

Thoughts on Spaces Explored, Cultural Encounters with a Dash of Interpreters in Field

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Abstract

This article serves as a comprehensive exploration of the pivotal role played by physical locations in ethnographic inquiry. It emphasizes the significance of the researcher's chosen locality, transect walks, and interviews in intellectualizing the field. The narrative unfolds within the contextual framework of native spaces, requiring a nuanced understanding of social nuances and dynamic positioning in temporal and spatial dimensions. The article delves into the intricate tapestry of socio-cultural practices, portraying the field as a landscape of social rules reflecting conditioning forces that demand adaptation. A central focus is on the spatial network, where interpreters emerge as crucial gatekeepers, facilitating cross-cultural understanding and encapsulating shared spaces. While acknowledging the echoes of scholarly works, the article presents a unique perspective, offering insights from a researcher in the early stages of fieldwork. Rooted in ethnographic research among the Konyak Nagas, it navigates the field as a spatial production, unveiling social mapping facilitated by interpreters within the community.

Keywords: *Ethnographic Inquiry, Spatial Dynamics, Native Spaces, Interpreters, Konyak Nagas*

Introduction

Fieldwork, in essence, becomes a conscious decoding of the native's space, with the 'self' dynamically positioned in both time and space. The social meaning of the field unfolds only within this contextual framework. The researcher is tasked with interpreting the social rules inscribed in the field's space, recognizing it as a reflection of conditioning forces that necessitate adaptation (Low, 2011). The actions of the

natives are perceived as manifestations of these ground rules, and any challenge to the spaces or practices within the field can prove precarious for the researcher. Acceptance into the society requires the researcher to accord due regard to the native's perspective. In the initial stages, the researcher may either endorse the values of the natives, remain aloof, or conform to prevalent practices—all dictated by the codes and templates of the field space (Sluka & Robben, 2012).

In the realm of ethnographic research, active participation in the daily life of the native population becomes imperative. The need to assimilate into the community arises, allowing the researched to organically express themselves through the research process. The natives, in turn, engage in the subtle positioning of the researcher within various social constructs, attributing diverse identities to the outsider. Scholars often encourage interpreting this positioning as the 'production of space,' conceiving it as a dynamic and generative process (Lefebvre, 1991). Prominent landscapes, as articulated in the ethnographic works of scholars such as Bronislaw Malinowski in *Argonauts of Western Pacific* or A.R. Radcliff-Brown's research on the Andaman Islands, emerge as visual encapsulations of shared spaces between ethnographers and natives. These landscapes serve as a lens through which the distinctiveness of a community can be studied, offering a visualization of the physical settings that shape the everyday lives of individuals. Consequently, the spaces within the field become integral components within a vast network of cultural, social, psychological, political, and economic interconnections (Driessen & Jansen, 2013). Actors in this narrative diffuse into these spaces through a myriad of social actions. The authentic essence of space is palpable within the interplay of actors in the field, a nuanced reflection of their collective experiences and interactions (Billo & Hiemstra, 2013; Caretta, 2015). Within the mind of the fieldworker, diverse conceptions of the study area's landscape take shape. This mental space is an embodiment crafted by the fieldworker—a realm fraught with anticipations, fears, and apprehensions, even if one is acquainted with the locale. Questions pertaining to the unfolding narrative persist: What will transpire? How shall I engage with the community? How can I establish connections? These concerns permeate the fieldworker's psyche.

At places where language barriers impede direct communication these dilemmas are more prevalent. Interpreters here, serve as vital gatekeepers, facilitating understanding between researchers and interviewees (Reeves, 2010). The research objective focuses on framing the spaces in the field as legible for both the researcher and the researched, with interpreters serving as architects of cross-cultural understanding (Shimpuku & Norr, 2012; Wolf & Fernández-Ocampo, 2014). The article posits that field spaces, intricately woven into social relationships, act as dynamic backdrops where interpreters orchestrate communication, revealing the nuances of cultural exchange. Emphasizing the dialectics of space in ethnographic research, it explores the interconnectedness and interactions facilitated by interpreters across the spatial network. The ethnographic narratives, rooted in the spatial landscape, provide a foundation for understanding the conscious and unconscious meanings attached to the field's unique contextualities. The article draws on ethnographic research among the Konyak Nagas of Longwa, Nagaland, India, highlighting the correlation between acceptance by the native community and the challenges of bridging initial gaps in the field. Grounded in the fieldworker's journey, the article explores the intricate spaces of language, culture, and religion through negotiations facilitated by interpreters.

Navigating the Cultural Terrain of the Field:

In 2013, I conducted ethnographic research in the village of Longwa, situated in the Mon district of Nagaland, India, among the Konyak Nagas. Longwa's geographical intricacies make it challenging to discern whether one is in Myanmar or India. Falling under the category of the most backward villages in the country, Longwa shares an international boundary with Myanmar to the east, cutting through the residence of the village chief known as *Angh*. Longwa sprawls on both sides of the international border, allowing people to traverse it freely without restrictions. The entire village is situated on a mountain range called *Shagot*, with houses positioned on terraced hilly terrains accessible via rugged steps. The Konyak community adheres to a clan-based kinship system, dividing the village into two clans: Wang'sha (the clan of the *Angh* or Chief) and *Pangsha* (the clan of

the commoners). Their belief system centered around animism, acknowledging good spirits (*yungwan*) and malevolent spirits (*hahshi*). The advent of Christianity in 1978 marked a transformative period. Christianity has not only fostered educational advancements but also ushered in significant lifestyle changes among the Konyak Nagas. However, this shift has come at a cost – the traditional status of the *Angh* has diminished with the ascendancy of the church as a central seat of power in the village.

My research was concerned with understanding the structure of food practices among the Konyaks. It was aimed at seeing the meaning of food for the Konyaks, how they define edibility. The focus was also to look at the categories they have comprehended for the food. Therefore, kitchen became an important space of study. The ritual significance of the food and its symbolic value was also studied. Thus, various taboos and foods associated with rituals were to be studied. The research was also concerned with the food security and politics over it in the village. In short, it was a holistic approach to study the structured, symbolic and development facets of food in Konyak society.

The fieldwork was a part of Master's course curriculum. The field area was chosen by the teacher-in-charge. I and my colleagues had no other option but to abide by his decision. Some of us also gave arguments against not going so far citing reasons of poor health, alas! all in vain. Now, once the name of the field area appeared, many who had never seen the north-eastern province of India had their own reasons to worry. Often the region is in light due to political instability and government-local struggles. To those who have never been to North-East, it was treading unknown region. This was the first time a place unseen gave worries to us. I interpret this as field already in coming action, even before we had come in real, physical contact with it. Many of us started reading more about the region. The virtual space that the village shared on the internet, celebrated its past of being the village of warriors and headhunters and to add to it skulls of men and animal could be seen in the images of the *Angh's* house. With scepticism like this around me, I had started preparing research design which I could execute there. All through my travel to the village I was worried about two things the language and rapport building.

Punch (2012) contends that native anthropologists possess linguistic mastery, facilitating their engagement with the local populace. As a non-native researcher, however, I found myself bracing for a realm rendered incomprehensible by the language barrier. The disparity in our mother tongues heightened the sense of alienation, casting a subtle divide in our worldviews upon my arrival at the field area. Beyond merely navigating the physical space of the village, I found myself situated in distinct intellectual and social capital spaces, distinctly separate from the position of the natives in the field. The initial encounter with this environment felt alien, a space shrouded in incomprehensibility (Odendaal, 2014). Only through the gestures on the faces of the natives could I glean any understanding. Yet, a lingering question persisted – were my interpretations of these gestures not inherently colored by the cultural lens through which I perceived them? The discourse surrounding me initially appeared as a tapestry of jargon, an entirely foreign culture that demanded meticulous exploration. My research journey necessitated grappling with the trials and tribulations embedded in this unfamiliar field space.

Attempting to Crack the Code of not being a Stranger in New land

On March 1, 2013, I commenced my fieldwork, marking the inaugural day of immersing myself in the study. Tasked with accompanying my group, which comprised colleagues, research supervisors, and five to eight local individuals appointed as our interpreters, the itinerary led us to the *Angh's* house, situated opposite the guest house where we were lodged. Equipped with a fresh jotting diary, pen in hand, and camera slung around my neck, I embarked on this venture. The *Angh*, a man of short stature adorned with tattoos across his face and a pierced ear, received us. Although he spoke sparingly, he affirmed the interpreters' dialogue with a nod of his head. Exchange of greetings ensued, and the interpreters commenced detailing the material possessions within the house and the *Angh's* influence in the village. Amidst this discourse, I felt like a black duckling in a sea of white, struggling to grasp the essence of the conversation. While my peers diligently recorded every bit of information from the interpreters, I found myself missing crucial details. Eventually, disheartened, I stowed away my diary and pen, choosing instead to observe my surroundings. Unlike many of my colleagues who quickly befriended the local interpreters, I remained ensconced in my cocoon. Recognizing my need for time

to independently comprehend the nuances of the environment, I opted to silently absorb the pulse of the space I found myself in.

In the late afternoon, I descended from the hill and wandered through the village, having by then acquired the ability to greet the locals in their native language with a warm '*Mai Mai taisa*' (How are you?). Responses to my greetings were minimal – some offered smiles, while others cast apprehensive glances. The village, it seemed, was not an entirely open space. Its inhabitants possessed subtle ways of signalling their lack of interest in my presence. On the following day, I decided to take help from the interpreter assigned to me. Initially perceived as a mere tourist, locals would often present handmade ornaments for sale. However, in order to conduct my research effectively, it was imperative to transcend this tourist lens. I requested my interpreter to convey that I was a researcher focusing on studying their food system. This revelation stirred varied reactions; some became curious, while others seemed disappointed.

A palpable gap persisted between me and my informants, a noticeable divide in the field site. We occupied the same physical space, engaged in surface-level interactions, yet an undeniable unease lingered, creating a substantial distance. Consequently, I found myself positioned as an 'outsider' within the Konyak society, a perception reinforced by their consideration of me as a leisure-seeking tourist rather than a serious researcher. Immersing myself in a homogenous, tightly-knit society posed a considerable challenge, given our apparent lack of common ground. The avenues for meaningful involvement were scarce, especially considering that the nature of my research necessitated delving into their daily lives to observe consumption practices and kitchen preparations. This, however, proved to be a delicate endeavor, as access to the kitchen – a sanctum typically restricted to kinsmen – was a private space among the Konyaks. Meals were treated as intimate affairs, prompting the partial closure of doors to dissuade visitors during these times.

In the spatial layout of a Konyak house, distinct zones of privacy and openness coexisted. These zones encompassed the kitchen, bedroom, toilet, storehouse, cattle shelters, as well as open areas like the front lobby, open fireplace (reserved for men), and external spaces around the house. My permissible entry

extended to the open zones, where discussions primarily revolved around political and economic matters. Men engaged in conversations about hunting expeditions, animal husbandry, and opium cultivation, yet the voices of women remained conspicuously absent. To navigate these spaces, I relied on interpreters, Kim and P (name changed), who not only facilitated intellectual understanding but also provided emotional insights into the intricacies of Konyak society.

The interpreters crafted intermediary spaces, bridging the gap where two strangers could communicate verbally, emotionally, and intellectually. They played a pivotal role in unlocking the intricacies of Konyak society, acting as key facilitators in my research. These interpreters curated environments that enabled me to establish a network of informants (Edward, 2013). Routinely we visited households. I shared moments – purposeful or not – enjoying tea with the residents, engaging with their children, and assisting in various activities, whether peeling potatoes or participating in any other routine task. The immersion into the daily chores of the community left an indelible impression, highlighting the commonality of human experiences despite differences in language and cultural practices. Amidst the routine, we exchanged insights into marriage ceremonies in my culture, discussing the diverse culinary traditions that accompanied such celebrations. The presence of interpreters during these interactions played a pivotal role in fostering comfort and communication. Communicating primarily in English with my interpreters allowed for seamless exchanges, as they adeptly translated my inquiries to the family members of the households. This collaborative approach facilitated an open dialogue, transcending linguistic disparities and fostering a deeper understanding of their daily lives.

My sustained immersion in their environments afforded me the opportunity to pose inquiries and commence dialogues. My attempts to converse in the local dialect evoked diverse reactions. Some found amusement in my efforts, witnessing a cultural exchange through language, while others applauded my dedication to mastering and using their native tongue. It suggests that attempts at linguistic assimilation go beyond mere communication; they become symbolic acts contributing to the construction of a shared cultural space. The varying responses, ranging from amusement to commendation, further emphasize the complex and subjective

nature of language interactions within the broader context of cultural exchange in fieldwork. These reactions provide valuable insights into the ways in which communities negotiate and appreciate efforts to engage with their cultural and linguistic identities. Interpreters are not mere linguistic conduits but active contributors who influence the researcher's interaction with the community (Piller, & Takahashi 2011 & Inhetveen, 2012). Their agency extends beyond language translation, encompassing cultural nuances, social roles, and the construction of the researcher's identity within the field (Kawabata & Gastaldo, 2015). In instances where anonymity is crucial, interpreters play a strategic role in managing the disclosure of the researcher's identity. They can introduce the researcher selectively, employing culturally appropriate descriptors that align with the local context. Turner (2010) posits that interpreters play a pivotal role in unveiling and transforming what can be considered as "obscured spaces" within the context of fieldwork. These obscured spaces refer to areas or aspects of the community that may be inaccessible, hidden, or culturally sensitive to an outsider or researcher. Interpreters, through their agency, become catalysts in bringing these concealed elements to the forefront and redefining them as arenas for social exchange. For instance, the introduction of a researcher as a *maiki* (daughter or girl) from Delhi, as observed in my own fieldwork, exemplifies how interpreters strategically utilize identity descriptors to navigate obscured spaces. This nuanced use of identity serves to establish trust and rapport, creating a neutral ground for interactions that might otherwise be obscured by the researcher's outsider status. The obscured spaces, once opened up by interpreters, become sites for meaningful social interactions. Through the interpreter's mediation, greetings, tea-sharing, jokes, and shared meals become channels for cultural exchange, forging connections that may have otherwise remained elusive. These might include private gatherings, rituals, or discussions that an outsider would find challenging to access. Interpreters, by virtue of their insider status and cultural understanding, contribute to breaking down barriers and creating opportunities for meaningful social exchange in these once-obscured spaces.

Understanding Changes in Spatial Dynamics:

The ethnographer's quest for profound understanding transcends the interpretation of verbal and non-verbal cues; it demands a discerning acknowledgment of the spatial dimensions that both shape and are shaped by

social actions (Odendaal, 2014). A concrete illustration of this spatial dynamic unfolded within the Konyak households. Here, my access was unrestricted, allowing me to seamlessly walk around their house after some time. However, the spatial dynamics shifted noticeably upon entering the residence of the chief, the *Angh*. In this distinct space, a nuanced hierarchy emerged, demanding a heightened awareness of spatial etiquettes. Within the *Angh's* house, the spatial arrangement reflected the elevated and auspicious status of the chief. I found myself obliged to demonstrate respect by assuming a posture of reverence, opting to sit on the floor at a respectful distance. This spatial arrangement underscored the inherent power dynamics within the Konyak social fabric. This experiential contrast prompted a meticulous examination and interpretation of the spatial intricacies governing power and dominance within the Konyak community.

Hence, the researcher's spatial positioning in the field assumes a multifaceted quality, unfolding numerous episodes of transformation (Pink, 2009; Phillips, 2012). Initially constrained to roads, narrow hill trails, and the courtyards of native houses, my mobility expanded over time, allowing exploration of their home interiors and venturing into the expansive fields.

One particularly memorable incident highlights the intricacies of spatial dynamics in my memory. Amao extended an unexpected invitation to join him in the forest—an area traditionally reserved for men engaged in hunting or agricultural pursuits. This offer, tinged with excitement and a hint of apprehension, prompted concerns about appropriateness and modesty as a woman. Proactively addressing these concerns, I communicated with my supervisor and requested Amao to do the same, ensuring a sense of security. The forest expedition, guided by Amao, unfolded as an enlightening adventure. He shared insights into the local flora, emphasizing seasonal cues that influenced their diet. During our exploration, I impulsively picked crimson red berries, met with Amao's firm response: 'Don't eat them; animals avoid these'. The correlation between the berries and the preferences of local wildlife became apparent, and in a paternalistic gesture, Amao took the berries from me, momentarily treating me like a child. Intrigued by the interplay between animals and berries, I queried Amao, unveiling a fascinating insight into the ancestral wisdom of the Konyak Nagas in choosing the forest as a consistent source of sustenance. The Konyak Naga diet mirrors that of the

forest inhabitants, meticulously excluding meat that carnivorous animals avoid and including only plants consumed by herbivores. This revelation marked a pivotal moment, offering a fresh perspective and dispelling lingering fears. It was a day when I felt enveloped, akin to being treated with care and nurturance. The forest expedition provided an immersive exploration of emotions, a crucial facet of my spatial journey. Amao's actions extended beyond dissuading me from consuming certain berries; he took the initiative to identify edible ones, skillfully replacing potentially harmful ones in my hand. This seemingly simple act held profound meaning. Reflecting on these field experiences, it becomes evident that the diverse moments within spatial dynamics forge intricate social relationships within the community.

The field, rich with symbolism, assumes a central role in shaping daily spatial practices. Echoing Lefebvre's (1991) insightful perspective, the landscape of the field transcends mere physicality; it becomes a repository of symbols that exert both overt and nuanced influences on the community's daily activities. However, decoding the meaning of these symbols necessitates the invaluable contribution of interpreters. In this intricate dance between the symbolic canvas of the field and the interpreter's medium, space is not merely traversed but actively appropriated and imbued with significance.

Conclusion

Today, as I find myself immersed in solitary contemplation, a wave of nostalgia washes over me, evoking memories of the field space and its people. The landscape of Longwa and the community of Konyak Nagas, navigated with the assistance of interpreters, have granted me a profound and enduring experience. This space transcends mere Cartesian coordinates; it is a phenomenological realm. The construction and reproduction of ordinary activities unfold against the backdrop of the shared spaces between the researcher and the researched, in the field. It is crucial to recognize that fieldwork goes beyond mere data collection; it is a complex endeavor involving the overcoming of spatial barriers and the identification of gaps that may veil the spaces between the natives and the ethnographer (Rose 1997). The day-to-day life of the natives offers a unique opportunity to immerse oneself in their world, gradually shedding the outsider identity. However, it is

essential to note that while the outsider identity isn't entirely discarded, it is, in a sense, masked or muted once the researcher enters the overlapping zones shared by both the native and the researcher (Casey 1994; Ingold 2008). In maneuvering through these intricate spaces, interpreters assume a crucial role, particularly in a cultural and linguistic milieu distinct from that of the researcher. They help bridge the gaps of anonymity that may exist between the ethnographer and the native community. The researcher, along with the interpreter, must employ strong actions and emotions, actively engaging with the natives to foster integration.

The article underscores the notion that while other agents in the field are active, the space itself is intricately shaped and perpetuated within the structures of daily life. This dynamic process dictates the inclusion or exclusion of the ethnographer within the field, with interpreters facilitating the negotiation of these spaces. Various moments in the field unfold across these spaces and places, serving as the mechanism or platform through which the ethnographer, with the guidance of the interpreter, seeks to integrate into the native community. A nuanced understanding of the natives' spaces, facilitated by interpreters, is pivotal for gaining profound insights into their social life. On a personal level, I, in collaboration with my interpreter, made a conscientious effort to grasp the complexities of Konyak spaces. Together, we worked towards a nuanced understanding, strategically positioning ourselves within those spaces where the likelihood of acceptance was higher. These spaces, inherently dialectic and become the conduits for social relations between the ethnographer and the natives. Spaces evolve into the sites where social interactions flow, allowing ethnographers and interpreters to construct narratives about the culture based on the intricacies of native social life. It is crucial not to perceive space as static, as there is an inherent gap between the ethnographer and the community, which, as discussed in this paper with the interpreter's assistance, can be minimized but not entirely eradicated. This space undergoes transformation through sharing and extending shared spaces. While the outsider, even with the interpreter's support, can never fully become an insider, spaces of restrictions and limits persist. Yet, as a member of the broader social setup, the ethnographer, facilitated by the interpreter, attempts to fit into the smaller frame of the native community. Everyday spaces are re-appropriated by the fieldworker and the interpreter for their own assimilation. The values, beliefs, and practices of the indigenous

people, interpreted by both the ethnographer and the interpreter, are interwoven within the fabric of the field space, demanding careful interpretation in their contextual richness.

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