

# Introduction

## The Vibrant Village

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In December 2016, *Etnofoor* published an issue about ‘The City’, signalling a flourishing ethnography of urban centres as anthropology shifted away from ‘rural remote and isolated field sites’ (Slooter and Diphooorn 2016: 7). The reasons for this shift are numerous, but they accumulate in a general narrative in which cities are seen as vibrant, lively, and ever-growing. The rural or the village in this narrative is often equated to stagnation, tradition and depopulation (Sorge and Padwe 2015: 235-236; Li 2010), evoking nostalgic images of life that has not yet been corrupted by capitalism and mindless consumption (Herzfeld 1991). While the current issue does not wish to deny the vibrancy of cities per se, we aim to challenge the idea that villages are stagnant and stuck in time. In this introduction, we argue that villages are vibrant too and that an ongoing engagement with village life has much to offer anthropology.

The demise of the village as the place for cutting-edge anthropological research has been swift. It was only at the turn of the century that Gupta and Ferguson (1997) argued against a ‘hierarchy of purity’, in which the village stood at the zenith of possible fieldwork sites; now, it seems that this hierarchy has been inverted (Sorge and Padwell 2015). Following the self-reflexive critiques of the 1970s and 1980s (see, for example, Assad 1973; Fabian 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986), the village as primary research site became associated with an outdated model of what it was to do ethnographic research. The village represented the home of the far-away exoticised Other, neatly contained in a coherent and fixed unit of analysis (‘the community’). Instead, ‘new’ anthropologies were, amongst others, about movement and globalisation (Appadurai 1990), the decolonisation of field research, and came with a

rise of ethnographies of places that anthropologists lived in themselves – that is, mostly urban areas in the North Atlantic (Jaffe and De Koning 2016).

Of course, rural places did not vanish from the anthropological canon. Still, when studying the village, ethnographers, *also* in this issue, take great pains to convey that they do not think and write of the village as fixed, bounded, and isolated. This urge seems to be related to the image of village-based research, and classic rural fieldwork in general, as old fashioned and out of time (Fabian 1983). This image, and the urge of ethnographers to distance themselves from it, has evoked discontent. For example, Judith Okely (Marcus and Okely 2007: 358) notes that ‘the field site as bounded isolate has been recreated for promotional demolition. It is wrongly presumed that anthropologists until the 1990s found only spaces which were mountain locked, sea trapped or enclaves in tropical forest’. Indeed, scholars like Wolf (1982), Mintz (1985) and Li (2014) – to name but a few – have convincingly debunked narratives of rural isolation, connecting village livelihoods to global developments.

As Sorge and Padwell (2015) argue, it is entanglements like these that make ‘the village’ pertinent to contemporary anthropology. Villages – in all their diverse manifestations – are ‘localised sites for the negotiation of meanings, as well as sites that respond to the changes wrought by late modernity and to the myriad political, economic and cultural forces that operate on a global scale’ (ibid.: 241). The specificity of the village as a ‘localised site’ for knowledge production makes it a relevant locus for anthropologists to study these processes. Yet, at the same time, the nature of these sites implies that we do not need to posit ‘the

village’ as opposed to ‘the city’. As the contributions to this issue argue, there is no need to think about villages in terms of a dichotomy between the urban and the rural. In fact, similar to the way in which Diphorn and Slooter (2016) note the ‘contested nature’ of the city, Sorge and Padwell (2015: 241) argue that villages ‘are historically contingent processes, never inert, but always becoming’.

The contributions to this edition recognise these contingent processes and use them to shed light on particular social constellations as part of an ever-transforming world. For example, Andre Thiemann’s contribution *Moral Appreciation: Caring for Post-Sociologist Cows in Contemporary Serbia* examines how small-scale dairy farmers in a Serbian village deal with a changing economic and agricultural landscape. Arguing against a static notion of rural moral economies, Thiemann shows how pre-capitalist forms of reciprocity *and* the embrace of capitalist utility maximisation come together in the survival of a family farm – and in the demise of others. By investing in cows, machinery, and buildings, some farmers are able to keep up with the demands of a capitalist market. As Thiemann argues, however, in labour-intensive times, they are only able to do so by drawing on old debt relations. In addition, caring for ‘post-socialist’ cows allows these farmers to perform the traditional ‘peasant ethos’ of a living village.

Like Thiemann, R. Elliott Oakley is concerned with understanding how global transformations are shaped by, and take shape in, the village. In *‘Opening Up’ the Village: Canoes, Conservation and Contending with Transformation in Amazonia*, Oakley investigates how residents of indigenous villages in southern Guyana partner with an environmental conservation

project. This large international program initiated in the early 2000s aims to protect the Amazonian rainforests by setting up protected areas in collaboration with communities that live in the forests. Oakley describes how the people in one such community contend with the forms of governance and conservation practices introduced by environmentalists. Rather than reproducing environmentalist rhetoric, this community has come to understand conservation in local terms of making a village. In effect, Oakley argues, environmental conservation has been interweaved with local ideas of living well together. In order to make this argument, Oakley offers us a detailed analysis of indigenous conceptualisations of ‘the village’ as a place that is made by ‘opening up’, an ongoing process of interconnections between people and other beings.

Giuseppe Troccoli calls for a similar open conceptualisation of ‘the village’. His contribution is the only one in this issue not based on ethnographic research in a village; instead, Troccoli worked with builders in the small-scale construction industry in Belize City. In his article *The Village in the City: Urban Experiences through Accounts of Rural Life in Belize*, he analyses the village as an open signifier in the accounts of these city dwellers. The builders in Belize City see the village as a quiet place where one can make an independent living by working the land. This is remarkable in light of a dominant understanding of modernity that presents a pathway ‘from agriculture to industry, from country to city, from peasant to wage worker’ (Li 2010: 69). Troccoli’s interlocutors turn this linear narrative on its head. For them, life in the city is dangerous and characterised by dependence on others, while the village represents a place of hope, emancipation, liberty, and

aspiration. Troccoli pushes his argument beyond a simple juxtaposition of rough city life and rural idyll by treating the village accounts of his interlocutors as indexes of urban positionality.

Fenna Smits and Rebeca Ibañez Martín’s paper, *Rethinking the Village in Response to the Anthropocene: ‘The Village’ as a Site for Multispecies Innovation*, turns another popular trope about the city on its head. Whereas the city is usually conceived as an innovative hub, they discuss the village as the locus of innovation, particularly in relation to the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. With two case studies, they illustrate how villages ‘become’ in response to global climate change, and how this process of becoming involves actors that are more-than-human. They show how people try to collaborate with algae, bacteria, tides and soil in experimental assemblages, in order to mitigate and work with this change. Hence, Smits and Ibañez Martín conceive of the village in relational terms, arguing that this understanding is vital when dealing with the Anthropocene. That is, such relational understanding goes beyond a humanistic conceptualisation of the field, helping us to understand the wider implications of climate change.

The notion of the village as ‘more-than-human’ is discernible in the work of Thandeka Cochrane as well. In her article, *‘The Village’ as Entangled: An Exploration of Rural Libraries in Northern Malawi*, she uses libraries as a metaphor to argue that villages are not discreet places, but *become* through their entanglement with other places and times. She traces the emergence of several small libraries in rural Malawi through a coming together of people, money, buildings, and books. Rather than a static place separate from and in

contrast to the city or globalisation, Cochrane shows that a rural library can better be seen as a complex assemblage of objects, persons, and epistemologies from near and afar. She then argues that tracking such a coming together could function as an antidote for a colonialist discourse that has imprisoned the African village in an underdeveloped and mythical past, expelled from a global and modern future.

We can find a similar engagement with ‘the African village’ in the final article of this issue by Gemma Aallah and Aloise Okoth. In *Living Honourably and Independently: Dreaming of a Good Village Life in an African Rural Health and Demographic Surveillance System Site*, they provide two interlinked stories: one is about a statistical construct of an African village in a global health monitoring programme; the second is about a local fieldworker working for this programme, who tries to build ‘a forested rural idyll’ based on nostalgic images. Both stories are closely linked, sharing the potency of village images, which enable both the abstraction of the village into health data, and the creation of an ideal rural landscape. Meanwhile, the stories also reflect the temporal entanglements between the global and the local. Most notably, the funding for the monitoring programme, though it has been continuously renewed for decades now, could be stopped at any moment. This has created a sense of perpetual temporariness, affecting the fieldworker – who moved to the village from the city as part of the health monitoring programme – and urging him to create something lasting for himself and the community he lives in.

The entanglements between the local and the global that Aallah and Okoth expose bring us back

to the core of this issue. Our engagement with the village is not a gimmick, or a return to old methods and field sites. The village matters because – contrary to some popular narratives – many people live in rural places, and they try to make sense of the changing conditions of present-day life. Whether you conceptualise the village in terms of ‘opening up’, meshworks, or more-than-human assemblages, villages are deeply modern, as well as continuously contested sites. The contributions to this issue show that this modern and contested nature of ‘the village’ provides fertile ground for anthropologists seeking to understand ‘the general in the particular’ (Sorge and Padwe 2015: 244). Their vibrant village portrayals thus exemplify the continued relevance of rural field sites to contemporary anthropology.

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