

Interview with Sjaak van der Geest

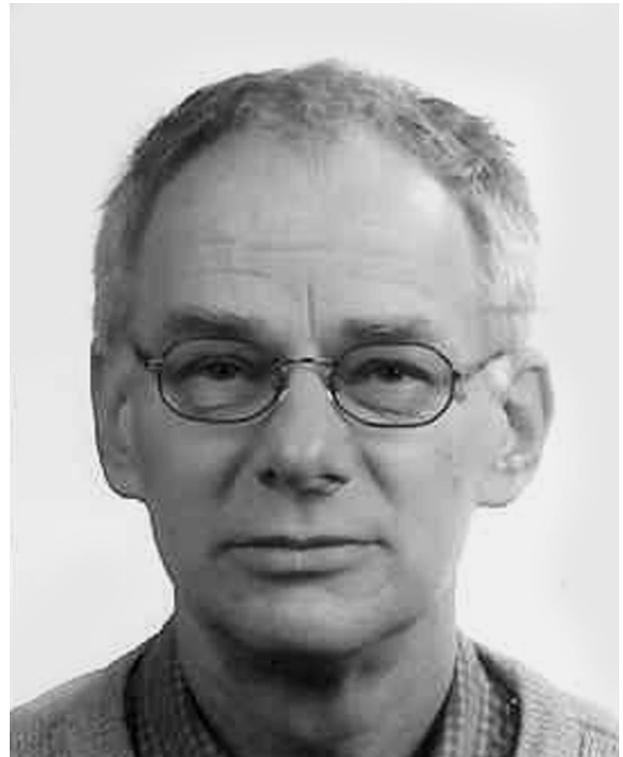
Ruth Kutalek
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Sjaak van der Geest is currently guest-professor at our department.

How did Medical Anthropology in Amsterdam start?

Actually we are celebrating our 25th anniversary on June 23. Not that this is an exact date because we don't know when we were born. Around 1978 we began to offer special courses in medical anthropology. That gradually developed and became bigger and bigger. I think it started when the Dutch anthropology departments came together and decided to make a division of labour, because not every university can do everything. So they asked us to develop medical anthropology which at that time, as you know, had become very popular and fashionable. The reason they asked us was that there were about three people in our team who had been working in that field. One of them was Klaas van der Veen, who is now retired. He worked in India and wrote about TB, doctors in hospitals, and private versus public health care in India. Then there was someone who has left us long time ago. She had worked in Tunisia on women and children and reproductive health. Finally there was me. I had just come from Ghana where I had worked on family planning and birth control which was somewhat related and relevant to medical anthropology.

From there we have slowly developed and grown. One day Anita Hardon, who was studying medical biology, said she was interested in medical anthropology. She did her PhD research in the Philippines on medicine use in two slum areas of Manila. Later on she joined our team and proved to be a very good organizer apart from being an excellent scientist. She was able to get contract research – research which was paid by a third party, which the university liked. At that time we were probably the only anthropologists who were earning money for the university and that created a lot of good-will.



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Slowly more people came: Els van Dongen, Ria Reis, Pieter Streefland, and Corlien Varkevisser. Others did a Ph.D. with us. We now have about five or six people who have a fixed position in the heart of medical anthropology, we have five to ten more who work in Medical Sociology and what we call Science Dynamics, the study of the social and cultural history of science, in particular medicine. Six years ago we began an international masters in medical anthropology, the AMMA. The course, which has attracted students from about thirty different countries from all continents, has created a world-wide network for us. This year, in September, we start a Dutch masters in medical anthropology.

If I look at the things we are doing, including the research by Ph.D students, there is an enormous variety of topics and themes. If I pick out some central themes I would say the pharmaceuticals which we started around the beginning of the 80s, have proven to be a very important theme. One could probably say that

Amsterdam is the ‘world leader’ in pharmaceutical anthropology. We have organised an international conference on this theme and have published a lot of central overview works there. A related theme was a multi-country research on social and cultural aspects of vaccination. That has been finished now. Reproductive health has become an important theme too. Migrants and health care in Europe is a new research programme, which we carry out together with colleagues in Spain, France, Belgium, Italy, Norway, Denmark, and a few more countries. Some of us are working with old people and now another theme which is becoming quite important is the study of children and health.

What about your own life and your connection to Medical Anthropology?

I could divide my anthropological life in few chapters. When I was very young I wanted to become a missionary. I studied and completed theology and although I never became a priest I was sent as a kind of liminal missionary to Ghana. In Ghana I switched fully to anthropology. I did my Master’s at the University of Ghana and carried out my Ph.D. research in the same community where I had done my fieldwork for the Master’s. Theology has given me a special sense and respect for other people’s ideas, even if you may not share them.

My first research, in 1971, was a case study of one extended large family in a rural town in Ghana. Actually the advantage of being a missionary is that you are requested to learn the language. So the first six months of my stay in Ghana was pure language learning. Ironically, many anthropologists don’t have – or take – the time to learn the language. I studied and practiced the Twi language in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town of about 5.000 people in the south of the country. I stayed with one *abusua* (extended family), about 75 adults living in five or six houses in the town. Some of them were living in Accra and other places, mostly as traders, but were often coming back to Kwahu-Tafo. The purpose of my research was to describe daily life in an ordinary family, but I ended up with a thesis on quite dramatic aspects in that daily life: marriage conflicts, death and funerals and witchcraft accusations. The thesis was defended at the University of Ghana.

My second research was on sexual relationships and birth control in the same town of Kwahu-Tafo. It led to my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Amsterdam. One of the main “findings” of that research was that family planning services were offered to people who did not want them (married couples) and denied to those who needed them urgently (young people involved in secret love affairs). I put “findings” between inverted commas because everyone knew this.

About five years later, after I got a position in Amsterdam, I had the chance to do more fieldwork in Africa, and that’s when I started my research on pharmaceuticals. I was interested not so much in indigenous herbal medicine and plants but was struck by the fact that modern Western medicines were used for very different purposes than they were supposed to be used for. I had noticed this already during my research in Ghana on family planning where a whole generation of young people were taking a medicine as contraceptive and abortivum, which later turned out to be a laxative.

In 1994 I decided to return to the place in Ghana where I had started my anthropological life, this time to study social and cultural meanings of old age. You may call it the third anthropological chapter in my life. That is almost ten years ago now and I have to kind of steal one month a year to do research. By now I have written a number of articles on that beautiful topic but these articles were meant to become chapters for a future book and that book has still not been written.

In the meantime, one research leads to the next. During the research on the old people my attention was drawn to sanitation, toilet behaviour, toilet visits of old people and of people in general. That is another topic which keeps me quite busy and which I decided to choose as my topic for a series of lectures here in Vienna to force myself to put my thoughts on culture and defecation in some kind of order, make a first overview for myself to find out what has been written about it and what theoretical discussions have been taken place in anthropology which are relevant for the social, cultural and historical study of defecation. The work of Mary Douglas is very crucial here but there are many more authors who have discussed the

topic, directly or indirectly. Doing this job in Austria has several advantages. It is easier to concentrate being away from home, but more important is that Austrian culture and society are full with fascinating stories on shit. The students here are giving me interesting suggestions about their culture (and their private lives!). Being in another place helps to think about one's own culture as well. That is the magic of anthropology.

Is there a central theme, a "red thread", in your anthropological life?

My topics are very diverse and it seems to be that I am not on a very stable course. I am doing many different things and I don't feel that my life and my ideas are very consistent in one theoretical school. I am an eclectic kind of person. If you would ask me "Is there something which has fascinated you all your life?", I think, somewhat arbitrarily perhaps, of introspection (see van der Geest 2002).

I have always been convinced that anthropologists are very introspective. Of course we learn in methodology class that the anthropological researcher is his own research tool but we may not be fully aware of the implications of that statement. Whatever you see, you see (and understand) with *your* eyes. All the senses which you use in fieldwork pass through your own body and through your own personal history and the sense you make out of it is basically what you believe to be true. In the hard exact sciences the rule is that you have to be objective and drop all your subjective qualities. You must observe as if you are a machine. But we never do this, we can't. Sometimes we try but if we tell ourselves that we are objective we are just naïve or lying. It is better to be aware of your subjectivity and to know how you are using it. It is both in the doing of fieldwork and in the interpretation and the analysing of observations and interviews and conversations that you should use your subjectivity strategically. That is one thing, your own research and secondly we are doing it all the time in reading the results of other researchers' work.

I feel this very strongly with the topic of culture and defecation which I am teaching presently. How should I understand what some people

claim about defecatory behaviour, what people do in public places with regard to this topic and what people do in private? I have no way of checking this whether it is correct or not correct, my only way of testing the reliability or the plausibility of the claims is introspection, to think how would I react in such a situation. It becomes even more delicate because defecation is a topic where people hardly share experiences so I cannot even compare how other people may feel about it because we don't talk about it. It is a lonely experience and the ideas and practices around this topic have been developed in my life and also in your life in relative solitude and isolation. Assessing the plausibility of toilet experiences is a very subjective exercise and yet, I feel quite confident about it. I am not overcome by doubt and hesitation even though I realise that I cannot compare my feeling with other people's feelings. My main reassurance is critically examining by own feelings about it. Secondly there are the reactions of students and other people to what I write and teach. I have not come across stories of experiences which are impossible for me to understand.

Introspection is an underestimated tool for doing fieldwork and reflection in anthropology. We should point this out to students because it is a great experience to realise that the articles and books in anthropology that you are reading have a connection with your own biography. I realise that if you are reading a book, whether it is a book on the Azande in Congo or about people in Malaysia, the book only captures your attention and is interesting for you if there is somehow a connection with your own concerns and your own life. The moment I discovered long ago that Evans-Pritchard's book on the Azande was not just about certain peculiar practises by a people far away but about rationality, it suddenly became exciting for me. What is rationality? Am I rational? Later on I heard that Evans-Pritchard once in an interview had said that ultimately he was not really interested in the Azande but in his own way of life and his own thinking. Anthropology is a journey to know other people in order to know oneself. That is the most fascinating aspect of anthropology. If you don't have that 'autobiographic' feeling with the themes of anthropology you won't finish the study, you will find it not interesting.

To know yourself is the beginning of wisdom. They say this was written above the oracle in Delphi: Know yourself. There is nothing wrong with it. If people claim that they are not interested in who they are, they are naïve and don't know what they are doing. Knowing yourself does not exclude others; it is through the other that you know yourself. That is what social sciences are about and anthropology in particular. Coincidentally, yesterday I saw a painting in your "Kunsthistorisches Museum" of a couple looking into a mirror. In the mirror two grey skulls were reflected. On the edge of the mirror was the text "Erkenne dich selbst" (Know yourself) Interesting, isn't it?

Yes, it is. Why were you particularly interested in old age?

There are a couple of reasons and most of them come from my own life. In the first place I become older myself. Secondly my mother was then in a critical phase of her life, she was around 85 and became very dependant. The family had to decide what to do and the painful decision to put her in an institution was really troubling me. It drew my attention to other societies where this may not be necessary, where old people seem to have a happier life. At the same time this romanticisation of old age in Africa was also in my mind because I knew from previous experience that it is not that fantastic as some people here tend to believe. When I looked around among my anthropology colleagues in Netherlands I realised that none has worked on the topic. That too is for me a reason to become curious. The same is true for my present topic, even more so. Later on I discovered that anthropology of old age is quite active in the countries around us, especially in the United States, but it was under-researched certainly in my own country. What surprised me most was that old anthropologists whom you would expect to become reflective and to be interested in old age, had not taken up the issue. That too was a reason to become curious. And of course I wanted to go back to the place where I had started twenty years ago. There was almost a sentimental reason to see the people again. I had not seen them for along time for several reasons. I wanted to go back because they had been very important in my life and they had become very good friends. As you can see, it was a well-reflected choice

with many emotional reasons in it. Introspection!

Where did you start your academic life?

I got a position in Amsterdam and I have been there for 27 years now. I have moved a lot over the world, often I did very different things, but I never changed my place of work, which was good for me. Maybe it is not in line with present ideas that you have to be flexible, that you have to change your job every five years. It helped me to build up continuance. The fact that I have a wonderful team was also important. I must admit that I once applied for another job. I was successful but when I told my family, my children were very annoyed with me. They said: "We don't want to move. We have been living here all our life, we have our friends here. If you think it is necessary for your career to go to another university you can go but we stay here!" To be frank I was impressed by their arguments and I think they were right. Friendship meant so much to them. I cancelled the whole thing and never regretted.

Now you have made me curious because you said you were not able to be in Ghana for quite a long time. This story would really interest me.

Basically the background had to do with confidentiality. I have published a brief article on it just recently in "Anthropology Today" (van der Geest 2003). It had to do with the fact that the information of both theses I had written dealt with delicate topics. My first research had to do with witchcraft. There were a lot of hidden witchcraft accusations, suspicions and gossip about members of the family. All these people had been telling me about their own uncles, mothers, brothers, sisters who were witches and who were trying to do some terrible things. I realised that if I would ever publish this it would be a big problem. Actually, the people were only willing to tell me about these things after I had promised them that I would keep it confidential. I was in a dilemma because when I finished I thought I should give my work back to them but in this case it was not possible because they would read what others had been telling me about them which would cause conflict and difficulties in the family. Even if I changed their names and the name of the town

they would still know, it was their family. In the back there was a beautiful genealogy, so they could easily trace all informants. So I decided to change my own name as well. My masters was published under a pseudonym. I could not go back to the town and tell them that: "This is my thesis and though your name is not there it is my thesis about you." The same happened with my Ph.D dissertation. The delicate topic there was abortion. Abortion was a very common practise. It was in a sense normal but at the same time it was shameful and disapproved of; it was practised in deepest secrecy. I knew if I go back the first thing they will ask me: "Where are the books?" So I decided that I would not go there. I went there once for a very brief visit and I had some excuses why the book was not there and I always had to find new excuses for the sake of confidentiality. Now twenty years later as it is so long ago I gave the books to the head of the family.

Now I am doing exactly the opposite. I am using all real names. I am sometimes using the name of the town in the title of the article because that is what people want me to do. Looking back at what I did 25 years ago I sometimes wonder if I have not been too careful. I don't think I have but in a sense my worries were much bigger than theirs. For them it was important that if someone from Europe comes to stay with them and he thinks they are interesting enough to study and write a book about, they should be proud of it and others should read about them: this are we, this is our family, this is our town, this is our life. It was very disappointing to them that nothing of that sort came out of my research 25 years ago. With my present topic I can do the opposite. When I

asked the old people, "Do you want me to hide your name?", they were surprised and almost offended. "Of course not! I want you to put my name on paper, I want to be remembered!" That is natural. So I see my present publications about old people as acts of remembrance and if possible I try to dedicate an article to a certain person.

What strikes me is that this concern about privacy is much stronger in our culture than for example for my friends in Ghana. They are not so worried about this privacy. They appreciate the honour and the respect of having their names mentioned in articles. Whether I say good things about them or things which are less favourable is less important. Ethical rules in anthropology and ethical rules in publishing anthropology are problematic. It is hard to make a kind of human rights code for practising anthropology because there are many cultural differences. The present rules are very 'Western'.

Thank you for the interview!

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