

'The Disease will Come!' Contingency, Irony, and Challenging Closures in Ethnographic Writing

Stolz, Rosalie

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Stolz, R. (2021). 'The Disease will Come!' Contingency, Irony, and Challenging Closures in Ethnographic Writing. *EthnoScripts: Zeitschrift für aktuelle ethnologische Studien*, 23(1), 125-140. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-8-16670>

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EthnoScripts

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR AKTUELLE
ETHNOLOGISCHE STUDIEN

How to write? Experiences, challenges and
possibilities of ethnographic writing

Volume 23 Issue 1 | 2021

Rosalie Stolz

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Ethnoscripts 2021 23 (1): 125-140

eISSN 2199-7942

Abstract

Drawing on a brief ethnographic encounter in north-western Laos, this paper argues that fleeting encounters in the field can bring unforeseen topics and phenomena to the fieldworker's attention – in this case rumours circulating about an antidote to the impending coronavirus disease. The paper explores the resonances of this rumour with experiences from previous fieldwork and discusses a variety of local reactions, including mockery and self-deprecating gestures. Reflecting on narrative choices in ethnographic writing, the paper argues that the inclusion of contingent encounters in ethnographic writing, how they unfolded in the field and were grounded in sociality, can allow the illumination of how ethnographic knowledge is produced. Finally, this contribution argues that sensitivity to contingency and irony allows for ethnographic writing that challenges epistemic closure.

Publisher:

Universität Hamburg
Institut für Ethnologie
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West)
D-20146 Hamburg
Tel.: 040 42838 4182
E-Mail: lfE@uni-hamburg.de
<http://www.ethnologie.uni-hamburg.de>

eISSN: 2199-7942



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'The Disease will Come!' Contingency, Irony, and Challenging Closures in Ethnographic Writing

Rosalie Stolz

The man had something *very important* to tell us, he said. Ma Man¹ and I were sitting on the veranda of a wooden house, taking a brief rest from the excitement of the wedding feast that was going on downstairs, when this middle-aged man approached us. He climbed up the stairs to the veranda and sat down next to us on a low stool. As the wedding was taking place in another village, we did not know him, or, in fact, any of the other guests, except for the groom's brother and a few emigrated kin from our village. In a rambling and animated monologue, the man recounted that a relative of his, who lived in the neighbouring province of Bokeo, had been told by a monk from a temple in the town of Mueang Sing (in the northern parts of our province of Luang Namtha) that there was a way to avoid contracting Covid-19 that was slowly but surely encroaching on Laos: one should eat a boiled egg *today!* Every person should eat one egg, not tomorrow, not the day after tomorrow, but today, he repeated emphatically. He held his mobile phone to my ear and wanted me to talk to his relative, so I could receive further evidence for his claim, but nobody answered. I was wondering what Ma Man, my closely-related companion, was thinking about this man and his proclaimed momentous message. She seemed to take an interest in what he was saying, yet I assumed that she listened to the words of a drunken man from a foreign village mainly out of courtesy. In other words, I related the man's enthusiasm and Ma Man's attention primarily to his inebriated state and her politeness but did not give much thought to *what* he said – erroneously, as it turned out later.

This brief encounter took place in early February 2020 just as the Covid-19 outbreak in neighbouring China was attracting increasing attention in local media coverage. What I want to focus on here is the role that such brief and fleeting encounters play in reorienting the fieldworker's attention to topics and developments she did not expect or of which she was not initially aware. It is this initial unawareness that I want to focus on in my contribution to this special issue on 'How to Write Ethnography': becoming explicitly aware of social situations that have sparked one's attention reveals anthropological fieldwork as an encounter and social process in which ethnographic knowledge production is entangled in the sociality of the field. That which is the typical stuff of backstage stories, floor talk, or ad hoc lessons in teach-

1 All names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

ing can have its place right in the centre of established ethnographic writing genres (see Gottlieb 2016).

Beyond a neat repertoire of ethnographic methods, various knowledge processes in the field are triggered by brief encounters, impressions, and non-discursive processes that are hard to pin down and difficult to translate in written form (Hastrup and Hervik 1994; Nielsen and Rapport 2018). It is the anthropologist's quest to try to make sense of them. Of course, the knowledge gained through formal methods and that acquired from informal sources is mutually enforcing. Narrative forms of ethnographic writing might be able to mediate knowledge and perspective whilst showing the richness of experiences from which this knowledge is drawn. Carole McGranahan (2020: 1) emphasises the epistemic relevance of writing: 'We figure things out in part by writing about them. Writing is thus not merely the reporting of our results but is as much process as product'. Kirsten Hastrup and Peter Hervik (1994: 7) point to the connection between anthropological knowledge and stories: 'While the scope of anthropology lies beyond the retelling of local stories, these and their experiential grounding remains the foundation of anthropological knowledge'. Writing the field, we could say, is to some extent thinking and memorising the field.

Literature on ethnographic writing, as Julia Pauli points out in the introduction to this special issue, is relatively scarce when compared with the number of publications on anthropological field methods. Recent years, though, have seen an increase in the number of publications on this subject. Several authors call for more explicit training on ethnographic writing in anthropology and graduate programmes or describe the advantages of mastering such writing (Gottlieb 2016). Others engage with literary anthropology (see the contributions in Pandian and McLean 2017; Waterston and Vesperi 2009) and with local forms of storytelling in ethnographic writing (see, for instance, Cruikshank 2005). Some advocate experimenting with genres and expanding the limits of conventional forms of writing (Gottlieb 2016; Wulff 2016). Others call for a more conscious narrative approach, tied to the ever-growing demands of a competitive publication market where stories sell (Gottlieb 2016). In an article on how to write for publication, Niko Besnier and Pablo Morales (2018: 169), former editors of *American Ethnologist*, point out that anthropologists 'have capitalized on storytelling techniques since the reflexive days of the 1980s'. Guidebooks such as Kristen Ghodsee's (2016) *From Notes to Narrative* give detailed advice on constructing plots, describing scenes, and portraying an interlocutor's mimics. Ghodsee suggests capturing details with which to form convincing and rich ethnographic narratives:

You might find it difficult to write about people that you don't know [. . .]. But you must endeavor to capture specificity in even the most fleeting encounter. [. . .] Describe gesticulation

and posture. Remember Sherlock Holmes; he could surmise the most intimate details of people's lives by small clues in their dress or behavior. (Ghodsee 2016: 38)

Like the famous investigator, one should find and present clues of people's selves and lives. Whilst the call for ethnographic detail is suggestively posed and this famous investigator is merely referred to for illustrative purposes, the figure of Sherlock Holmes in fact stands in vivid contrast to ethnographic practice: the aloof and socially detached detective is the exact opposite of the socially enmeshed participant observer.

Brief encounters such as the one above might appear fleeting and contingent and may easily be forgotten if not recognised as noteworthy and jotted down in the field notes. Some, however, might hold a revelatory or transformative character or, as is the case here, trigger the anthropologist's attention (at least at a later point). Whether one calls them fleeting moments or chance meetings, such encounters can come in many different guises: what I wish to point out is their contingent character. Contingency is often alluded to in works commenting on the 'partial truths' (Clifford 1986) that anthropology can come up with, the 'provisional' nature of ethnography (Cohen 1992, cited in Rapport and Nielsen 2018: 200), or the historical contingency of phenomena. There are different ways in which ethnographic encounters can be described as contingent (Holmberg 2012: 100), amongst which the social contingency of encounters (developing in a field of social relations) and contingency as outcome of serendipity or fortuity are relevant for the present undertaking. The chance in contingent encounters lies in their potential to bring unforeseen topics to one's attention. What is of particular interest for this contribution is the potential of such encounters in ethnographic writing: drawing on a brief ethnographic case from recent fieldwork amongst the Khmu in northern Laos, I argue that writing about contingent encounters can highlight how encounters unfold in the field, that they can be part of sociality, and that they can assist the anthropologist in making sense of the field.

The run on eggs

The brief encounter with the man was quickly pushed aside by many other conversations Ma Man and I had during the wedding. It was brought back to my attention, however, in the evening, once we had returned to our village. Ma and Yong Khwaay, with whom I was staying at the time, and I had just started our evening meal when Ma Man arrived. Holding a plastic bag with eggs, she adamantly demanded that I come to her house to eat. Taking care of close kin is indeed common, often expressed through meals to which members of the same house-group (*muan kaaj mooy nuay*)² are invited. But her

² If not indicated otherwise, all foreign language terms are in Khmu. The transcription of Khmu words largely follows Svantesson et al. (2014).

persistence was certainly unusual. Ma and Yong Khwaay hid their curiosity as far as possible. I ate a few more spoons of vegetable soup but then decided to follow Ma Man. I apologised, left, and went across to her house. I assumed that she wanted me to eat with her after having spent two whole days in each other's company.

When I entered Ma Man's house, she handed me a boiled egg and demanded I peel and eat it, right then and there, and alone. This was indeed unexpected. Eggs are not eaten whole or by one person; they are served mashed in a bowl and shared by all, each person taking a few bits to add to a ball of sticky rice. But then Ma Man reminded me of what the man had told us during the wedding feast and determined that each of us had to eat an egg today; in fact, she had already eaten hers. I smirked and said: '*Kulaak*'. This is a widely used term to indicate that one believes a statement to be false. Her brief reply: 'Who knows' (*muah niŋ*). A number of thoughts crossed my mind: if there was a chance that this man was right, we had better eat an egg today; all Ma Man was doing was taking care of me; and a boiled egg – dipped in chilli sauce – is a delicacy one should not pass over. And so I ate the egg. Naan, a young mother of a baby boy who married into our village and regarded Ma Man 'like a mother' (*muam ma tee*) was curious to hear about the prophecy and Ma Man filled her in, with a tone of conspiracy, as we sat at the low table in front of the kitchen, ate the remainders of the evening meal, and chatted.

On my way back to the house of Khwaay, I briefly stopped at the fireplaces in front of some of the neighbouring houses. It was the cold season (*mong hrnim*), when the temperature falls markedly after sundown, and everyone was trying to find warmth, both the physical and the social one, sitting with kin and neighbours around log fires. At one of these, the congregated neighbours asked me for news from the wedding, the village where it took place, and the people who had attended it. Just as I was finishing the odd story of the man's prophetic hearsay account, Teen Sen, one of the women assembled, received a mobile phone call. She became increasingly upset and, when she hung up, instructed an older child to hurry to the kiosk to buy eggs. Her husband, who was staying on a plantation for wage labour, had warned her that 'the disease is coming' (*pnyaat cə rɔɔt*).³ To prevent becoming its victim, he stated, one should eat a boiled egg that very night at nine p.m. and so he instructed his wife to prepare eggs for their much beloved adoptive daughter and herself. Her sister, Teen Khæew, asked why she was not told so earlier and clearly also wanted to follow this advice. Though many of the neighbours assembled around the fire were laughing at this story, the phone

3 The word *pnyaat* is a Tai/Lao loanword. Amongst the Khmu, it is commonly used for chronic diseases that have a more or less clear diagnosis and for which biomedical treatment is sought (often complemented by consultation of local healers). For common pains and malaise, irrespective of their cause, the word *cu* is used.

call clearly gave the prophecy more weight. It was at this point that I began to wonder whether the prophecy might not in fact already be a widely circulating rumour (now with the added ‘before nine p.m.’ specifying a particular time). I was used to rumours and circulating stories, especially with regard to kinship- and spirit-matters (Stolz 2018), but what appeared quite novel here and what caught my attention was the speed by which the rumours about an approaching disease, or a calamity of any kind, were spreading and that they were doing so via mobile phone.

When I arrived back at the fireplace at the house of Khwaay, I told the people seated there about the prophecy but earned only a few sceptical glances. Yet, before we had even finished with the topic, we heard the loud voice of Ma Kham as she hurried to the kiosk located opposite our fireplace and asked the shopkeeper’s elder son for some eggs. This was followed by roaring motorbikes and adolescents arriving at the shop, most likely sent by their mothers. Like an audience at a play, we observed the spectacle of the sudden run on eggs unfold in front of our very eyes and to our great amusement. Ma Phoon, another member of the house of Khwaay stood on the veranda facing the kiosk and shouted to the small but growing crowd that if one truly wished to avoid the disease one should not eat eggs but rather stop working on the Chinese melon plantations. An argument ensued, with Ma Kham insisting on the truth of her claim and the shopkeeper’s son challenging it. But what kind of a shopkeeper would he be if he would not take advantage of this situation?

As we sat around the fire, we joked that this misinformation had been spread by no one else than the shopkeeper herself in order to sell the eggs from her growing chicken farm and commented on how the price of eggs had quickly increased from K1,000 to K5,000.⁴ Would the excitement dissipate as soon as it had come? Was it a triviality that would not even be talked about the next day? There was a wedding negotiation planned for the next evening that was at the forefront of the attention of everyone in the house of Khwaay. The ritual procedure for it had been innovated, and everyone was concerned about what to expect and how the new procedures regarding the ‘entering of the room’ would compare with the previously used ones. As the evening progressed, however, it became evident that everyone knew about the approaching viral disease and the egg antidote. Teej Maa stated deadpan that now those of us who had failed to eat an egg were doomed to die. We laughed even more when he quipped that this healing power of eggs meant we did not need hospitals anymore! The rumour indeed increased not only the sale of eggs but also the number of jokes circulating: with whomever one talked that night and the next day, boiled eggs were omnipresent.

4 The Kip (K) is Laos’s currency. At the time of the fieldwork, around K10,000 were worth €1.

The story seemed to have its source in a WhatsApp post, later repeated on Facebook (or 'Fatebook', as it is pronounced in Lao and Khmu) where advertisements by local shop owners with special offers for eggs proliferated. The daughter of the shopkeeper in our village showed me the initial post on her smartphone (Figure 1). According to this post, a newborn baby had miraculously spoken and warned its parents of the impending coronavirus disease. It then announced to them that boiled eggs eaten on 6 February would act as antidote. The post ended with the call: 'Give each person a boiled egg. Eat it today. This is the 6/2/20. Boil the egg and eat it!' Whilst the baby's words were not repeated in the accounts that circulated in our village, the part of the egg was taken literally. A few days later, Yoŋ Hak said he had heard that the police were searching for the person who initially published the post and had caught a young man who, as far as this rumour went, sold eggs in the provincial capital Luang Namtha.

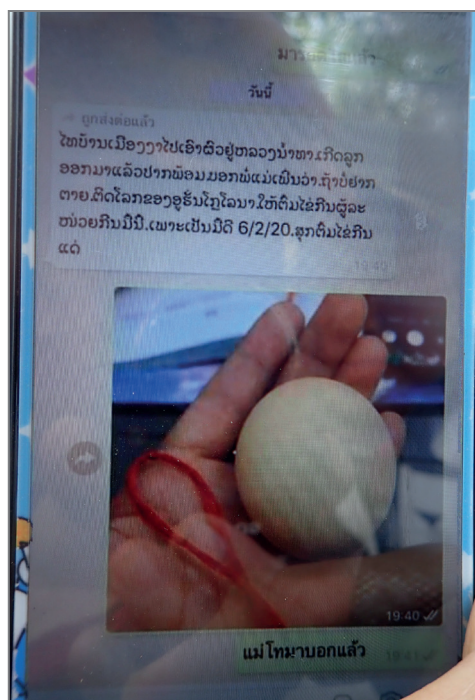


Figure 1: Photograph of the post on a newborn's prophecy of the impending coronavirus disease and the antidote effect of boiled eggs that was allegedly the original source of a run on eggs in northern Laos in early February 2020. Photograph: Rosalie Stolz

Unfolding the run on eggs

The conversation with the man at the wedding took place during a field stay in early February 2020. The main aim of my fieldwork was to expand on previous research on the changes of building practices, especially the use of concrete, in this rural upland Khmu village in north-western Laos

(Stolz 2019). The Khmu are Mon-Khmer speakers. Their livelihood is based on shifting cultivation, the collecting of vegetables, and hunting and trapping, and increasingly includes wet rice agriculture and cash crop production (Évrard 2006; Tayanin 1994). A tradition of temporary labour migration is now complemented and partially replaced by wage labour on often Chinese-run plantations in the wider region. Kin-based sociality is very much predicated on the difference of relations amongst kin group members and the hierarchical wife-giving/wife-taking ties between kin group (Stolz in print).

Although the events around the prophecy actually happened in rapid succession and in the sequence described above, their selection is based purely on chance: we happened to be in this village where this man happened to confide in us; it was a coincidence that I was sitting at the fireplace when Teej Sen received her husband's phone call; and it was serendipitous that I stayed at a house located directly opposite the kiosk. I am sure there were many more conversations about eggs at log fires in the village and other telephone calls that I did not become aware of. Yet the story as told here is not the mere outcome of a narrative strategy: it is part of how I made sense of and remembered what happened. Already during the various encounters, they appeared to condense into a story, and my field notes as well as my 'head-notes' – those 'impressions, scenes and experiences' that are not jotted down (Ottenberg 1990: 144) – already had a narrative imprint. In its narrative form the meanings, but also the contingencies surrounding the reactions to the approaching coronavirus disease, drew my attention – showcasing aspects that were already familiar to me through previous fieldwork but also pointing me to issues previously unknown to me.

This instance of a story spreading via WhatsApp in this rural, upland place made me aware of how new media have entered local life over the course of a short period. Whilst smart phones were a rarity during my fieldwork in 2014/2015 (though simple mobile phones did exist by then), now socialising on Facebook or WhatsApp is a cherished pastime amongst the village youth – though they have to bear with annoyingly slow speeds. The WhatsApp post that was regarded as the source of the rumour spread furiously on the evening of 6 February. Though the post was a stepping stone, the usual avenues of spreading news and stories were also used. Novel was that the information spread so rapidly, connecting far-flung places and people such as a monk in Mueang Sing, a relative in Bokeo, the purported author of the post in Luang Namtha, Khmu labourers on plantation sites, their kin in various Khmu villages, and an unknown number of further recipients and spreaders. The story was also shared beyond the provincial borders of Luang Namtha: my colleague Oliver Tappe, who at the time was staying in the north-eastern province of Huaphan, reported that he had heard the story there too. It even

entered Lao news coverage.⁵ The knowledge that the message came from elsewhere and received attention across the province seemed to have produced a sense of urgency and thus accelerated the speed with which the story made the rounds. Yet, the reason *why* it spread amongst my Khmu interlocutors so rapidly seems to be related to the specific matter of the eggs.

Rather than the baby's prophecy, which was unknown to most of my interlocutors, what seemed to contribute to the story's persuasiveness was the curing power assigned to eggs. Eggs (*ktor*) are not any foodstuff: they are symbolically highly laden, evoking the image of the healthy unity and wholeness of entities. The role the story accorded to eggs, thus, rang true for local recipients of the rumour as it did for me as I was observing the run on eggs and tried to put it into narrative form. Eggs, I had learnt during my earlier research, are part of the ritualised gift exchange between wife-givers and wife-takers: at a certain point during the marriage exchange wife-takers give gifts of eggs to the wife-givers; at some point these gifts are then 'answered', when the wife-givers hand over gifts of dried squirrels or rats to the wife-takers (Stolz 2020b; Sprenger 2006: 154). In the context of this gift exchange, the gift of the egg mediates acts of mutual recognition amongst kin.

Eggs are also used as ad hoc healing items to prevent souls from getting lost. Illness, exceptional emotional states, travels, and accidents can loosen the tie between body and soul, with the effect that the soul wanders around and can get caught by ever lurking spirits who might abduct them to the spirit land. Children's souls, less firmly tied, are assumed to get lost and fall prey to spirits more easily. This is when the ritual of 'calling back the souls' is conducted, mainly though not always for child patients. During this ritual, a boiled egg and the incantation of verses by the healer are used to attract the wandering soul. At the end of the ritual the patient consumes this boiled egg. It is not only true for the Khmu but also for the Tai that the egg as 'a symbol of life in embryonic form' (Ngaosyvathn 1990: 294; Collomb 2008: 160) plays a crucial role for the reintegration of the soul into the body. Eggs contribute to well-being, both in terms of binding the soul to the body and cementing the relations between wife-givers and wife-takers. Thus, the rumour of eggs as antidote against the coronavirus appeared to resonate with local understandings of eggs as healing and generally socio-ritually significant food.

5 In an article in the *Laotian Times*, Francis Savankham (2020) compared the account of the (prophetic) powers of a newborn with the birth story of King Fa Ngum – founder of the Lan Xang kingdom in the fourteenth century who was miraculously born with thirty-three teeth – and that of Sang Sinxay – a figure from a famous epic poem who was born with bow and arrows. Interestingly, it is not because of this association with these legendary figures that the egg story caught the attention of the Khmu of Pliya and elsewhere.

Mocking the rush on eggs

Recognising the healing potential of eggs might lessen the peculiarity of the story of anti-coronavirus egg eating. Yet it would be far from correct to state that my interlocutors actually assumed that eating boiled eggs would really prevent an infection. At the time when I captured the run on eggs in my field notes, Covid-19 had not yet been declared a pandemic and I felt increasingly uneasy: do I expose my interlocutors to ridicule when I present them as ostensibly susceptible to peculiar rumours about eggs as immunisation against the coronavirus? But, just as much as the rumour led to frantic attempts to source eggs at the local shop, it also evoked a spontaneous voicing of disbelief, scepticism, and mockery. When I reconstruct the unfolding of events in my head, it is not only the initial encounter with the man at the wedding but also the voices mocking the rumour that form part of the picture.

The rush on eggs led to a proliferation of laughter and ridicule – even amongst those who made an effort to eat an egg. A young teacher at the local primary school, who herself had grown up in the village, admitted with a self-deprecatory smile that she had taken her motorbike that night and driven to the district town to find enough eggs for her large house-group. Self-ridicule, mocking, and joking are established repertoires of local talk and part of what makes social intercourse enjoyable. She knew right away that the claim about the egg antidote might be nonsense but she nevertheless wondered, ‘what if there is something to it?’ Irony, Hans Steinmüller (2016: 2, 5) argues, ‘refers to an incongruity between an appearance or an utterance, and that to which it refers’; it ‘emphasize[s] openness and contingency’ (see also Fernandez and Huber 2001). The latter differentiates irony from cynicism, as ironical statements or gestures (such as an ironical smile) ‘leave space for interpretation, whereas cynicism closes this space and implies radical criticism, denial, or resignation’ (Fernandez and Huber 2001: 2).

This openness of meaning, this persistence of ambiguity is perhaps particularly vibrant with regard to elusive phenomena such as spirits (Willerslev 2013). Ironical statements that allow the inclusion of contingency, what is otherwise, and doubt are part of local discourses on spirits but also on imminent social changes (Stolz 2019). Yet, *self*-deprecatory statements carry a singular importance here. Showing one’s ability of self-deprecation and joking about oneself is part of humorous talk and, in some situations, ritually prescribed (for its role in traditional songs, see Lundström 2010: 157). In the story of the eggs both come together: self-deprecatory gestures and comments in relation to the run on eggs express the speaker’s inadvertent epistemic uncertainty about the rumour’s content and their inconclusive stance towards it. Again, the rumour could be nonsense, but what if it is not? Ma Man put this dichotomous ‘double-think’ succinctly when she uttered, ‘who knows’: it is quite likely that eggs will not help, but it is worth a try.

Those who were more sceptical let themselves be entertained by the events and scoffed at them. Teenj Mɔɔ jibed that with the eggs hospitals would no longer be needed. This mockery, different from self-deprecatory statements, does not leave space for Ma Man's double-think but rather exposes the seeming dichotomy on which it is founded. The mocking comments entail a moment of critique. Ma Phɔɔn's comment falls into this category when she scolded those rushing to the shop in search of eggs to rather quit their work on the Chinese-run plantation site if they were concerned by the virus. Watermelon plantations have been mushrooming in upland Laos, attracting labourers from far and wide. At least since 2014 a plantation has been in operation in walking distance from the village on fallow wet rice fields for the time between cultivation periods. The wage of K50,000 per full working day is an incentive for large numbers of villagers to give it a try, including mothers whose children are at school or cared for by their grandparents. Although many feel ambivalent about the working conditions on the plantation and the harmful effects of the chemicals that are widely in use, the mushrooming number of concrete houses being built in the village gives evidence of the wages that people rely on. The general sense that *khon chin* (*the Chinese*) might take advantage of Lao soil and labour was now being topped by the feeling that they brought 'their disease' to Laos. Ma Phɔɔn's comment unveiled this ambivalence: everyone is afraid of contracting *pnnyaat chin* (the disease of the Chinese) but still enters their service on a daily basis. Ma Phɔɔn's critique was raised smilingly – she too frequently works on the watermelon plantation.

Contingence and co-presence in ethnographic writing

When I was invited to write a contribution to this issue on ethnographic writing, I instinctively decided to focus on the vignette of the boiled eggs against the coronavirus. But why? I have asked myself during the revisions. One reason why I hesitated was the above-mentioned worry that this story could misrepresent my interlocutors as naïve country bumpkins who believe fake news spread on WhatsApp. More critically, however, I wavered because, as it took, the story did not have an immediate effect on me, did not force itself on me to alter or trigger a new understanding of sociality in the field. Despite this, I have always retained the feeling that there is something to the story – something that perhaps illustrates particularly well some of my concerns with ethnographic writing. These concerns are about the role of contingency, the related problem of co-presence, and the insights that the comical can offer.

Let me begin with contingency. The story of the run on eggs began for me with the brief encounter with the man at the wedding. It was merely by chance I was sitting on the veranda with Ma Man when this man approached us. Not particularly noteworthy at first, the situation could have well been

drowned out by the wealth of impressions gained and conversations engaged in at a feast. Just as fortuitous was the fact that I was at the log fire exactly when Teeng Sen's husband called her and urged her to buy eggs. Similarly opportune was the fact that I was living at a house that faced the shop that was called upon so frequently that night. Like pearls on a string these snippets embedded themselves in my headnotes, and were later captured in my field notes as that which became known as 'the run on eggs'. Whilst I cannot anticipate whether this story will be remembered for a long time, what is quite typical for ethnographic encounters is the contingency of its genesis.

Contingency entails not only such a moment of chance but also the eventuality that defines the social relationships established during the fieldwork process. The way the researcher is enmeshed in social ties in the field is far from a side effect of fieldwork but bears an imprint on the fieldwork process and how knowledge is built. Ethnographic accounts often confine reference to the relational side of fieldwork to special sections, such as the discussion of the methodology employed or the acknowledgements (where the author's power to relate to prestigious institutions, grants and prominent 'names' is also displayed [see Callaci 2020]). In this, Judith Okely (1992: 5) notes, anthropologists 'produced accounts from which the self had been sanitised'. It is a divide that prevails in ethnographic writing, attracting continued calls to explicitly reflect on the relational and affective nature of fieldwork (Stodulka et al. 2019) and the social persona of the fieldworker and their company in the field (Braukmann et al. 2020; Pauli 2020; Stolz 2020a). Indeed, social contingency, or what Liana Chua calls 'co-presence', goes to the heart of ethnography: it points to 'the wider relational field through which ethnography is generated – and in which it remains enmeshed' (Chua 2015: 646). The places mentioned in the narrative presentation of the run on eggs are not any places: they closely entwined with kin-based sociality to which I am not an unattached, or 'invulnerable' (Chua's 2015: 646), observer. Being positioned in the local web of kin allows intimate insights (into matters of relevance for close kin) but might also limit the knowledge (about distant wife-givers/wife-takers or of all those kin whose house one cannot easily enter). In any case, and this is relevant for the run on eggs: it shapes the conditions under which one encounters phenomena in the field.

The degree to which the persona of the fieldworker and her involvement in social relations in the field should enter the ethnographic narrative varies strongly and is a distinguishing mark of the different ethnographic writing styles that John van Maanen (2011) describes in his *Tales of the Field*. He identifies three writing styles ('tales' in his parlance): a realist, a confessional, and an impressionist writing style. These styles coexist and, in fact, contemporary ethnographies are still commonly shot through with all of them. Realist tales have a detached tone of description and the author does not appear as fieldworker persona; it is a style often used when providing overviews

(such as the mandatory historical or regional context) and when the author feels like 'merely' delivering information – such as when I described the role of eggs in ritual gift exchange above. The confessional style, in contrast, lives off the exhibition of the fieldworker person and her feelings, attitudes, and struggles. This is no less touched by strategic considerations and editing: a shared theme of confessional tales is the telling of struggles and trials, often during the early stages of fieldwork, and how the fieldworker managed to overcome them. The impressionist narrative style also allows a glimpse into the situation in the field but is not as obsessed with the ethnographer's self as the confessional narrative. Impressionist tales are dense and lively narratives of often dramatic or comparatively unusual events or series of events, told in a way that pulls the readers into the setting. The perspective of the fieldworker and how she is involved and impressed by the course of events forms part of the narrative, yet the focus is as much on what happened as on how the ethnographer reacted to it. Lively narratives that transport a sense of 'being there' and provide glimpses into the social backstage of ethnography, so to say, become a well-established element of ethnographic writing.

Challenging closures

Contingency and constraints apply not only to how the fieldworker relates to 'the field' but also to how other people co-present in the field and their statements and actions are presented (Chua 2015: 655). Over time, the impression one develops of one's interlocutors and companions in the field gains in complexity and so does one's sensibility towards the situatedness of accounts. Good ethnographic stories aim to express this complexity and challenge closure. As Joanna Davidson (2019: 170) convincingly argues, good ethnographic stories 'tell multiple truths; they create multidimensional characters; they refuse flattened or simplified understandings; and, ideally, they transform the listener through an intersubjective experience'. The editorial choices of composing narratives, especially when they aim at producing a sense of 'immediacy' (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2019: 78), can be quite profound and certainly extend beyond cosmetic questions of narrative aesthetics. The decision to include, for instance, Ma Phoons exclamation from the veranda or Teen Moo's witty remarks is based on my ethnographic finding that the local articulation of ambiguity through the use of irony and mockery is not merely an epiphenomenon but is part of the story. As irony can allow for contingency and ambiguity of meaning, its capacity to challenge closure is a valuable device in ethnographic writing.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Julia Pauli for inviting me to contribute to this special issue and providing me with valuable and encouraging feedback. I am also grateful to Oliver Tappe, Michaela Haug, and an anonymous reviewer for inspiration and critique. The fieldwork on which this article is based was funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. I am indebted to my hosts in northern Laos.

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Rosalie Stolz is a guest lecturer at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Freie Universität Berlin and a postdoctoral research affiliate at the Institute of Anthropology at Heidelberg University. She focuses on Southeast Asia and on Laos in particular. She has published on spirit stories as narrative traces of spirits in *Social Analysis* and on aspirational houses in *Ethnos*. She is co-editor of a volume on *Being a Parent in the Field*. Her monograph *Living Kinship, Fearing Spirits* will be published by NIAS Press. Her work focuses on kinship, sociality, socio-economic change, and the transformation of houses.

Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany; Institute of Anthropology, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany

Email: rosalie.stolz@fu-berlin.de