

# Questions from the Field

## Anthropological Self-reflexivity through the Eyes of Study Participants

*Sangmi Lee*

**ABSTRACT:** Although there is nothing new about how anthropologists can be the observed instead of simply being the observer and that they can also be interviewed while interviewing, no one has studied the kinds of questions they receive from the people that they study and interact with in the field. Questions that research participants ask the anthropologists during fieldwork provide a critical way to reflect upon historical and persistent issues related to fieldwork, such as positionality, self-reflexivity and methodology. Based on fourteen months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork among two Hmong communities in Laos and the United States, this article examines some of the questions I received from the people in my study and suggests that anthropologists need to pay more critical attention to these questions as a source of self-reflexivity and positionality in the process of ethnographic writing.

**KEYWORDS:** fieldwork methodology, Hmong diaspora, Laos and the United States, positionality, questions from study participants, self-reflexivity

### Prologue

In the summer of 2010, I was visiting my Hmong friend and her family in Sacramento, California during preliminary fieldwork. One afternoon, my friend Yia, who apparently had been observing my constant habit of taking notes, joked to me by saying, ‘Sister, I know what you are writing down in your small notebook all the time. You write, “I had eggs and rice soup for breakfast, I had chicken and rice for lunch, and I will have BBQ for dinner with Yia’s family.” Am I right?’ I could not stop laughing. Her hilarious comment on my overly serious professionalism did not feel offensive at all but rather was very true. For me, fieldnotes are the exclusive property and the product of academic practice but for my Hmong friend, they could just contain trivial information such as the daily menu.

### The Basis of Anthropological Self-reflexivity

Discussion of the issues of reflexivity, positionality and fieldwork methodology has almost become a tacit requirement for good ethnographic writing. Indeed, reflexivity, a conscious effort and exercise ‘to turn back upon or to mirror itself’ (Robertson 2002: 784) seems inevitable in any social research that involves human relationships. Reflexive anthropology may seem to indicate that researchers care about social relationships with their study participants and do not treat them as instrumental objects for their research goals. Although many anthropologists are concerned about the problems and politics of representation intrinsic to anthropology (Clifford 1986; Kunnath 2013: 741), no studies I am aware of have discussed the potential significance and methodological value of questions that study participants ask anthropologists.



During fourteen months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork among two Hmong communities in Laos and the United States, I received various questions from research participants in regard to my own ethnicity, nationality, gender experiences, educational background, class status, family relations and numerous other subjects. In this article I discuss how these questions helped me think reflexively about my positionality as an anthropologist as observed and interpreted by the people that I studied during fieldwork, and also imposed a new dilemma related to fieldwork and ethnographic writing. Through people's questions, I was able to analyse not only the context and implications behind them but also how they are critical for anthropological self-reflexivity as influenced and constructed through the eyes of our study participants.

## Defining Anthropology in Local Terms

Before my graduate studies, I lived in Laos for a total of fifteen months<sup>1</sup> as a long-term volunteer to help with community educational development projects in a rural village located in the central province of the country. Although my previous long-term relationships with the Hmong community there certainly helped my fieldwork in various ways, my transition from a former volunteer helping their community to a researcher studying their community was more difficult than I initially expected. I was there to 'collect' data for my own research, instead of teaching English, working at schools or dealing with funding for different community projects. Even after I explained my different purpose, Hmong villagers still asked me questions such as 'when are you going to start teaching English?', 'How are you going to manage funding for the projects this time?', 'Can you fix the community centre building that was abandoned since you left?'

Recognising that my status among them was notably different than before, when I started my fieldwork, I consulted a Lao-English dictionary and introduced myself to Hmong by using local terms like 'anthropologist (*nak-ma-nut wi-ta-nyaa*)' and 'PhD student (*nakhian ppa-lin-nya-eh<sup>2</sup>*)'. However, my Hmong hosts were still confused and asked about what anthropology was because the word 'anthropologist' in the Laotian language is a combination of two abstract and unfamiliar words 'human' and 'science'. As a result, I had to employ a number of other words such as 'culture', 'ethnic group', 'daily life', 'interviews' and 'observations' to identify who I was and to describe what I was doing. After a few more exchanges, people came up with their own way of understanding

my fieldwork by suggesting, 'Oh, so you mean something like *kebb keomun*', which means to 'pick up/collect information/data'. This reflects the most familiar previous experiences of Hmong in Laos with census-related surveys conducted by both governmental institutions and international NGOs. So my identity as an anthropological researcher and fieldworker was rather simplified to the status of a student who came to Laos to live with them in order to *kebb keomun*.

I still remember vividly how baffled I was when Hmong people told me how governmental and institutional researchers conducted interviews in the past. They were organised, operated and advertised by authorities such as governmental officers, village leaders and international organisation staff accompanied by local interpreters. In short, *kebb keomun* was understood as a research activity that has enforcement power and leads to immediate incentives (often monetary rewards followed for being interviewed). In contrast, my research, also defined as *kebb keomun*, was completely individual and independent and not associated with any governmental and institutional authority and enforcement. This gap did make it difficult for me to find people who would voluntarily agree to do an interview. Without an official announcement that mandates participation, when I tried to set up interviews, villagers would often say they could do so 'anytime', which usually meant 'never'. I always had to explain that there will be no cash payment for an interview as a reward and did not feel comfortable paying participants. I still brought food to my interviewees, especially eggs (that people like but are expensive to buy for an everyday meal). But this was never intended or understood as a conditional compensation for an interview.

Considering the fundamental differences between official and anthropological research, Hmong villagers' willingness to talk to me was based more on personal sympathy to a greater extent because of my previous relationships with the community as a long-term volunteer. On the other hand, I could not completely disregard the fact that their preconceived understandings of governmental and NGO *kebb keomun* had at least made them familiar with the interview process (that is, an appointment had been made, the researcher would visit their homes, they had to sit down and answer the questions). Therefore, I did not need to explain to villagers every single basic concept and technical process involved in interviewing from scratch. For this reason, I ironically had to live with the dilemma of constantly referring to the term *kebb keomun*, because it was the most accessible way to introduce my research activities while delib-

erately and arduously attempting to distance my work from it.

## Analysing the Questions

In contrast to Laos, it is more difficult to generalise about questions asked by Hmong in the United States because they vary according to personal background, socioeconomic status and individual interests. My comparative research and multi-sited fieldwork were highly valued by Hmong people, especially because Laos was the origin country of the U.S. Hmong immigrant community and most Hmong adults currently living in the U.S. were born and grew up in Laos before they resettled as refugees after the Vietnam War starting in 1970s.<sup>3</sup> After learning that I lived in Laos for an extensive amount of time, Hmong in the U.S. showed their interest in my position and relationships with their co-ethnics in Laos and asked me questions such as the following:

You talked to both young and old people, the educated and uneducated, farmers, and many other people in Laos. So did they have the same conclusions about your topic? What did they feel about the Hmong living all over the world? (Steve Vang in his forties)<sup>4</sup>

Since you have already been to Laos, listened to them, and came here to continue your research, how would you compare the two groups? (Yer Xiong in his forties)

So now that you had an opportunity (to do comparative research), I am very curious. Have your perceptions or view on Hmong people in the two countries changed over time, from the beginning until now? (Shoua Smith in her thirties)

These questions reveal that life changes and perceptions of their co-ethnics in the diaspora are at the centre of U.S. Hmong community's memories and current concerns. More importantly, they indicate a shift in my fieldwork positionality as I transitioned from a foreign stranger and outsider to a transnational messenger of the Hmong diasporic community who became a partial insider engaged with their transnational lives. Although there was no explicit expectation that I help connect their two communities across borders, Hmong people in both Laos and the U.S. asked me to 'deliver' their stories and current living conditions to their compatriots if I meet their families, relatives and friends in the other country. By the time I finished my fieldwork, I ended up leaving with a number of phone numbers, photos and home addresses of people in each country.

In fact, my unexpected, new position as a transnational messenger based on people's inquiries and expectation in Laos did help me to contact and establish

rapport and new relationships with Hmong in the U.S. I was not able to deliver all of the photos and personal news that were requested, simply because I could not travel to every city and state in the U.S. with Hmong populations. But it made the Hmong more willing to engage in my research and extensively tell me their personal stories, ideas and life details as well as those of co-ethnics residing abroad.

## Ethnographic Writing in Question

Earlier in my fieldwork in June 2012, I was attending a week-long funeral held in the Hmong Palace Church in Sacramento, California. I was introduced to people as a 'PhD student in anthropology' (note the emphasis on PhD student, not on anthropology), who wants to study U.S. Hmong people's cultural activities, ethnic identity and their social and economic relationships with Hmong in Laos. Mai Lee in her early forties, one of the women with whom I had become acquainted earlier, sat next to me and started a conversation. She mentioned that there were other researchers 'like me' in the past and expressed her concern about the direction of my research. Mai said:

Some female researchers misunderstand Hmong culture and then write a book about Hmong people. They often criticize Hmong men by accusing them of oppressing Hmong women. But I don't agree with them and I personally don't like that kind of opinion. I think it's unfair. What are you going to write about us after you finish your research?

Perhaps I was expected to be ready eloquently to describe what I am going to write about after fieldwork. However, I was completely stunned by her direct question and only briefly responded that I cannot present a predetermined conclusion about my research before I actually complete my fieldwork. Mai continued and expanded on her understanding of ethnographic research on Hmong culture:

A lot of people misunderstand our marriage customs and they still describe us as if we 'steal brides'. In reality, we never practiced that kind of thing. In fact, Hmong women sometimes play mind games and manage romantic relationships by saying 'no' to men. Marriage practices are very complicated in Laos, too. I also care for my people and my own kids. If they grow up, people will still remember and say bad things about us. You are Korean, so you can say anything about Hmong and think to yourself, 'It's okay, because I am not Hmong'. But for my kids, they can't just change their Hmong [ethnicity], go to Korea, and say 'we are not Hmong'. I respect my husband and,

therefore, I respect my culture. Even if men eat first and women wait and eat after them, I take this as cultural respect. I mean, it's a voluntary thing. But it is not because women are low and men are high [in gender status].

Mai concluded by asking me to do 'fair' research on Hmong people and write something that 'makes sense'. In fact, Mai's critical call for doing fair research reflects her negative perception of anthropological (and related) research, which was based on her evaluation of the way previous researchers conducted their fieldwork and analysed their materials. It is not clear whether she claimed that Hmong have a 'good culture' because she was conscious about public and academic representations of Hmong people, or because she was convinced this was actually the case from her perspective. Regardless of the objectivity of Mai's personal evaluation, her point and question are poignant enough to cause me to reflect on the fundamental dilemma of cultural representation that all ethnographies might potentially face – What is a 'good' ethnography? Is it what satisfies the people we study? And is it possible to write about other cultures 'correctly'?

The conversation with Mai reminded me that the problem of representation is a reality and it is highly possible that the influence of the study participants can influence and even constrain the direction of research in both fieldwork and ethnographic writing. Indeed, I have become more conscious about how people would react to and evaluate my findings and analysis in my ethnographic work. How am I going to respond when people criticise the way they are represented or simply dislike it because it contradicts their self-interests, beliefs and subjective opinions or leads to negative implications about their group? How am I going to explain what my ethnography conveys to the Hmong in Laos, who would not be able to read or even access it? This pressure has never been resolved but has become greater over time during the write-up of my dissertation.

## Questioning Anthropology

While doing fieldwork, perhaps anthropologists have focused too much on the questions they wish to ask the people they are studying in relation to their own research agendas. To reiterate a simple point, questions must be listened to in order to understand better the complicated issue of fieldwork positionality in relation to those we study and how it affects our ability to access ethnographic information during fieldwork as well as the nature of our ethnographic writing.

While reflecting on the questions and comments in the process of fieldwork, our own interview questions can also be modified and better reframed. I do not suggest that these are 'true' voices that can resolve the inherent issue of the authorial power that anthropologists have to represent those they study (see Agar 1980: 255–6). However, on what basis do anthropologists reflect upon themselves and what they do in the field? Anthropological self-reflexivity should start by paying serious attention to the kinds of questions and comments people have about the way they are being studied and the process of anthropological research.

SANGMI LEE is a doctoral candidate in the anthropology programme at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology (ISCA), University of Oxford. Her primary research interests include Hmong diaspora and transnationalism, tradition and authenticity, globalisation, and Southeast Asia (Laos and Thailand), the United States, and southwest China. E-mail: sangmi.lee@anthro.ox.ac.uk

## Notes

1. Six months in 2003–2004 and seven months in 2005–2006.
2. My Lao–English dictionary only has master's degree (*ppa-lin-nya-toh*), but I learned that the word which refers to PhD involves changing the last syllable in order to differentiate between the two degrees.
3. This does not mean that Hmong in Laos were not interested in the way my research examines their ethnic connections and cultural identity comparatively. Because I interviewed them before my fieldwork in the U.S., they often expressed interest in whether Hmong in the U.S. had become different or remained similar to them after years of separation.
4. All names used are pseudonyms.

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