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What Will be Left of Those Years? The Ethnographic Archives in Poland in the Context of Contemporary Anthropological Criticism

Abstract

The subject of the present article is a reflection on the epistemological value of ethnographic materials collected by ethnologists in academic archives, especially during the period of the People's Republic of Poland. The author disagrees with Filip Wróblewski, who, in one of his articles, radically criticises not only the scientific value of the aforementioned archives, but more broadly the activities of the researchers themselves at that time. Therefore, from the large catalogue of problems that emerge from reflection on these archives, the author first focuses on the possibilities of using these materials in current research, including attempts at re-contextualisation, as well as the ethical issues related to today's archival methods and access rules.

Keywords: anthropology, archive, ethic, fieldwork, People's Republic of Poland

> I tried to imagine which index to consult, what department to decipher, how best to control the chaos of what seemed an infinite chain of documents.
>
> (Dirks 2002: 47)

> […] clear distinction must be made between the problem of archiving as such and access to archived material.
>
> (Kazimierska 2014: 236)

Sources kept in academic ethnographic archives in Poland are valued by specialists in many academic disciplines navigating the world of "small places, large issues" (Eriksen 1993). The unique 'local knowledge' contained in field materials, photographic film rolls, drawings and maps proves interesting not only to experts

in cultural studies, linguists, historians, art scholars, scholars of religious studies or geographers, but also researchers representing disciplines further removed from anthropology, such as biology, botany, architecture, economy, etc. Interpreted in alternative ways, ethnographic sources – particularly old photographs – become a source of inspiration and material for creators of socially engaged art, who expose the models of colonial and post-colonial doctrine hidden within them (Tomas 2012; Ferrara 2012). Materials produced by ethnographers also seem invaluable in the context of the rapidly growing interest in the past, centred around people discovering the cultural heritage of their own community (Kowalski 2013; Macdonald 2013). Considered an important component of *one's own heritage*, these materials become a symbolic link connecting the living and the dead. The authority of the institution that keeps these records (academy, museum, archive) or the ethnographer recognised as a professional scholar eventually makes the sources function as a kind of evidence testifying to the *authenticity* of its content (Karpińska 2014: 209–210; Zeitlyn 2000: 2; 2022: 11).

My informant said that…

Paradoxically, as ethnographic materials generate more and more interest, anthropologists themselves have begun to see them as highly questionable. Severe criticism is directed especially at ethnographic interviews and photographs collected during the academic fieldwork regarded (from the perspective of de-colonising and post-colonial thought) as testifying to hegemonic practices ethnographers directed towards Others. Works borrowing not only the argumentation, but also the characteristic sociolect of anthropologists specialising in the aforementioned trend of anthropological criticism (Asad 1975; Stoler 2009) have already been written in Poland, attempting to diagnose the state of Polish ethnographic archive keeping. An example of this kind of criticism is, for example, Filip Wróblewski's article *Archiwa a etnografia* (eng. *Archives and Ethnography*), published in one of the most important Polish sociological journals "Kultura i Społeczeństwo" (eng. "Culture and Society") in 2019. With no regard to the geo-political context in which scholars worked in the People's Republic of Poland, ethnographers from that period are described, among other things, as "functionaries of the knowledge regime"[1] (Wróblewski 2019: 51) occupying a privileged position within the system. Paradoxically, however, ethnography in the communist period was practised in a number of ways, depending on the specific time, academic centre and the personal choices made by scholars themselves. It is clearly apparent that e.g. in the Chair of Ethnography of Slavs of the Jagiellonian University, some of its employees

[1] Translator's note: Unless otherwise stated, all citations from non-English-language sources were translated solely for the purpose of the present article.

conducted their research in a manner that was practically subverting the ideological principles enforced in the academia at the time. Since the 1970s they regularly disassociated themselves from the strict materialism endorsed in that period and the 'class struggle' omnipresent in the Communist Party newspeak, focusing instead on the world of the social imagination, beliefs, myths and symbols, drawing inspiration from the politically neutral semiotics or phenomenology. Moreover, it was then that ethnologist Anna Zadrożyńska from Warsaw University published her habilitation book *Homo faber i homo ludens* [Homo faber and homo ludens], describing the bleak reality of State Agricultural Farms, Ludwik Stomma was working on *Antropologia kultury wsi polskiej XIX wieku* [Anthropology of Polish rural culture in the 19th century], and Czesław Robotycki struggled with censors while preparing his book on the norms and rules in the Jurgów region for publication. The official decided to 'erase' any and all passages that were inconvenient for the ruling regime, and which mentioned the complicated relations between Polish and Slovak residents of the region.[2] While the issue of the political entanglement of Polish anthropology does indeed require a detailed analysis, it should be approached in an unbiased manner and from many angles. Instead of sarcastic judgment and biting remarks made from the comfortable position of a contemporary critic, it would be more useful to offer a thorough overview (in the context of the particular time period, location, political climate and culture of a given institution) of the work of specific scholars and their oeuvre. Thus, I consider Zofia Sokolewicz's statement about the responsibility of ethnographers, not ethnography, to be a very valuable guideline for all those who wish to tackle this issue (Sokolewicz 2005: 6).

Apart from ethnographers, post-colonial criticism is also directed at archives as such, dismissing them as "obstructing", "appropriating", "oppressive", "hermetic" institutions "inherently inscribed into relations of dominance" (Wróblewski 2019: 48, 57, 59). In their eagerness to denounce, critics levy charges that are downright grotesque, for instance when archives are accused of "suspending o r delaying the use of materials [stored therein]", which allegedly leads to their "confinement", "**obsolescence**" [sic!] and transformation into secondary sources (Wróblewski 2019:: 56). Does the essence of archiving not lie in collecting and storing documents that are a trace of **past** events, encounters and conversations? Does an 'obsolete' source signify one not fit to be reused (or reinterpreted), like a tube of dried-up glue? Who has the authority to define the span of its shelf life, and by what criteria? Uncompromising supporters of presentism should perhaps be reminded of the still accurate (though written over eighty years ago) statements by Marc Bloch:

[2] The story of his struggles with the censor when publishing his doctoral dissertation was recounted to me by professor Robotycki during one of our meetings in 2012.

> With some reason, perhaps, the man of the age of electricity and of the airplane feels himself far removed from his ancestors. With less wisdom, he has been disposed to conclude that they have ceased to influence him. There is also a modernist twist inherent in the engineering mind. Is a mastery of old Volta's ideas about galvanism necessary to run or repair a dynamo? By what is unquestionably a lame analogy, but one which readily imposes itself upon more than one machine-dominated mentality, it is easy to think that an analysis of their antecedents is just as useless for the understanding and solving of the great human problems of the moment (Bloch 1964: 36).

> Finally, what of those things past which seem to have lost all authority over the present – faiths which have vanished without a trace, social forms which have miscarried, techniques which have perished? Would anyone think that, even among these, there is nothing useful for his understanding? That would be to forget that there is no true understanding without a certain range of comparison; provided, of course, that that comparison is based upon differing and, at the same time, related realities (Bloch 1964: 42).

As far as Polish archives are concerned, the majority of ethnographic research materials produced in the communist period and the first few years after the political transformation indubitably represents a different, 'pre-Clifford' paradigmatic model. The content and form of these works seem a far cry from the methodological paradigms currently dominant in anthropology, which have been introduced nearly forty years ago following the reflexive turn (Crapanzano 1982; Dweyer 1982; Rabinow 1977). At first glance, the presence of the ethnographer is hardly discernible in these documents, save for the very fact of their conducting interviews, preparing transcripts (with more or less diligence), and signing the works with their name. The dry description seems utterly devoid of traces of what we now call anthropological experience (Hastrup 1995). While some information on the emotional reactions of the interlocutors may at times be found in brackets, no indication is ever given about similar reactions from the researcher. Furthermore, the practice of presenting field interviews followed in Polish ethnography until the mid-1990s not only lacked any description of the situation in which the interaction between the researcher and 'the researched' took place (which would now contribute to understanding the circumstances in which anthropological knowledge was produced), but often edited the words of the interlocutors already when transcribing, to make the 'coarse' form more smooth. The unique discursive and linguistic layer of the interlocutors' utterances was thus irretrievably erased, a fact which – from our contemporary perspective – indeed seems a tremendous loss.

This being said, one should not be too hasty in questioning the value of the mentioned archives. Might such criticism be but a cloak hiding the wish to find the original (i.e. perfect) record of the research? Are we not succumbing to "archive fever" (Derrida 1998), perceiving archival sources as a reflection of a lost reality? Or perhaps, following Clifford Geertz's argumentation, we are dealing with yet another model of the practice of ethnography, this time translated into a petrified written description. After all, ethnography is

> […] like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript-foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior (Geertz 1973: 10).

No consent clause

Evaluations of the content of archival material aside, harsh criticism is also directed at any methods of its acquisition that do not conform to ethical standards adopted in present-day anthropology. The 'arch-critics' representing the most radical wing of anthropology not only renounce the very practice of interviewing as unethical, but openly talk of the need to close or even destroy archives as a gesture of the ultimate crackdown on the so-called 'dirty ethnography'. Archival collections, which contain large quantities of sensitive data, should naturally be given special protection, for not only ethical but also legal reasons. This is why some anthropologists programmatically consider their own home archive to be the only place that guarantees the safety of the materials gathered in the field (Pool 2017). Furthermore, documents not supplemented with a formal, i.e. **written** proof of the interlocutor's ('informant's') consent not only to the interview, but also to sharing its contents, should in principle be banned from circulation. From the perspective of post-colonial criticism, often transplanted to Polish anthropology mechanically, without regard for the realities in which ethnographers had to work in the communist period, the fact that field materials contain no information regarding consent is treated as proof of using unethical – i.e. violent – practices towards interlocutors. The older generation of ethnographers, at whom such criticism is directed, most likely find these accusations difficult to accept, especially if they had contested the communist system by engaging in opposition activity.[3] Given the context of that time and place, the unwritten agreement between the ethnographer and their interlocutor was something that naturally fit the inherently paradoxical reality of real socialism. It was a period in which the criteria of *normalcy* in everyday human relations were set by the principle of cultural intimacy, with its avoidance of official regulations of the system (Narojek 1996), including the obligation to sign formal written (and therefore inspiring mistrust) declarations of consent for the interview, which even contemporary interlocutors sometimes find puzzling. Moreover, obtaining the informed consent does not always guarantee that the ar-

[3] For instance, a group of employees of the Chair of Ethnography of Slavs (presently the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Jagiellonian University) was actively involved in opposition activities in the 1970s and 1980s. Several of them, such as Czesław Robotycki, Zbigniew Fijak and Jausz Barański were arrested during martial law for their dissident activities.

chived data will be treated with due sensitivity and respect towards the interlocutor, as Kaja Kazimierska rightly points out (2014: 234).

The absence of the informed consent (aforementioned clause) means that most of the resources collected in Polish ethnographic archives do not conform to the norms specified by current ethical codes of conduct in social research, or the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) adopted by the European Parliament in 2016, which directly leads to problems with making these sources available to the public. Thus, ethnographic archives in Poland are faced with the need to break this impasse if they do not want to close their doors to readers. Given the scale of the problem, finding a solution will not be easy, and not only in terms of meeting the formal requirements imposed by the GDPR. The most obvious and ethically clear choice would be to make a large-scale attempt to obtain official rights to the archives. Following the example of Western anthropologists (Zeitlyn 2022), original interlocutors or their descendants should be sought out, presented with materials pertaining to them, and asked to give their consent for using the said documents. Naturally, such tasks carry the risk of failure, but should nevertheless be attempted if we wish to improve the ethical standards of our discipline and revive existing archival collections whose publication is currently impossible. The endeavour might bring satisfaction to both parties involved therein, especially if the research materials will be regarded as an interesting personal document or a valuable memento of someone's ancestors, thereby gaining the status of a family heirloom. It could also cause the younger generation of anthropologists to reevaluate their critical approach towards these sources, demonstrating their real value. This being said, the project of 'legitimising the archives' would require not only the involvement of properly trained research teams, but also stable sources of financing for the works to be conducted in a systematic fashion.

Archival ethnography. Towards constructive criticism of ethnographic sources

In his most recent article, provocatively subtitled *Damned if we do, damned if we don't*, David Zeitlyn rightfully observes that the ethics of archiving itself contains irresolvable dilemmas and contradictions (2022: 9). He lays down his arguments in favour of depositing field materials in archives in four succinct points. Firstly, he draws attention to the matter of funds being wasted if a researcher – as the grant beneficiary – refrains from delivering their materials in an archive. Secondly, in Zeitlyn's view, keeping materials to oneself points to a lack of respect for the studied people and their descendants. He also claims that such practices will thwart future attempts at forming new interpretations of existing documentation. Finally, he openly states that concealing research materials, or indeed their

anonymisation,[4] are in fact expressions of a very colonial attitude towards the subjects of the research, who then lose the possibility to pursue their rights as co-creators of the documents produced (Zeitlyn 2022: 9). Aware of the paradoxes found within the idea of archivisation, Zeitlyn concludes his text with the sober observation with which one cannot help but agree:

> Living with contradictions is what humans are used to doing. And anthropologists as well as archivists are (mostly) human (Zeitlyn 2022: 11).

Returning to the analysed example of Polish ethnographic archives, if we take into account the aforementioned critical remarks regarding the manner of conducting research and presenting data collected in the field, we must also consider how to use their potential. First of all, the thousands of field materials deposited in academic and museum archives remain the only substantially sized record ethnographers made of the complex sociocultural processes that were taking place throughout the 20th century in the specific area of culture referred to as the 'non-elite', 'local', 'folk', 'folk-type' or 'post-folk' culture. It is owing to the ethnographic practice of registering things 'from up close' that we can deepen our understanding of the customs-related, economic and political changes not only on the local, but also the global level. In this respect, records are still immensely valuable despite all of their shortcomings; a fact that has been repeatedly noted by historical anthropologists, who extensively work with such materials. However, to unlock the potential hidden in the mentioned ethnographic archives, we must first develop suitable tools of critical interpretation, as indicated by anthropologists focusing on the so-called 'archival ethnography'. But how should we analyse 'finds' carefully fished out from archival storage, created without our involvement and left for posterity only in the form of material records? After all, the goal is not just simple verification of the information, since (putting aside the mentioned issues of methodology from before the reflexive turn), the materials often refer to the non-verifiable realm of imagination, collective and individual memory, and not only to the social or individual experience of the world, routine practices and experiments.

One methodological idea that may be of interest to archival anthropology is the concept of contextual source analysis introduced by Rebecca Lenartsson, which can be applied not only to historical archives in the traditional sense, but also to those created by ethnographers. Lenartsson proposes to distinguish between three standards of interpretation: the narrative level, the communicational level, and the level of broad cultural context. On the first level, the researcher focuses on the material itself, trying to decipher the meaning contained in the textual layer. The second level of interpreting a source consists in an attempting

[4] The issue of mindless anonymisation of research materials, which is in line with colonial practices employed towards research participants, was also discussed by Judith Buthler (2014: 21).

to reconstruct the relevant situational context and identifying the discourses in which the source is involved. The third and broadest level of the analysis entails presenting the activity of specific subjects, as well as practices and events recorded in the material, in the context of their relevant cultural universe (Lenartsson 2012: 10–12). However, to conduct this kind of analysis, the person using the source must not only have a solid background in methodology and a thoughtful approach to the query itself, but also activate their research imagination when reading, which can help them navigate between the singular and the structural, the individual and the social (Wright Mills 1959; Lennartson 2012: 15). The importance of this element in the research practice of sociologists and anthropologists has already been discussed by many authors (Geertz 1973; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Willis 2000); here I would like to refer to Marc Bloch's observations, which seem particularly applicable to the problem of ethnographic archives. Describing the role of imagination in the work of historians (which rings equally true for ethnographers' research practice), he stated:

> For here, in the present, is immediately perceptible that **vibrance of human life** which only a great effort of the imagination can restore to the old texts. […] whether consciously or no, it is always by **borrowing from our daily experiences** and by shading them, when necessary, with new tints that we derive the elements which help us restore the past (Bloch 1964: 69).

Aside from putting the studied materials in their proper context, contemporary scholars should also pay attention to the person of the original researcher who produced them, in order not to succumb into the illusion of abstracting 'brute facts', which Geertz once called "the most persistent ethnographic will-o-the-wisps" (1986: 374). After all, the quality of the material that ultimately came to rest on the shelf in the archive depended on the circumstances in which that researcher conducted their project, the questions they asked, their personal ethical sensibilities, communication skills, perceptiveness, consistency in recording things – in short, every factor that testified to their professional maturity.

In addition to the aforementioned methodological, ethical and social issues, contemporary ethnographic archive keeping – digitalised and network-oriented – is dealing with yet another pressing issue, namely the development of the right tools to efficiently search for and exchange data. Many anthropologists who have in their research practice made use of material deposited in archives will probably agree with the passage from Nicholas Dirks's (2002: 47) work cited at the beginning of the present article. Dealing with hundreds of pages, often in barely legible handwritten script, drawings that may not be easy to decipher, or uncaptioned photographs is certainly a daunting yet fascinating experience (as is a trip into the field). In this respect, I am inclined to agree with Wróblewski's view that insufficient knowledge on the collections held in specific archives and the lack of coordinated initiatives between them poses a serious problem for researchers wishing to conduct large-scale archival queries. We therefore need integrated

systems of databases and keyword vocabularies suitable for the nature of ethnographic sources, which would not only make it easier to find the access paths to specific sources, but also organise the highly elaborate and diverse terminology pertaining to the aspects of culture and social life studied by anthropologists (Babik, Robotycki 2002, 2005; Kuźma, Wilbik, Deredas, Piotrowska 2017: 4–5).[5] However, to improve the situation the system would have to undergo extensive changes that could reinforce the status of archives as dedicated units dealing with documentation and information within their parent institutions (institutes, museums, societies). As already noted above, it is crucial not only to employ a properly trained staff of anthropologist-archivists, but also to ensure sufficient funding that would enable them to conduct systematic work on organising, digitalisating and documenting collections.

What will be left of those years? In lieu of a conclusion

There is yet another – essentially the most important – condition without which archives may soon be reduced to mere storage rooms frozen in time. For our archival collections to grow, researchers need to be ready to deposit their materials in them. All practitioners of field ethnography know how much effort is required to create valuable documentation, so a dose of reluctance at the thought of parting with it and handing it over to an archivist is perfectly understandable. On the other hand, as noted by Zeitlyn, a lion's share of our fieldwork is conducted as a part of grant projects, and therefore receives external funding. While the obligations toward the grant-giving institution rarely specify how the materials are to be stored after the project has concluded, and the grant recipient has the freedom to de cide their future fate, the question of who has the right to the said materials

[5] Work on database systems of ethnographic archives are being carried out simultaneously in several academic institutions, i.a. in Łódź (the Centre for Ethnographic Documentation and Information of Polish Ethnological Society [ODIE] of the Polish Ethnological Society, the digital repository of photography entitled '*Workers in the 19th and 20th century*' at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Antropology of the University of Łódź), Kraków (*the Carpathian Database* of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Antropology of the Jagiellonian Universisty), Lublin (the *FOLBAS* of the University of the Maria Curie Skłodowska University), Poznań (*The Józef Burszta Digital Archive* of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Adam Mickiewicz University). The concept of an integrated database system is exemplified by the *Carpathian Database* (formerly PROKES), a database system of unpublished ethnographic sources pertaining to the Carpathian region, created and developed by the Section for Ethnographic Documentation and Information at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Jagiellonian University (Duszeńko 1986a, 1986b, Robotycki, Duszeńko-Król, Mrowiecki 1997). More on that topic in Tobiasz Orzeł's article *Selected problems with describing cultural phenomena in contemporary ethnographic archival studies, as exemplified by work on the nomenclature of rural settlement and vernacular architecture*, published in the present volume of "Ethnographies".

is more than justified. Meanwhile, despite the relatively large number of research projects carried out by teams of ethnographers in the field, archival collections, especially those of university institutions, have not grown for some time. What might be the cause?

The situation seems to stem from several reasons. Some of them are discussed openly, others rarely admitted to. First and foremost, researchers regard such materials as their original work, which is why they make all the decisions regarding what to do with them. Secondly, materials from the field often contain sensitive information which ought to be protected by the scholar documenting it (Golonka-Czajkowska, Trebunia-Staszel 2022; Subotić 2022). This is a matter of not only following a strict work ethic, but ordinary human empathy and responsibility for another person who takes the scholar into their confidence, in good faith and 'for the sake of science' (as per the formula we repeat in the field). With the development of digital archive keeping, the problem has grown in importance among anthropologists, as evidenced by the discussions around the principles of presenting sources, especially in terms of anonymisation, digitalisation and scope of access (Agostinho, D'Ignazio, Ring, Bonde Thylstrup, Veel 2019; Buthler 2016; Jimerson 2009; Moore 2012), which have continued for over a decade. Thirdly, reservations about making one's own work process public, glossed over in embarrassment, especially in today's age of heated debates over the methodology of conducting ethnographic research (note, for instance, the extensive courses and training programs on the matter for present-day students of ethnology and cultural anthropology), may prevent people from revealing their research practices documented e.g. in their observations and transcripts of conversations held in the field.

How, then, can today's scholars be encouraged to deposit their materials in archives? It should be noted that all of the abovementioned reasons for researchers' reluctance to transfer sources to archives stem from concerns about what might happen to them in the future. These, in turn, reveal a degree of mistrust towards archives as institutions which would have to protect them in an adequate fashion (which in practice means: in a way that meets the expectations of the authors). Reversing this trend would therefore require developing new principles for the operation of ethnographic archives, which would transform them into credible institutions taking due care of the knowledge produced by anthropologists, and facilitate the process of collecting materials and using them in the future. Regardless of the specific arrangements for making collections accessible (whether archives follow an open, dim or dark strategy), it is important for documentation not to become scattered and be preserved for posterity. We must give future generations of anthropologists the chance not only to read the texts we produced, but also to work with 'raw' materials on which these were based. After all, the ability to produce knowledge by creating specific types of sources, providing meticulous, detailed descriptions of the wealth of human thought and diversity of behaviour is what sets anthropology apart from other disciplines and constitutes its greatest

strength. Our successors are very likely to interpret the materials we produced differently; perhaps noticing something that we have yet failed to see, or have not considered worthy of attention. We must not censor the future, but allow these new generations to act. One thing is certain: regardless of all imperfections of our research practices and the changing paradigms, these sources will one day become a trace of our contemporary reality, priceless in their inimitability.

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