

# Prologue

From the beginning of December 2018, I spent four months in Bibiclat – a large, sprawling village in the rice basin of Nueva Ecija in the Philippines, just over 130 miles north-east of Manila. This is where my wife was born and brought up, and where, after working for many years in Hong Kong, she had decided to build her own home. I went back to her village twice over the next year, and spent a further nine weeks there (and am here again for another five months now). This book describes the people I've met in Bibiclat, and the things that they've said and done in their everyday lives there.

Although these weren't my first trips to the Philippines, they were the first occasion there when I found myself confined to one place and obliged to make sense of an alien world in which I was living with my Filipina wife and various members of her extended family. The only way I could do this successfully was by making use of my training as a social anthropologist.

I should perhaps add, by way of introduction to those who don't already know me or my work, that I am Anglo-Irish, trained in anthropology at London University, and have been coming and going to Japan for well over half a century. It is in Japan that most of my previous anthropological fieldwork has been conducted – primarily on folk-art pottery, art marketing, advertising, incense production and international fashion magazines – but the last research project took me also to Hong Kong, Paris and New York. I've also done research on book fairs and other kinds of trade fairs and festivals in England, Germany and Hong Kong (where I have lived and taught for over a decade), and written about a ceramist in Denmark and her 'creative encounter' with Royal Copenhagen.

As you might anticipate from my somewhat chequered career, life in Bibiclat wasn't totally alien, at least not in terms of personal experience. I had lived in a remote country valley in Kyushu, Japan, for four years back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I did my doctoral research on the interaction between a pottery community

and the Japanese *mingei*, or folk art, movement, and also wrote an ethnographic diary of my life in the valley (a book which I can still read with a little pleasure). But in Japan I'd had the advantage of being able to speak, read and write Japanese fairly fluently, and so could engage in all sorts of conversations directly with the local inhabitants among whom I lived. In Bibiclat, even though – I was assured – local people had all been to school and taken classes in English, I discovered that very few of them could converse with ease in my own language. They preferred to speak Tagalog and usually struggled with English, which they would laughingly say made their 'noses bleed'.

And so I found myself having to learn the basics of Tagalog. Luckily for me, though, this language includes a lot of Spanish loanwords, as well as whole phrases in English inserted by speakers seemingly at random. This has on occasion allowed me to follow the general gist, if not the detail, of a conversation, which I have then had others elaborate on at greater length in English. It's not a perfect way to carry out research in a foreign language and country, but it's the best I've been able to come up with during this past year. Hopefully, one day, I'll reach a level of ability in Tagalog that has served me so well in Japanese, and perhaps write a more analytical book about Philippine society.

Because I've been participating in everyday life and observing how people around me interact with one another, I've often found myself reflecting on different aspects of life here in this village. Still, as an ethnographer obliged to adapt to people and circumstance, and to making both the strange familiar and the familiar strange, I have on occasion forgotten just how alien some customs and events are to others. Friends back in England, for example, raised the occasional sceptical eyebrow when I sent them extracts from my journal. Somewhat surprisingly for someone brought up on Clifford Geertz's 'Notes on the Balinese cockfight', my description of cockfights in the Philippines appalled my vegetarian friends. So let me warn those of you with similar concerns to skip that section – although to do so will mean your missing out on an important theoretical reflection on sacrifice.

And yet, at the same time, my description of the cockfight is a good example of how the familiar – an ordinary chicken – becomes a rather strange bird in a different environment (although it is totally familiar to those concerned in that environment). The same can be said, I think, of my descriptions of, among other things, circumcision, migrant workers and Valentine's Day – all of which are present in our everyday lives in Europe and the United States, but which we tend to take for granted until we find them reappearing in a strange environment where people behave in somewhat unfamiliar ways.

The cockfight is, in fact, a good example of how everyday objects, actions and events are constantly oscillating between familiarity and strangeness in our lives. When I first read Geertz's description, I was struck by the strangeness of the event. Why should people want to encourage their chickens to fight? And why chickens? Why not dogs? But, in the context of my study of anthropology at the time, I was becoming familiar with this and other accounts of strange cultural activities around the world. This familiarity led me to overlook how strange my own account must seem to others not versed in our discipline and made me, too, see it again as somehow strange.

At the time I encountered the cockfight, two months into my stay in Bibiclat, sacrifice struck me as a potentially useful concept, or trope, with which to understand other aspects of Philippine society. It seemed to fit in with what I'd already learned about male circumcision and Filipinos working overseas, so I developed the idea. You can imagine, then, how pleased I was with myself as an ethnographer when I later discovered through Internet and university library searches that other researchers had, in one context or another, said much the same. This encouraged me to compare my observations here with those of other scholars writing about other customs among other peoples in other parts of the world, as well as in the Philippines itself.

This brings me to the crux of why I've written this book. Over the years, when doing fieldwork – whether among folk art potters, or incense manufacturers, in an advertising agency, or travelling round the northern hemisphere talking to the editors of international fashion magazines – I have, like many of my colleagues, always made two kinds of notes: one dealing with the 'serious stuff' (the complex relationships among those involved in the production, marketing and aesthetic appraisal of folk art pottery, for example); the other a journal of casual observations (about life in a Japanese pottery village and the valley in which it was located). Later, back home, when going through both types of notes, I've found that the 'casual observations' of my journals have sometimes provided pointers for the direction that my 'serious stuff' (theoretical analyses) might usefully take. In other words, these two kinds of records – field notes and journal – are not separate, but complement each other and are, to my way of thinking, of equal theoretical importance.

As a result, budding anthropologists, as well as their seasoned seniors, should, I think, pay much more attention to, and be prepared to publish and seriously discuss, ethnography in the raw. Alas! Although there is a developing interest in anthropologists' styles of writing, this isn't often the case. Within a discipline devoted to

participant observation as a method of study – a method now taken up by numerous other disciplines – it is, ironically, the ‘serious stuff’ that gets read and discussed *ad nauseam*, while those casual observations of daily life ‘in the field’ that enable the discipline’s theorising tend to be ignored entirely or reduced to a mechanical chapter on research methods in a monograph.

This jettisoning of raw detail obtained during fieldwork can give rise, I think, to a kind of intellectual masochism that, as anthropologists, we could well do without. It also produces a mass of books that are in large part unreadable because of their theoretical jargon. (Non-native English-speaking anthropologists writing in English as their second language tend to be the exception to this general rule.) In our disregard, occasionally contempt, for our real life experiences as ethnographers, we not only give our discipline a bad name; we allow other disciplines to hijack the concept of participant observation and ‘thick description’ and mould it to their own, often rather shallow, ends.

First impressions are always important when doing fieldwork – whether in a rural community like Bibiclat, or a business corporation like Asatsū, the Japanese advertising agency I studied back in 1990. These impressions need to be recorded at once before what is at first novel becomes routine and later overlooked, even ignored. This is because they often have a bearing on later discoveries or discussions. The five o’clock dirges broadcast from the tower of the local Catholic church in Bibiclat, for example, act as a precursor to what I later have to say about religious institutions and beliefs. Similarly, the crowing of cocks all over the village before dawn – why are there so many cocks crowing? – heralds my description and analysis of cockfights. At the time, though, I had no idea of the importance of either. I was merely, like the oyster, annoyed by their noisy noise when all I wanted to do was sleep.

Another set of observations worth recording right from the start of fieldwork is what used to be referred to, a bit negatively, as ‘palm tree anthropology’. What is it about the place in which you’re conducting your fieldwork that makes it interesting? And in what ways interesting? What kind of people live there? Why are they there in the first place, and what keeps them there? Questions like these can throw light on community, family, friendship and other forms of organisational structure, as well as on work patterns and larger issues of financial wherewithal and the economy.

A second aspect of palm tree anthropology concerns people. What kind of people do you meet in your fieldwork location? If we accept the etymological definition of anthropology as ‘the study of people’s

words', then who these people are whom you talk to during fieldwork (those objectified 'informants') has a bearing on everything that, as ethnographer, you have yourself to say. What encourages them to tell you what they tell you? What ulterior motives (if any) may they have? Why on earth should they want to spend their time talking to you in the first place? And how and why do they interact with one another in the ways that they do? Early character sketches can be filled in as you get to know someone better. Well-formed characters can illuminate what might well have otherwise been turgid theorising in a monograph.

This sort of approach is what I like to refer to as ethnography in the raw. It is the fruit not of participant observation so much as of observant participation – a transition in methodological practice that every fieldworker should aspire to, but which usually ends up being hard earned. As I've recounted previously when writing about my fieldwork experiences in the Japanese ceramic art world and an advertising agency, this shift from participant observation to observant participation brings about a parallel movement in both activities and understandings of those being studied, from what Erving Goffman called 'front stage' to 'back stage'.

In Bibiclat, precisely because I was immediately incorporated into a Philippine family which had spent the best part of half a century embedded in village life, I found myself at once back stage as I carried out my ethnography in the raw. However, unlike almost all of my earlier work, this book consists only of the 'casual' kind of observations of everyday life in a Luzon village and does not pretend to offer a detailed objective analysis of family structure and kinship terms, land ownership, irrigation and labour exchange, classificatory and political systems, and religious beliefs and practices, although all of these topics (plus several more) make their appearance on the stage on which life in Bibiclat is performed. What the book does do, I think, is show how such casual observations can give rise to unanticipated insights and 'lateral' reflections, which themselves can provide the impetus for more sustained theoretical analyses of different aspects of Philippine society. If the following pages succeed in doing this, I will have done my job as an ethnographer, if not as an anthropologist (and, yes, I differentiate between the two).

This book, then, is for two kinds of readers. First, it is for students of anthropology who wonder what it must be like to carry out fieldwork in a foreign country when they have an incomplete grasp of its people's language. It reveals the curiosities of an unfamiliar culture, the fieldworker's frustrations and delights, and the ways in which

different forms of activity open themselves up to unanticipated kinds of anthropological analysis.

But this book is also for a second kind of reader who is not necessarily an (aspiring) anthropologist, but who retains a sense of curiosity about life in general. It is for intelligent laymen and women who are interested in learning about what it's like to live in a country whose existence reaches their consciousness only when they hear about a volcanic eruption or a major typhoon striking the islands; or encounter a Filipina nurse in their local hospital; or decide to hire a nanny to look after their young children. These days, too, President Duterte's drugs war and support of extradition killings also get a few mentions in the media, but that's about it when it comes to knowledge of the Philippines in England and the rest of Europe, and even the United States (which has a large Filipino-American community).

In another life, I used to have fairly lengthy conversations with a curious, intelligent and politically aware Greek island baker of the kind I imagine this second kind of reader to be. One day, he was asking me about a book I was then writing. Would he be able to read it?

That question stopped me in my tracks. It changed my attitude to both the writing of anthropology and my academic career, as I decided there and then to forsake grand theorising and let common sense prevail.

As Yiorgos mused philosophically, while putting a cheese pie into a paper bag for me:

'Books are written to be read, Brian, not written in the head.'

Yea, verily.

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Bibiclat  
27 January 2020