through my research area). From governmental officials, security forces, and local media outlets, I first faced silence and placation. And from the loudspeakers at the celebration of International Peace Day, I heard the words 'peace means business, peace means development, peace means tourism', accompanied by admonitions to respect each other despite ethnic or religious differences. Not a single public statement about the ongoing attacks.

However, in other, less public spheres of discourse and practice, it soon turned out that the terror was indeed present. Moreover, the way people engaged with it revealed ambivalence and contradictions. And so I was advised to lodge only in the middle of the town and to stay indoors when it was dark, while at the same time I was reassured of my safety. I was told not to type notes into my phone because it would make people suspicious that I was working with the security forces. I witnessed how prices rose because trade had slowed down, or how people hesitated to travel. Or, in the case of some relatively high-ranking officials whom I talked to in private, I was first asked, 'Have you seen someone spraying bullets with your own eyes?' Moments later, again, I was being told that they would and could not take any responsibility for me.

I soon also encountered various rumours that there was 'more' behind the attacks. These ranged from notions of weak and unorganized security forces clashing over smuggling and competition for funding and resources within their own ranks, to suspicions about the involvement of ethnically affiliated groups, and/or local and non-local bigwigs such as politicians, businessmen, security officers or elders that wanted to 'scare away farmers' in order to access their land. The most prominent narrative was that 'it would and should be easy to get rid of the militants, so there must be more to it'.

These narratives could be understood as attempts to assign meaning to apparently meaningless incidents, to create a more stable reality via the discursive (see Oldenburg, 2010). They appear also to have been informed by the lack of trust or even the fear that the people had towards parts of the state apparatus, or their feelings of negligence and vulnerability based on a longstanding experience of political marginalization, top-down (infrastructure) projects, arbitrary police and military actions, and the prevailing insecurity around land tenure and resource extraction. Furthermore, the experience of the displacement of communities that lived in the nearby forest and were flushed out by a military intervention targeting the militants' hideouts, and the suffering of the communities that had been attacked, reminded people of former clashes between pastoralists and farmers. In these clashes, villages were attacked, people killed, and others displaced. Thus, in a setting of mistrust between the people and the state, former experiences of violence were activated and met with new experiences of a different type of violence. This led me to the impression that people (still) had to navigate between denial, horror, and the quest to 'routinize' violence in spite of being 'routinized by violence' (Oldenburg, 2010). Similar to my colleagues, supervisors or the embassies and foreign ministries, the officials' and civilians' response-ability was limited and the town appeared to be caught in a sort of tripartite liminal stage between the containment or repression, the emergency, and the banality of danger.

Such ambiguous, conflicting, and emergent thoughts and feelings about or towards violence, the individuality and positionality of the experience of violence, and its complexity and multifariousness across different scales mean that violence is a 'layered' phenomenon that can be seen through various analytical lenses – for example, one could focus on the political or the psychological aspects of violence (see Oldenburg, 2013; Robben and Nordstrom, 1995). In moving towards Haventown, however, I had arrived at the 'front line' (Robben and Nordstrom, 1995). This meant getting entangled in the 'front line's' visceral situatedness and to approach other, more distanced ways of looking at the violence from there.

In difficult research settings, different methods influence, (in)validate, reform, and bring out one another (Diphoorn, 2012). Furthermore, they serve as 'defence mechanisms' that promise a degree of steadiness and stability amid disorientating conditions (Jackson, 2010). Confronting a difficult setting via methods with some level of rationality can be comforting (Nilan, 2002), yet methods might not (only) create rationality, but also evoke what is commonly perceived as its opposite, namely emotions (Davies, 2010). The consequence is a specific, entangled, and ultimately murky epistemology where one rapidly shifts between different states of thinking, feeling, and acting. For example, I sometimes caught myself measuring distances on maps and calculating the time that the militants would need to cross the area from point X to Y. This then led me to engage with the development of the security governance of the state over time. When I became worried about the inactivity of the state, I again shifted towards the 'front-line' narratives around our personal safety, and the logic, patterns, and aims behind the attacks. Hence oscillating between the different realms of violence based on my 'front-line' situatedness was an everyday, inevitable practice, which reflected and again (re-)informed my methodology and sense of self.

Do You See Something That I Cannot See?

Doing ethnography means to meander and to strike a balance between detachment and immersion; proceeding in a more directed way and collecting as much as possible (Nilan, 2002). In my situation, there was, on the one hand, a strong underlying impetus to evaluate the danger and engage with the affected people with the aim to search for validity, to establish a certain truth about the situation and a basis for my decision to stay or to leave. Yet, on the other hand, I had to rely heavily on everyday life, and on the ways danger and violence surfaced in or were strikingly absent from day-to-day practices. This also related to the specific quality of the violence.

In attempting to understand violence, Giphoorn (2012) proclaims, one has to be a participant in its manifestations. In my fieldsite, there was, however, hardly any experience of violence itself; it existed more as a distinct possibility or omnipresent ambient, background, or anonymous danger (Lee, 1995; Yancey and

Rainwater, 1970). This danger was 'already there' as opposed to situational or presentational danger – a danger caused by the researcher's activities (Lee, 1995; Yancey and Rainwater, 1970). As such, my capacity to reduce the (situational) danger, to assess and validate my own actions and their consequences was very limited. However, even though there was no physical manifestation of violence for the majority of people (there were indeed some people who survived an attack and reported on it), the anxiety about and the fear of violence were socially relevant and formative.[24] I, too, came to be gripped by it, yet in order to assess it, I was not able to draw on a certain, commonly acknowledged object 'out there'. My own perceptions, interpretation, and emotions and those of my interlocutors remained ambivalent and were constantly shifting. But in the absence of a clear object 'out there', these mutable phenomena became the only entry point for me to gain deeper insights into how safe we really were. And so I tried to relate and align my perceptions, interpretation, and emotions to those of others.

Fearing Together, Fearing Alone

The relations and alignments to and with others, if possible at all, were always fragile and fleeting, and they also depended on the ways in which we experienced and communicated them. Anxiety, latent and murky, continuously remained in the shadow of my consciousness as well as in my body, for example in the form of palpitations, insomnia, or the feeling of being perpetually restless. These sensations were not so easily assessable by myself, and difficult to relate to others. And so it was only in retrospect that I came to conclude how I sometimes resonated with and therefore also learned about the restlessness in others; for example when an interlocutor did not want to stroll about the village while talking, as often experienced on my previous visit, but instead steered determinately from one place to another. In the realm of the discursive again, I noticed 'irregularities' in the form of unfinished sentences, hesitant answers, long pauses or contradictory statements. In the moment, I was rarely able to pinpoint or verbally address them, but I experienced both irritation and tacit empathy. Only later, having shifted my attention in the process of writing up my notes (and even more so in revisiting them later on) was I able to relate those 'irregularities' to my interlocutor's anxieties, and reflect on them. The basis to do so was thereby my own experience of anxiety – assembling, among others, hesitancy, flightiness, otherness, and ambivalence – which in situ had been hard for me to grasp (see also Hage, 2009). Conversely, reflecting on the anxiety of others also allowed me to reflect on my own anxiety.

In this case, it was thus ex-post reflections that served as stimuli and led to a cognitivization, assessment, and validation of my preceding experience. This experience had also been possible because it did not need to be pinpointed; because our differences could remain open. Such a tacit understanding beyond words, which might rather divide and distinguish (Jackson, 1989), was enabled by way of a certain non-predicatedness or unconsciousness, immersion and bodylines. That said, some doubts remained: 'Did I interpret those experiences correctly? Did my interlocutors and I really experience a tacit communality?'

In more predicated communications, which were also revolving around fear rather than anxiety, such doubts were easier to confront, yet the outspoken communications often served to also painfully reaffirm the differences between people as well as the inexplicability of the situation. One such example was the question of how militants target their victims. It turned out that different people had very different perceptions of the extent to which they or others were at risk. Some felt quite safe as members of an international first aid NGO; some felt that Christians would be more at risk than Muslims; others claimed that the militants did not distinguish much between beliefs; and I voiced my concerns about being an especially attractive kidnapping victim. All of our own positionalities entailed the possibility of situational danger. Yet, they were more part of who we were than what we did, and as such they appeared far from manageable. And so these discussions on the risks of being targeted highlighted again and again the limitations of fearing together, to speak about fear, to protect each other, and to establish a shared, stable perception of and a discourse on the danger and our emotions (see also Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990).

In addition, however, there were some instances when fearing was something shared. For example, Jonas and I would often indulge in reminiscences about our formerly widespread motorbike trips through the area, lauding how safe we used to feel. Sharing the impression that we could no longer embark on the same travels because it had become too dangerous, we were thinking back, and this reassessment of our experiences resulted in a shared imaginary of what would hopefully be once again. Our shared past experiences and our common imagination of a future also allowed us to experience fearing together.

Drawing on these examples, I would argue that the experience of fear and anxiety, even in the absence of

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[24] Both fear and anxiety are enacted and experienced with and through our mindful body as something we simultaneously experience and do, which includes the body, the social, material, and semiotic (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987; Scheer, 2012). Yet, a (gradual) differentiation between them appears useful for inquiring into attention and habitualization, as well as intersubjectivity. In this light, I take fear as being something more directed towards an immediate and cognitively classifiable threat, and anxiety as being something that relates more to an apprehensive or anticipated, vague and often conflictual or ambiguous threat, which can have an insidious character (Sadock, Sadock and Ruiz, 2014; Sylvers, Lilienfield and LaPrairie, 2011; Blanchard et al., 2008).

physical violence must not but indeed can be shared – in which case it fosters intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity has been described as a shared judgement of aspects of the world between two or more persons, or as overlapping perspectives on the life-world that entail the possibility of trading places, which emerges through the simultaneity of experience, for example when actors participate in the same practice (Kesselring, 2015; Förster, 2011). Intersubjectivity can therefore also mean to establish moments of a commonly accepted reality and to test and (in)validate one's own perspective so as to align it with those of others. Over time, intersubjectivity can lead to sedimentation, routinization, and habitualization – which are themselves processes of testing, (in)validating, and then incorporating or spacing out certain aspects of life for oneself.

Consequently, when we fear together over time, we can go through both a change in our personal and interpersonal experiences (i.e. we can experience, deepen, and prolong intersubjectivity) and a change in the fearing itself (i.e. sedimentation, routinization, habitualization, and loss of attentiveness). Thereby, fear can morph into something chronic, or anxiety.

Some authors have stressed the 'volatility' of danger and violence while at the same time problematizing the fieldworker's ability to become accustomed to them. Green (1994; 1999: 59), for example, notes that 'subjectively, the mundane experience of chronic fear wears down one's sensibility to it' and that she and her interlocutors were 'swinging wildly between controlled hysteria and tacit acquiescence' (these words are reminiscent of Taussig, 1992). Oldenburg (2013) recalls how her interlocutors' contradictory practices, relativizing language, and ironic comments signified and constituted 'a normal state of emergency', and how she started to imitate their behaviour in order to tame the challenging conditions of her research. And Hage (2009) states that the more deeply we are immersed in the 'emotional borderline', the more (emotional) effort it takes to remove ourselves from participation and shift to the observational/analytical plane.

My attempt to make fieldwork work largely foregoes what Green (1994; 1995) or Oldenburg (2013) were experiencing over time. I was still in a mode of searching for control, testing and validating different relations and positions. As I encountered an array of perceptions and opinions, I also (still) experienced rapid and severe shifts between different emotions, thoughts, and actions. The choices, opportunities, and offers both between others and myself, and within myself, were manifold. Moments of interpersonal and personal coherence as well as fragmentation were always ephemeral. And intersubjectivity remained forever fragile and was continually ruptured. Rather than a regular pendular movement between different states of being that would be comparable to the ethnographer's 'swing', it thus appeared as if I had (still) been caught up in an individual, volatile, arrhythmic, and shapeshifting state of being in itself.[25]

Coda

In ethnographic fieldwork, there are always many situated uncertainties and unpredictable variables. These are also relevant because the self, with all its senses, is part and parcel of the scientific endeavour, and while the process of trial and error is inevitable its effects can be extremely far-reaching, irreversible, and non-reproducible. In fieldwork under the possibility of fire, one might have just a single chance. Consequently, all decisions and actions take on a heightened relevance and amplitude, all the while remaining partial and somewhat suspicious. Furthermore, all experiences can potentially be linked to the danger. One keeps an eye out for danger, or, like a black hole, feels constantly pulled towards it. Even more, this black hole might appear more as a sort of phantasm than as a clear object. The difficulties in identifying, ordering, and communicating about and making sense of danger might thus even lead one to doubt one's own perception of reality (Green, 1999).

When the danger is not so immediate and objectively present, but is rather present-absent, bound to unpredictable actions by unknown actors, different people are and/or feel differentially targeted or exposed, largely independently of their capabilities or their doings and non-doings. Narratives, explanations, and strategies diversify, while categories such as Muslims, Christians, People of Colour, Whites, Women, Men, Pastoralists, Farmers, Anthropologists, Interlocutors, Assistants, Civilians, NGO workers, or Military personnel become reinforced, all of which contributes to the fragmentation of sociality. This fragmentation, in turn, further hampers the response-ability and the establishment of common perceptions and interpretations of, or strategies towards, danger.[26]

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[25] Hage (2009, after Spinoza, 2000) describes such an aggravated and accelerated form of the ethnographer's 'swing' as 'vacillation' – a product of contradictory strivings for joy.
[26] In contexts of a less present-absent threat, common mitigation strategies alongside interlocutors or direct negotiations with perpetrators can indeed be possible (Rodgers, 2007; Oldenburg, 2010; 2013; Dolnik, 2011).

In such a situation, sedimentation, habitualization, and routinization can be key (Blanchard et al., 2008). On the one hand, shared extreme experiences in the past might (still) function as a future-oriented bond and as a useful form of guidance (Geertz, 1983). On the other hand, sedimentation, habitualization, and routinization can further be expanded when a past that somehow resounds in the present becomes activated, and when emotions take their cue from what has been (Beatty, 2010). Yet, those who do not share this past experience, or who are not completely involved in re-evoking, re-(in)validating, and re-formulating it, might also not be able to fully relate to it (Beatty, 2010). And those again who unsuccessfully try to find, validate, and stabilize a 'truth' on the one hand, but do not need to stay in place on the other hand, might end up leaving – such as me, the anthropologist with European citizenship. Hence, especially when positionalities are diverse and the danger and violence remain present-absent, it is not the case that one stable 'truth' is established, but rather an array of emergent assemblages of possible 'truths' that allow for (shared) moments of living and moving on or might also drive some away.

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