Confidentiality and pseudonyms
A fieldwork dilemma from Ghana

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Fig. 1. Akua Mansaaw with two grandchildren. During the last years of her life she could be seen every morning sitting in front of her simple house, doing practical things to help the family.

The first article of the ‘Statement on Professional and Ethical Responsibilities’ drawn up by the Society for Applied Anthropology contains the following clause: ‘We shall provide a means throughout our research activities and in subsequent publications to maintain the confidentiality of those we study.’ That same article emphasizes that anthropologists owe it to the people they study to disclose their research goals, methods and sponsorship. Strangely enough nothing is said about what I consider even more important: the obligation to return the research findings to the people among whom the study was carried out. Unfortunately, confidentiality may prove hard to reconcile with openly sharing research findings, as I came to realize after my fieldwork in a Ghanian community.

Early research
Thirty years ago I undertook anthropological research in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town in southern Ghana. My intention was to stay with one extended family (abusua in the local language, Twi) and study its social ambiguities – its one-ness and its internal conflicts. On the one hand, the abusua was presented as a locus of ultimate belonging; on the other hand opposing interests, secret and open hostilities and lifelong vendettas revealed cracks in the old institution. My interest had been fuelled by an African ethnography (van Velsen 1964), which had also revealed some other ‘cracks’, these ones in the once dominant structural functionalism, which had always emphasized the harmony of African kinship. Van Velsen’s fine analysis showed that communal values and kinship terms of unity often served hidden private interests. The transactionalism of Barth, Bailey, Goffman and Boissevain was in the African air.

I settled with a family of approximately 75 adults and adolescents. The fieldwork led me to three areas of considerable conflict in the abusua: marriage (and divorce), death (and inheritance), and witchcraft accusations. The last area proved particularly sensitive, as witchcraft (bayie) was believed to be only effective when practised between close relatives. Several proverbs were cited to explain this, one of them being: Aboa a ohye wo ntama mu, na óka wo (‘Only the insect in your own cloth bites you’). The members of the abusua told me that the closer the relative, the more dangerous he/she was. At first, most of them were reluctant to reveal names, but when I assured them that I would treat their information confidentially and that they could speak safely to me as an outsider, they began to mention some cases of witchcraft. Moreover, I made it clear to them that I already knew about quite a few skeletons in the family’s cupboard. Only some older people refused to discuss the topic with me. There were a few whom I did not dare approach, as I knew they had been frequently accused of practising witchcraft.

Most ‘informants’ told me in strict confidence what they had heard from others or what they had experienced themselves. I never heard anyone openly accuse someone else. All ‘accusations’ were made in secret and took the form of gossip, sometimes in a tone of concern and anxiety, sometimes uttered with malicious intent. A few informants seemed to enjoy tarnishing others’ reputations with witchcraft accusations. These were usually directed at elders who had treated them unfairly (cf. Bleek 1976). In all I heard 71 stories of witchcraft involving members of the family.

Two years later I returned to Kwahu-Tafo to conduct research for my PhD on sexual relationships and birth control, including the practice of induced abortion. Abortion was and still is a delicate issue in this region. It is practised on a large scale by young people, and in a sense it is a quite ‘normal’ thing to do when one becomes pregnant while still in school. At the same time it is a scandalous practice
and people are terribly ashamed when their actions are discovered (Bleek 1981). Moreover, at the time of the research abortion was a criminal offence, punishable by a maximum of ten years’ imprisonment. In Kwahu-Tafo, as in all other parts of the country, abortion was predominantly a self-help practice, carried out in secret. People told me about 53 different methods of terminating a pregnancy, ranging from taking or overdosing on pharmaceuticals to drinking herbal concoctions or applying ‘instruments’. The complications linked to this last type of abortion could be serious. Some women never became pregnant again and a few died as a result of the operation. Understandably, the people with whom I discussed the matter were not eager to tell me about their experiences with abortion. Respondents in a questionnaire-based survey lied profusely about their involvement with this method of birth control (Bleek 1987). I was only able to convince them to speak more openly about their experiences after I had promised to keep the information strictly confidential.

When I started to write up the data from my first and second fieldwork experiences, I discovered the awkwardness of my promise of confidentiality. It is a good anthropological tradition to give one’s informants and their community pseudonyms, but I soon realized that in this case such a measure would be an insufficient guarantee of confidentiality. Ghana’s academic community is like a village. Through my (the author’s) name it would be simple to trace the identity of the town and consequently of the informants. Moreover, two young people from Kwahu-Tafo were students at the same university where I was completing my Master’s degree. They could easily read my published accounts in the university library. After giving fictitious names to the town (‘Ayere’) and the people, I decided I had to hide my own identity as well if I wanted to protect the people who had told me about their confidential – dangerous and ‘shameful’ – experiences. I chose the name Wolf Bleek as a pseudonym for myself.2

Novelists and poets often hide their identity behind a pseudonym, but it is unusual to do so in academic work. Why? Literary authors write mainly about themselves – either directly or indirectly. By using a pseudonym they protect themselves, or their work from censorship. This is an accepted practice in the world of literature, but an anthropologist writing about others is not supposed to use a pseudonym. Apparently, protecting others is a less pressing motive for disguising one’s identity.3

When I tried to publish an article on self-help abortion in a leading population studies journal, it was rejected on the grounds that: ‘the editors would like to publish your paper…but they cannot agree to your using a pseudonym.’ No reasons were given, but one can imagine why the editors were uncomfortable with an anonymous author: it seemed irreconcilable with their concept of scientific work. My argument about protecting people’s identities did not convince them, in spite of the ethical statement cited at the beginning of this note. After two more failed attempts to have a pseudonymous manuscript accepted for publication I started to submit my articles without mentioning my use of a pseudonym. It worked. The results of my research on witchcraft and abortion appeared in international and Dutch journals and editors and colleagues started to correspond with ‘W. Bleek’. In the correspondence I usually revealed my real name but asked them to respect the pseudonym in their published work. As it turned out, the pseudonym in no way prevented me from discussing the content of my work with others and exchanging views on the social, cultural and moral aspects of witchcraft and induced abortion. However, there were other concerns.

Consequences

What were the consequences of using a pseudonym?

There were some agreeable side effects. It happened, for
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Vidich et al. 1964.

6. ‘Hiding’ a whole tribe was not entirely new, however. Herdt told me that he followed the precedent of Margaret Mead in her Sepik work, where she created pseudonyms for all.

7. To be absolutely accurate: I also changed the dates of my research and some small details in the life histories of my informants.


9. A successful example of this dialogue about data with informants is Robert Pool’s study of illness concepts in Cameroon (Pool 1994).

4. When the novelist Doris Lessing submitted her manuscript The diary of a good neighbour under a pseudonym, the manuscript was rejected. This happened when Lessing was already a famous writer. Later book was published and the publicity around the case probably compensated amply for the initial deception. Some critics, therefore, suspected that her pseudonym had been a ‘pseudo-pseudonym’ – a clever attempt to arouse more public interest. The same accusation was levelled against me when I published my dissertation on sexual relationships and birth control (including abortion) under a pseudonym.

5. See also the discussion in Vidich et al. 1964.

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example, that people commented to me on my work without knowing that I was the author. Such comments are usually far more valuable because the conventional politeness is skipped.4

The most crucial question, however, was: How effective was the pseudonym? Were the identities of the informants kept secret? Shortly after I had started using a pseudonym, I heard about a similar case. In 1945 the American sociologist ‘James West’ wrote a study about a small town in the United States which he gave the fictitious name of ‘Plainville’. West was not successful in keeping the identity of the town and its inhabitants secret. Soon after the book was published people found out the real name of the author (Carl Withers) and the exact location of ‘Plainville’, which turned out to be Wheatland, Missouri. Gallaher (1961), who conducted a follow-up study of ‘Plainville’ 15 years later, told me that students were the first to identify ‘West’ and ‘Plainville’. Some of them went to visit the town and irritated inhabitants with their questions. When a copy of the book was placed in the local library, someone added the informants’ real names next to their fictitious ones. At first, the inhabitants of Plainville were angry and upset by what Withers had written about them, but later they felt proud of the fact that he had brought them to the public’s attention. In 1961 Withers wrote a foreword to Gallaher’s follow-up study of ‘Plainville’ and signed it with both his pseudonym and his real name.

An author using a pseudonym may be a rare phenomenon in anthropology, but giving fictitious names to informants and places is common practice. The Dutch anthropologist Lodewijk Brunt wrote a book about natives and newcomers in a rural Dutch community. He gave the village another name, but its real name was revealed in the newspapers on the day the book was published.

Many more examples could be cited here to confirm that such disguises do not effectively conceal the identity of informants. I asked William Foot Whyte if he had ever considered using a pseudonym for himself when he published his celebrated Streetcorner society. He answered:

No I did not… I suppose that one of my reasons for putting my own name on the book was the selfish one that I wanted to get whatever credit was due that work. There might also be a more respectable reason: if a book makes any sort of mark at all, it may stir up a discussion in the profession, and it is rather important for the exchange of information and ideas to be able to include the author in that discussion (personal communication, 22 March 1976).

I put the same question to one of the authors of a book about a cancer hospital in the Netherlands (van Dantzig & de Swaan 1978). That book suffered a fate which – as far as I know – has never affected a study carried out in a ‘developing’ country; it was destroyed by a judicial decision. The hospital authorities felt the book presented a biased – in their eyes too negative – picture of the hospital and they sued the authors and publisher. They won the case and all printed copies were sent for shredding before they could reach the bookshops. When asked, one of the authors told me that he had never contemplated hiding the identity of the hospital, let alone his own. Moreover, he added, it would not work in a small country like the Netherlands.

I suspect that he was right. Only when there is – literally and metaphorically – an ‘ocean’ between the academic world of published books and the world described in those books is it possible to maintain the disguise. How could it be removed, if the book itself does not even reach those whose words and activities are quoted in it?

When Herdt (1981) published his Guardians of the flutes, dealing with erotic activities in a Papua New Guinean community, he did something rather unusual: he gave the ethnic group a fictitious name (‘Sambia’). The book described some ideas and practices which in North America and Europe would be categorized as ‘pae-dophilia’. Apparently Herdt wanted to protect his informants and prevent tourists and curious colleagues from crossing the ocean to see (and experience?) things for themselves. I am not sure it worked. Anthropologists in Papua New Guinea know where he did his research. Moreover, the practices he described are not unique to the ‘Sambia’, they occur or occurred throughout the country.

My own triple disguise (informants, location and author) in Ghana did work.20 Twenty years later my measure proved still effective. There was no copy of my thesis in a local library and no-one had established a link between my publications and the community. I should have been content, but I was not. My decision to ‘go into hiding’ had a number of consequences which I found both unethical and simply annoying. I had kept the outcome of my research study from my informants, ‘for their own good’. On the one hand, I had respected their wish (and the first article of the anthropological ethical code) to keep

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gives, not his sweet words. The proof of real love, she often emphasized, is not his physical support, but the man. She often said to her grandchildren, who she had many, ‘you can never have too much, and divorced two
husband, whom she loved very
much, and had twenty children. He
was literate, living in a house
he had built himself, but at the end
of his life he was lonely
and miserable. None of the
twenty children, nor any of his
many grandchildren, was ‘able’ to look after him.

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In 1973, when I finished my fieldwork in ‘Ayere’, I asked the head of the abusu to assemble as many relatives
as possible in his compound. I took a number of pictures
of the entire group and promised the old man that I would
send him a very large print of the picture to hang in his
house. The man’s reaction was significant: a photograph
would be nice, but ‘the book’ was more important. I
nodded, but knew that I would never be able to give him
‘the book’. There was too much in it which would upset
him and his relatives. My concern about protecting
people’s anonymity prevented me from giving them the
text which would betray their identities. It also prevented me
for many years from returning to the town and the
people who had become my friends. I knew that people
would ask me where ‘the book’ was. When, after about
seven years, I finally paid two short visits to the place, I
had prepared polite excuses for not bringing the book. By
that time, the old head of the family had died.

Had I been too concerned? Was my worry about confiden-
tiality an attitude typical of my own culture with its
emphasis on individuality and privacy? Had I made the
wrong decision when I chose not to share the outcome of
my research with them in order to preserve confiden-
tiality?

New research
Twenty-three years after my first research study, I went
back to Kwahu-Tafo to study social and cultural meanings
of growing old. I reasoned that 23 years was a long period
and that things of the past would have lost their pungency;
the elderly who had been the main targets of witchcraft
accusations had all died and the teenagers who had told me
about their romantic encounters and the subsequent preg-
nancies and abortions were now parents and grandparents.
I brought a few copies of my PhD thesis along and formally
handed them over to the new head of the family and
some others. The head, a former schoolteacher, expressed
his disappointment that the name of the town was not men-
tioned on the cover or inside the book and that neither his
name nor any other appeared in the text. In 1973 he had
been one of my most straightforward informants. My MA
dissertation had contained a long list of witchcraft accusa-
tions he had made against relatives he suspected of
working toward his downfall. The PhD thesis which I pre-
sented to him recorded several stories about his amorous
escapades and sexual frustrations. I explained that I had
given him and all the others the fictitious names to protect
them. When I met him the next day he smiled and said he
had found himself in the book. He did not complain about
what I had written about him and still seemed disappointed
that his real name was not used. We did not speak again
about the book and I do not know if he ever read it in full.

I am again writing articles and a book about the people
of this rural community. I describe how the elderly spend
their days and how they are cared for. The articles deal
with respect and reciprocity, with money, building a house,
wisdom, loneliness, death and funeral; they also discuss
topics which were ‘anonymized’ in my earlier research –
witchcraft accusations and sex.¹ I have changed my policy,
however. The name of the town, Kwahu-Tafo, is now cited
in bold face in the articles, as are the names of the old
people with whom I conversed about the pleasures and
pains of growing old. I have made it a rule to dedicate each
publication to one of the elders. I want them to be proud
of the fact that their life histories – good or bad – and their
reflections about being old have been published and are
being read by people in different parts of the world. Of
course, the information they provided is less threatening
than what their relatives told me in 1971 and 1973, but I do
not hide the less favourable things that are said by or about
them. They said they did not like my attempt at confiden-
tiality. They wanted to see their names on paper. Their
main worry was that after death they would sink into
oblivion. My writing about them will help them to be
remembered.

Ethical paternalism?
My struggle with confidentiality and the use of pseudo-

names has taught me at least one thing: ethical rules and
feelings about right and wrong are as much subject to

Fig. 7. Nana Dedaa with a
calabash. She was very open
about her life. She lost her first
husband, whom she loved very
much, and divorced two
others. She also had a number of
lovers. The proof of real
love, she often emphasized, is
the material support the man

gives, not his sweet words.


