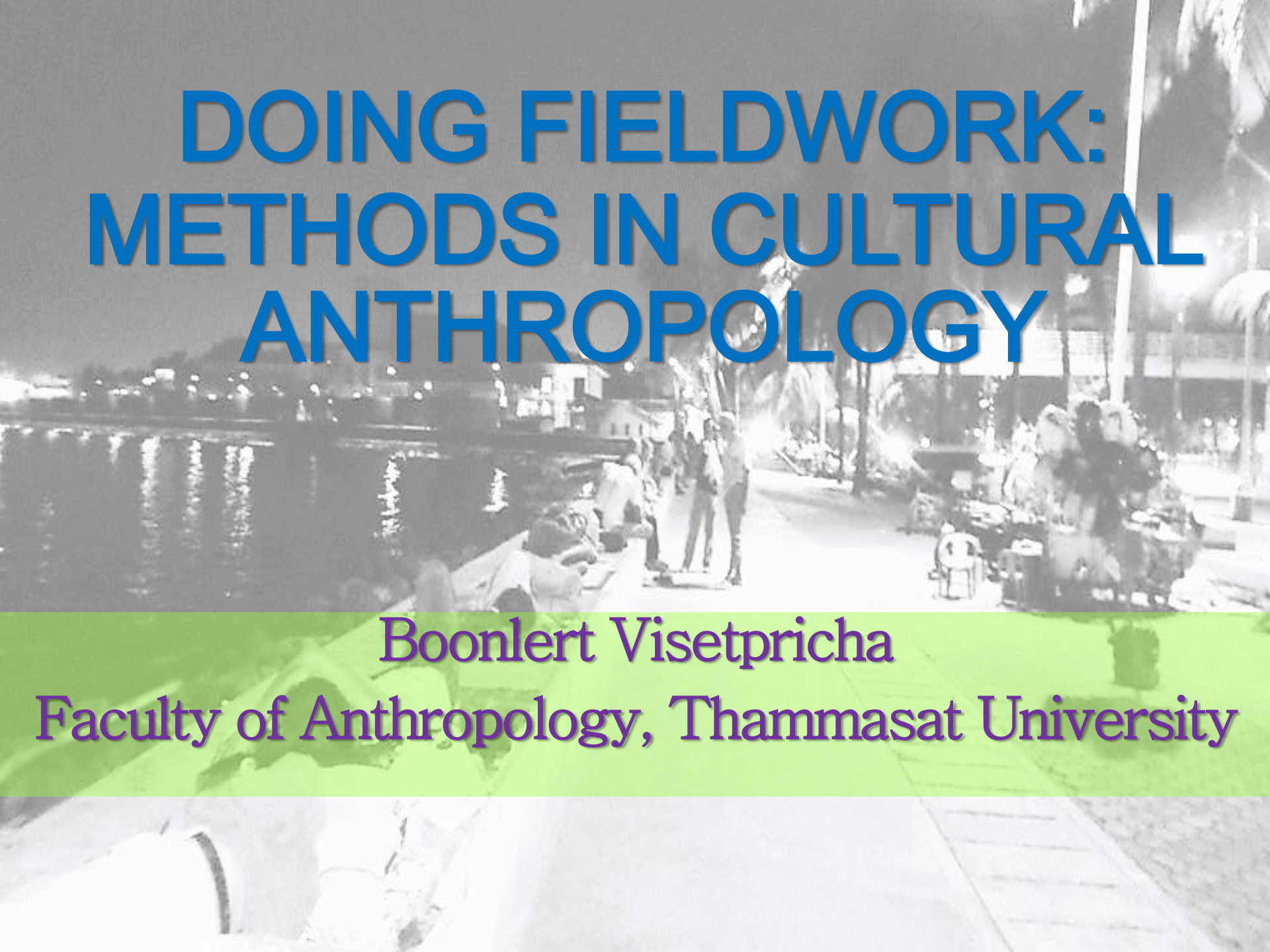


DOING FIELDWORK: METHODS IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

A grayscale photograph of a waterfront market scene. In the foreground, a person is seen from the back, wearing a light-colored shirt and dark pants, looking towards a group of people on a wooden pier or boat. The pier is crowded with people, some standing and some sitting. In the background, there are buildings and palm trees along the waterfront. The water is calm, reflecting the lights from the buildings.

Boonlert Visetpricha

Faculty of Anthropology, Thammasat University

My Background

- From Fisheries to Anthropology
- World of Homeless People (3 editions)

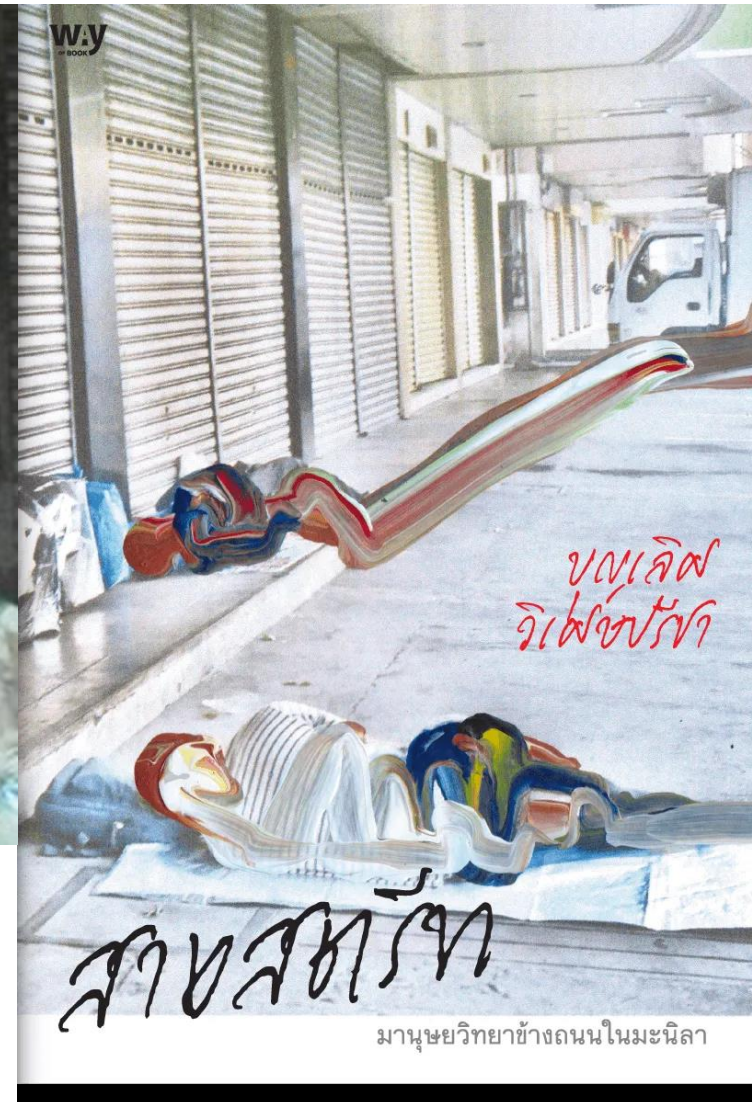


*Structural Violence and Homelessness: Searching for
Happynees on the Streets in Manila, the Philippines*

University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2015



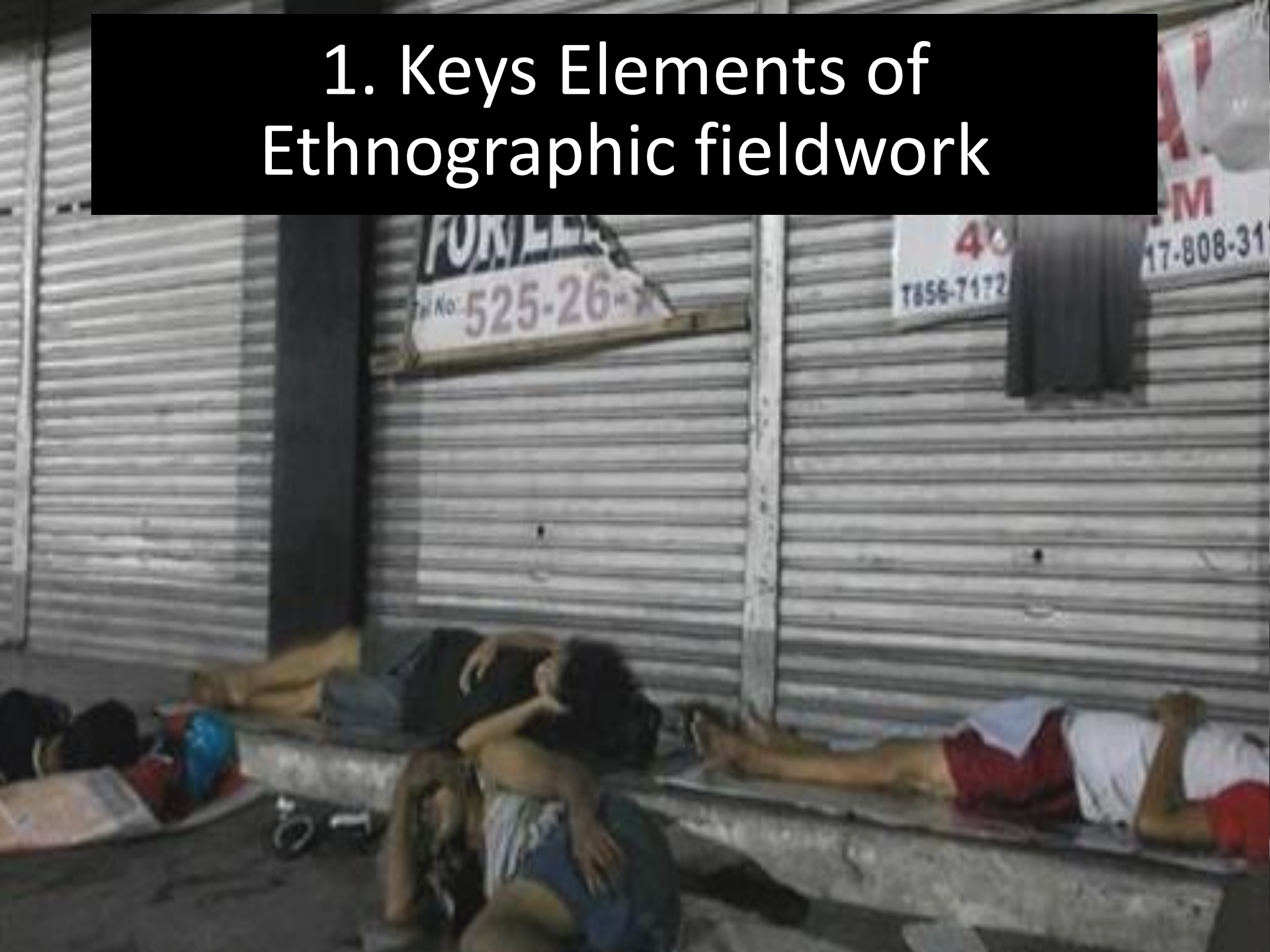
“Being there” with Homeless People for 14 months



Outline

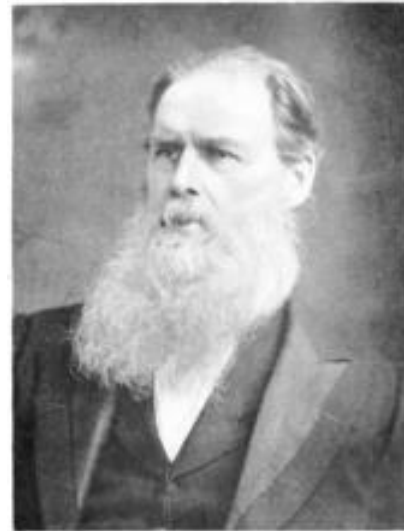
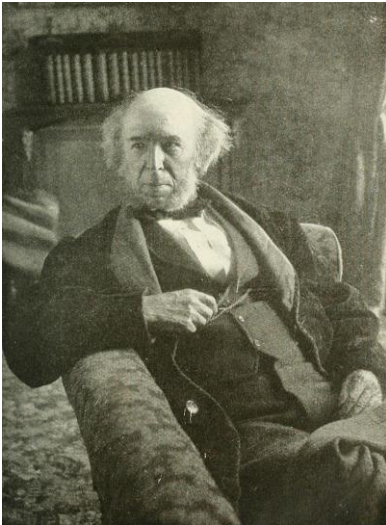
- 1. Principles of ethnographic fieldwork
(Classical ethnography)**
- 2. Ethnography Today: Perspectives and techniques**
- 3. Ethical Concerns**
- 4. Strengthens and drawbacks of ethnography**
- 5. Questions and discussions**

1. Keys Elements of Ethnographic fieldwork



Early armchairs anthropologists

- Relying on information from missionaries, business travelers etc.
- Pre-conceived ideas and racist conclusion



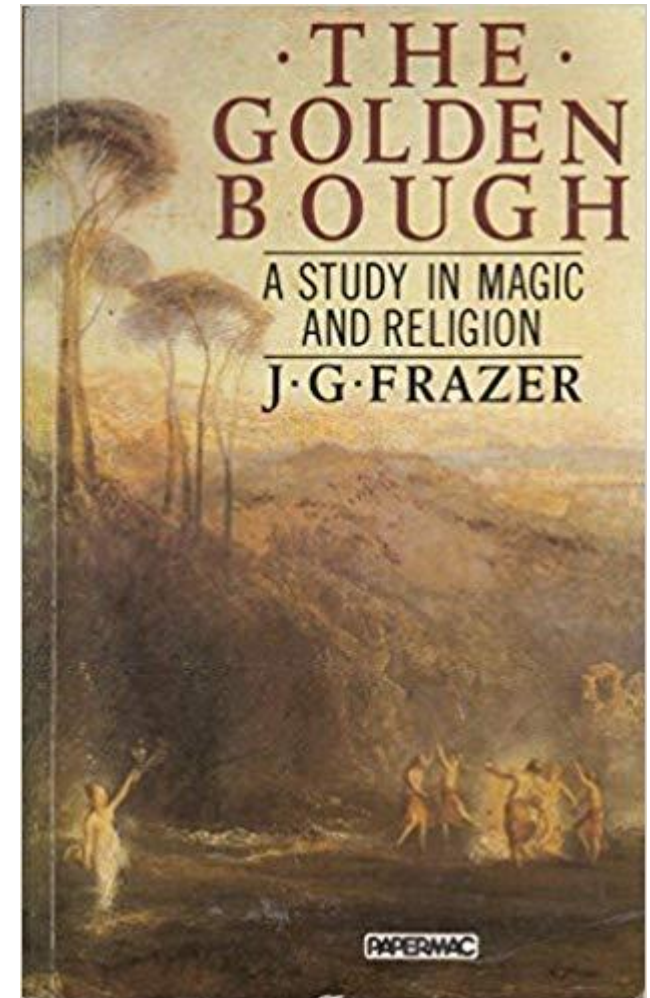
- Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) Edward B Tylor (1832-1917)

https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Burnett_Tylor

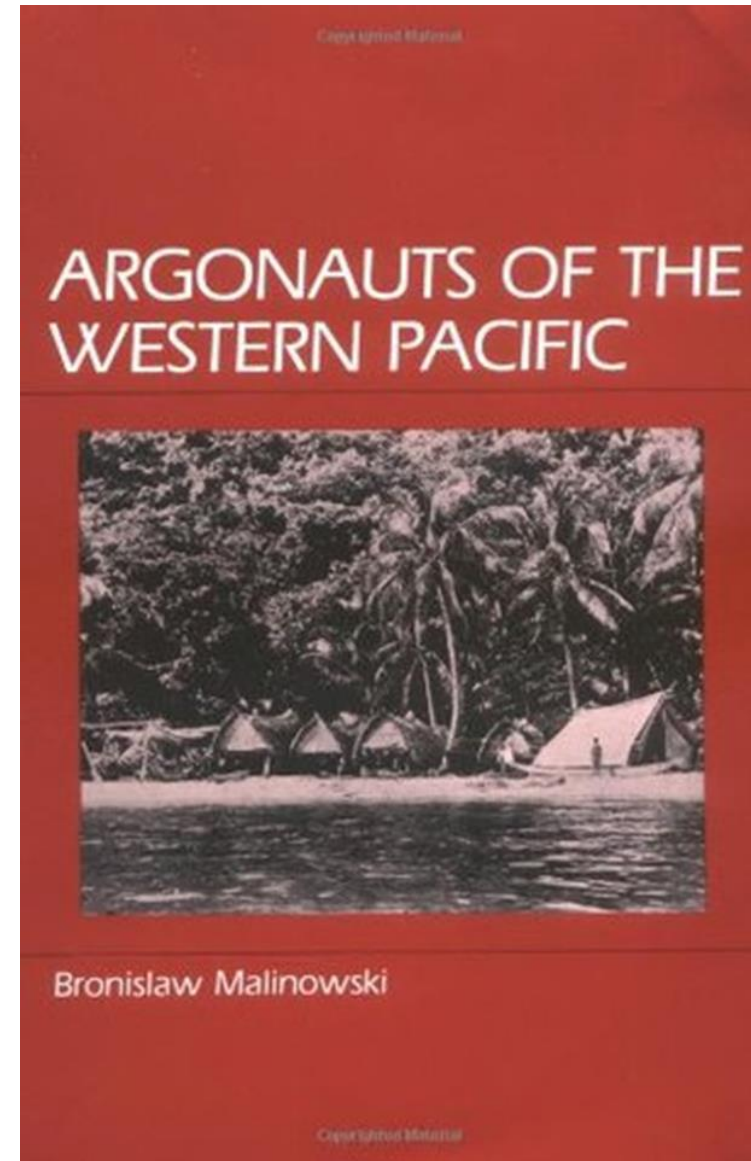
James Frazer (1854–1941)

- The Golden Bough (1890)
- 1. Magic
- 2. Religion
- 3. Science

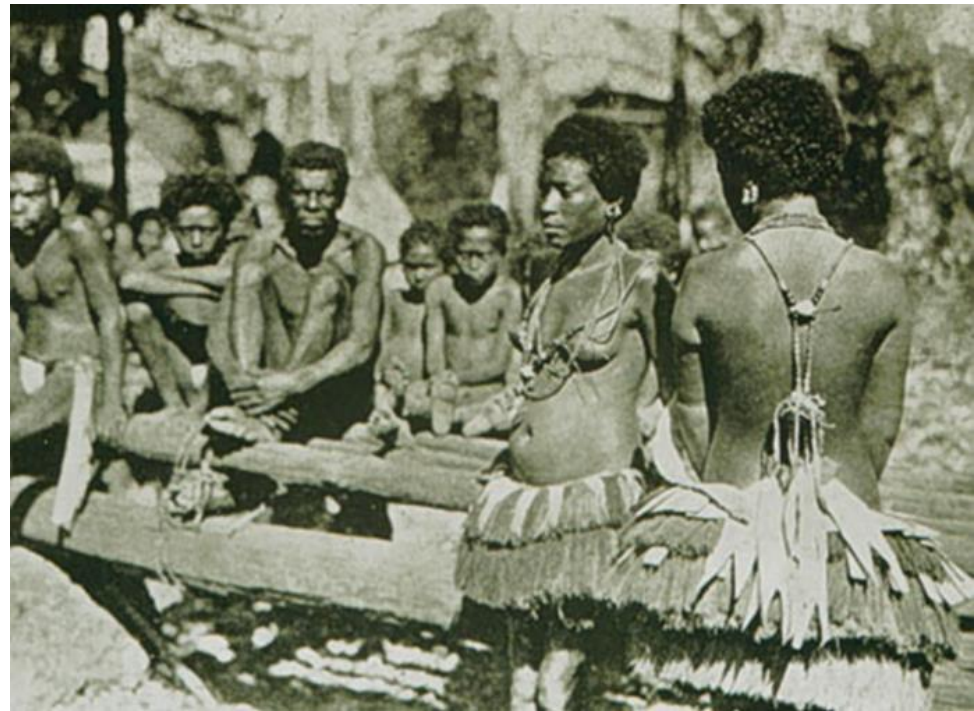
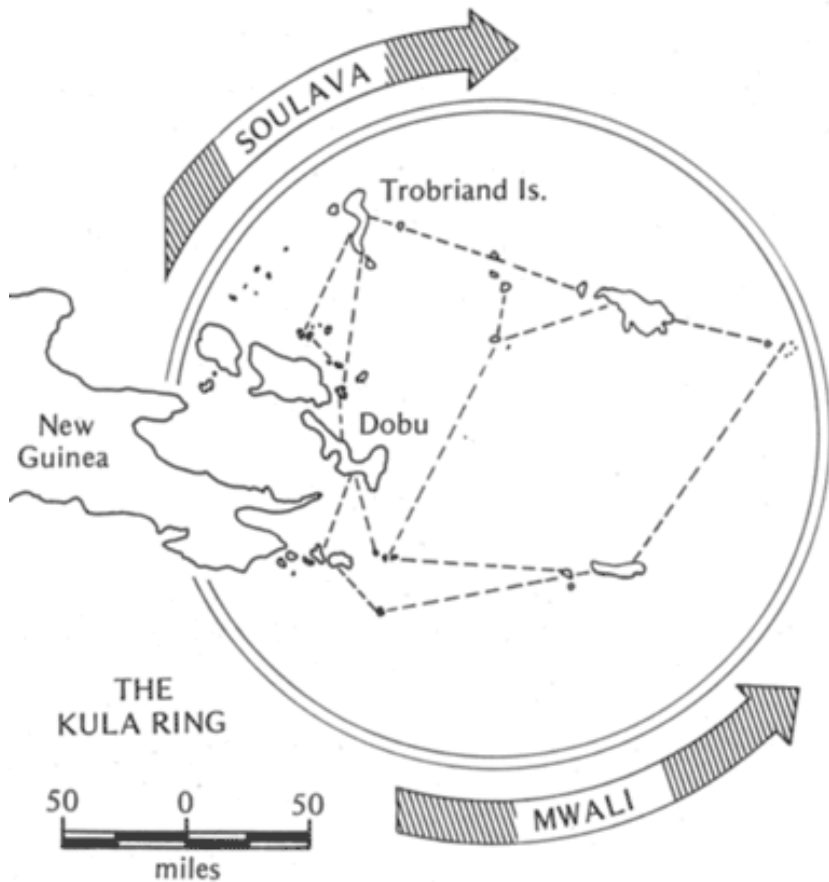


Emerging of professional ethnographers

- Bronislaw Malinowski's (1884–1942)
- *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922)
- Establishing a new standard of ethnographic fieldwork

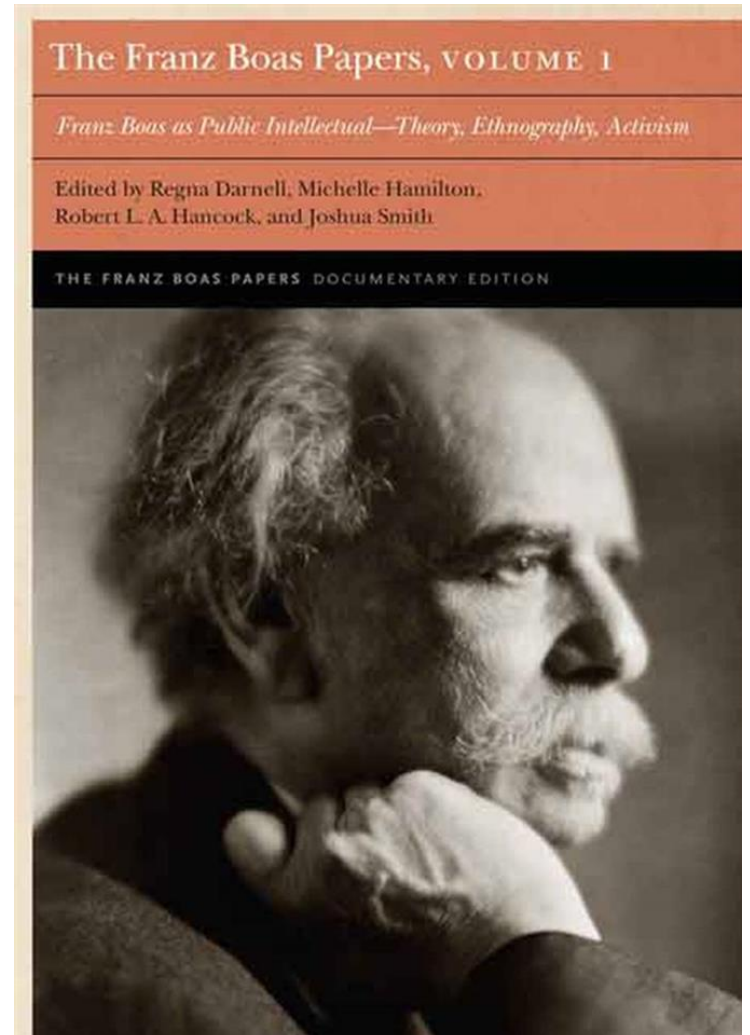


Functions of the Kula Ring



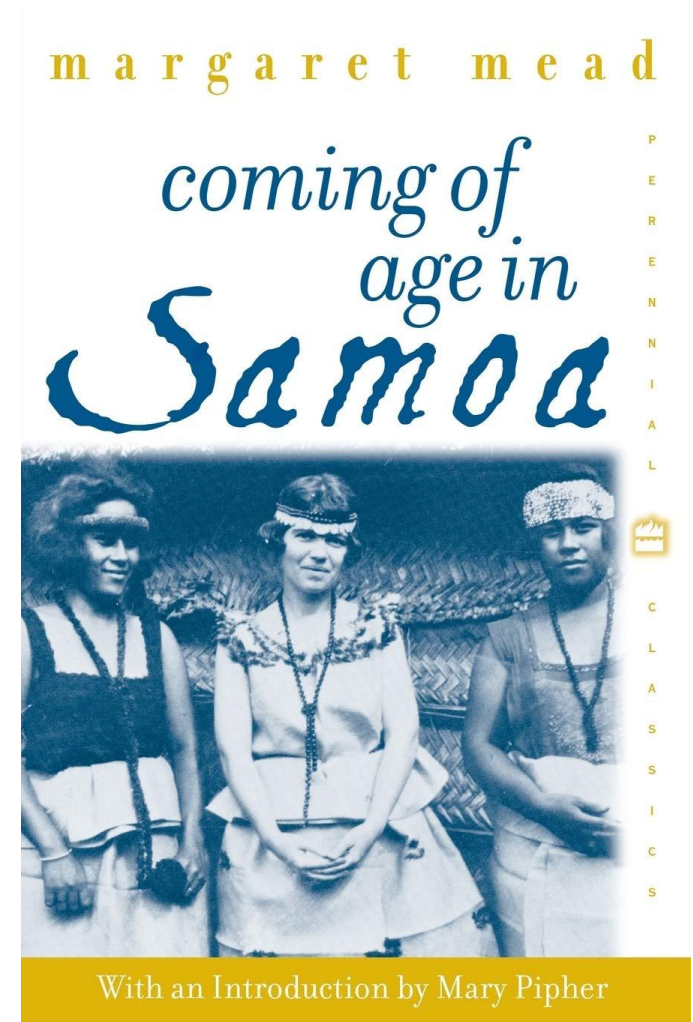
American professional anthropologists

- Franz Boas (1858-1942)
- Cultural Relativism
- Salvage Ethnography



Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928)

- Young women in Samoa experienced a smooth transition to adulthood with relatively little stress or difficulty.
- Stress among adolescence is not the result of biological factors, but it is the result of social and cultural factors.



Doing Ethnographic Fieldwork

- Ethnography– “the attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing” (Sherry Ortner 2006: 42)
- To grasp the natives’ point of views
- Participant observation
- Emic and etic views
- Key informants
- Fieldnotes

Doing Ethnographic Fieldwork

- Immersing yourself to the group of people whom you are studying.
- Spending a long period of time in the fieldwork
- Learning local language
- Observing and participating in activities in everyday life
- To understand them as they are
- It seem easy, but in fact it is not.

My own experiences with homeless people in Bangkok

- Participant observation is necessary for studying homeless people
- Earning trust
- “I am not a homeless person; I just collect recyclable items for fun. I have a condominium at another side of the river.”
- I was suspected by homeless people.

Falling in line to get free food



Being there with homeless people



Hanging out with homeless people

- “Are you still interested in homeless people?”
- The meanings of sharing water with me
- I got many deep feelings of homeless people from informal conversations.



Objectivity and Activist Anthropology

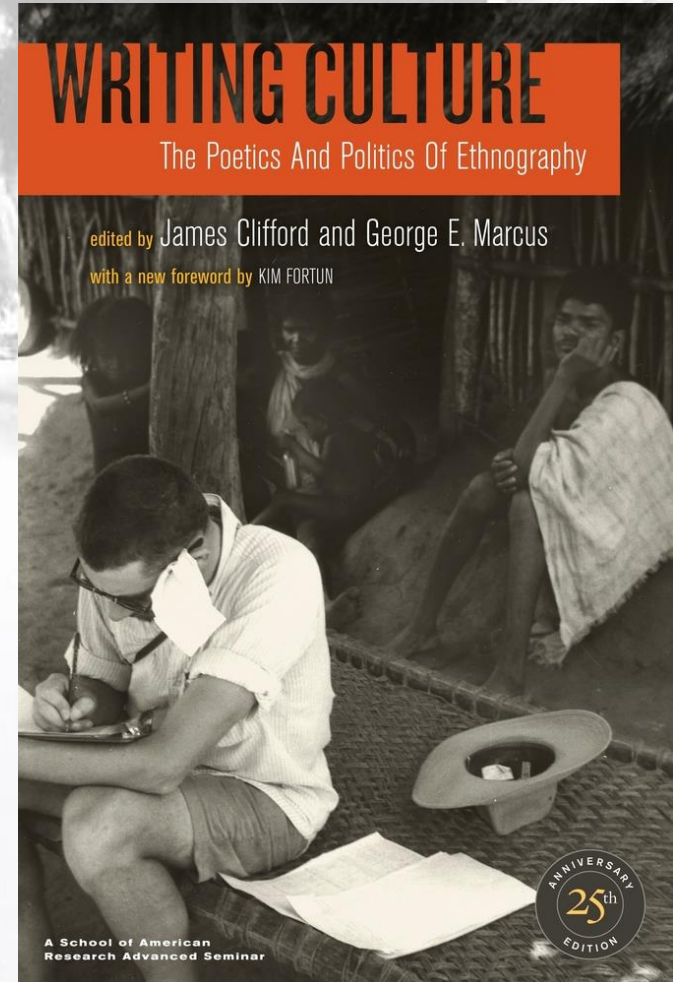
- Female genital cutting (FGC)
- Woman rights VS local cultures



- <https://www.facebook.com/waymagazine/videos/160113220805521/>
- สายสตรีท
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVUR1aPk3ZQ&feature=youtu.be&t=2195&fbclid=IwAR1_3wSq4yutowr7ogJLqbEGAftm55u-jdHWuE50iARHMaWiNZ-VK93cLjc
- เริ่มหน้าที่ที่ 36.

2. Ethnography Today

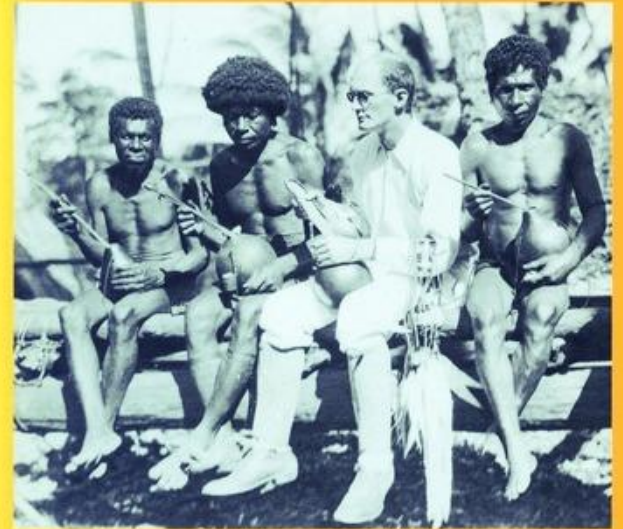
- Starting from the critics of postmodern theory
- *Writing Culture : The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (George Marcus and James Clifford 1986)
- Criticizing that ethnography is a kind of literature.



Crisis of objectivity

- Anthropology is related to European colonialism
- Male-centered discipline
- A researcher's point of view influences an interpretation.
- Partial truth
- Can we trust ethnography?

A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term

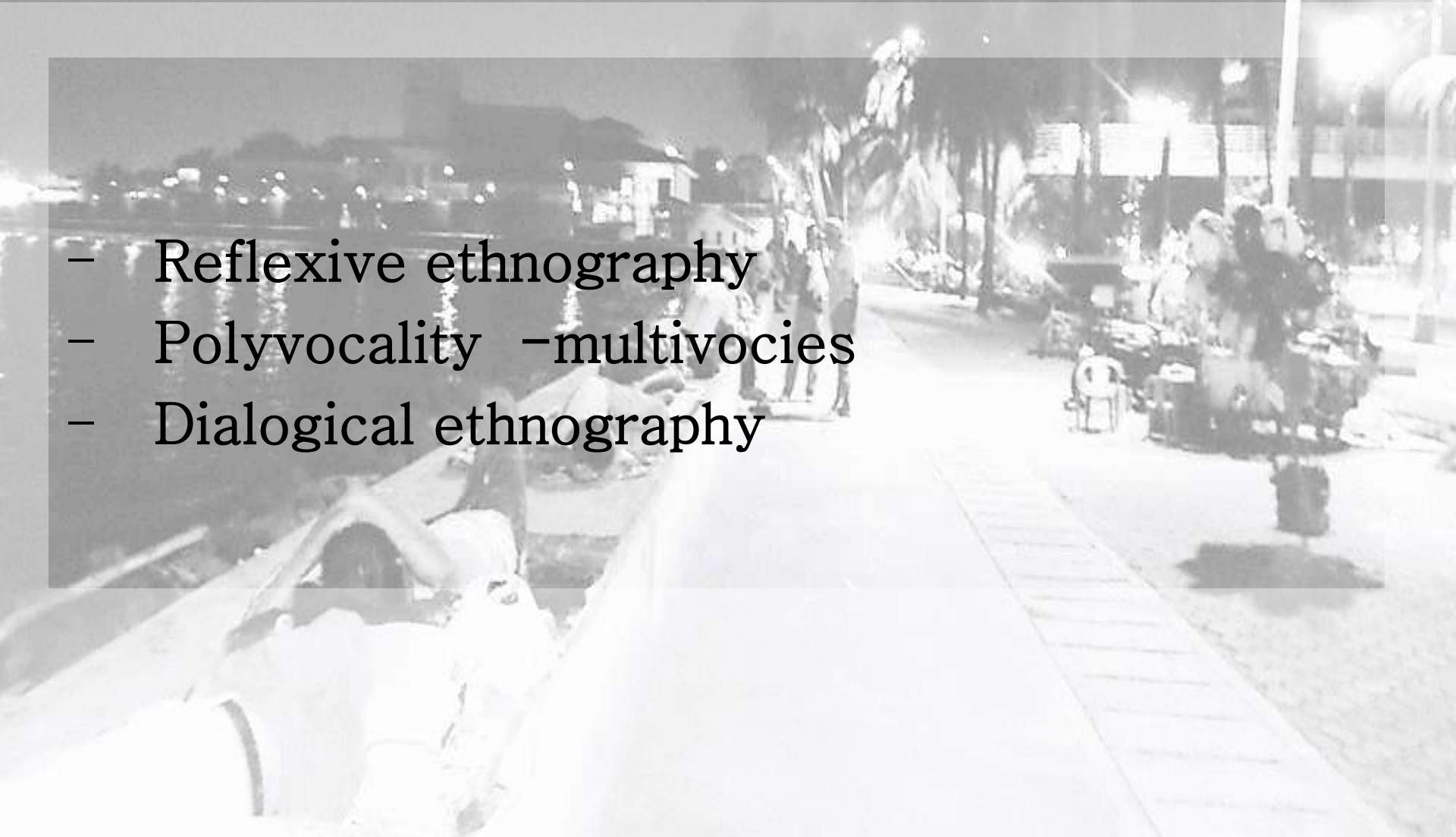


Bronislaw Malinowski

With a New Introduction by Raymond Firth

Anthropology responds to the criticism.

- Reflexive ethnography
- Polyvocality –multivocies
- Dialogical ethnography



3. Ethical Considerations

- Concerning how anthropological research affects people whom anthropologists study.
- Do no harm
- Obtained informed consent
 - Sincerely and transparency
- Maintain anonymity and privacy
 - How about taking pictures with your informants
 - “Hey Boon, you can show my pictures in your book.”
- Make results accessible

4. Strengthens and drawbacks of ethnography

- Strengthens: Power of meaningful stories



Strengthens

- Be able to get the deep meanings of social behaviors
- WHY SOME PEOPLE DO NOT WANT TO WORK...
 - Polyne: “My salary is too low”



Strengthens

- Be able to get accurate information particularly for marginalized people
- A government official:
“Homelessness is a way of life and a choice.”



“It is not a problem of choice; it is a problem of chance.”



Strengthens

- To be able to discover unexpected findings
- Homelessness is the result of both micro and macro factors
- Street words can reflect homeless people's attitudes.
- *Phi* (ghost), *Khon thaew* (traveler)

Drawbacks

- Inappropriate to employed to answer “quantitative questions”
- It takes times.
- Require well-trained and high skills researchers

5. Questions ? & Discussions



Suggestions for Further Reading

- บุญเลิศ วิเศษปรีชา. (2559) (พิมพ์ครั้งที่ 3). *โลกของคนไร้บ้าน*. นนทบุรี: ฟ้ายาวกัน (ดูบทที่ 2 น. 13-30)
- บุญเลิศ วิเศษปรีชา. (2560). “การกลับมาของงานชาติพันธุ์วรรณา: บทสะท้อนผ่านงานภาคสนามกับคนไร้บ้านในมะนิลา ประเทศฟิลิปปินส์” *วารสารธรรมศาสตร์* 36 (2): 1-32.
- บุญเลิศ วิเศษปรีชา. (2561). *สายสตรีท เรื่องเล่าจากข้างถนนในมะนิลา* (กรุงเทพฯ: WAY of Book).
- Bernard, H. Russell (ed.). 1998. *Handbook of methods in cultural anthropology*. London: AltaMira.
- McGranahan, Carole. (2014). “What is Ethnography? Teaching Ethnographic Sensibilities without Fieldwork”. *Teaching Anthropology* 2014. 4:23-36.
- Ortner, Sherry B. (1995). Resistance and the problem of ethnographic refusal. *Comparative Studies in Society and History: an International Quarterly*. 37: 173-193.

Bangkok Post, 27 Nov 2016.

“No roof overhead”

NEWS > SPECIAL REPORTS

No roof overhead

A university professor tells of his time spent living on the streets in Thailand, Japan and the Philippines as part of his field work

27 Nov 2016 at 05:00

WRITER: CHAIYOT YONGCHAROENCHAI





THE STREETS: A homeless person sleeps at Sanam Luang in Bangkok. The area has long been popular with homeless people.

No roof overhead

University professor tells of his time spent living on the streets in Thailand, Japan and the Philippines as part of his field work **By Chaiyot Yongcharoenchai**



A homeless person rests under a pedestrian bridge in Tokyo.

There's something wrong with how our society's structured. The economy's growing and we seem to be developing, but the number of people living in slums and on the streets keeps rising," Boonlert Visetpricha reflects. The Thammasat University professor has experienced this reality first hand in his field work, living as a homeless person in Bangkok. He sees a vast contrast between the lives of the rich and the poor.

After earning a bachelor's degree in fishery studies, Mr Boonlert decided to change course and pursue another passion of his — anthropology. He got a job at the Human Settlement Foundation, an NGO working with homeless people in Bangkok, with the ideal of achieving a more equal society in mind.

His work involved spending time with slum communities and talking to the people about their experiences. But after some time, he was following a new calling — he decided to delve back into academia. In 2001, he enrolled in Thammasat University for a master's degree in anthropology.

His studies nonetheless reflected an ongoing interest in marginalised communities. When searching for a thesis topic, he was committed to find one that would have a real impact on society, not simply land him an easy A. He finally drafted a research proposal about homeless people in Bangkok, a problem that had been around for as long as he could remember.

When his proposal was approved in 2003, he got straight to work on his research. But he wasn't satisfied to sit at his desk. With his active, social work-influenced attitude, he resolved that the best way to understand the reality of homeless people was to experience their lives first-hand.

"I decided to become a homeless person on the streets," Mr Boonlert recalls. "That way, I could actually feel what it's like to be one." His experience and the reflections that followed it generated a big buzz in the academic world, showing a level of commitment to research that had rarely been seen before.

BECOMING HOMELESS

To prepare for his research, Mr Boonlert began by seeking out clothes that would make him look the part of a homeless person. After acquiring the right attire, he headed to Sanam Luang, a Bangkok area where many homeless communities used to gather back in the early 2000s.

At Sanam Luang, he approached people and asked them if they would share their stories with him. Despite his efforts, no person he approached seemed willing to talk with him. On the contrary, they tended to run in the opposite direction.

After many attempts, he finally found one person, a man, who would sit down and



EXERCISING OUT AN EXISTENCE: A homeless man searches a garbage bin at Sanam Luang.

introduce himself to Mr Boonlert. The man promptly filled in the professor on why he couldn't get anyone to talk to him.

"He told me the reason that people refused to talk to me is because of my mannerisms and the word choice I used while talking to them. They thought that I spoke like a police officer or social welfare government official who wanted to come along and evict them," Mr Boonlert explained.

So Mr Boonlert changed his approach, adjusting his speech and mannerisms to fit in. This allowed him to gain people's trust and make them more comfortable around him. One contacted to another, and he met another man who agreed to show him how to survive on the streets.

The first and perhaps most important lesson he learned was how and where to find food. His friend, serving as his research assistant, brought him to the National Council of Social Welfare of Thailand's office, where free food is given out to hundreds of homeless people every day. He learned that there are two types of homeless people: those who rely on free food from beginning or welfare services, and those who collect garbage to sell and buy food.

Chinese shrines turned out to be a popular place to get free food. Those who relied on these are referred to as *pi*, meaning ghost, since the shrines are intended to feed hungry ghosts.

SURVIVAL GUIDE

At the start of his field work, Mr Boonlert lived between the streets and his home. At times he returned to his house to shower, change to fresh clothes and eat a proper meal.

But after five months, he felt that his research

ON THE BREADLINE: Above and right, the homeless in the Philippines earn small money from calling passengers for buses and picking trash for recycling.

RESEARCH: Boonlert Visetpricha lived on the streets in three countries.





ON THE EDGE: Above and right, Boonlert Visetpricha observes homeless people at some popular spots in Manila.



that went on to win the Utikpan Award offered by Amarin.

Building on the success of these endeavours, he was advised to apply for a Nippon Foundation research grant to do public intellectual research, which he successfully secured.

Tokyo was chosen as his next research destination, and he moved there in 2004. With eight months to complete his field work, he focused on the Shibuya district.

Using the same approach that he deployed in Bangkok, he slid back into the role of a homeless person. At first, he expected his work to be easy enough — he had already learned Japanese

and had experience interacting with people on the streets.

But he found out quickly that he was wrong. He found that Japanese people were afraid to talk to foreigners. He admitted that he hadn't considered this potential obstacle beforehand.

Five months passed before Mr Boonlert got insider access to Tokyo's homeless community. He had spent much of his time joining homeless support foundations, but he found out that these were frowned upon by Japanese people.

"In Japan, there's no culture of giving food or money to homeless people. Moreover, to receive free help from others is considered an

embarrassing thing. People who give out free food are seen as violating the social norms of Japan. Being homeless in Japan will not get you any sympathy from others because they think that homeless people are simply not trying hard enough," Mr Boonlert explained.

It was only in his sixth month that he met a homeless man who agreed to show him how to survive in Tokyo. His experience was under particular strain since getting free food was nearly impossible.

The sole way to sustain oneself as a homeless person in Tokyo was via finding work. Mr Boonlert found. One way his friend showed him



BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL: The Baywalk is another popular rest area for Manila's homeless.

how to make money was by riding on a train and collecting abandoned comic books on passengers' seat. They could then sell to used book stores. Each trip earned them between ¥2,000 (630 baht) and ¥3,000.

Another way to earn money was to have other people buy discount products or concert tickets. For four hours of standing in the queue, he would get ¥4,000 to ¥5,000.

As he neared the end of his research period, he decided to fly to Manila for two months. A friend working for an NGO had told him it was easier to survive as a homeless person in the Philippines, a fact that Mr Boonlert confirmed in his experience. He settled into a slum community and found himself making friends quickly who opened up to him about their survival strategies.

HARD BUT HAPPY

When Mr Boonlert returned from his trip in 2005, he got a job as an anthropology lecturer at Thammasat University. After working there for five years, the university encouraged him to get a PhD so that he could teach both master's and doctorate degree classes.

The recommendation led him to leave Thailand and pursue a PhD in anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 2009. After studying there for only one year, he submitted his proposal to conduct more research on homeless people. His adviser told him that he could do the research anywhere in Asia but Thailand to expand his expertise. He decided to focus on Manila.

He received his pre-dissertation research grant in 2011. He headed to Manila, contacted his friends at local NGOs and gathered enough proof that his research would be doable.

He proceeded to spend 14 months there from 2013 to 2014. He got with the company of street people including alcoholics and drug users. He rented a room to keep his belongings, but spent six days a week on the street.

There were parallels between living on the streets in Manila and Bangkok, Mr Boonlert found. For instance, his homeless friends brought him to religious sites, Catholic churches, where they had homeless people pray or sing the songs for the Lord before giving them free food. For dinner, they all walked to Sikh temples to get dinner, nicknamed "Mumbai" by his friends.

Similarly, homeless people in Manila mainly earned money through garbage collection. Another way to earn money was by working as a barker, somebody who directs people embarking on local buses, called jeepneys. This work amounts to about 10 pesos (7 baht) per day. For homeless people who can afford to buy a pack of cigarettes, they can unpack and sell per unit instead of a whole pack and earn at least 100-200 pesos per pack.

Mr Boonlert had a close group of friends in Manila as well as support from locals. One time, when he was too sick to go to work, he fell asleep under an overpass. But an older lady who recognised him walked out to get food and medication for him, and took care of him until he recovered.

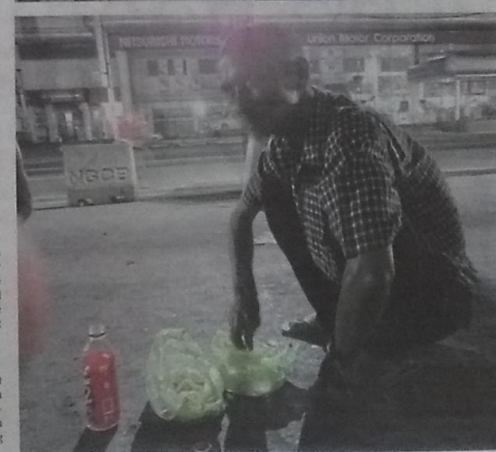
"I got many surprise friendships in my time as a homeless person, more than I expected. I feel really lucky to be surrounded by good people who actually cared for me. One time, I was playing a word puzzle game with my homeless friends, they said *mahirap*, which means hard or difficult in Tagalog, which refers to their lives. I add the word to complete the sentence with the words *pero masaya*, which means 'hard but happy'. They all smiled with happiness once they realised I understood them," Mr Boonlert explained.

A DIFFERENT VIEW

After wrapping up his research, Mr Boonlert returned to Bangkok. He is now working as a full-time lecturer and researcher of anthropology at Thammasat University, and his research has been heralded as some of the most cutting edge at the school.



HELPING HAND: From above to below, the homeless wait in a long line for free food in the Philippines and once they receive their portion, they eat on the sidewalk.



Street people in Manila treat even something as a joke, found very ironic BOONLERT VISET

During his time on the streets, Mr Boonlert found that homeless people are subjected to various treatments around the world.

"I came back here with a different attitude after seeing problems [with homeless people] in other countries. Compulsions [in other countries], that street people have better lives. Their life is supported by many organisations. They can easily find opportunities they look out for them. In Manila, it's more difficult to come by and a major stigma attached to homelessness," Boonlert explained.

The biggest takeaway of his research was how life is affected by homelessness, not just the attitude.

"Street people in Manila treat even something as a joke, which I found very ironic. They say they have a big house, but they have to walk from one place to another for free food to eat all the time. It is not easy for them to have a better life," Mr Boonlert said.

Even though Thai homeless people in Manila proved to be more resilient, Boonlert chose to have a positive outlook on his experience. Happiness is whatever you are. ■

Thank you very much



