Gifts of Grief: Performative Ethnography and the Revelatory Potential of Emotion

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Encountering Grief: Performative Ethnography and the Revelatory Potential of Emotion

Abstract:
After participation in the funeral of a beloved friend in the Western Highlands of PNG, I was drawn to contemplate the revelatory potential of emotions such grief. With reference to literature on the anthropology of emotions, I consider the relationship between anthropological understanding and deep emotional responses in the context of fieldwork. How might moments of emotional engagement, which many of us have experienced during fieldwork, lead to a fuller ethnographic understanding of a social situation and/or a cultural context and how do we adequately and ethically translate such moments into ethnographic writing? I describe a style of ethnographic engagement that I term the 'performative' style, where a researcher's ethnographic practice is grounded in participatory cultural performances that mediate the conceptual divide between meaning and feeling, observer and observed.

Key words:
Western Highlands, Papua New Guinea; anthropology of grief; funerary ritual; mourning rites; anthropology of emotion; ethnography; ethnographic fieldwork.

In April 2009, I attended the funeral of a close friend of mine from the Western Highlands of PNG. My friend Magdalene Wilson was born in Kunguma Village in the hills above Mt Hagen, daughter of a Highland woman – and Patrick Leahy, older brother of Michael and Daniel Leahy, the Australian gold prospectors who were among the first white men to encounter the Highland valleys. Daniel Leahy established a gold mine at Kuta, near Kunguma Village. Maggie's mother, Jara, was a Melka woman married to Kuan, from the Penambe Wia clan. According to Maggie, Kuan had not been able to have children with either of his two wives, so he sent Jara to the white man to conceive a child for him. Maggie grew up as a much loved and favoured child in the village, bright, wilful and determined. When she was about 12 years old, Daniel Leahy recognised Maggie as the daughter of his brother Patrick, and decided to send her to school, first in Mt Hagen, then Port Moresby and lastly in Australia where I met her in 1969. We were among a handful of students at the Catholic girls' boarding school in north Queensland that were from Papua New Guinea (my family was living in Kerema in the Gulf District at the time) and we quickly became close friends.

Maggie returned to Papua New Guinea in 1974, on the eve of the country's independence. Although her uncle had urged her to apply for Australian citizenship and stay in Australia after completing her high school education, Maggie preferred to go home to Mt Hagen. She confided in me at the time that she felt that it was her calling to return and make a contribution to the successful development of an independent Papua New Guinea. Maggie became an important business entrepreneur and a 'big woman' in the Western Highlands. As the years progressed she gained deep respect not only among

her own immediate clan but also more widely, particularly for her contribution to the tourist industry in Papua New Guinea and for her determined struggle to improve the welfare and political participation of women. Yet, her efforts were not always successful and her status was often challenged in the highly competitive social world of the Western Highlands. The road that Maggie had chosen was not an easy one.

Three years ago Maggie and I began to plan a book on Papua New Guinea women in politics, featuring the experiences of women, including Maggie herself, who had stood as candidates in the 2007 elections. On 1 April 2009 we met in Cairns, Australia, where we listened to a preliminary interview she had done, fine-tuned our interview questions and excitedly planned to meet in Papua New Guinea later in the year to conduct further research. Maggie returned to Mt Hagen from Cairns the following day and died in her sleep a few days later on Monday 6 April 2009.

In this paper, I reflect upon my experiences at Maggie's funeral and two funerals I recorded while in the field some years earlier, in order to comprehend the relationship between an anthropologist's emotional responses in the context of fieldwork situations and the ethnographic understandings that we might develop. The idea of emotional understanding and the importance of 'empathy' in ethnographic knowledge production have been of interest and discussion in anthropology and other fieldwork based disciplines for at least the past 30 years. Here I attempt to make further contribution to debates in the field, by turning to the concept of 'performativity' and by exploring the relationship between performativity and empathy.

My approach in this paper is autobiographical in spite of the fact that I am somewhat uncomfortable with the potential of the reflexive turn in anthropology to lead to narcissistic navel-gazing, or an indulgent over-emphasis on the research self in favour of an understanding of social situations. Renato Rosaldo (1989:7) expressed a similar discomfort in "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage", published as the introduction to his book *Culture and Truth* (1989):

> Introducing myself into this account requires a certain hesitation both because of the discipline's taboo and because of its increasingly frequent violation by essays laced with trendy amalgams of continental philosophy and autobiographical snippets. If classic ethnography's vice was the slippage from the ideal of detachment to actual indifference, that of present-day reflexivity is the tendency for the self-absorbed Self to lose sight altogether of the culturally different Other'.

Yet, participation as a mourner at Maggie's funeral (or *haus krai*[1]) in the Western Highlands has drawn me to reflect upon the ethnographic value of paying some attention to one's own bodily experiences and the 'experiential bases of knowledge production' (Leibing and McLean 2007:9). Are moments of emotional engagement, which many of us have experienced in the context of fieldwork, relevant to ethnographic understanding of a social situation? If so, how do we adequately translate such moments into ethnographic writing?

As noted above, during the 1970s and 1980s, a flourish of anthropologists began to tackle such questions and raise issues concerning emotional engagement and reflexivity (see Scholte 1974, Marcus and Fischer 1986, Clifford and Marcus 1986). Anthropologists began to produce a new genre of experiential, or reflexive, ethnography (eg. Crapanzano

[1] The Tok Pisin term for funerary or mourning rites.

1980, Rabinow 1977) and experiment in different styles of 'autoethnography' (Reed-Danahay 1997). Nevertheless, questions regarding the production of ethnographic knowledge remain unanswered and 'the blurred borders between ethnography and life' continue to be the focus of much scholarly examination today (McLean and Leibing 2007; see also Forsey 2004, Dickson-Swift et al 2009).

Rosaldo (1987) famously drew on his experience of grief, following the accidental death of his wife Michelle Rosaldo in the field, to reflect upon the 'emotional force of death' among the Ilongot. His own loss led him to question the interpretive adequacy of semiotic approaches, or 'the common anthropological assumption that the greatest human import resides in the densest forest of symbols' (p. 2). He argued that: 'The human sciences must explore the cultural force of emotions with a view to delineating the passions that animate certain forms of human conduct' (p. 19). Rosaldo noted that in spite of over 14 years of fieldwork he had not been able to grasp what Ilongots had repeatedly told him about the connection between grief, rage and headhunting, until he drew on his own experience: 'Only after being repositioned through a devastating loss of my own could I better grasp that Ilongot older men mean precisely what they say when they describe the anger in bereavement as the source of their desire to cut off human heads' (1989: 3). Rosaldo's paper raised a number of questions. Firstly, is personal experience truly essential to the understanding of a social situation? In other words, as Wikkan (1991) in her paper "Towards an Experience-near Anthropology" put it: 'How valid is knowledge that is not anchored in experience?' Secondly, what is the *nature* of this experience-based knowledge? What does it say about the relationship between emotion

and reason, feeling and meaning? Although Rosaldo emphasises the importance of empathy, his paper is also a reflection upon the value of different theoretical approaches. Thus, it could be argued that it was not so much an understanding of Ilongot emotional states that Rosaldo's personal grief facilitated as the capacity to reflect upon, or reason about, anthropological theory, or interpretive approaches in the discipline. After all, one of the key aims of his paper was to question the value of semiotic approaches.

Lutz and White (1986) have pointed out a number of 'classic theoretical or epistemological tensions' in the anthropological literature on emotion. These include whether emotions are irrational or whether they are potential sources of knowledge about the world, the universality versus the cultural particularity of emotions, and the material basis of emotions as psychobiological facts versus their basis in ideas. A number of scholars have attempted to go beyond such body-mind dichotomies, arguing that emotions involve both thinking *and* feeling (Leavitt 1996:516). Kirschner (1987:218), for example, argued that empathy involves an interplay between cognitive and affective processes and Wikkan (1991:292), suggested that anthropologists adopt as an analytical tool the Balinese concept of 'feeling-thought', based on the idea that 'no one can think but with their feelings, indeed that feeling and thought are the same'.

Other anthropologists, such as Jackson (1989) and Csordas (1993, 2007), have advocated the phenomenological paradigm of embodiment as a means 'for analysing human participation in a cultural world'. This I would argue includes analysing the participation of ethnographers in the cultural worlds or social situations they are trying to understand.

Fieldwork by its very nature involves 'somatic modes of attention', which Csordas (1993:138) defined as 'culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others'. In other words, as Csordas (1993:136) puts it, we are 'not isolated subjectivities trapped within our bodies, but share an intersubjective milieu with others'. There are some ethnographic moments, in which we become particularly aware of, or attune to, this intersubjective milieu; in other words, there are moments when one's 'somatic mode of attention' becomes sharper and more focused. In a recent account of certain spontaneous experiences he has had in the course of his ethnographic fieldwork, Csordas (2007:106) proposes that such a moment 'can best be described as a transmutation of sensibilities' in that it 'could have been experienced by an indigenous person in the sense of its form and its relevance to the immediate setting'. He argues that when an ethnographer experiences empathy and/or intuition spontaneously in the field, then it is fair to call such moments 'revelatory', even when they do not occur in a ritual context (Csordas 2007:115). Yet Csordas does not elaborate upon what is actually being revealed. Of what are such moments revelatory?

Clearly, since emotions are always socially situated (Beatty 2005) one needs to consider the social and cultural particularities of the context in which the revelatory moment takes place, in this case the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea. The regional ethnography on Melanesia has produced a wealth of literature on the key concerns of this paper – the notion of the gift, of revelation, concepts of personhood and the relationship between mind and body (for example, Gell 1979; Herdt 1984; Iteanu, 1988; Jorgensen 1984; Li Puma 1988; Munn 1986; O'Hanlon; Robins; M. Strathern 1979, 1988, 1999; A.

Strathern 1994, 1996; A. Strathern & Stewart 1998). Marilyn Strathern (1999) directly addresses the idea of the revelatory moment' 'ethnographic issues in

During my field trips as an anthropologist to the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea, I too experienced moments when my somatic mode of attention seemed to be more enhanced than at others. Being able to neither speak nor understand a word of the language (Tembuka) and very little Tok Pisin, during my first field trip in January 2000, I became intensely aware of the bodily attention that I was paying to the people around me – I felt as if every hair on my body was standing on end, reaching out to understand the significance of what people were saying and doing. Actually I felt incredibly alive, and exhaustedly so. During that first field trip my colleague, Chris Morgan, and I were conducting research on the films 'Joe Leahy's Neighbours' and 'Black Harvest' by Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson. The films record the complexities of the relationship between Maggie's cousin, Joe Leahy, and the customary owners of the land on which he had established a coffee plantation, the Ganiga people.

In the early days of our fieldwork, we attended the funerals of two men, one on our very first day among the Ganiga at Kilima Plantation and the other a week later in Kunguma, the village where we were staying with my friend Maggie. At the Ganiga funeral I began to play the role of an ethnographer, observing the proceedings, listening to the speeches, discretely taking notes and the odd photograph. However, as the visitors came up, group by group, towards the mourning family, keening and crying to offer their condolences, I began to cry too, involuntarily on and off in concert with the mourners. As it was my first

day in the field, I did not know the deceased, nor in fact anyone else there (apart from Joe Leahy) but I could not help the tears streaming down my face. An old man noticed and came and cupped me under the chin and said something in Tembuka which I did not understand, but which I took to be a recognition and appreciation of human empathy. At that moment we appeared to share something, but what, I later wondered?

Kirschner (1987:213) classifies ethnographic engagement in the field into two types: the interpretive orientation which emphasises the social construction of meaning and the subjectivist orientation which emphasises the potential of the fieldworkers' emotional responses as 'an important channel through which ethnographic knowledge is gained'. More recently, in his paper 'Emotions in the field: what are we talking about' Beatty (2005:22) describes 'two kinds of ethnographer, two styles of engagement in the field: the constructivist, interpreter of symbols, and the empathizer, diviner of feelings; the one pursuing good translations, the other good vibrations'. While typologies are always problematic, let me take the liberty here to add a third kind of ethnographer, one who is neither focused on interpreting symbols, nor on divining feelings, but on the relationship between the two. I will call this style of engagement in the field: the performative. This third style does not draw a strict boundary between meaning and feeling, observer and observed; but nor does it dissolve these binaries altogether. A performative style of engagement draws on feeling to convey meaning and on meaning to convey feeling, productively moving back and forth between the two. Since the concept of performance is associated with playing a part, or acting, it might be thought that a performative style involves lack sincerity. As Lutz and White (1986:413) point out, 'Some ethnographers

have attempted to distinguish "genuine" from "conventional" emotional expression in ritual'. However, they continue, this dichotomy 'may be too simple to do justice to the variety of ways in which cultural thought and ritual act together to construct emotional experience'. A performative mode of engagement in the field, I submit, does not imply lack of sincerity, but draws the ethnographer into authentic emotional experiences through the productive mediation of meaning and feeling.

Whether my tears at the funeral indicate that I was somehow 'vibrating in harmony' with Ganiga feelings is not the issue. What I suggest my tears did do was instantly transport me, if only briefly, from the role of observer to that of a participant; a participant in a sincere performative social relationship initiated by the reciprocal exchange of tears and sealed by a small funerary gift of 20 kina[2] which my colleague Chris Morgan presented on our behalf.

The second funeral took place a few days later in Kunguma Village, where we were staying with my friend Maggie. The deceased was of the same clan as Maggie (Penambi Wia) but of a different lineage (*haus line*). I walked with Maggie to the *haus krai*. Before going into the area where the *haus line* of the deceased was seated in mourning, Maggie and others from her line gathered together to collect and tally their contributions into a single sum of a few hundred kina (to which I also contributed) for presentation to the lineage of the deceased. Again I tried to approach the event as an ethnographer might, observing everything carefully and filing it away in "my mind" in order to be able to

[2] At that time, 20 kina was approximately 11 Australian dollars, the equivalent of almost one week's wages for an unskilled worker.

write up some field notes later. Again, however, I became immersed in the event, my tears flowing freely in response to those of others. Perhaps my tears were a result of empathy, 'based on a common analogous experience' of bereavement (Beatty 2005:20), or the result of 'a transmutation of sensibilities insofar as my sense of performative presence and power was spontaneously manifest in a culturally appropriate form' (Csordas 2007:112). Whatever the reason, I believe that my bodily response made possible a mode of attention to the event and a heightened sensitivity to the context that allowed insights I might otherwise not have had - insights into what an exchange of tears might mean within a wider system of social expectations and obligations in the Western Highlands; that the performative dimensions of mourning (such as tears, sorrowful faces, men puling at their beards, or at non-existent beards in the cases of those who were clean shaven, women and men keening, faces daubed with red and yellow ochre) are highly valued as expressions of compassion that should be reciprocated. As Beatty (2005:35) has written, 'often enough, emotions are a matter not of who we are and what we feel, but of where we are and what is expected of us'. I would rephrase this somewhat as: emotions are not *only* a matter of who we are and what we feel but also of where we are and what is expected of us.

Little did I know as I participated with Maggie at the *haus krai* in Kunguma Village in 2000 and witnessed the presentation of a pig she had given and the gift of money from her *haus line* (lineage) that nine years later I would be returning to Kunguma to attend a *haus krai* for Maggie's herself. It was a huge event that took place over 6 days.

Each day members of her lineage, Ulgamp (of the Penambe Wia) including her children (and me for the last 2 days) sat in mourning on the village *sing sing* ground accepting from group after group their gifts of grief. Men took the opportunity to display their skills in oratory before presenting funerary gifts on behalf of their *haus lines*. One day a big man invited any woman who wanted to, to speak. He said that Maggie was a 'big woman', a business woman and that she had been able to talk like a man. Several women stood to speak and present gifts of money on behalf of different groups of women, including a group of single women of Kunguma Village who had pooled earnings from the sale of their garden produce and woven net bags (*bilums*).

I was expecting that I would dissolve into a complete mess at Maggie's funeral, but unlike the other funerals I attended, during Maggie's *haus krai* my tears did not flow as readily. An old woman came up and threw her arms around me, sobbing and crying. I performed as expected and held her close, cradling her head on my shoulder, but I could not bring myself to cry. It seemed like I was holding the woman forever, and I was just beginning to wonder how long I could keep it up, when a man came and dragged her away from me, admonishing her to move on.

Why did my tears flow freely and, apparently involuntarily, at the funerals of two men that I had never met, while at the funeral of a woman with whom I had shared a deep and abiding friendship for nearly 40 years, I shed relatively few tears? I find it hard to describe how I felt at Maggie's *haus krai*; I think I was mostly tense and worried and my somatic mode of attention was on Maggie's daughters and how they were feeling as well

as on the nature of their relationships with Maggie's *haus line* (including her nine brothers and sisters and their extended families), other Penambe Wia lineages living in or near Kunguma and neighbouring groups. Some of these groups I knew had been in conflict with Maggie over compensation demands for the land on which she built her tourist lodge, or compensation for use of the road. I felt a motherly concern and sense of responsibility for Maggie's children, particularly her two elder daughters who had brought their husbands to Kunguma Village and had settled and built houses there[3]. Their security of tenure seemed to me to rest rather precariously on Maggie's lifework of relationship-building within her own group and with neighbouring groups.

It is perhaps almost a truism to say that in the context of death, what are crucially at stake are the nature, quality and continuity of the web of social relations that bind the participants through their links with the deceased. But it was actually my experiences at Maggie's *haus krai* that substantiated for me the anthropological characterisation of death as a time of 'provisionality, indeterminacy and contestation as social relations are reordered' (Kaufman & Morgan 2005:319). In truth, I think I was too busy to cry. I spent much of the time during the *haus krai*, helping Maggie's daughters keep track of who was who and who was giving what in terms of funerary gifts. I knew that they would need to comprehend the complex net of relationships into which their mother was woven and into which she had woven herself, in order to be able to manage the expectations of individuals and groups who would, in future, turn to them for assistance, or might challenge them over land tenure rights. Maggie's daughters had both built houses and

[3] According to custom in the patrilineal, patrilocal Western Highlands' societies, a woman would normally move to live with her husband's family on his clan land. However, Maggie had brought her English husband to settle in her natal village, and her daughters had followed suit with their husbands.

settled in the village, on land over which their mother held freehold title and on which she had built a tourist lodge. However, over the years there had been intermittent conflict between their mother and some of her clansmen who had demanded further compensation for what they claimed was their customary land.

In conclusion, the difference between my responses at Maggie's funeral and the first two funerals I attended, I suggest, has much to do with the fact that the first two funerals occurred during the early stages of my fieldwork. While my brief moments of empathy at these funerals led to relatively shallow insights about the cultural meaning of tears and performative expressions of grief, I had not yet fully experienced the fraught politics of place and identity in this ethnographic context. By the time of Maggie's funeral, however, I had developed a deeper understanding of the political economy of the 'performative conventions and dispositions' that I had so readily absorbed and adopted at the earlier funerals. In the context of Maggie's funeral, '…intuition and empathy as already constituted were amplified within a matrix of symbolic and personal connections' (Csordas 2007:115). My close personal connection with Maggie led me into not only a heightened 'somatic mode of attention' at her funeral, but also a more ethnographically grounded intersubjective experience and consequent performative response. I define performance here as the interplay between meaning and feeling, cognitive and affective processes, where oneness and separateness, identity and difference are experienced, if not simultaneously then in terms of a movement back and forth. **Feeling** for/with Maggie's daughters drew me into thinking about customary social obligations and exchange relations as well as customary landownership and the additional tensions and

contradictions that arise when private economic development comes into in the picture. The intensity of my emotional experience was revelatory in the sense that it served to enhance my ability to understand the contested values at stake in this complex social situation; what Nussbaum (2001) refers to as 'the intelligence of the emotions' was at work, not only for me but also for all the other participants at the funeral. In turn, my understandings of the **meanings** of land ownership, and of social reciprocities, drew me into an empathetic appreciation of the emotional states of the actors and the fragility of the damaged net of social relations that was left, after the sudden death of this strong highlands woman, my friend Maggie Wilson.

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