

Fieldwork on the Banks of the Pilcomayo River: The Place of Erland Nordenskiöld in Pre- Malinowskian Traditions of Ethnography

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Cet article fait partie d'une série de six articles initialement présentés dans le cadre du panel « *Historicizing Anachronistic Motives* » qui s'est tenu lors de la première conférence internationale des histoires des anthropologies « *Doing Histories, Imagining Futures* » (4-7 décembre 2023, en ligne) co-organisée par le History of Anthropology Network de l'EASA et l'Università di Pisa avec le soutien de Bérose et de dix autres acteurs institutionnels dans le domaine de l'histoire de l'anthropologie. Le panel a été organisé par David Shankland (Royal Anthropological Institute ; University College London, Royaume-Uni), Christine Laurière (CNRS / UMR9022 Héritages, France) et Frederico Delgado Rosa (Universidade Nova de Lisboa, CRIA Centre for Research in Anthropology, Portugal).

Introduction

Swedish ethnologist and Americanist scholar Erland Nordenskiöld (1877–1932) became acquainted with the South American Chaco for the first time in 1902 when the Chaco-Cordillera expedition (1901–1902) made an incursion into the northern area of the Pilcomayo River, where various Indigenous societies partially maintained their traditional ways of life. This encounter marked him profoundly. It not only reoriented his research interests from zoology, the discipline in which he was trained, towards ethnography, archaeology and ethnology but also made him dedicate the rest of his life and work to the study of the “South American Indian”. This was done on the basis of extensive fieldwork which was carried out during his numerous expeditions to both the highland and lowland regions of South America.

My research on Nordenskiöld is part of a larger effort to bring visibility to and discuss the type of ethnography and fieldwork carried out during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before what some historians of anthropology term as the “Malinowskian revolution”. The central place given to Malinowski’s understanding of ethnographic fieldwork in the anthropological canon has historically overshadowed other ethnographic practices and writing. As Rosa and Vermeulen (2022) argue, there exist deep-rooted assumptions about how professional fieldwork is carried out which are inadequate to assess the significance of ethnographic studies previous to and different from Malinowski’s formulations. Since Nordenskiöld belongs to the lesser-known tradition of Swedish anthropology, analysing and discussing his fieldwork makes it possible to look at the history of ethnography through the prism of a “minor” tradition which has been overshadowed by the four “major” ones: the British, the American, the French and the German research traditions (Barth et al. 2010). As Lindberg (2008) states, only occasionally are contributions of Nordic figures included in historical accounts of the formative years of anthropology.

In the case of Nordenskiöld, his role in the history of the Swedish and international Americanist tradition has been studied and praised, in terms of his scientific career, theoretical perspectives and international recognition (Lowie 1933; Alvarsson et al. 1992; Laurière 2008). Laurière (2021) has for instance stressed that thanks to Nordenskiöld’s engagement in organizing the International Congress of Americanists in 1924, he played a key role in resuming international scientific relationships between Americanist scholars who had been isolated during WWI. Nordenskiöld’s contribution to museum anthropology and the formation of the Gothenburg School has also been highlighted (Lindberg 2008). Nonetheless, little has been said about his role as a field researcher.

It is also worth mentioning that the figure of Nordenskiöld and his ethnographies have been especially acknowledged and reassessed in recent decades within Latin American anthropologies, especially Argentinian and Bolivian, the ethnographic researches conducted in the Chaco region being a landmark in the development of the discipline in both national traditions (Bossert 2021; Bossert and Villar 2007). Nordenskiöld is seen as one of the founding fathers of “Chaco anthropology” (Gordillo 2006), i.e. the area of studies which specializes in the Chaco region.

Here I discuss the type of fieldwork which Nordenskiöld undertook on the banks of the Pilcomayo River in the border region between Bolivia and Argentina, reflecting upon the place of these practices within pre-Malinowskian traditions of ethnography. This is done by analysing and discussing the Hernmarck expedition to Bolivia and Argentina (1908–1909), namely by focusing on the social, cultural and economic factors which conditioned this research endeavour, as well as on the way Nordenskiöld engaged with the groups who came under his ethnographic gaze. My findings are based on the analysis of the letters Nordenskiöld wrote home to his friend and patron of the expedition, Arvid Hernmarck (1876–1940), which are held in the Royal Library of Sweden. These letters served as reports from the field, including accounts of the expedition’s findings, hardships and anecdotes,

which are much more detailed than what can be read in Nordenskiöld's fieldnotes, held in the archive of the Världskulturmuseet (Museum of World Culture) in Gothenburg [1]. I also base my research on Nordenskiöld's published popular accounts of the expedition, *Indianlif* (1910) and *Indianer och hvita* (1911), which largely match the travelogue genre.

Fieldwork on the Banks of the Pilcomayo River

The Hernmarck expedition was Nordenskiöld's fourth expedition to South America. Arvid Hernmarck, a former classmate of Erland at Uppsala University, had financed the expedition and therefore it carried his name. It was the first time Nordenskiöld solely concentrated on archaeological and ethnographic findings. In his prior three trips, zoological research still held a prominent role although gradually displaced by an anthropological research agenda. In contrast to his two prior expeditions to the region, which took him and fellow scholars to both the Andean plateau and the Chaco bush and grasslands, in the case of the Hernmarck expedition, Nordenskiöld was the only scholarly figure taking part in it and carried out fieldwork only in the lowland regions of Bolivia, first in the south-east Chaco region bordering Argentina and then the lush north-east region which borders Brazil. Although he was the only scholar, he had hired two young Swedes to be his travel assistants: Andersson and Moberg. Based on his previous experience in terms of hiring workers who could help and assist the expedition, he considered it was better to be as "as independent as possible of local (creole) people" preferring "to count solely on Swedes and Indians". [2] He was convinced that this smaller format of an expedition would make it more effective and funds would last longer.

Although the formation of collections usually guided his ethnographic practice, for this expedition Nordenskiöld considered it of importance to live together with the Indians so as to penetrate into their views, customs and traditions. This type of engagement is not something that happened sporadically in the field; it was something Nordenskiöld had desired and planned to carry out. In a letter to Hernmarck from 1907 Nordenskiöld writes, "In the first place my plan is to seek Indians who are uncontacted by white society to live their lives with them so that I can really penetrate into a primitive people's views, customs and traditions. [3]"

This type of intensive fieldwork based on engaging in everyday activities as well as in rituals conducted by the Indigenous society was achieved by Nordenskiöld when living for two months on the banks of the Pilcomayo River in the Bolivian Chaco. In this region, Nordenskiöld visited and stayed in different Ashluslay [4] and Chorote [5] villages first during the months of May and June 1908 and then again by the end of October 1909 as he was coming back from his travels in north-eastern Bolivia before heading to Buenos Aires.

There are vivid accounts of this field experience in *Indianlif*. Because of the particular type of narration employed, combining ethnographic descriptions with his own travel experience, the book includes not only descriptions of the different aspects of Chorote and Ashluslay

societies, such as modes of subsistence, family organization, forms of government and interethnic wars, but also of Nordenskiöld's own acting and interactions in the field, which included fishing, hunting, fabricating tools, eating, dancing, singing and drinking together with his hosts. In contrast to the fear and distance the Chacobo showed him in the Bolivian Amazon (Nordenskiöld 1911), the Chorote and Ashluslay welcomed him warmly, and let him participate in their festivities and daily activities. According to Nordenskiöld's perception, they treated him almost as a member of the tribe. His account indicates that, although the time spent in each village was limited, the type of engagement was intense.

In one of the Chorote villages Nordenskiöld visited he describes his stay in the following way:

There I had a really nice time; almost naked, wearing only a few feather adornments and my glasses, I danced at night with Indian men and women on the Pilcomayo's shiny white sand beaches. We felt warm from the dancing, we tumbled about in the roaring water of the river. We hunted, we sang, we played, we fished, we smoked in shifts and never had a dull moment. (Nordenskiöld 1910:14; my translation)

This sharing of the indigenous vital space required suspending Nordenskiöld's own dress code and basic Western practices of commensality, sleep and sociability, and adopting those of his hosts to the best of his capabilities. At times, Erland's engagement was significantly embodied, particularly when it involved exposing and leaving his body at the mercy of the tribe. On one occasion, he pretended to be sick in order to experience the indigenous healing practices first-hand. On another occasion, he subjected his skin to the tattoo techniques of an old Chorote woman. Although he knew the local food and beverage lacked the basic hygienic standards he was used to, he never rejected them. This also meant that at times he would enter into the same drunk state as the people he was celebrating with; and this in turn could end in sharing the habit of sleeping with others: "That night I slept outside my bed, since three Indians were snuffling rolled up in my blankets" (Nordenskiöld 1910:14).

It is important to note that although Nordenskiöld spoke and wrote in Spanish, his knowledge of the indigenous languages was very basic. He was eager to learn indigenous vocabulary which allowed him to pronounce isolated words without necessarily being able to construct sentences. His field work by the Pilcomayo River thus heavily depended on interpreters and translators. On one hand, he hired interpreters who became part of the expedition. This was the case of Flores, a "mestizo" man who was fluent in Chorote and who understood some Ashluslay. Flores not only spoke the native tongue but also had good insight into indigenous life and customs.

For years he lived amongst the Indians, where he had various wives. Of all the white men who lived in the Pilcomayo region there was none who had succeeded at understanding the Indian way of life like this man had. (Nordenskiöld 1910:15; my translation)

Nordenskiöld also speaks of the presence of interpreters, also known as *lenguaraces*, in some of the indigenous villages he visited. According to his observations, these Spanish-speaking

members of the Indigenous groups were rapidly gaining power within the communities.

One might wonder why he was allowed to participate with this degree of engagement, when his fieldwork was of a transient nature. It is important to note that, in contrast to his ethnographic fieldwork in north-eastern Bolivia, the Pilcomayo River was a place that Nordenskiöld was returning to. Many of the Chorote villages he visited in 1908 were the same ones visited during the 1901–1902 Chaco-cordillera expedition. And when he came back to the Pilcomayo in 1909 it was to follow up on an invitation made the year before by the Ashluslay to visit some villages located in the heart of their territory. Nordenskiöld's own explanation as to why he and his assistants gained the trust of the tribe's members was that they had spent countless hours playing with the children and learning their games:

Our good relations with the Indians were probably largely based on the fact that we often played with the children. That was appreciated by Indian fathers and mothers alike and that is how we gained their trust.
(Nordenskiöld 1910:61; my translation)

The extent to which Nordenskiöld was aware of the scientific benefits of that kind of engagement during fieldwork is not entirely clear. On one side, according to his published text, he did hint at how participating permitted a certain insight and understanding of the societies he studied: “As much as possible, I have tried to live the Indian life, tried to understand them” (Nordenskiöld 1910:7). On the other side, he claimed it was necessary to forget about science to truly bond with people in the field. “When possible, I have tried to forget that my purpose has been to study these people and not only live with them and have fun” (Nordenskiöld 1910: 1). But it also seems that he carried out this kind of intense engagement in the field because he deeply enjoyed it and considered the members of the tribe as his equals (Alvarsson 1992). In his 1910 travelogue, he speaks repeatedly of his preference for staying in Indian villages rather than in “civilized” contexts and that the time he spent on the banks of the Pilcomayo was among the happiest of his life. It is interesting to note that although *Indianlif* hints at the importance of personal engagement in the quest for ethnographic knowledge, including many reflections upon his own preferences and feelings in the field, in his academic writing Nordenskiöld expressed no methodological reflections on these practices whatsoever.

Even though Nordenskiöld prioritized travelling through milieus as untouched by civilization as possible, he was not concerned about the extent of time spent at one single field site. As a matter of fact, he used the terms “expedition”, “trip” and “excursion” when referring to his work in the field. The fact of being constantly on the move was most likely motivated by another activity that oriented his fieldwork: forming collections from indigenous cultures that covered large geographical areas in order to be able to make distributional maps and theorize about cultural history in South America. The main results of the expedition were the collected objects, both ethnographic and archaeological. In the correspondence between Nordenskiöld and Hernmarck, the importance of living with the Indians is emphasized at the start, but the reports from the field focus mainly on the number

and type of collections that Nordenskiöld was able to gather. In his travelogue, collecting objects and stories also stand out as central field practices: “All that I could collect from them, I bought; during the evenings I sat by the elders while they told me this and that” (Nordenskiöld 1910: 17). The objects were seen as important testimonies of a way of life that was, so he believed, on the brink of disappearing. Collecting them was a way to guarantee that these cultural expressions would be saved from oblivion. These field practices respond to a wider project of salvage ethnography, common at the time, which sought to gather evidence from primitive peoples to reconstruct their cultural history and their institutions prior to contact and colonization. Thus, Nordenskiöld juxtaposed the field practices of participant observation with that of collecting.

Although the indigenous villages and peoples with most contact with “white society” were less interesting to Nordenskiöld due to his research perspective being focused on pre-Hispanic traditions and material culture, his travelogue shows that he started his observations, notes and inquiries as soon as he encountered any “Indians”, no matter how influenced or even proletarianized by Western culture they might be: “Where the Indians begin, that is where my travel account will start” (Nordenskiöld 1910:3). He took a particular interest in the hundreds of Indigenous workers who migrate alone or together with their families from the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco, serving as seasonal labour for the sugar cane harvest at sugar mills in north-western Argentina such as La Esperanza (Nordenskiöld 1910: 3–12). Nonetheless, the chapter about indigenous labour in the sugar mill is titled “Journey to the field”, indicating that La Esperanza was merely an interesting stop on the way to the real “field”.

Nordenskiöld’s success at temporarily living with the Chorote and Ashluslay in the Bolivian Chaco and his failure to do something similar with the tribes in the Bolivian Amazon can also be understood in the light of larger power relations between the colonizing white population and the Indigenous peoples. To be sure, Nordenskiöld was himself immersed in these power relations. While the act of “returning” surely had a positive effect on his hosts by the Pilcomayo River, Erland’s possibilities of “living with the Indians” was especially conditioned by the extent to which capitalist and extractivist industries had penetrated each of the regions he visited. In the Amazonian region there had been a rubber boom since the 1880s which affected large portions of the amazon territories of Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia and Venezuela, the colonizing front penetrating more and more into Indigenous communities which were, most often by force, rapidly converted to labour (Córdoba et al. 2015). In every corner of the vast territories in north-eastern Bolivia covered by Nordenskiöld by boat, the rubber industry had left its mark, and it was precisely the fear of being taken as a slave for the industry that impeded Nordenskiöld from establishing rapport with the populations.

In the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco surrounding the Pilcomayo River, the colonizing situation was very different. At the beginning of the 20th century, no valuable natural resource had yet been discovered there, the river was hardly navigable, and there was no

abundant fertile land. Already in 1902 Nordenskiöld was aware of how the low economic interest in this region made it possible for some Indigenous peoples to live somewhat undisturbed by this river although many migrated seasonally to the sugar mills in Northwestern Argentina, becoming temporary labour for the powerful sugar industry. This milieu with a limited colonizing effort was a more fertile ground for practices of participant observation and temporary co-habitation than the milieus completely transformed by the rubber industry.

Conclusion

Like many other pre-Malinowskian ethnographers, Nordenskiöld practised a type of participant observation, engaging in everyday life and rituals for short periods of time in different villages pertaining to two distinct Indigenous peoples on the banks of the Pilcomayo River. This was done without reflecting upon or systemizing the benefits of this type of practice in terms of scientific method in a published format which other field workers could access and replicate. Nordenskiöld was far from presenting himself as self-conscious ethnographic innovator in the fashion Malinowski did (Stocking 1993). Nor did he point out how these kinds of practices made it possible to understand indigenous life from the perspective of the native. Although interested in indigenous language, he did not consider learning the native language as a cornerstone to ethnographic fieldwork.

This practice of engagement gave insight to different aspects of indigenous life but not necessarily to the point of view of the native. It was accompanied, however, by a fervent collecting of myths told by the elders, beyond the mere collection of indigenous objects. Here we see how what later would be recognized as two very different ways of doing fieldwork – intensive cohabitation and extensive survey approaches – co-existed in the case of Nordenskiöld.

Since he analysed most of the material and observations he gathered in the field through the theoretical lens of diffusionism and cultural history, employing mostly diachronic perspectives, it seems that his participation in tribal practices was less motivated by scientific aspirations than by his own personal preferences and ideological standings, stressing the equal worth of all people (Alvarsson 1992). Having said that, it is also interesting to note how participant observation practices in the field do not necessarily produce synchronic analyses of society. It might be the overarching collecting activity that finally overshadowed Nordenskiöld's original take on participant observation and impeded a more synchronic or holistic perspective from blooming in his research. On the other hand, although his interest lay in doing ethnography among a people living a traditional "primitive" life as similar as possible to what he thought was a pre-Hispanic situation, he also took an interest in Indigenous people and made ethnographic observations of them immersed in colonizing contexts.

As is the case for many other pre-Malinowskian ethnographers, the question of exclusion

from histories, traditions, canons and disciplinary memories is complex and often combined with scattered gestures of inclusion in the form of reassessing contributions (Rosa and Vermeulen 2022). In the case of Nordenskiöld, even if there has been an effort to include Nordenskiöld in broader histories of anthropology, including Latin American traditions, in Sweden he has been systematically excluded from disciplinary memory, as the identity and framework of Swedish social anthropology was, from its “birth” in the 1960s, heavily inspired and influenced by the British and North American traditions (Hannerz 2018). It is possible to think of Nordenskiöld as representing a defeated tradition within the national anthropological tradition to which he pertained both personally and institutionally. Yet he survives and is vindicated in bits and pieces in other anthropological environments dedicated to the study of the geographical regions where he carried out fieldwork or/and to historicizing the discipline from this angle.

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[1] <https://www.varldskulturmuseet.se/arkiv-kalendarium-2022/mobilizing-heritage-in-theory-and-practice/>

[2] Letter from Nordenskiöld to Hernmarck, San Pedro de Jujuy, 3 April 1908, *Hernmarcks brevsamling* at the National Library of Sweden.

[3] Letter from Nordenskiöld to Hernmarck, Stockholm, 25 September 1907, *Hernmarcks brevsamling* at the National Library of Sweden.

[4] Historically referred to as Ashluslay or Chulupí, the Nivaclé People today live on both sides of the Pilcomayo River in the Argentine and Paraguayan Chaco. Their language belongs to the Mataguayo linguistic family.

[5] The Chorote People currently inhabit the triple border area between Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia on the right side of the Pilcomayo River and close to the city of Tartagal, Province of Salta, Argentina. Their language also belongs to the Mataguayo linguistic family, which can be divided into two dialectal groups; the southern Chorotes or *iyojwa'ja* and the northern ones or *iyowujwa* (Siffredi, 1973).