

Introduction: Vignettes, Social Change and Solwezi Town

Field course 2017/18

Rita Kesselring

What is social change, and where is it coming from? How can we see it when it happens, and is there ever any moment of time where there is no change? Societies never stagnate, of course, but is there something like accelerated change or the beginning of social change? What are the conditions for it? And how can we not only recognise it when it happens but also relate it to a readership?

These questions shaped our discussions during two terms in the seminar rooms of the Chair of Social Anthropology, University of Basel and – albeit in the background – during six weeks of guided field research in Solwezi town in Northwestern Zambia (and in one case in Alice Springs, Australia) in January and February 2018.¹ In this Basel Paper issue, master students in Social Anthropology and African Studies present the results of this enquiry.

The issue's contribution is threefold: First, it engages with the question of how to present social change with the help of vignettes, second, it offers a diverse tapestry of insights into a central region of today's capitalist world and, third, it attempts a refinement of the ethnographic method of participant observation.

Vignettes as a means to study social Change

A vignette is a genre whose inclusion in ethnographies is common practice in anthropology. Vignette is a loose term, though, and we do not intend to give a final definition of its style and possibilities. Rather, we focus on what we can do with vignettes. The most famous vignette – although not called this way at the time – is probably Max Gluckman's *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand* (1940), in which he describes the opening of a bridge in today's KwaZulu Natal, South Africa in the late 1930s over nine pages in detail. This allows Gluckman in the subsequent, longest part of his essay to embark on an analysis of the divisions between and within the black and the white community, tax collection, labour migration and recruitment, the contradictions of the colonial state, but also the in/equilibrium of a specific social structure and the coexistence of conflict and cooperation.

The combination of the initial “naked” description of a social situation followed by a long analysis of what can be extracted from it is a method called extended case method, which Gluckman initially developed and which Jaap van Velsen further extended into situational analysis (1967). Their motivation for this new way of presenting research data was to move away from (functional) structuralists' method with their often decontextualised abstractions.

This shift in anthropological writing was also a reaction to societal challenges such as colonialism, urbanisation and industrialisation, whose effects Gluckman, Van

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Velsen and their colleagues at the Rhodes Livingstone Institute (RLI) and the Manchester School did not want to ignore anymore. One of their premises was that conflict is the rule rather than the exception. As a consequence of their focus on what people do and not on what they are supposed to do, the notion of social structure started to disintegrate into an interest in social process or social change. Key to the study of social change as pursued by these anthropologists is the belief that a social situation anywhere is always embedded in a “broader, world historical context” (Burawoy 1998, 5). Michael Burawoy, a student of Van Velsen, describes this as “extending out from the field” (1998).

For this issue, we take inspiration from the extended case method. Each contribution describes a social situation (vignette) and subsequently offers an analysis and theorisation. A vignette is often a social situation made sense of after the actual event, and is subsequently re-written and polished for its use in a specific text. Four points guided our writing. First, vignettes are never simply an illustration. While they are carefully chosen, the author should in theory be able to produce a number of additional social situations where the same issue is at play, or, as Gluckman said: “I have presented a typical sample of my field-data” (1940, 9). Second, a vignette can stand for many arguments. It is the discretion of the author to lead the reader into a certain direction. Third, a vignette ideally allows the reader to come to a different conclusion than the one presented by the author. In Gluckman’s words: “I am presenting this detailed material by which it can be criticised” (1940, 2). Fourth, a vignette allows the author to write herself or himself into the text; not as key determinant but as a participant who has shaped a specific situation just like everyone else.

Solwezi Town in Northwestern Zambia

Solwezi was not a town where RLI or Manchester School scholars conducted their research although they were only 200 kilometres away in the Copperbelt towns in then Northern Rhodesia. Solwezi did not follow the almost legendary growth of the Copperbelt mining towns in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s and did therefore not qualify for research into industrialisation and urbanisation. It only received attention as a new mining town in the 2000s.

Strictly speaking, Solwezi town is not a new mining town. In fact, it was the first outpost for the British South Africa Company to explore mineral deposits in the broader region in the late 19th century, and in 1908 Kansanshi mine was operated as the first commercial mine in the Central African region. Its significance reduced rapidly once the rich and easily accessible ore in the Katanga region (in today’s Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC) and the Zambian Copperbelt was found, though. Solwezi’s history diverges considerably from the Copperbelt towns established in the 1930s and 1940s; it completely missed out on the infrastructural boom of these years.

Solwezi town has however grown throughout the 20th century, it became the province’s capital and developed a type of urbanity different from the Copperbelt towns. While Kansanshi mine was intermittently open, it largely remained – socially, economically and politically – disconnected from life in Solwezi town next-door. Despite this non-synchronicity, Solwezi town and Kansanshi mine share a history; and since the most recent resource boom of the 2000s, Kansanshi mine and Solwezi town cannot be separated empirically, analytically or spatially.



Tour of Kansanshi mine, Solwezi.
Rita Kesselring, February 2018

Like elsewhere in Zambia, Solwezi has witnessed little infrastructural development since the global recession of the 1970s and the liberalisation and privatisation of the mining sector in the 1990s. Maybe this lack of infrastructure is part of the reason why life in Solwezi town is directly affected by the current extractivist cycles of boom and bust. Small changes, like a new road or a new suburb for mine workers or the mine's management, have a great impact in a town where most people have to cope with little municipal infrastructure.

Life in town would however also continue if the mine closes. Ordinary urbanisation processes taking place in the rest of Zambia have shaped Solwezi town, and it would not turn into a “ghost town” since many people have made Solwezi their home unrelated to the largest employer in town.

The most remarkable aspect in Solwezi which indeed distinguishes Solwezi from other towns in the region is its unprecedented growth, though. Between 2000 and today, Solwezi's population grew fivefold from approximately 50 000 to 260 000 residents (Preuss and Schmidt-Eisenlohr 2016); a fact which can be attributed to the lack of employment across the country and the hope for work and employment in a region where the biggest share of foreign direct investment went since the early 2000s. This investment did not benefit the ordinary resident in Solwezi but rather went into ensuring the smooth extraction of copper and gold (Kesselring 2018).



Solwezi town seen from a water tank.
Rita Kesselring, May 2015

The first five contributions in this issue each portray an aspect of life in Solwezi to the reader, framed with conceptual and theoretical anthropological discussions. The mine shaped our research stay in Solwezi – we participated in a tour of Kansanshi mine, for instance – but all in all, we took the approach to study everyday life in town without prematurely succumbing to the easy grand narrative that everything happens because of the mine. As the reader will see in the contributions, though, in almost every research project, the mine did play a role because residents' lives are affected by it. In this regard as well as in any other regard, we chose an inductive approach to the question of Solwezi's urbanity (Förster 2018).

Julia Hohn gets us started with a close examination of ordinary life in Solwezi. Water structures everyday life, as Julia shows, both at the household level and in terms of social differentiation across Solwezi town. Water takes on a variety of values, qualities, meanings and uses depending on the context, and is therefore an ideal element through which to examine intimacy and solidarity on the one hand and segregation and differentiation on the other. Her locale of enquiry is a social situation in front of a house where a mother and her children wash clothes and clean dishes as a joint household chore. Water becomes a necessary and playful element in this practice; but it can never be taken for granted as water is scarce, sometimes far away and potentially polluted. These qualities structure life and possibilities in the household and beyond. While water practices have a strong habitual dimension, as Julia shows, they can also become the origin of criticism of a larger unequal system and thus a call for change.

Just as water shapes every resident's life, so does language. In her contribution, Carole Martin examines language use in schools. As a result of Solwezi's growth, the language situation has changed, and school teachers are often overwhelmed by the multiplicity of languages spoken by their pupils and have to deal with their own language deficiencies when transferred to Solwezi. A new national language policy stipulates that the first few years of schooling are taught in the local language Kikaonde. Language use on the street goes the other way, though: English and Bemba, the dominant language spoken in the Copperbelt towns, have grown into lingua francas in Solwezi. Language change is a classic indicator for social change. Based on her close examination of language use in schools, Carole shows how language use changes slowly and not necessarily unidirectionally. Each individual, teacher and pupil, skilfully adjusts to and shapes complex social situations in the midst of ongoing change.

Farming, equally, is something almost every resident in Solwezi engages in, ranging from an herbal garden in town to a field further away on customary land. Monika Huber's field of enquiry are agricultural (subsistence) practices and training programs offered by the mine's Foundation and the state's Ministry of Agriculture. Their training focus and the motivation for offering trainings to subsistence farmers differ, though. The Ministry has a mandate to support farmers and connect them to the market. It does so with limited funds and with limited success and reliability. On the other hand, the Foundation has decided to offer courses to farmers as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility programme, which is well funded and exerts considerable influence on farmers' perspective on agriculture. Farmers fall between these two ideologies and have to find their own way of feeding their families. They make complex decisions considering factors such as climate change, the size and quality of their land and access to water sources. On the one hand, farmers stick to their well-tested practices (which might be described as traditional), on the other hand, they are influenced by (unreliable) state programs and the luring of the mine's well-financed programs for conservation farming. Social change, Monika seems to suggest, happens as a result of these different – and often contradicting – discourses and practices.

At the core of Anna Karsko's study are musicians in Solwezi. Music is of course a hobbyhorse of scholars of social change (Mitchell 1956). She is interested in how societal hierarchies between different groups play out and are formed in social encounters around musical practice. She closely looks at an audition where aspiring musicians and theatre/movie performers present their skills in an environment imbued with power relations. She shows how these young people are caught up in a double-bind which we know from music scenes across the world: in order to pursue one's dream of doing art for art's sake, one has to engage with those who potentially compromise the purity of art. Social change, Anna seems to argue, can potentially come from art practice, but it happens within the societal constraints any member of society is necessarily part of.

In her contribution, Anna-Sophie Hobi brings together, somewhat unusually, the notions of governance and luck. She describes a situation where strong power relations play out between representatives of a youth group and the town clerk. She shows that, for civil society activists, gaining the attention of a high-ranked official is one of the key entry points to effect social change. Whether or not the attention-seekers are successful, is, as Anna-Sophie proposes, a question of persistence, luck, and the skilful engagement in governance processes. "Being there" is thus not only the anthropologist's call (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009), but could also be understood as a rule for civil society activism in post-colonial settings with an underfunded and overwhelmed (local) state.

Methodology

The contributions in the second part of this issue focus on questions of methodology. The authors reflect on their positionality and refine the methods of ethnographic research. Methodology has been a major concern at the Chair of Social Anthropology in Basel (Förster 2001; Förster et al. 2011; Förster 2014) and was a key focus in the training leading up to the field research on which these contributions are based. In short field stays in particular, one is completely dependent on people's goodwill to find out something meaningful. With limited time, there is the danger of doing quite the opposite, though, and trying to control the outcome of one's research from the very beginning – in the hope to at least have something "factual" to take home. Part of the challenge of a short research stay is hence the necessity to open up to where people lead you from the very beginning. This can be anything from confusing to unsettling; and perseverance and trust are important ingredients here.

This dependency on other people is not just a wise strategy when faced with time constraints but is the core of how we understand the practice of anthropology. Relying on someone else means to pause, listen, and participate in what he or she is doing, with the aim of slowly adopting a different perspective of the world. Even in a short period, we can try to be attentive to moments when our perspective on things shift with the help of our interlocutors. There is the possibility that we share something – a slice of an outlook on the world – momentarily precisely because we share mundane daily activities (Kesselring 2015). Vignettes are a good way of presenting this shift in awareness and attention, because the author can write herself or himself into the narrative while keeping the focus on the content of the discussion.

The four contributions in part two reflect on power, intersubjectivity, relationships and patience as elements of participant observation, while speaking about as diverse issues as refugees, TV culture, carpentry and art production.

Misato Kimura draws a parallel between her experience of obtaining permission to conduct research in a refugee settlement one hour's drive west from Solwezi town, and refugees' experiences with the power of papers in their daily lives in the settlement. In other words, access, both into the settlement and the continuous fostering of her hosts' (UNHCR) goodwill, was a condition she shared with refugees to a certain extent. For refugees, obtaining a gate pass to legally leave the settlement for a limited period of time turned out to be an emotionally draining but central dimension of life in the settlement. Either way, whether one complies with the rules or not, one has to engage with the attempt of the Zambian state to control one's movements. This means to either stay in the settlement, leave legally for a couple of days, or leave illegally, risking getting caught in Solwezi town and being jailed or exploited for bribes. Dependency and agency are a strange couple but they inextricably belong together for both the researcher and for refugees in a precarious environment. People constantly work against stagnation, but their attempts for social change are individualised by a bureaucratic and sometimes corrupt state.

In her contribution, Deborah Oliveira takes the daily ritual of watching Bollywood soap operas with her host family as a point of departure to reflect on the affective reactions that media narratives trigger and how they are able to create moments of shared intersubjectivity and interconnectedness. She explores the guilty conscience which spending her time in the intimate realms of the household during field research evoked and calls for a critical reflection on hierarchies of knowledge embedded in the private vs. public dichotomy which shape our knowledge production – an epistemological project that feminist ethnographies have long pursued and which is worth being revisited, as she argues.

Aurel Everwijn, impressed by the way his perspective on the chosen subject matter – carpentry – has been shaped by the relationships he has formed in the course of his field research, calls for more attention to the ways in which relationships are formed in ethnographic encounters. He does not stop at relationships between persons but suggests to extend the enquiry to relationships between a person and “a thing”. Aurel shows how his perspective on wood and its potential has grown as a result of his apprentice work as a carpenter and the close attention to his teacher's movements (and sometimes words). New insights, it seems, can come from a splinter which our inattentive or inexperienced planing produces. We acknowledge the skills of the other, halt, and adjust our own practice to what the other has unwittingly shown us.

Michèle Monnier, who went to Alice Springs in Australia at the same time as the rest of the group was in Solwezi, was primarily interested in the continuation of an artistic style, that of Aboriginal artists, rather than its rapid transformation due to a changing global market. She observes and eventually interacts with artists as they compose paintings which relate to their memories, stories and social position. Michèle puts the emphasis on the possibility of conversing with people whom she struggled to access initially due to a societal setting she inadvertently was part of. Ethnography requires patience and the sensitivity and willingness to acquire new gestures and communication skills to be invited into the world of others.

Finally, in an epilogue, PhD candidate and colleague Anna Christen offers a reflection on “the good vignette”. Elaborating on the etymological origins of the vignette, she shows how vignettes in ethnographies have come to stand for a picture or “states of affairs” (Wittgenstein 1921) that show themselves. Vignettes, Anna argues, ask questions rather than answering them. She and all the contributors to this issue therefore invite the reader, with the help of our accounts of social change, to think ahead.



Election Day, Kim-
iteto Primary School,
Solwezi.

August 2016

Roan Antelope Club
House in Luanshya,
Copperbelt, where
Rhodes Livingstone
Institute researchers
A.L. Epstein and C.J.
Mitchell, and Ameri-
can anthropologist
H. Powdermaker
conducted research.

September 2017

Photos: Rita Kesselring





High cost area,
house and garden
with maize plants.
January 2018

Road leading from
the city centre to
the neighbourhood
Urban Extension.
February 2018

Cooking dinner:
Nshima (maize),
with okra soup, red
beans, fried chicken
and sweet potato
cubes.
March 2018
Photos: Julia Hohn

