



This is an inquiry into understanding
the world of perceptions
through encounters between
lights and shadows,
words and images,
and an ethnographer and her informants.

It is about the seeing and understanding
the life-world as the result
of an active involvement
in the process of shaping
social and cultural environment we live in.

Research Proposal for the confirmation of doctoral candidature in anthropology
James Cook University, The Cairns Institute, School of Arts and Social Sciences
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Co-supervisors: Prof. Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and Prof. David MacDougall

Introduction: Skin has Eyes and Ears

When Slovene anthropologist Borut Telban conducted his fieldwork in Ambonwari village, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea between 1990 and 1992 a vast majority of the customary practices were still going on. His work on Ambonwari cosmology dealt with the main concepts and practices, which he found important in people's articulation of their lived experience. Ambonwari saying 'skin has eyes and ears' implies that 'skin' (*arim*) is the main sensory organ, and a person perceives the world through the 'skin', which is a visible and tangible link between the 'outside' (*kay*, 'way of doing things') and the 'inside' (*wambung*, 'insiderness, understanding'). His portrayal, however, did not deal with the significant social and cultural change, which began, under the impact of the newly established Catholic charismatic movement, two and a half years after he left the village. In the new millennium, also other changes began to take place in the area independently of the movement. More men left the village seeking work in towns, a new Elementary school started in the village, and people got their first DVD player with TV screen operating by generator. One of the main features of these changes is noticeable modification in people's perception of the world. One could say that people have become aware of processes 'inside' their bodies through their perception of things and processes 'outside'. This awareness (*wambung*) became creative and resulted in changes in people's ways of doing things (*kay*). It is for this reason – and because of my general interest in the audio-visual domains of human existence – that I decided to focus my research on the sensory experience and modification of perception amongst the Ambonwari.

The following question arises:

In what ways has Ambonwari people's perception of the world changed in relation to their traditional concepts of *wambung* and *kay*?

By focusing on perception and sensory experiences of people, which can be detected not only through their sayings and doings but above all through participation in events, deep semi-structured and unstructured discussions, and contextualized observations with the focus on details over an expanded period of time, I would like to approach this question in the following ways:

- Firstly, through Ambonwari's own concepts and theories of perception: not only of seeing and hearing – and other senses – but equally of *wambung* 'insiderness, understanding, memory, seat of desires, emotions and thoughts'. *Wambung* makes people conscious, enables them to reflect upon their lived experience, and actually drives them towards a particular creation of their life-world.
- Secondly, as photography and film are known methods directly addressing the interconnectedness of the senses, the audio-visual approach is most appropriate for an exploration of the sensory world of people. Moreover, the catalytic role of a camera, as I have argued in "Camera as a Catalyst: Experience from Papua New Guinea" can produce specific situations, elicit particular responses, and actually stimulate people to tell their own truth.
- Thirdly, otherwise inaccessible *wambung* can be 'heard' and 'seen' in 'dialogic editing' of records, and in creative visualisations made by the people themselves.

Objectives

The arrival of Pentecostal and Catholic charismatic movements to different societies in Papua New Guinea has divided scholars in their effort to understand the pertaining social and cultural changes. While many anthropologists look at these changes from the perspective of a continuation of tradition (see, for example, Mosko 2001, 2010), others – most forcefully represented by Joel Robbins in his many writings (2004, 2007, 2009) – see them as a rupture, as a radical break from tradition resulting in a totally new Christian culture. Robbins, following Louis Dumont, argues that radical cultural change can take place only when the central values have radically changed. Mosko, following Marilyn Strathern, emphasises a dividual characteristic and partiability of the Melanesian persons who, in the manner of classical Maussian gift reciprocity, attach and detach bits of themselves as persons. It is through such transactions, Mosko (2010: 219) argues, that Melanesians change themselves, their social relations and their cultures. I presented this short summary in order to outline the purpose of my study. I do not intend to focus on Christianity as such. My objective is to show how an analysis of people's sensory experiences and perception of the world generally can lead to a better understanding of people's lived experiences, including those that belong to a period of cultural change elicited by the Catholic charismatic movement. I want to explore what kind of relationship is established between the outside world perceived through the senses and the internal world of thoughts and feelings hidden in *wambung* and in which way the camera with its audio-visual record can show people's ongoing modification of perception. Thus my exploration should contribute to a debate on change and continuity.

By acknowledging the inside and the outside, the visible and the invisible, the closeness and the distance on the perceptual level, my aim is to pay a particular attention to the interplay of the senses. While people perceive the world through all the senses simultaneously, it is often a particular situation that gives priority to a distinctive sensory experience. Sensory meaning is mediated by culture, which may foreground and elaborate upon certain senses. Moreover, the analysis of people's sensory experiences facilitated by different audio-visual media is yet under-represented compared to that of ordinary interview and consequent writing. Steven Feld (1990: 240) introduced 'dialogic editing' to see how the subjects of ethnography challenge author's authority and contribute to re-evaluation of the text. In a similar way, but by using audio-visual material which will be recorded by me as well as by people using still and video camera themselves, I suggest bringing on the screen multiplicity of voices from Ambonwari as well as mine. The inherently reflexive fact of seeing and being seen will be approached from two perspectives: the one of an ethnographer and another one of the Ambonwari themselves. Thus the aim of my inquiry is not simply to explore people's senses, but rather, by getting involved in "the dialogue of sensibilities" (Feld 1990: x), to try to understand how people's life-world is actually shaped and made real through both their sensory experience and their understanding of it.

Theoretical framework

My theoretical approach is based primarily on phenomenologically informed anthropology with its emphasis on lived experience and intersubjectivity as an inherent part of a person. Within this broad philosophical field I am primarily inspired by the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on perception and Gilles Deleuze on film, as they are extremely relevant for my focus on the senses and the audio-visual methods which I intend to employ in my research. Consequently, the studies of those anthropologists (see below) who followed a similar path are indispensable for grounding my arguments in a more theoretically informed way. Equally important for

me are the works of those authors in the history of visual anthropology – discussed in my paper ‘Camera as a Catalyst: Experience from Papua New Guinea’ – who marked the field as such: from Dziga Vertov and Robert Flaherty to Jean Rouch and David MacDougall. It is this theoretical framework that directs my focus on the anthropology of the senses.

It has been claimed that ‘vision’ and ‘oculocentrism’ have determined the Western world’s sensory orientation, especially in the 20th century (Jay 1993), and that other cultures have cultivated and privileged other sensory practices, for example, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, and so on (Levin 1993). It has also been said that to study vision in small scale non-European communities is to impose a Eurocentric perspective. My view, however, is rather on the side of those who see the senses as being interrelated. Moreover, senses are context dependent, and it is the context that privileges a particular sense or requires a particular sensorial attention. When it comes to ‘manipulation of the senses’, both sound and image, for example, can be disturbing (Ingold 2000). In the introduction to *Empire of the Senses* Howes says: “The most elucidating cultural studies of the senses are those that bring out indigenous theories of perception” (2005: 6). Howes also writes, that many scholars are still suspicious about the study of the senses fearing that the writing will be vague and overemotional, losing that intellectual precision characteristic of urban, technological, market oriented rationalism. Here I deliberately avoid making artificially constructed and imagined dichotomy between the West and the Rest, knowing that people, regardless of their place of origin, are perceptive beings which includes both sensual and rational experiences of the world. Moreover, already by saying that people are both sensual and rational we are in danger of falling into a trap of Cartesian dualism which not only separated mind from the body, thinking from feeling, and culture from nature, but also constructed an imagined reality appropriated and followed by technological idea of progress. It is also for this reason, beside his focus on perception, that I found Merleau-Ponty’s writings instructive because he does not follow this kind of dichotomy. Therefore, I would like to pay a particular attention to “vision and sight as something sensorially integrated, embodied and experienced” (Edwards and Bhaumik 2008: 3).

Considering anthropology of senses, sensory experience, and scholars who conducted research on this topic, I want to mention Paul Stoller, Michael Jackson, Tim Ingold, and Michael Taussig. Their works are valuable and relevant for my research as they deal with lived experience, embodied knowledge, reciprocal and reflexive processes, and people’s engagement with the life-world. Stoller writes about being an apprentice among the Songhay people of Niger (1989, 1997), learning through his own body, including the incidence of illness and pain, and through sensorial experiences of smell and taste. Tim Ingold (2000) has developed the idea of sensory apprenticeship drawing on notion of skill, embodied practice, and tacit knowledge. This involves active and ongoing participation in the sense of relational approach to each other and also to surrounding environment. He suggests that understanding vision is possible mainly through interrelationship with other senses, hearing in particular. Michael Taussig (1993) has written about mimesis and its counterpart alterity. In his view mimesis should be understood as a mode of sensuous knowledge, and not simply as copying or imitation. He refers to mimesis as the capacity to relate to the ‘other’ in an instant contact that is sensuous, visceral and relational (between perceiver and perceived). His concept of ‘active yielding’ described as trying out the very shape of a perception in one’s own body, when the muscles become connected to the percepts, may also be applied to visual anthropology and particularly to the use of a camera. Michael Jackson’s (1996) ongoing focus on the phenomenology of everyday life, existential issues and human experience generally is well known. One of his earlier sensuous studies (Jackson 1983) was about bodily movement among the Kuranko people of Sierra Leone.

Through initiation rites we are led into conviction that what is done with the body becomes the ground for what is thought and said.

In her new book *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, Sarah Pink questions how to share the knowledge about practice. She advocates applied research that bridges with academic work and speaks in favour of interdisciplinary research (anthropology, art and history, for example). Trying to build on early ethnographic studies she states that “sensory ethnographer is trying to access areas of embodied, emplaced knowing and to use these as a basis from which to understand human perception, experience, action and meaning and to situate this culturally and biographically” (2009: 47). Pink’s words could be compared to those of David MacDougall who writes in his book *The Corporeal Image* about ‘social aesthetic’ (in Greek *aesthesis* originally meant ‘sense experience’). He presents aesthetics not in the Kantian sense of beauty, but in made up elements such as the design of buildings and grounds, the use of clothing and colours, and the particular style of speech and gestures. For him aesthetics is a field “composed of objects and actions, in some respects the physical manifestation of the largely internalized and invisible ‘embodied history’ that Bourdieu calls *habitus*” (2006: 98).

There has been very little research done regarding sensory experience in Papua New Guinea. Amongst a few exceptions I can mention an interesting account by Donald Tuzin about the ideas concerning smell among the Ilahita Arapesh people of East Sepik Province. Following his observations in the field he came to the conclusion that the smell among the Ilahita Arapesh is a medium of shared substance and of mutual trust and identity. He argued, that the “Ilahita judge smell to be the distillation of physical and, more importantly, moral essences – of goodness and badness, of purity and pollution” (2006: 61). Probably nobody else emphasised the importance of hearing in Papua New Guinea so much as three renowned ethnographers of the Kaluli people (E. Schieffelin 1976, Feld 1990 [1982], 2005, B. Schieffelin pers. comm.). Bambi Schieffelin (1990) wrote a detailed study about children’s everyday speech which shapes and is shaped by reciprocity and social relationships. She emphasises that the language is essentially social and that the verbal expression of feelings appears very important in the complex interrelational system. In a well known book, especially in the chapter on the unseen world, Edward Schieffelin wrote, for example, that animals and birds are perceived more by the sounds than by their appearance (1976: 95). Sound, in Schieffelin’s words, “brings to awareness not objects, but movements, activities, and events, to which the Kaluli are ever alert” (ibid.: 96). Specific emphasis on sound and the Kaluli being embraced by a ‘hearing culture’ came from Steven Feld (1990 [1982], 2005). He not only broadened our understanding of Kaluli’s acoustic perception of their environment but highlighted a particular sense that has been among the ethnographers of New Guinea somehow neglected. His main argument is that in a dense rainforest auditory perception is in a tense dialectic with vision: while much of the forest is visually concealed the sound cannot be hidden. It seems to be a quite sensible conclusion when we imagine ourselves in a jungle overgrown by trees, vines and bushes and not seeing any horizon. This kind of a dense environment then shapes people’s perception, their behaviour and also their social organization. Regardless of Feld’s convincing account, however, I want to argue that there is always a particular way of looking at things around, behind, and inside the forest. Moreover, looking at the Ambonwari sensory expressions and their dwelling environment of rivers, grasslands, and sago swamp, besides the rainforest, directs me towards further exploration of the complexity of synaesthesia and simultaneity of vision and sound.

Empirical background

Ambonwari village is the largest of eight Karawari speaking villages in East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. The Karawari language belongs to the Lower Sepik Family of the large Papuan or non-Austronesian group of languages. Their two closest neighbours, Imanmeri and Kanjime, speak two other languages which belong to Arafundi language group (Foley 1986; Hoenigman 2007). This classification, however, is not final and further research will be needed to establish the actual linguistic situation in the area. The *Lingua franca* Tok Pisin is the language which people use at important meetings, masses in church, and in discussions with foreigners. The Ambonwari community with twelve totemic clans follows patrilineal descent and post-marital patri-virilocal residence. The census in December 2007 has shown that population in Ambonwari has reached 750 people. The total number of absentees was 111. Of those living in the village, women (129) outnumber men (99). This is due to the fact that it is mainly men, and rarely women or whole families, who left to live in towns. Most of the villagers, however, are children under sixteen years of age (411). The number of Ambonwari people in 2007 is very different from the one recorded in 1954, when only 187 people lived in the village. Together with the rising number of people, also the number of built houses, from 57 in 1990 to 80 in 2007, is significant as it shows that the village has expanded (Telban 1998; Vávrová 2008).

I have already conducted five months' fieldwork (2005, 2007-8) in Ambonwari village, for my Mag. Phil. thesis in anthropology at the University of Vienna. My stay in the village and endless discussions with the people enabled me to become fluent in Tok Pisin. My thesis was dealing mainly with single mothers and widowed women. My intention was to show the extreme pressures under which these women find themselves because of the low status imposed on them by the community. The film *Enet Yapai – an Ambonwari Girl* that accompanied my thesis was awarded the Wiley-Blackwell Student Film Prize Commendation at 11th Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) International Festival of Ethnographic Film in 2009, and has been since then distributed by RAI. Later on, it was selected for screening at several international ethnographic film festivals and conferences (see my CV at my personal website: <http://rachel.reflectangulo.net>). I went to Ambonwari village with my partner and anthropologist Borut Telban, who has been returning there since his initial fieldwork from 1990 to 1992. It was his ethnographic study of social organization, kinship, and ritual that facilitated my own understanding of Ambonwari cosmology. This was especially true after I had been adopted into a particular lineage and clan, and was able to experience people's social relationships personally. As I was using still and video camera most of the time, I became more and more interested in people's perceptions and articulation of their sensory experience. They also became more and more interested in my work and the camera, which according to the people had become my extension. I observed and discussed what and how they see, what does appearance mean to them, and whether it is hearing or seeing that they find more important for their beliefs: in either ancestral spirits or the Holy Spirit recently introduced by the Catholic charismatic movement. In the end I realized that I would need more time to fully comprehend these issues and I decided to return to the village with more developed ideas how to involve the use of a camera in a reciprocal way, and with a particular plan how to study people's sensory perception. As an example I offer here some Ambonwari concepts related to visual perception, which in my view need to be studied further in different social contexts:

<i>anggin</i>	'beam of light, a ray'
<i>anggin-dar-kwa</i>	'life-giving spirit of a thing (stone, plant)'

<i>anggɨndar-kwanar</i>	'life-giving spirit of a man'
<i>anggɨndar-kwanma</i>	'life-giving spirit of a woman'
<i>kwanar/kwanma</i>	'watchman/watch-woman'

Life-giving spirit also refers to a photograph, a shadow, or a reflection in mirror or water; it is through this spirit that a person perceives the world also during his or her dreams.

<i>ang-</i>	'give, put something on a visible place, make something glow'
<i>s-ang-gwana</i>	'where'
<i>s-ang-gwa-</i>	'to see'
<i>sa-</i>	'to hold, to touch, to sit'

One could say that 'to see' is 'to hold/touch something glowing'. For the neighbouring Yimas, whose language like Karawari also belongs to the Lower Sepik Family, Foley additionally translates visual *tanɨkway-* by 'carefully'. This incorporated adverbial "expresses that the action being accomplished is being carefully monitored by vision" (1991: 339). The Ambonwari saying 'skin has eyes and ears' (Telban 1998: 54, 173) can be understood in terms that skin (a term that is nowadays also used for the body) is the main sensory organ of which seeing and hearing constitute inseparable parts. It is significant that smelling is expressed by the verb 'to hear' with an additional noun denoting the odour (see also Aikhenvald 2008: 558 for the Manambu and Feld 2005: 187 for the Kaluli) and tasting with the verb 'to see' in a compound with the verb 'to eat' (for a similar way of expression among the Manambu, but not among the Kaluli, see Aikhenvald 2008: 556). I do not want to imply that Ambonwari actually hear the smell and see the taste, but there is obviously some cultural weight and priority given to hearing and seeing in people's active relationship with the external world. One may also say that in Karawari language there is a recognition and appreciation of synaesthesia. Everything perceived by 'external skin' is felt and understood by internal *wambung*.

Methodology

Focus on the lived experience of the people under study is characteristic of anthropological long-term fieldwork. It entails involvement, commitment and intensity. The same is required for making a complex ethnographic film. As MacDougall says: "As writers, we articulate thoughts and experiences, but as photographers and filmmakers we articulate images of looking and being" (2006: 5). Twelve months of participant observation will include the gathering of experiential knowledge (face-to-face encounter), practical knowledge (learning how to do something), and propositional knowledge (talking about something, statements), the last being rooted in the first two. This gathering of data will include written, audio (sound recorder), visual (still camera), and audio-visual (video camera) records which will be employed according to situation. Written records will be recorded in the form of detailed descriptive notes, analytic notes (charts, tables, patterns in data, lexicon), and diary. Notes and all recorded material will be thematically indexed.

I would like to follow Steven Feld's method of 'dialogic editing' and expand it to audio-visual recordings. The 'dialogic' dimension, as Feld wrote "implicates what Kaluli and I say to, about, with, and through each other" (1987: 418). Feld used this method to analyse people's reception of his book *Sound and Sentiment* (1982). After showing the book to the Kaluli, he was reproached that he omitted everyday sounds,

such as, for example, rain, thunder, and the noises of the morning awakening of the village. Subsequently he supplemented his writings with 'dialogic auditing' and made several CD recordings. *Voices in the Rainforest* (1983), for example, is a soundscape documentary depicting a day in the life of the Kaluli in their rainforest environment. Twenty four hours are condensed in a thirty minutes sonic story without narration, including natural and human sounds. Using Kaluli directorial participation and Feld's technical skills, the end product shows how people's sound and songmaking is inspired by their surroundings.

Because of my lengthy involvement in photography and my interest in ethnographic film and visual matters generally, I will employ a set of audio-visual methods. From the perspective of my particular focus on sensory experience of people my research requires a long-term engagement and recording with a camera. A large amount of pictures taken in a short time is information not knowing! Therefore I want to focus on:

- Talk-in-interaction is best to be audio-visually recorded because only in such a way one gets a fine-grained detail of speech exchanges which can be transcribed, discussed and analysed already in the field. And not only that, field analyses always pose new questions, which can immediately be dealt with.
- In the past still photography was used mainly for documentation, record keeping, and confirmation and not for interpretation. For a present day ethnographer the camera constitutes a mode of communication. Visual research is not the one-way flow of information (from an informant to a researcher) but rather a particular kind of collaboration. A technique of a photo elicitation interview is based on discussion stimulated and guided by the photographs. Cultural information contained in the image emerges from a dialogue. This is creative and engaged visual ethnography.
- I will stimulate people to draw and make collages. We will discuss them together. Their drawings and collages, together with their explanations, will then provide the basis for further analysis of people's imaginative creative power, memory or wishes situated within particular socio-cultural and environmental settings.
- Following the method of 'dialogic editing' (see above) I will firstly, bring with me recordings, which I made in the past, to be watched and discussed with the people; secondly, bring extra audio-visual equipment to the village and encourage people to make their own photographs and recordings; thirdly, watch newly recorded material with them and partially edit it on the spot.
- I will focus on events over time, social interaction over time, relationships over time, and practices over time. Relation to space and time is different in photography, moving picture images, drawings and collages. Each of these methods will disclose Ambonwari's perception of the world in its particular mode.

Justification/relevance

In my research I want to focus on a theme that has rarely been the subject of ethnographic studies in Papua New Guinea: people's perception of the world from the perspective of their sensory experience. In relation to this topic, I want to pay special attention to the innovative use of a camera in the field. The justification of my research and the relevance of pertaining methodology can be understood in the following terms:

- The anthropology of the senses is one of the newly established subfields rarely tackled in Melanesian anthropology which, in my view, deserves more attention;
- Ambonwari's active involvement in the project will provide me with additional dimension regarding their perception of the world;
- Discussions dealing with social and cultural change are presently at the centre of Melanesian anthropology;
- The use of audio-visual media is nowadays an important topic of discussion especially in the subfield of visual anthropology.

Expected outcomes (including ethics)

My final aim is to produce a PhD thesis about how Ambonwari people in present day perceive, understand and interpret the world around them, and in what ways their perception of the world has changed in relation to their traditional concepts of *wambung* and *kay*. Short films addressing the interplay of the senses in particular situations and relationships will be integrated into the written account. Subsequently, jointly made photographs can supplement words and together with collages and drawings could be exhibited and/or published in a separate book. I also intend to produce a longer film running parallel to the written work, although its final editing will be most probably realized after submission of my doctoral thesis, as one cannot write highly informative text and edit a complex film at the same time. The film should be – under ideal conditions – made from collaborative footage made with Ambonwari people. If there was an option to submit a major part of my PhD work in a filmic form, my timeline would be differently structured.

In 2007 and 2008 Ambonwari people became fully acquainted with my goals, intentions, and my use of the camera. Their participation has always been voluntary. The village teacher, for example, expressed his wish to make a book together with me about children stories, which would be accompanied by photographs and drawings. In 2008 the elected officials of the village – councillor, ex-councillor, committee, and teacher – signed a written consent approving my wish to continue with my audio-visual ethnographic research in their village. I fully respected people's confidentiality and will continue to do so. Certain things cannot be told, published or shown on the film but rather kept in one's heart as confirmation of trust and friendship.

It is not just the matter of consent for filming but also to make it clear to the people what will be included in postproduction. Feld's words say as much about ethnography as they say about ethics when he writes that "in the end an ethnographer's accountability for depiction is more than an accountability for representation, it is an accountability to other human beings whose lives, desires, and sensitivities are no less complicated than his or her own" (1990: x).

Timetable

20 February 2010 – 20 December 2010

Preparation for fieldwork in Papua New Guinea: study of the literature, formulation of research questions, presentation of papers at JCU and ANU, acquisition and testing of equipment, visa application, medical checks...

20 December 2010 – 20 December 2011

Fieldwork in Ambonwari village, Papua New Guinea

20 December 2011 – 30 February 2013

Thesis writing and editing of the audio-visual material

Budget

See Appendix 1

Potential Publications

BOOK: My intention is to write a Ph.D. thesis that could be later transferred without many problems into a book that will include all relevant visual material.

CHAPTER IN A BOOK: "Camera as a Catalyst: Experience from Papua New Guinea". In: Peter I. Crawford and Naško Kriznar (eds.), *Teaching Visual Anthropology* (Nordic Anthropological Film Association). Intervention Press.

ARTICLES: My aim is to publish two articles in *Visual Anthropology Journal*, one on my own and one co-authored with supervisor Ton Otto.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM: Edited film which will be submitted to the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

COLLABORATIVE WORK: A book 'Words and Images from the Sepik' (text with b&w photographs; together with Borut Telban) on which we have already been working for some time.

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