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# Between life sciences and ethnology. Report from interdisciplinary field studies on public health and impact of tourism in Ethiopia and Islamic shamanism in Kazakhstan

## Abstract

The author presents scientific achievements of two scientific projects conducted by the Student Scientific Circle of Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of Jagiellonian University in cooperation with the Student Scientific Circle of Institute of Public Health Collegium Medicum of Jagiellonian University which he took part in: “PromoAfryka” and “PromoKazachstan”. “Promo Afryka” was the scientific expedition to Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania (the author was responsible for an ethnological part of the research). The participants took part in the 13<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Public Health in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and conducted field research on the question of the impact of tourism on traditional culture of 12 tribes settled in lower Omo Valley and nutrition habits of the members of the tribes. The project has won several prizes. The “PromoKazachstan” project consisted in field research on Kazakh shamanism. Doubtless, both projects are fine examples of the key role which can be played by ethnology and its methodology in interdisciplinary scientific projects, as a complementary with life sciences approach.

**Keywords:** ethnology, life sciences, quantitative inquiry, Ethiopia, tourism, traditional culture, Omo Valley, Kazakhstan, shamanism, interdisciplinary projects

## The birth of an idea

Generally, numerous advantages of interdisciplinary cooperation between branches of science are well-recognized. But what about particular research using both life sciences and anthropological approach? The aim of this paper is to

describe scientific achievements as well as present stage of two scientific projects conducted by the Student Scientific Circle of Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology Jagiellonian University (JU) in cooperation with the Scientific Circle of Institute of Public Health, the Collegium Medicum and JU, in which I took part in PromoAfryka and PromoKazachstan. The summary of my experience as a member of a interdisciplinary scientific group, essential information about methodology of our research, raw material and local context of explored issues will be provided.

Previously, the idea of Promo Projects has been invented by assistant professor Krzysztof Krajewski-Siuda, the head of Health Promotion Department, the Collegium Medicum, Jagiellonian University, as a set of interdisciplinary field study tours. In first of them, PromoAfryka, he has invited young but skilled undergraduated researchers from following fields: geography, ethnology and of course public health; in Kazakhstan research were conducted by Prof. Krajewski-Siuda and an author (ethnologists). Due to lack of experience in working in interdisciplinary research, it was challenging for the teams trained primarily in qualitative approach. It was easier for the teams whose members represented similar disciplines of science with approximately similar methodology and general lack of consciousness of methods of other disciplines – cooperation between undoubtedly quantitative public health researchers and ethnologist.

Despite the scientific goals, both PromoAfryka and PromoKazachstan projects were expected to train future leaders of science by giving them an opportunity to gain a unique knowledge about organizing and managing scientific projects on international scale as well as to develop scientific skills and gain, priceless for beginners, experience during interdisciplinary researches on other continent.

## PromoAfryka: introduction and 13<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Public Health

PromoAfryka is an initiative achieving a purpose of promoting in Polish society both science and matters of three east African states: Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania. It was spearheaded by Prof. K. Krajewski-Siuda. The essential part of the project and main subject of this chapter was a scientific expedition to Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania, exploring the fields of tourism, nutrition and public health, conducted by the interdisciplinary research team of JU, including a geographer, ethnologists, and public health specialists under tutoring and supervision of Prof. Krajewski-Siuda. In many recent publications the name of “PromoAfryka expedition” was commonly in use.

This tour has three key purposes, the first one was to represent Polish science and Jagiellonian University on 13<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Public Health (23–26.04.2012) in Addis Abebe, Ethiopia, one of the most important and prestigious conferences concerning public health worldwide, every three years

organized in another continent. Participation in the Congress was a unique opportunity for younger members of the PromoAfryka team to establish international professional contacts, and furthermore, present the findings of the previous research in one of the most significant and influential international conference in the field of public health.

The second goal of PromoAfryka expedition assumes the investigation of the impact of increasing tourism movement, nutrition habits and public health issues in 12 tribes inhabiting south Ethiopian Omo Valley during field trip, and, basing on the findings, to prepare a few peer-reviewed publications, with an impact factor. Additionally, data collected in Ethiopia was expected to be a fundament of master thesis: Barbara Kwiaciszewska's and Piotr Pyzik's. Also, the author planned to base his bachelor thesis on this material.

Lastly, the project plan includes the study visit to public health of Prof. Krajewski-Siuda in the Medicover (the Polish company, the biggest health services provider in east Africa), the facility in Kenya as well as the Catholic mission and the medical service center in Kiabakari, Tanzania.

During the 13<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Public Health the members of our team presented a few scientific posters considering matter from impact of rising sea levels on pacific islands and giving birth at home in Poland to phenomenon of herbalism in Poland. Prof. Krajewski-Siuda was moderating one of the Congress panels and gave two lectures. The author presented his poster of "Herbalism in Polish society after 1990" characterizing the forms of contemporary herbalism in Poland from rural, unlicensed practitioners through Catholic orders providing herbal treatment to scientific phytotherapists to pharmaceutical concerns producing herbal remedies. During the Congress the author also established contact, *inter alia*, with a lecturer of medical school of Jimma University, Ethiopia, and researched Ethiopian plants of medicinal use. He is also interested in a joint, international project.

Another result of the Congress is a post-conference article in Congress Proceedings entitled "*Physicians, phytotherapeutics and healers – Polish herbalism after 1990*". The proceedings are indexed by Thomas Reuters, expected to be published this year.

## PromoAfryka: Omo Valley and field study tour (13–23.04.2012)

As it was mentioned above, studying the impact of increasing tourism movement was one of our main fieldwork subjects. Our particular interest was focused on its influence on decline or continuance of small ethnoses inhabiting Omo Valley. The situation was examined in 12 tribes: Wolayta, Dorze, Konso, Arbore, Hamar, Karo, Desanech, Banna, Mursi, Bodi, Tsemay and Adama, however, most of our time we spend in four of them: Hammer, Dorzie, Konso and Mursi.

Ethiopia is a unique subject of study on tourism – till the year 2000 tourism movement there was vestigial.<sup>1</sup> During the last decade this situation has been gradually changing, but very recently typical tours are offered by large tour operators to mass client.<sup>2</sup> Even today, safety issues are carefully considered by the tourists.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the popularity of famous touristic highlights like Axum and Gonder, Omo Valley remains a domain of small groups of up to about 10 people, using jeeps for transport.

In terms of methodology, we applied qualitative inquiry: non-participant, undisguised and unstructured observation as well as in-depth, semi-structured interview (Konecki 2000; Przybyłowska 1978). Most interviews were taped with a sound recorder (after gaining acceptance of respondents). The structure of an interview included the following general questions asked to our respondents:

- what they think about tourists,
- what tourists think about them,
- what they think is the motivation of coming tourists,
- if and what they speculate about reason of tourists' visit,
- how they evaluate the impact of tourism movement on their community (positive/negative),
- what changes tourism brings to their life,
- personal data: age, name, residence etc.

Findings from observation were noted during observation as often as possible and daily, every evening. All interviews were conducted in English, sometimes with an interpreter. This part of research was projected, conducted and are being analyzed by a geographer and ethnologists. The author was sole responsible for the ethnological part of research.

<sup>1</sup> The authoritarian monarchy of Haile Selassie I ruling until 1974 was not supportive of tourism industry. After a military coup in 1974 and erecting the Marxist military government of the Provisional Military Administrative Council, widely known as the Derg, country faced 13 years of political and physical terror (De Waal and Human Rights Watch (Organization), 1991) with its culmination between 1975–1977 known as Red Terror due to its brutality. This extralegal violence organized by the Derg and its chairman, Mengistu Haile Mariam, called sometimes the “black Stalin” because of his fascination with the USSR as well as the politics of Joseph Stalin. During times of monarchy tourists came to Ethiopia rarely, Derg's policy and infamy of its casualties and unstable domestic situation (fights with underground armed anti-governmental organizations like Oromo Liberation Front) made Ethiopia unattractive for potential tourists. With the fall of communism in 1991, foreign support for the Derg came to an end and it was overthrown in 1991. Nevertheless, the situation was far from being solved out – north-east part of state (today Eritrea) demanded secession and independence, problems inherited from the times of the Marxist dictatorship which cast a shadow over enthusiasm of newly proclaimed Ethiopian Democratic Republic. 1990s were abound of events rather deterring for visitors, in particular secession of Eritrea in 1993, military intervention in Somalia (and threat of counteraction, i.e. terrorist attacks in Ethiopia) in 1996 and, finally, Eritrean-Ethiopian war with over 150 000 casualties from May 1998 to June 2000.

<sup>2</sup> In Poland similar sightseeing trips are in an offer of Rainbow Tours entitle “On a track of Ark of the Covenant”, <http://www.rainbowtours.pl/etiopia-na-tropie-arki-przymierza/zakwaterowanie-eto> (accessed: 4.05.2013) with a price of approximately 1850 EUR.

<sup>3</sup> It might be interesting to point out that after typing “tour Ethiopia” in Google browser, two from six proposed keywords are “tourists killed in ethiopia” and “tourism ethiopia safety” (accessed: 4.05.2013).

The analysis of findings is currently being carried out. Particular interesting are: stereotypes about tourists, auto-stereotypes, a place of tourists in respondent's *imagine mundi*, and social, economic and cultural consequences of tourism movement.

Erving Goffman's conception of the world as a theater (1971, 2008) was used as a theoretical frame. The two suitable conceptualizations of tourism were also used: J. Urry's theory of the social role of tourism and G. Hofstede's theory of the journey as a form of cultural contact. Urry treats tourism as a catalyst of changes: social, economic, cultural and typify them. On the other hand, Hofstede presents a vision of interaction autochton-tourism as act of communication, where new codes and principles of communication emerge. Also remarks of Elżbieta Puchnarewicz (2010: 20–22) about economic pressure on traditional lifestyle created by tourism movement and paper of Ewa Nowicka-Rusek concerning negative changes in Nepal caused by tourists (2009) made a significant contribution to a theoretical base of our research.

As maintains Joanna Tokarska-Bakir: "Ethnographic description, according to its principles, is always unrepresentative and in some sense subversive due to revealing of factors til now not took into account but diversifying opinions, testing findings of quantitative approaches"<sup>4</sup> (2009: 39). Ethnology doubtless prefers idiographic approach to data and as an ethnologist the author is in command of them more than in quantitative methods. Moreover, our research due to limited time simply could not provide data for representative quantitative analysis. As a result, F. Znaniecki's conception of a humanistic principle (2008) was applied to form the basis for taking *insider view* in gathering and analyzing data.

The techniques of visual anthropology occur useful at the initial stage of studying material.<sup>5</sup>

## PromoKazachstan: training scientific skills and exploring shamanism

This project has two main assumed scientific goals, dividing it into two parts. One was study tour on research methods in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. We took part in the specialized scientific course "The Research Methods in The Era of The Internet", organized by University of Pittsburgh, USA, in cooperation with Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan. The other was field case study concerned specific element of cultural phenomenon of Kazakh shamanism which is Muslim imams healing with Koran.

During the course mentioned above, skills of research projecting and managing, scientific publishing, using specialized software in science and techniques of

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<sup>4</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>5</sup> Indispensable especially in discovering new, unexplored elements of data (Banks 2009: 32). Literature concerning visual methods used in analysis: Rose 2010; Sztompka 2006; Banks 2009.

quantitative inquiry. It was a challenging and developing experience for variety of reasons, but foremost due to diversity of participants background. Most of them work on the field of medicine or public health, but many of them were chemists, molecular biologists, and physicians. As an ethnologist, I was a sole representative of humanities.

In Kazakhstan a cultural phenomenon of healing has various forms. General category of healer (*emsi*) includes three main groups (Grzywacz 2010):

- body healers (*tamirisi*, *uwqalawsi*),
- fortune-tellers (*palsi*, *balger*, *zawirinisi*),
- spiritual healers (*tawip*).

*Tawip*'s main curing technique is reading words aloud believed to have religious or magical might. The most essential type of *tawip* is unquestionably a shaman (*baqsi*), which is one of the most influential symbols (or maybe we should say “remainings”, according to modern transformation of Kazakh culture) of traditional, folk Kazakh culture till today. *Tukiruwsı* are another type, a healer spiting on his patient after aloud lecture of prayers and *uskiruwsı*, blowing on a sick person to “give him a breath” (*dem saluw*) and through this, transmitting his life energy (Grzywacz 2010: 68–69). The last type of *tawip* is imam (*molda*), who is a foremost issue of this chapter. Islam and imam, its official representative, is one of the key symbols<sup>6</sup> (Ortner 2002, 2003) of Kazakh culture and identity (Grzywacz 2010). Even though the phenomenon of shamanism in Kazakhstan (and worldwide) occurs to be popular as a subject of research as well as in popular culture, very little was published in Polish scientific literature about imams-healers in central Asia.

When writing about shamanism in Kazakhstan, pluralistic Kazakh health care system needs to be mentioned which, compared to Polish, may give interesting conclusions. After regaining independence in 1991, Kazakh state proclaimed restoring of Kazakhness (*qazaqıyılıq*), that is i.a. traditional medicine (Grzywacz 2010: 70). Traditional medicine, persecuted in the Soviet times, was legalized since the beginning of the Republic of Kazakhstan. In 1990, shortly before gaining independence in Almaty Republican Scientific-Practical Center of Traditional Medicine starts its activity (Grzywacz 2010: 70; Penkala-Gawęcka 2010: 24). This new situation is in a complete contrast to “shamanic underground” during the USSR, when healers practiced in full conspiracy, aware of severe penalties, including imprisonment in Gulags.

To heal lawfully, every healer needs to pass a state exam and revive a license, due to law concerning health protection of the citizens of the Republic of Ka-

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<sup>6</sup> In theory of S.B. Ortner key symbols are those elements of culture which construct group's identity and, as a result, are indispensable. She enumerated two categories of key symbols: summarizing and elaborating. Summarizing keys are those which are powerful images or symbols, often connected with sacrum, expressing multiple ideas and playing a role of symbols of clear identity e.g. national flag. Islam in Kazakhstan can be called a summarizing symbol according to this conception. Elaborating symbols are more specific, they apply to concrete ideas. They are not sacred, their importance comes from outstanding frequency of their use in particular culture. Ortner proposed two subcategories of elaborating symbol: root metaphor and key scenario. For further reading: Ortner 2002, 2003.

zakhstan from 2003; healing without this certificate is punished with prison sentence up to three years, illegal is also organizing private courses of traditional medicine (Grzywacz 2010). In 2000 Ministry of Health submitted in an official list of medical specializations “doctor of east medicine”, homeotherapist and hindurotherapist (Penkala-Gawęcka 2010). What is more, since 1997, a healer can obtain a title of Honored Professional Healer of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which is desired by many practitioners of traditional medicine due to its prestige (Grzywacz 2010).

However, as long as most board members examining candidates for natural medicine healers are doctors of biomedicine, full equality of conventional and traditional medicine is fiction.

While preparing research on Muslim imams healing with Koran, we chose to conduct a case study, due to limited time. Applying a qualitative inquiry, we used non-participant, undisguised and unstructured observation. Findings were noted in a summary after every day as well as during observation, if a current remark seemed valuable. Semi-structured interviews were another technique used in-depth (Konecki 2000; Przybyłowska 1978). Eventually, two interviews were conducted (with an imam Turar-Bek and a mother of an imam’s patient). Interviews were conducted in Russian. The research group was formed by the author, representing ethnology, Prof. K. Krajewski-Siuda, a medicine doctor and one of the best Polish specialists in the field of health promotion as a tutor and supervisor. As a consequence, our approach was interdisciplinary, with all its limits and advantages, and extremely efficient in conducting a medical anthropology research project.

During interviews we focused mainly on a matter of healing methodology and its relation to Islam (the imam was a Sunni), techniques of making a diagnosis, occurrence of “shamanic illness”, demand for faith healing and Turar-Bek’s opinion about biomedicine and its efficiency comparing to his practice. Moreover, according to the fact that most of *tawips practice* are special rituals, patients make a pilgrimage to tombs of ancestors or saints etc to recover their healing capability (Grzywacz 2010). We were also interested in Turar-Bek’s (source or sources) of spiritual power.

We had identified a practicing Muslim healer in the village Small Barap, located approximately 110 km from Astana in north direction. His name was Turar-Bek, and in Small Barap he was running a small mosque. After our arrival to Turar-Bek’s mosque, the first person who welcomed us was a mother of the patient staying in imam’s house during her son’s healing. We were straightforward with her introducing ourselves as a researchers from Jagiellonian University, Poland, asking for imam’s permission for a scientific interview.

Gatekeeping (Hammersley, Atkinson 2000) appears in our research for the first time at that moment – she was the one who introduced us to the imam and explained our request. After approval, we were invited to enter the imam’s house and meet him. Imam’s previous attitude toward our presence could be described as rather distanced and cautioned, doubtless formal. It is likely that it was associ-

ated with his high social status as religious leader as well as a healer and authority which he was holding for this reason. One of the imam's first actions was to call some person who was told to be an interpreter, what was reasonable explanation due to the fact that Turar-Bek speaks only Kazakh and Arabic, but not Russian, in which language we were conducting our research. After the arrival of an interpreter, who introduced himself as imam's friend, he took over a function of a gatekeeper, in particular: selecting information and influencing subjects of the interview.

Recognition of Turar-Bek's healing practice vary from place to place – in village Gusarka, which lays about 12 km from Small Barap, only one marriage of around 15 people, when asked about shamans in the local area, mentioned “some imam” in Small Barap, but without certainty. At the same time we met Turar-Bek's 19-year old patient, suffering periods of amnesia, and his mother, who had come from a city a few hundred kilometers away from Small Barap, because of his healing fame. In Small Barap every person asked about a shaman immediately and precisely showed us the Turar-Bek's home.

## Afterword

Currently, raw material collected during both projects is being explored. It is expected to result with the publication of made reviewed articles in scored scientific journals. The raw material gathered during both projects consists of approximately 20 000 images and 10 hours of films, recordings of interviews and numerous field notes. Despite that, further research would be highly beneficial, i.e. control research in Omo Valley providing data about time change and another case studies of imams-healers from Kazakhstan. Even though the issue of funding next expeditions currently is far from being solved, plans of future research are being made.

Three diploma thesis were based on the material gathered in Ethiopia: Barbara Kwiaciszewska's master thesis “Nutrition habits of ethnic groups inhabiting Omo Valley in Ethiopia” (supervisor: professor Małgorzata Schlegel-Zawadzka), the master thesis entitled “Culture of southern Ethiopian nations as a touristic value” (supervisor: professor Włodzimierz Kurek, not defended yet) written by Piotr Pyzik and authors of this article bachelor thesis “Autoethnography and narrations about freedom in comparative prospection” (supervisor: assistant professor Jerzy Barański).

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The author is proud to mention also some awards won so far by PromoAfryka: two 1<sup>st</sup> prizes (diploma and statuette of the minister of science) in the contest of Student Scientific Movement StRuNa in categories: Expedition of a Year, Tutor of a Year and was awarded in category Scientific Circle of a Year. In addition, PromoAfryka has won Stanisław Szwarc-Bronikowski Eldorado Award as Scientific Expedition of a year 2012.

This report does not aim to entirely describe the material, stages of analysis and final findings of PromoAfryka and PromoKazachstan projects. Moreover, it would be impossible due to word limit. It is rather invitation to a discussion, to comment, and, after all, to criticize. Furthermore, an author's aspiration is to encourage other students of social sciences and humanities to "do science", to accept a challenge of interdisciplinary projects, despite its difficulties. As it was expressed by Steve Jobs in his famous speech for graduate students of Stanford University: "Stay hungry. Stay foolish".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Source: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/steve-jobs-told-students-stay-hungry-stay-foolish/2011/10/05/gIQA1qVjOL\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/steve-jobs-told-students-stay-hungry-stay-foolish/2011/10/05/gIQA1qVjOL_blog.html) (accessed: 4.05.2013).

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