

The Expeditions Malta summer school for international students and scholars: some outlines

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A B S T R A C T / R É S U M É

This article offers an insight in fieldwork experience Expeditions had in Malta. It especially focuses on the authors' work with students during the yearly summer field school for anthropologists. The fieldwork of Expeditions covers a numerous amount of angles, going from architectural anthropology to the anthropology of tourism, from archaeology to the anthropology of food, thus acknowledging the inner hybridisation in the science of anthropology. Reflecting on these experiences, the authors sum up some basic insights in anthropological fieldwork.

Cet article réfléchit sur base d'expériences de terrain vécues par Expeditions à Malte. En particulier le travail avec les étudiants pendant les cours d'anthropologie en été est mis en évidence. Les travaux sur le terrain d'Expeditions comprennent un éventail de différent angles thématiques, à partir de l'anthropologie architecturale jusqu'à l'anthropologie du tourisme, de l'archéologie jusqu'à l'anthropologie de la nourriture. De cette façon, l'hybridisation inhérente à l'anthropologie est reconnue. Dans le contexte de ces expériences, l'article résume quelques notions de base des travaux anthropologiques sur le terrain.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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The concept of a summer field school

In the last ten years of the Expeditions research unit island cultures were an echoing subject in our fieldwork. Crete, Barbados, Jamaica ... they all proved to be outstanding places for ethnological research. In our contact with students and young anthropologists all over the world we ascertained the idealising presumption that island cultures were the summit of anthropological research. Of course it is not hard to understand and even to sympathize with exotic locations. The perception of the solitary and secluded geographical situation of an island, together with its often relatively small population feeds an underlying feeling that "every island is yet to be explored". Although this attitude might seem naive at first sight, it is a good foundation for any scientist's mentality.

The economic reality of finding employment as a young anthropologist in which one can find scientific and intellectual satisfaction, endorses even more the general feeling that doing valuable anthropological research on an island is something unattainable. Nevertheless, most anthropologists who performed research in such a framework acknowledged it to be an important step in their scientific development. Each researcher we met had her or his own explanation for this phenomenon, going from ascetic and personal reasons to the belief that exploring an island is an ontogenetic repetition of the phylogenesis of anthropology as a science. Some of them even describe island cultures as “the petri dishes of the anthropological science”. It might be a nice metaphor, but of course it is a flaw to assume that the geographical isolation of an island makes it “sterile”.

During the years of research and networking with different research units and universities the idea of starting a summer school for young anthropologists and other social and cultural scientists grew. The island of Malta, e.g. the Maltese sister islet of Gozo (30.000 inhabitants, 67,4 km²) drew attention for a number of reasons. First of all within Expeditions we had quite some field experience involving Mediterranean cultures by the work of Marc Vanlangendonck. The foregoing research also led us to many contacts with local authorities and prominent people of the Maltese society. By constantly interacting with these local institutions and people during various research setups, the idea of starting a summer school grew.

One of our keys of a summer school is to bring together different people with shared interests. Especially when they come from different universities and different academic backgrounds, the process that is generated has a synergetic effect which broadens the scope of all the participants. The concept of summer schools is more embedded in the Anglo-Saxon academic customs than it is in European universities. The reason for this is uncertain, but it led to the fact that almost all of our applications in the 2006 project came from the USA or UK. In the second edition already 40% of the applicants came from European universities.

The Maltese archipelago as a research subject

“Why Malta as a subject for a summer school?” is an often posed question.

First of all, as an island culture the Maltese archipelago formed a pivot point between the African and European continent. It was and is a crossroad of many traditions but is still contained in rather small geographical boundaries.

Nevertheless, as a nation-state, it still has the contrasts and oppositions one would expect on larger geographical scales. The most striking is maybe the distinction between Gozitans and Maltese people who consider themselves very strong as different ethnicities. So all the ingredients of culture are there and on a relatively small geographical scale.

Secondly, although Maltese is the common language on the islands, about 95% of its population speaks English. This makes it for (young) researchers a very accessible field. Although one must acknowledge the counter-effect of this: students might be easily driven to the presumption that it is a Western society.

Finally, although it is very well structured (or because of that), Maltese culture is a very dynamic one. It's not hard to notice changes from year to year. When talking to locals about their island, testimonies of recent alterations constantly pop up. Nevertheless, the turbulent history of colonization of an island on the crossroad of North African and European influences led to a strong and rigid underlying social structure with a constant dynamic of emerging subcultures. This metaphorical “socio-cultural constellation” makes Maltese culture highly adaptive.

Tourism as cultural dynamics

The most recent “colonisation” of the Maltese archipelago is that of tourism. Of course in the strict sense one cannot use the term colonisation for this phenomenon, but in the framework of this article and Maltese history the comparison does make some sense. Tourism of course is not about one nation state that opposes itself as dominant culture towards a colonized country. But the same effects of acculturation and “deculturation” do take place on a smaller scale. And since tourism is Malta's main industry, this happens in such a high frequency that the phenomenon has a very profound impact on daily life. Still, the underlying Maltese socio-cultural structure is sort of used to this and in a way is “hardened” to this constant clash of subcultures.

The constant cultural dynamics created within the field of tourism is very obvious and of course (almost by definition) very accessible for foreigners. In the Maltese tourism industry there are no very strict boundaries between locals and tourists that are when only looking at the surface. If we take for example the numerous dive-shops who organize scuba diving trips and provide independent divers with equipment, one sees that although the shop-owner is usually Maltese (or Gozitan), the staff comes from practically anywhere.

These foreign dive-instructors live for three to eight months on the island to work there and most of them have been doing this for several years. They can be seen the mediators between the host and guest culture, between locals and tourists. In a way they function as “cultural brokers”.

Putting it like this it might seem very easy for a young anthropologist to go outside “the tourist bubble”. But three factors have to be taken into account in this presumption. First, young ambitious researchers have the tendency to want to go to deep into “tradition” or what they call “the real culture”. Although cultural dynamics are happening before their eyes they don’t seem to acknowledge this as relevant. All things considered this is very strange attitude. It is comparable with an engineer who is trying to understand the mechanism of a diesel engine by looking at the blueprints, while in his or hers back a mechanic is busy tuning a working engine. You don’t have to dig for culture if you are standing in the middle of it.

A good illustration of this issue is the fieldwork of Ian Tangert (student of the Summer School in 2006) that was performed during the 2006 project. While trying to study the tradition of wine making he tried to get in contact with the major key-persons of the winemaking industry. Of course their insights and information was valuable for his research. But the most important step he took was in slowly approaching the field and being able to drink home-made wine together with the men and women who made it. When at the end of his research he said goodbye, his hosts gave him a bottle of their home-made wine. One might call the pride of these people about their wine something that is staged, but this staged piece of culture still was given to him, not sold.

Related to this, secondly, lots of researchers still seem to make an absolute distinction between “the staged culture” and “the real culture”. The staged culture is what is being sold to tourists and is not relevant for the cultural reality. But they don’t realize that it is impossible to make a clear distinction between “staged culture” and “real culture”. The reality, as we are able to know it, is staged.

In this case we must refer to the papers of Sara Rich (student of the Summer School in 2006, member of the staff in 2007) about the preservation and presentation of Neolithic and maritime heritage. By maintaining heritage, whether maritime or Neolithic, traditions are continually incorporated into the ever-changing modern Gozitan culture. They are renewed and revisited, and even if the primary purpose of such is for the attraction of cultural tourism, the local inhabitants are still responding constantly to that influx of stimuli.

Third, an often made mistake is that the students/scholars consider themselves as neutral observers and don’t consider the fact that they also have an impact on “the object” (here, in fact, the subject(s)) they are studying. In anthropology one cannot create a sterile lab situation in other exact sciences like chemistry or physics. One of the most important steps every anthropologist has to make is to become profoundly aware of his or hers place and impact in the reality of the object they are trying to study. Instead of seeing the people they are studying as “research subjects,” they learn to see them as collaborators in their research.

The fieldwork of one of the participants encountered this problem. While trying to study the tradition of lace making in Malta, Adrienne Foster (student of the Summer School in 2006) realized that lace production in Malta actually was “an introduced tradition from the outside” at a certain point in history, so it could not be “real culture”. At first she was sort of disillusioned by this discovery, but while going deeper into the subject she gradually acknowledged the fact that not only the source of tradition is worthwhile, but also the dynamics of the process up until the current day. Her being there and talking to the actors in the field also had an impact on how these people looked at their own work; her being in the field encouraged people to explain why things are the way they are and thus strengthening their own insights in their traditions. Tradition is passing on the flame, not worshipping the ashes.

Cultural dynamics and the in-field attitude

One of the main focus points of the leading staff during the summer school is working with the students on their in-field attitude. How does one approach the field? Hereby stressing the value of a constant self-evaluation of ones attitude and the impact it has on the field. To this problem no formal solutions can be posed, only a patient pragmatic approach, in-field experience and an attitude of self-evaluation can be a foundation for a qualitative approach.

A very good example of this process is provided by the fieldwork of Adam Thompson (student of the Summer School in 2006, at present working in the Pacific). As an anthropologist with an archaeological focus he was interested in the building of dry-stone walls on the Maltese islands. Instead of studying the subject from the outside, he tried to participate in the living tradition of the building of these walls. Starting of with the right attitude he hiked around the island for several days, virtually talking to anyone who crossed his path. In one of his conversations with some locals he asked about the age of certain wall in a village and got a variety of

answers, going from 500 years old to only a few years old. In stead of concluding that the tradition or meaning of these walls for locals is benign, he realized that the mere fact that different answers were given (and the certainty by which they were given) in itself is meaningful. In only three weeks time he succeeded in actually participating in the building of one of these walls. The only tools he had was his attitude that was built two foundations: patience and decisiveness, and the ability to choose when they were needed.

In the end building this attitude comes down to accepting the fact that there is no distinction between the self (as a person) and the staged-self (as an anthropologist in the field). The question about the self and the staged self is comparable to that of the chicken and the egg: the only meaningful explanation is that the self is the same thing as the staged self.

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