EDITOR'S FORUM

APPROACHES TO PROBLEMS OF FIELD ETHICS IN OCEANIA[1]

by Mervyn McLean

My concern in this paper is to take up a challenge recently posed by John Blacking (1980) in a policy statement made in support of his candidature as President of the Society for Ethnomusicology: "How far can the Society promote the interests and satisfy the needs of Third World countries in a way that is compatible both with the scientific aims of ethnomusicology and with ethical principles?"

As a case study, let me begin with a brief report on a prolonged controversy about the role and responsibilities of the anthropologist which took place in the pages of *Man in New Guinea* (later *Research in Melanesia*), *Oceania, Current Anthropology,* and other journals from the year 1970 to date.

The controversy began in a small way with a seemingly ordinary suggestion from a social anthropologist that academics who undertake fieldwork in Papua New Guinea might discharge some of their responsibilities to the Territory by depositing copies of slides or photographs portraying village life with the local university library (Anon. 1970:2-3). There followed a suggestion (White 1970) that as a further gesture anthropologists should perhaps be compelled to take an indigenous trainee assistant into the field. And, by degrees, a full-scale debate emerged on the merits and demerits of indigenization of research. One outcome of this debate was the revelation that there is plainly a good deal of dissatisfaction with anthropologists in Papua New Guinea even though, by and large, anthropologists are well liked by the people among whom they work and have excellent relationships with them. A much-voiced claim is that people who are used as informants give time and labor and suffer nuisance in hosting a research worker but get nothing in return, though anthropologists make careers and reputations and get rich as a result. It is frequently claimed that inaccurate or misleading ethnographic reports have been published by anthropologists. And indigenous students complain that if foreign researchers are allowed in, they themselves will have nothing left to research (Talyaga 1974:17). It is useless to argue that the anthropologist does benefit the community, though perhaps in indirect ways; that an-

thropologists are not really rich but only seem to be; that the academic observer is merely interpreting facts in unaccustomed ways; that persons who give social scientists a bad name are often not really anthropologists; or even that Papua New Guinea students' concepts of knowledge as a finite and scarce resource result from a Melanesian cultural belief that if "ritual" knowledge is put to a secular "use" which outsiders do not comprehend, it is regarded as "stolen" (Young 1975:55-56). All or most of these arguments may be true, but the criticisms must, nevertheless, be taken seriously because they are of real concern to the peoples themselves and pose a real problem for future research.

The problem is exacerbated by the very real difficulties faced by anthropologists in explaining in lay terms what it is they are trying to do. As Hau'ofa (1975:284) points out, "We often end up saying we are there to learn their customs and write books about them," which is an oversimplification. And when the people themselves read the books their expectations are not realized, and they see themselves as distorted or misrepresented. From this it is a small step to the belief that "outsiders are excluded in principle from knowing the truth about a society," and "that foreign anthropologists can only write 'half-truths' " (Morauta 1979:564). Solutions offered by anthropologists have included calls for more adequate returns to the host country, more effective ways of communicating results to nonacademic audiences, and more emphasis on collaborative research. Meanwhile, as more and more Pacific countries become independent, events have overtaken the homilies and it has now become less a matter of anthropologists offering these things than of the host countries claiming them as a right. Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and most recently, the Cook Islands all now have a system of research permits for visiting researchers and insist that certain conditions be met before a permit will be issued. A commonly applied principle is that the research to be undertaken must be of local value.

What kind of research?

The kinds of ethnomusicological research that would be acceptable to Pacific Island administrations can be gauged by examining research and research activities currently being carried out by Pacific islanders themselves. Elsewhere (McLean 1980:47) I have pointed out that these are strikingly similar to those which have already taken place in postcolonial Africa. From a report by Nketia (1975) it seems that indigenous based and indigenous controlled research on African music departs in some cases very markedly from the disinterested pursuit of knowledge for its own

sake which is the preferred hallmark of most Western research. Rather, the emphasis tends to be on applied research, giving preference to "immediate, Africa-centered problems" and the gathering of information that will be of use to educators, creative artists seeking new forms of expression, and politicians eager to encourage a "national" identity to replace older divisive tribal loyalties. Developments supportive of such emphases include country-wide song and dance festivals, the use of mass communications for wider dissemination of former "tribal" musics, and national theater and creative arts movements which draw upon traditional resources as a starting point.

Oceanic parallels can readily be found. A large South Pacific Festival of the Arts involving twenty or more Pacific nations is now staged every four years; national dance theaters have been established in the Cook Islands, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea; the latter country also has a Creative Arts Center modeled on one in Nigeria; and a recent trend has been the establishment of cultural centers for the study of oral tradition in such places as Honiara, Solomon Islands, and Vila, Vanuatu, which dedicate themselves to collecting oral materials and disseminating them by means of local radio stations. Indigenous research is not as firmly established as in Africa, and there are not as many institutions which support it. Nevertheless, such work as has been carried out tends also to follow the precedents of Africa. Recorded materials are used directly in local activities (e.g., in museums and schools); documentation is of "culturally meaningful events as a whole [with] musical components not necessarily documented in full detail"; and the music to be recorded is selected primarily in terms of "relevance to ethnic/cultural/national identity" (Smith 1977).

Are such concerns compatible with scientific aims? I think that they are if the ethnomusicologist's brief is broadly interpreted. In a review of indigenous anthropological research in Papua New Guinea, Morauta (1979:565) draws attention to the high proportion of indigenous writing which falls into the category of "rescue ethnography." "There are," she says, "numbers of articles which aim simply to record traditional legends, songs and customs before they are lost." It is worth emphasizing that this used to be a concern of ethnomusicologists also before the somewhat unkindly dubbed "white knight" approach became unfashionable from the late 1960s onward. I believe it may be time for a return to some such approach, not as an object of the discipline--for it was never that--but as a necessary *quid pro quo* and means of identifying more closely with the clearly expressed needs and concerns of the people among whom we choose to work. In some parts of the world "rescue ethnography" may not

be a pressing need. But there can be no question that in Oceania, at least, salvage research is a matter of urgency. The case for field research in Oceania has been argued fully elsewhere (McLean 1979), and I will not reiterate it here. In the current context, however, I do wish to emphasize that in my belief there is a major deficiency in ethnomusicological research programs--world-wide--which could well justify accusations of "irrelevance" and which must be remedied if ethnomusicologists are fully to discharge their responsibilities to host communities. I have asserted (McLean 1979: 104) that "anyone who is entering a field area whose music has never been fully studied before has a responsibility to record *all* data about music-making even if it is not strictly germane to his or her own immediate goals." This demands what I have called "base research," rather than currently popular "problem-oriented' approaches which aim to meet academic criteria of problem solving at a theoretical level, or to test the efficacy of particular theoretical "models." This is not to say that the data gathered ought not to be so used, or that problem-oriented research should be abandoned. It *does* mean, however, that data-gathering ought to go beyond immediate, narrowly academic or scholarly needs and it would obviously be an advantage also if there were a shift in opinion within the discipline in favor of straight music ethnography as a legitimate if sometimes unexciting research objective. And in practical terms, I suggest that governments are likely to see such studies as relevant to local needs and will be correspondingly more likely to grant permits to allow the research. Notice that I am not advocating an abandonment of "pure" research in favor of "applied" research in order to accommodate these needs. I am suggesting rather a dual approach which will serve *both* sets of objectives using the same body of data as a starting point. This is something that ethnomusicologists have often, in any case, been doing informally out of a simple sense of obligation to the host cultures, as in New Zealand where the Archive of Maori and Pacific Music has been assisting the active conservation of indigenous Maori music since the inception of the Archive in 1970. One of the Archive's activities is a free dubbing service, running currently at sixty requests a year, for Maori individuals and groups who wish to learn songs. In New Zealand, the sheer bulk of materials now available far exceeds that required for purely ethnomusicological purposes, but the Archive continues actively to acquire materials simply out of regard for conservation. In the Pacific at large, local archives attached to museums or culture centers could provide similar services in their own areas, while at the same time acting as a safe repository for field materials contributed by visiting and local researchers.

Who should do the research?

Calls for greater local involvement in anthropological research in Oceania have tended to fall into three categories. The first is a call for more locals to be trained as fully professional anthropologists (Hau'ofa 1975:288). The second is a recommendation for greater commitment to collaborative research in which people will be treated more as equal partners than as passive suppliers of information (Frazer 1975:48). The third is a rejection even of collaborative research for fear of academic exploitation (Morauta 1979:564), and a demand for nothing less than the complete indigenization of research on the insiders' own terms. Such views arise from obviously deeply held convictions that outside research is, by its nature, always exploitative, that outside research *never* has relevance to local needs, and that insiders are uniquely placed to discern the truth about a society.

Is there anything to be said for this view? How influential is it? And need ethnomusicologists come to terms with it?

In her article on "Indigenous Anthropology in Papua New Guinea," Morauta (1979:564) accepts the view that "the extreme form of the insider doctrine . . . is particularly likely to emerge in situations of social conflict," and thinks it likely that it will become less important as Papua New Guinea becomes accustomed to independence. If this is correct, it will doubtless become true also of other Pacific nations. On the other hand, whereas Pacific islanders may in the long run be perfectly happy to leave anthropology to professionals, the same may not apply to ethnomusicology. Even in our own society there is a distressing tendency to think that while the acquisition of, say, linguistic information is a professional activity, the recording of oral tradition, including music, can be undertaken by anyone and the more technical study aspects left till later. Moreover, the very relevance of ethnomusicology to island concerns could well cause it to be regarded as a field of endeavor that islanders themselves are competent to research fully without outside help. Our remedy to combat this misconception is more effective publicity about the objectives of our research, and resistance to any claim that "applied" ethnomusicology should be the *sole* end-product of collecting and study activity.

> What then of the idea that only a person who has been born and brought up in a society is competent to write about its culture? Hau'ofa (1975:288) makes the apparently commonsense observation that local anthropologists should be in an excellent

> position for conducting continuous re search and keeping in touch with local happenings . . . should have a thorough knowledge and a deep appreciation of the nuances of their own languages . . . and should have the intuitive knowledge and a built-in "feel" for the subtleties of their cultures and their human relationships.

Although writing in support of Hau'ofa's plea for more local anthropologists, Crocombe (1975:66-67) points out, on the other hand, that the sole criticisms of indigenous researchers tend to be meted out by their own compatriots: predictions that the doyen of expatriate anthropologists, Margaret Mead, would be "either mobbed, killed, humiliated or thrown in the sea" if she ever dared to return to Samoa so far failed to materialize that when she did return she was extended "the largest welcome that almost *any* foreign visitor has ever been given." Moreover, leading Samoans who had strong negative feelings about her completely reversed them on getting to know her as a person (*ibid.*:69).

The contradictions can easily be explained. Insiders, in fact, have no special advantages as observers. As Gjessing (1968:400) has explained: "Tradition is, in its very essence, unconscious. Tradition molds us, but we are always inside the mold and cannot look at it from the outside."

But a similar set of restraints applies to the outsider, whose view is likewise tempered by his conditioning and so cannot be objective either. The doctrine of the "insider" is false, then, but so is that of the privileged outside observer. As John Blacking (1977) has said:

> Neither an insider nor an outsider is especially privileged to understand a culture. All ethnography, like all history, incorporates the prejudices of the ethnographer . . . and it is acknowledged that even in the most objective measurements the observer becomes a factor in the situation.

What then is the solution for ethnomusicology? Before I offer my answer, let me make two further observations: The first is a comment by Ralph Beal (1968:408) who while believing "that man . . . is a creature of his culture and its value system and hence science is never wholly objective," indicates that it is better to struggle with an imperfect objectivity than to surrender the fight.

The second is a quotation from a thoughtful editorial in *Man in New Guinea,* written in 1971 in response to criticisms of anthropologists and

seeking to explain why anthropologists were getting what appeared to be an unjustifiably bad reputation in newly independent nations (Anon. 1971:4). The writer says:

> It seems very important at this stage, when the climate of indigenous opinion . . . though obviously ambivalent, does not yet appear in general to be unfavourable, that research workers should not sell themselves, their colleagues or their projects short. They must simply be prepared to explain patiently and in detail what the objectives and the implications of their research are.

In short, part of our "ethical" responsibility--and nonetheless so for being commonly overlooked--is to our own discipline, our own colleagues, and our own traditions of scholarship. We may assist "applied" research, and I believe, indeed, we have an obligation to do so, but if we want "pure" research to be undertaken as well, we must maintain the right to do it ourselves and we must convince our indigenous colleagues that it is worth their while allowing us to do so. We may assist the training of indigenous workers, and again this is something I actively support, but not with any implication, tacit or otherwise, that insiders ought one day to replace outsiders, or that current Third World needs are a sufficient end for ethnomusicology. By now, then, my answer to the "insider/outsider" question ought to be obvious.

To sum up, we owe responsibility on the one hand to scholarship and on the other to the indigenous people amongst whom we choose to work.

Our concerns and theirs towards music as a cultural product overlap but do not coincide.

As neither insider nor outsider can be fully objective, all that would be achieved if research were to be made exclusively indigenous would be to exchange one set of constraints on objectivity with another. Equally, however, it can be argued that insider and outsider views are by their nature complementary and that *both* must therefore be taken into account.

We arrive, then, at similar solutions to those already worked out by anthropologists.

For ethnomusicology, no less than for the other social sciences, the problem can best be resolved first by an increased commitment to collaborative research between insider and outsider, and second by a greater willingness on our part to pursue indigenous goals jointly with our own.

NOTE

1. The paper was read at the Twenty-fifth Silver Jubilee meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology held at Indiana University, April 1980.

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