

# When the power relationship is not in favour of the anthropologist: reflections on fieldwork in Gilgit-Baltistan

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**Abstract:** Without doubt, a great deal of fieldwork is monitored or influenced by government or intelligence services; yet, ethnography about such circumstances is rather exceptional. The reason for this, as I understand it, is the power that is attributed to the publication – and through it also to the ethnographer – possibly being harmful, due to the notion that publications can harm the researcher him- or herself, interlocutors or subsequent researchers. But is the researcher really as powerful as such a view proposes? Taking ethnography as a comprehensive project, i.e. comprising both ethnography and an ethnographic process, it should be clear that the ethnographer is often far from being in a position of power, regarding both ethnographic counterparts as well as powerful institutions and bureaucratic organisations. These elements affect not only the lives of the people anthropologists use to study, as Laura Nader (1972) proposed, but the fieldworker as well, by influencing his or her research possibilities and experiences and thus the ethnographic view and output. Examining my fieldwork under surveillance in Gilgit-Baltistan, the main concern of this contribution is to look at such power relations and how they influence the research. Setting the stage with an ethnographic encounter with intelligence officers, the article continues with a short discussion of the challenges of carrying out fieldwork under surveillance, followed by an overview of common surveillance practices in the region where the fieldwork took place. Subsequently, it offers a concise ethnography of fieldwork under surveillance, followed by an analysis of the premises on which the intelligence officers I encountered may have engaged as well as the local and cultural logic behind their engagement. I conclude with the proposition that the researcher is often far from being the one who decides about defining the terms of the research, ethnographic relationships or encounters. *[Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, agency, fieldwork, power, surveillance]*

## Prologue

I was called to the reception room of the house where I had taken lodgings in Gilgit, capital of the region Gilgit-Baltistan in the North of Pakistan, where from 2011 to 2014 I conducted between three and six months of fieldwork every year for a doctoral dissertation in social anthropology on water management in the high mountain desert.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My fieldwork was made possible by the interdisciplinary research network Crossroads Asia, which was generously funded by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research. Permission for fieldwork was kindly granted by the Pakistani Ministry of Interior with grants for research visas and two 'No Objection Certificates' for one year and six months, respectively. I am very grateful to my supervisor, Martin Sökefeld, for his support during and after the fieldwork.

There, Imran (or 'Ali', as he had introduced himself to me during his last visit the previous year)<sup>2</sup> was already sitting on one of the big brown upholstered settees – a short man in his late thirties, with greyed, crop-eared hair and piercing eyes, wearing a black imitation leather jacket over his white shirt and brown trousers. A colleague of his was sitting next to him. Although they never introduced themselves as such, it was evident from their activities – taking my photo with their mobile phones when I went out in the bazaar, tailing me on a motorbike when I visited interlocutors, interrogating and threatening me, my interlocutors and hosts – that Imran/Ali and others were working as inspectors for one of Pakistan's military intelligence services.<sup>3</sup>

I had been called to the reception room by my hosts, without any clear reference as to who was awaiting me; apart from officers, hardly anyone paid me visits. As always, my heart beat fast when I got ready, papers out, head-scarf on, deep breath in. Their visits often stretched a full hour, including the tea that was served in small floral patterned cups accompanied by biscuits as a token of hospitality. These visits would follow the usual pattern of official meetings in Pakistan, first engaging in light conversation about the weather, health or the educational system for the first half hour that the tea needed to be prepared, followed by consumption of said tea and then, for only the last ten to twenty minutes, 'down to business' – in this case, asking me for another set of copies of my documents or for my documentation regarding my research activities.

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Not least, I am deeply grateful to so many for their help, guidance, encouragement and hospitality, as well as the supportive discussions during and after fieldwork in Gilgit, Islamabad and Munich.

<sup>2</sup> While later on I learned from confidants that his name was indeed Imran, he had introduced himself as 'Ali', maybe to live up to the fact that he was working as an intelligence officer or so that I could not make complaints about him to local people, other departments or more senior officers.

Although officers are routinely and regularly transferred every two or three years, a number of them remained posted in Gilgit longer and engaged with me throughout the four years of fieldwork, making the relations with these institutions, to some extent, personal or even obstinate.

<sup>3</sup> Out of some thirty Pakistani intelligence services – commonly referred to as 'the agencies' – the three biggest and most prominent ones are the Intelligence Bureau (IB), Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Military Intelligence (MI). The IB is an internal and counterespionage intelligence service also monitoring politicians and political activists; it performs its operations under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior. The ISI deals with counter-intelligence, foreign and domestic intelligence, while the MI is likewise engaged in counter-intelligence operations and furthermore monitors the activities of army officers (including officers of the ISI). Both operate under the army.

Out of almost two dozen officers with whom I had contact, here I will refer to those officers who had the greatest impact. Besides Inspector Imran/Ali, there were two other officers from the same 'agency', whom I will refer to as 'Major Bilawal' and 'Colonel Zahid'. Like Imran/Ali, most intelligence officers are recruited from 'down-country', i.e. the four provinces of Pakistan, with a majority from the Punjab, but there are also people from Gilgit-Baltistan working for the agencies as both officers and local recruits.

This time, however, it was a rather brief meeting. The ‘agency’ for which Inspector Imran/Ali and his colleague worked had not yet processed the reports on my research activities from the previous year, and therefore the Ministry of Interior (MoI) had not yet been able to issue a second ‘No Objection Certificate’ (NOC) serving as a research permit. With the NOC still pending I was not yet permitted to continue the research, thus, when Inspector Imran/Ali and his colleague came to ask about my recent activities in Gilgit I did not have much to tell them. Hence, after some twenty minutes, the two men put down their cups and gathered their notepads.

“Ok, take care of your health,” Imran/Ali remarked in his rough-and-ready English. “And concerning your hardships,” he continued, “Alama Iqbal says: ‘Oh Eagle! You should not be afraid of resistance or opposition. It is always for you to fly you higher and higher’,” citing the poem perhaps to impress or console me.

After all, Imran/Ali was very well aware of my situation, being stuck halfway through my research.

“Such a complicated system with Pakistan,” he commented further in regard to the difficulties in obtaining the permission to continue the research. “I feel sorry for you. After all, you are only a student [...]. But God has blessed you with courage, determination.”

Facing this kind of confrontation, he continued to explain, he himself, or any other person for that matter, would have already left the area and the research – a remark he repeated whenever he came to check on me throughout the four years of my fieldwork.

## Challenges of fieldwork under surveillance

Certainly, as mine has been, a good deal of fieldwork is monitored or even influenced by government or intelligence services. Nonetheless, ethnography about fieldwork under such circumstances is rather exceptional, and the circumstances and influences of surveillance seem hardly to be discussed; if details ever make it into publications, they are often relegated to footnotes or short paragraphs, or they are hidden in publications or languages inaccessible to the local reader.<sup>4</sup> As some colleagues – not only anthropologists at the Munich department, but also colleagues from other departments and different disciplines – warned me, acknowledging surveillance or interference by government or intelligence services in a public forum should be avoided, because

<sup>4</sup> Exceptions in which government/intelligence surveillance of fieldwork(ers) is reflected upon are, for example, Begley (2009), Verdery (2012) and Thomson (2009, 2013). Verdery (2012:20), in this regard, mentions that out of fear, much research which resulted from fieldwork under surveillance in Romania in the 1970s was published only following a considerable time gap or was not published at all.

writing about such experiences would pose 'security risks', possibly to interlocutors, but, more probably, the researcher herself and, most importantly to their reasoning, regarding subsequent researchers.

But is the researcher really as powerful as my colleagues suggested? Regarding such 'power', my colleagues' attention focused on the representations alone, conceptually separating the research process from the 'scientific output'. However, if we argue that the research process cannot be dissociated from the resultant ethnography, and that research is actually data production rather than data collection, as has been argued in recent decades following the interpretive turn, the picture suddenly looks somewhat different.

Taking ethnography as a comprehensive project, it is clear that the ethnographer is often far from being in a position of power or in a "certain power relationship in favor of the anthropologist", as Laura Nader (1972:289) put it.<sup>5</sup> This is of course not a new insight. Especially recent work from different fields such as intersubjective and autoethnographic approaches as well as feminist writing has paid attention to asymmetrical power relations in fieldwork (e.g. Ellis 2007, Hastrup 2004, Nencel 2005). In postmodern ethnographies fieldwork is knowledge production through interaction, resulting in studies not of actors but of researcher-actor conversations and relations. As, for example, Marcus (2009) reflects, postmodern ethnographies increasingly focus on the modalities and circumstances of the researcher's participation in the field and on learning about a subject, as it emerges in interactions with and reactions to the research. Such knowledge is necessarily contextual and partial, for which in post-traditional ethnographies incompleteness becomes the norm. However, this norm requires that the incompleteness of data is contextualised in the conditions of fieldwork, in order to overcome imminent thinness (ibid.:28f.). This, for example, can be done by detailing "how diverse responses to a *project as it develops* become part of its integral data-sets" (ibid.:31, emphasis added).

The main concern of this article is to look at power relations that manifested in my fieldwork under surveillance and interference from government and intelligence agents. With this, I want to underscore that researchers are really not necessarily the ones who decide about the research project, the terms of research, the encounters or ethnographic relationships, irrespective of whether they have studied up, down or sideways. To acknowledge such circumstances as being part of participation in the field, on the one hand, this invites us to analyse interactions to learn about social and cultural logic that emerges in the interaction, engagement of the officers and explanations from

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<sup>5</sup> In her famous article, Nader of course called for anthropologists to "study up", i.e. to research bureaucratic organisations, powerful institutions or individuals that affect the lives of the people anthropologists study (ibid.:291-3). If we carry the thought through a bit further, bureaucratic organisations, powerful institutions and individuals may well affect the life and research of the fieldworker, too, by regulating possibilities to research and affecting experiences, the ethnographic view and output.

local confidants. On the other hand, it challenges us to understand and analyse the effects surveillance has on fieldwork as well as on data and understanding of the field.

Doubtlessly, fieldwork under surveillance can have vastly different results. In one of the few publications on this issue, Katherine Verdery (2012) reflects about methodological dilemmas stemming from intelligence officers' surveillance and interventions in 1970s socialist Romania. Verdery outlines the fears of unforeseeable consequences regarding both research and publications. She reminds us that "[a]lthough ethnography is possible in trust's absence, our best work rests upon it" (ibid.:21). In situations of "constant undercurrent of mistrust and doubt" the development of trustful relations is very difficult. As she recounts, in her situation trust was undermined not only by the *actual* presence of intelligence officers, but also even by the *possibility* of their presence (ibid.). Nevertheless, surveillance does not necessarily make trustful relationships impossible; for example, Susan Thomson (2009, 2013), in her research on rural post-genocide Rwanda, argues that she was able to use the circumstance of surveillance by government representatives to build a rapport with her (rural) interlocutors.<sup>6</sup> And as Begley (2009) argues after her fieldwork under surveillance in a conflict zone, fieldworkers are often not prepared for the fears, questions and ethical challenges that such environments pose, which applies probably even more so to first-time fieldworkers.

## Ethnography of fieldwork under surveillance

In the following sections I offer a concise ethnography of my fieldwork under surveillance, starting with an overview of common surveillance practices in the region where my fieldwork took place. This is followed by an analysis of the intelligence officers' engagement, seeking to establish reasons for their involvement as well as local and cultural logic.

One question that obviously immediately arises from fieldwork under surveillance is why some are "singled out for suspicion" and others not (cf. Lyon et al. 2012:3). In the case at hand, two aspects seem important. The first broadly pertains to suspicion and surveillance that are grounded in the historical circumstances as well as in security concerns regarding infrastructural mega-projects proposed for the region. My broadcast research proposal, to research water management in the high mountain desert, and my interest in a proposed dam on the border might possibly have *triggered* suspicion and surveillance. The second aspect spans diverse elements that *sustained* suspicion and surveillance, even after I focused on a much less contested topic, namely the water-scape of Gilgit city. Apart from personal overzealousness or struggles for appreciation, the main elements are paternalistic fears about the defiance of local gender boundaries, friction caused by the openness of the ethnographic approach, through both the secu-

<sup>6</sup> Thomson also had to struggle with questions of authority of representation. Yet, as she argues, research invariably involves making representational choices (2009:112).

rity concerns and positivistic research concepts of intelligence officers, and a culture of suspicion in which rumour and gossip easily take the place of missing information.

## Surveillance of and in Gilgit-Baltistan

Pakistan is well known for its extensive and multifaceted surveillance apparatus, which is justified when one looks at the country's history, political friction and geopolitical position. Pakistan, and likewise Gilgit-Baltistan, the mountainous region in the North, with a population of about two million, is home to different intelligence and police 'agencies' monitoring the movements and activities of conspicuous people, such as politicians, political activists, journalists and foreigners.<sup>7</sup>

Concerning Gilgit-Baltistan, suspicion and surveillance are grounded in its geopolitical location, historical circumstances and religious alterity. Touching Afghanistan, China and Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan forms a 'border area', which Pakistani administrators and locals alike believe to be of international geostrategic interest. What's more, Gilgit-Baltistan is considered a part of the former Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir, and thus, too, part of the Kashmir dispute. Therefore, the governance structure of Gilgit-Baltistan is ever-changing but always ambivalent. As a result, the relationship between local people and federal institutions is complicated, too. Most local people identify themselves proudly as Pakistanis, and they refer to the *jang azadi*, the fight for freedom from the rule of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947 and the subsequent voluntary accession to Pakistan. Yet, Gilgit-Baltistan is not included in Pakistan's constitution. Formally, the region is administered by Pakistan but lacks full provincial status.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the majority of Pakistan's population follows Sunni Islam. In contrast, the population of Gilgit-Baltistan splits into three Islamic sects, i.e. Sunni, Shia and Ismaili Islam. As Nosheen Ali (2009, 2013) argues, based on this religious alterity and the geographic and legal marginality, government and army institutions see and render Gilgit-Baltistan's citizens suspect. Faced with continuous suspicion, formal non-inclusion in the Pakistani state, an environment of mistrust, doubt and frequent violent conflicts, the citizens of Gilgit-Baltistan in turn become themselves suspicious of each other, of 'down-country'

<sup>7</sup> Suspicion against foreigners has increased significantly in the past years, especially after two prominent cases of covert American intelligence and military operations in Pakistan became known. One case is that of Raymond Davis, an American who had worked for the United States Army, private security firms and the CIA. The second case is the operation launched by US Special Forces in Abbottabad in 2011, in which they killed Usama Bin Laden – an operation that had not been shared with or sanctioned by the Pakistani government. See also Sökefeld and Strasser, Introduction, this volume.

<sup>8</sup> About the political entanglements of the region see, for example, Ali (2009, 2013), Bouzas (2012), Kreuzmann (2012) and Sökefeld (1997a, 1997b, 2005, 2015).

officers and of strangers (ibid.). Nevertheless, many people I spoke to in Gilgit agreed with the necessity of the agencies, to ensure security. To echo Lyon et al. (2012:7), surveillance practices are ‘normalised’ and accepted as part of the governance process. Nonetheless, specific actions of agency officers, such as harassing people, intervening in local politics and herewith transcending their task to ensure security, are resented – as is the military’s engagement in local and economic affairs.

Regarding the surveillance of foreigners, control lists are screened during the visa application process, and scanning technologies are used at border control. After entering Pakistan, foreigners are monitored, especially outside big cities. In Gilgit-Baltistan, their movement is registered at checkpoints along the main roads, and civil recruits report on foreigners’ activities. In addition, inspectors query locals who talk to or host foreigners. In this way, researchers doing fieldwork in Gilgit-Baltistan are monitored covertly, and so most do not come into direct contact with agency officers. Interestingly, both intelligence officers and Gilgitis share the idea of state security being vulnerable to internal and external threats. Correspondingly, although most Gilgitis are fond of contact with foreigners, many of my interlocutors appreciated the suspicion of intelligence agencies against foreigners; many ‘corroborated’ suspicion as being apposite with anecdotes or comments about ‘spying’ foreigners and foreign researchers.<sup>9</sup> However, at times, caution gives way to conspiracy theories, such as the story a hotel employee in Gilgit told me illustrates. While earlier intelligence officers had always gone in person to collect information about all hotel guests, from 2013 onwards they would only demand information about female guests by means of a personal visit; data on male visitors were collected simply by telephone. When the hotel employees asked about the reason for this change, the inspectors told them that they had recently seen the Hollywood film *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) – a film that portrays a female CIA agent as the major protagonist involved in the identification of and raid on Usama Bin Laden in Abbottabad in 2011. They explained their recent focus on women, following the movie’s ‘cue’ that women could also work as intelligence agents. While the idea that agency officers cited a Hollywood movie as the basis for their surveillance strategy first seemed somewhat awkward, their understanding of the movie after all matches prevalent apprehensiveness about spies and unrestricted women, as I will argue later.

## Raising suspicion

In autumn 2011, I began my fieldwork in Gilgit with what I believed to be a ‘standard’ initial exploration, seeking out different options on what to focus on in the research,

<sup>9</sup> Even if people in Gilgit were probably not aware of this, this notion is of course not farfetched. After all, anthropology, too, has a controversial history of assisting colonial states, and researchers, including anthropologists, have been engaging in intelligence work and counterinsurgency, as, for example, Sökefeld and Strasser (Introduction, this volume) note.

talking to staff of organisations working in the region and visiting different districts within Gilgit-Baltistan. Through a series of introductions I met a young man from Hunza, an area in the north of Gilgit-Baltistan, who introduced me, among others, to a cousin of his, a bureaucrat working in the Gilgit Home Department. While he introduced us so that the bureaucrat might be of help should I get into any kind of trouble, the connection had the opposite effect.<sup>10</sup> Sitting in the bureaucrat's office and explaining my proposed research, he phoned the major intelligence agencies asking them for documents about me, informing them about my planned research and – as I believe – making them sufficiently suspicious. I had taken the research visa sanctioned by the MoI as a token that there was no objection to my research and that I could start with confidence. Now, the bureaucrat claimed that I needed not only the research visa and the support letter from the MoI, but also an NOC. However, there is no official policy concerning foreign researchers' visas, prerequisites, rules or concerned authority; their requests for research permits are handled within the MoI. Therefore, foreign researchers occupy an unspecified position in Pakistan, and so there are a number of voids which in turn open up various uncertainties for researchers, different bureaucrats and officers. Thus, for example, the bureaucrat at the Gilgit Home Department and the intelligence agencies demanded an NOC for research in Gilgit-Baltistan, even though there seemed to be no corresponding official policy – or at least none that would have been public.

Following my visit to the bureaucrat's office, agency officers began a campaign of overt engagement. They interrogated, pressurised and threatened my hosts and interlocutors about my research. Malicious rumours were spread, for example inventing that I had spied on geological resources used in international warfare or suggesting that as a woman I might seduce men, in order to gain classified information. During a visit to Chilas, a town in the south of Gilgit, close to a site for a planned mega-dam, police appeared and took me to the district's Assistant Commissioner, who ordered me to return to Gilgit, incidentally remarking that he had got this instruction from the Home Department, where the aforementioned bureaucrat was working. On my return to Gilgit, the bureaucrat again pointed to the necessity of an NOC and made me apply for it through the Home Department, i.e. himself. Three weeks later he personally rejected my application, contending that my research proposal was not sound and did not state details about the planned research.

I spent one month in Islamabad, and with the same papers I again applied for an NOC directly from the MoI, with the help of an Islamabad university professor, be-

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<sup>10</sup> I elaborate on this point in Grieser (2014) in more detail, including the malicious rumours that the bureaucrat spread and the underlying principles behind doing so. Mostly he argued that I had behaved inappropriately and dubiously. For example, he pointed out that I would even talk to children, apparently something that a researcher, as he imagined, would not do. Suggestively he even spread rumours that I had 'kept company' with the chief executive of the area as well as with a high-ranking intelligence officer, namely Colonel Zahid.



fore eventually returning home to Germany. After three months, in March 2012, the MoI issued a research NOC on top of the previously sanctioned documents. Since I expected that disruptions were bound to stop once I had the NOC – as a number of inspectors had promised –, I wanted to continue the research in Gilgit-Baltistan. Nevertheless, the interference of the intelligence officers continued during the following periods of fieldwork.

## Restrictions

Equipped with the NOC I returned to Gilgit in April 2012. Only four days after my arrival a curfew was imposed on the city following a series of violent clashes between members of the Sunni and Shia sects of Gilgit-Baltistan.<sup>11</sup> Nearing the end of four weeks of curfew I was approached by an officer, who inquired about my stay in Gilgit. One hour after this contact a black jeep drove up to my quarters, with an officer requesting me to come along to his superiors. There, I was ushered into a large, wood-panelled room, lavishly furnished with settees, two massive desks, numerous phones, a huge flat screen TV with running news and a Persian carpet on the marble floor. Sitting behind his desks was Colonel Zahid, who asked me to explain myself – a task at which I performed rather badly; I was tense because of anxiety, repeatedly interrupted by phone calls the colonel had to take and because of his questions and spiteful remarks, such as that I had ‘wiggled’ my way through my last stay. Despite his apparent disapproval the colonel reluctantly conceded that I would be allowed to do my research, if I abode by their conditions, namely that I should get my activities vetted by Gilgit’s university and his officers, obtain his permission to move in and out of the city and limit my contact with local families. Furthermore, he had summoned a representative of the university and fixed an appointment for the next day to assess my research plan.

On the next day, I met the representative of the university, together with a lecturer and a professor who had been summoned as ‘liaison officers’. Coming from the science faculty they were critical of ethnographic methods but nevertheless supportive. Suddenly an officer, who later introduced himself as a major and whom I will refer to as ‘Major Bilawal’, stormed in and, at the drop of a hat, started to shout at me: I would have to stop my ‘roaming around’, and each day, before leaving the house, I would have to inform them exactly where I wanted to go, whom I intended to visit and for what purpose. In the course of his monologue he forbade me to eat in restaurants, access internet cafés, be out after nightfall, venture into natural surroundings, meet persons for ‘private purposes’, talk to people for research purposes without approval or talk to

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<sup>11</sup> Since the 1970s, sectarian awareness and (violent) conflicts have increased in Gilgit-Baltistan. Many locals attribute the growing antagonism and conflicts between the sects to stipulations by external actors; see, e.g., Ali (2009), Grieser and Sökefeld (2015) and Sökefeld (1997a).

government employees. On top, he obliged me to list my activities and produce plans for the upcoming weeks. They would monitor me very well, he snarled, and should I make a single mistake I would be expelled from the country. After all – as later the colonel also underscored – they made the rules, and if I did not stick to these rules I would have to bear the consequences. At the end of the two days, I was not only timid but devastated.

Since this appointment had taken place during curfew hours, the vice chancellor (VC) of the university had not been available to sanction the university's inclusion in the arrangement. When I met her later, it became apparent that the VC was not eager to support a PhD student who had been sent by an intelligence agency. She accused me of 'using them as tissue paper' and declared that my research proposal did not meet the standards of a doctoral proposal, since I had not specified my sampling methods, used the 'wrong' citation style, i.e. the one used in anthropology and not that of her own discipline, and had not included her name on the cover page. Four more weeks went by until the VC consented to the arrangement the colonel had ordered. She finally approved of my proposal and appointed a social scientist as a liaison officer. However, she kept refusing to approve my biweekly plans, stating that I should give names and addresses of all interlocutors and exact time schedules for each day. Because I found this demand impossible, I contacted Colonel Zahid. The colonel himself did not seem too concerned with the details of my documents, but he was sceptical about why I wanted to contact all these 'common people' at all – what, he asked, would any common man know about urban water distribution? However, paradoxically, he also barred me from contacting 'experts', such as employees of the government's Water and Sanitation Authority or the Public Works Department, as well as employees of other organisations working on water supply. Furthermore, instead of doing research in different places I was to select a precise research location; after all, as he maintained, research would always be done in one specific area. Finally, the university liaison officer was called in to discuss the basics of ethnographic research and to suggest to whom I may – or may not – talk.

## **Working with/for the intelligence officers**

Finally I took up the interviews on the terms set by the officers. More or less diligently I made plans about which persons I wanted to contact and subsequently listed whom I had actually managed to meet, beginning with interviewing neighbours and the extended family networks of my hosts and research assistants, which, as it turned out, made the officers doubtful about how I could actually know all these people.<sup>12</sup> On one

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<sup>12</sup> Already, at our first encounter, the colonel had accused me of having made 'too many' friends during my first stay.

occasion the colonel sent an inspector, who interrupted an interview, introduced himself as my driver, took part in the conversation and interrogated my interlocutor after I had left. From some of the colonel's later comments I gather that they also tapped my phone and emails. Still, all officers kept on promising smooth fieldwork, provided that I adhered to their instructions.

Moreover, though, the officers' interference effectively provoked self-surveillance and self-censoring. During interviews, for instance, I was often unable to talk freely about my research or to ask questions. I made efforts to appear modest, harmless and 'apolitical', so much so that at one point my two research assistants<sup>13</sup> independently criticised me for not posing good and critical questions. I felt alienated, insecure and uncertain about how to proceed in order not to cause trouble for anyone else such as my hosts, my research assistants or the university liaison officer. The surveillance officers' threats created an environment in which collaboration seemed to be the only way to continue research and to prove I was indeed a legitimate researcher. I thus continued in the same geographic area and field of interest and tried to proceed as far as possible according to the officers' instructions.

Only during a visit from Inspector Imran/Ali, towards the end of the field stay, did I learn from his remarks that their surveillance had not been immediate or comprehensive at all. Flipping through my reports and lists of interlocutors, he expressed his approval that I had cooperated so well and did not further complicate their duty. But – obviously forgetting that I was able to understand Urdu – he then mumbled to his colleague that they should have followed up on my activities on a daily basis rather than just collecting my lists. For months, they had just made me list interlocutors instead of watching me themselves, as they had done in the beginning.<sup>14</sup>

## Permit demands and unexpected freedom

When I applied for another NOC, to continue research the next year, I was cleared by all agencies except the one that had intervened the previous year. Although there were no negative reports on me, as a retired army officer remarked, the officers at this agency ignored all ten summons made by the MoI to issue a report on my previous fieldwork, which was needed to issue another NOC. Thus, during my fieldtrip in spring 2013, I spent most of the time waiting for the NOC: the first four weeks in Islamabad, where

<sup>13</sup> Two young university graduates, who were between jobs.

<sup>14</sup> Paradoxically, my self-documentation was a form of 'outsourcing' of surveillance which apparently relied on trust, either in my honesty or in their ability to create an environment of intimidation that would force me to comply. Realising that their surveillance was not as comprehensive as it could have been, I regretted that I had taken on all these efforts and that I had submitted to their restrictions and limited myself so assiduously.

an MoI section officer was waiting for the missing report, and another six weeks in Gilgit, where I asked for an 'Interim NOC' from the regional administration, as had been granted a few weeks earlier to a colleague of mine. Without the NOC I was not officially allowed to continue research, and therefore I mostly just revisited people I knew from the previous year. Even though officers haphazardly talked to some of the people I visited and regularly paid visits to me, my actions were not objected to. Hence, apart from my apprehensiveness related to the pending NOC applications, I suddenly experienced an unknown freedom: freedom from the obligation of making plans and schedules and freedom from so much contact with officers.

Still hoping for a permit, I met the head of the regional administration, in order to plead for the Interim NOC, and in fact he directed the Home Department to issue it there and then. There, however, the task was directed to the bureaucrat with whom my troubles had started. Again, Colonel Zahid was involved, and he charged me of having behaved suspiciously. As a result, the issuing of the Interim NOC was denied and it was clear that I had to leave Gilgit. I returned to Islamabad and soon thereafter to Germany, deciding that I should write my dissertation on the basis of the data I had collected to that point, even if this meant I would have to go for a rather 'thin' description.

However, based on the application originally submitted in Islamabad, in fall the MoI finally issued another research NOC for six months, for me and colleagues of mine. With this NOC I returned to Gilgit in the spring of 2014 for another three months of fieldwork. By that time, Colonel Zahid had finally been transferred and the new colonel allowed me to continue research freely, setting only the condition that I find accommodation in a hotel and making it known to me that I should not use public transportation. Imran/Ali, who was also on the verge of being transferred, was introducing a new inspector to his job. Twice he called on me at the hotel, recollecting how scared I had appeared to him in the beginning. For some weeks, the new inspector and other officers tried to build up a similar state of anxiety, telephoning me round-the-clock, sitting on the hotel's central lawn for many hours, repeatedly demanding to talk to me and pressing me to introduce my colleague to them, who at that time was also staying in Gilgit but had done her best to stay out of sight and out of reach of the officers. This time, however, a confidant's relative managed to put an end to this harassment by informing an agency superior in Islamabad about the inspectors' behaviour.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, surveillance mostly shifted to covert monitoring.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> As it turned out, some of the officers pressurising me, such as the one that Imran/Ali had introduced to the job, were not even charged with monitoring foreigners but local politicians and political activists.

<sup>16</sup> Direct contact was reduced, but I learned later on that I was still monitored. One intelligence agency officer introduced himself to me at one point, informed me that he had been monitoring me for a long time and then again disappeared from my view. In addition, an officer of another agency had taken lodgings in a room opposite mine and had also monitored me, as a confidant who was related to the hotel owner later told me.

Despite the relaxed situation, nearing the end of my fieldwork I was asked by the regional administration to leave Gilgit immediately. Major Bilawal – who had bawled me out at the university the previous year – had filed a complaint claiming that the NOC had expired. While I had to leave the day after, my colleague, who had entered Pakistan and Gilgit at the same time and on the same NOC, was neither contacted nor asked to leave.

## Analysis of the officers' engagement and the fieldwork under surveillance

Despite gaining official permission to carry out research, which the federal ministry had granted through the research visas and NOCs, (military) intelligence officers, time and again, referred to their own and ad hoc ultimate authority on such matters. At times they discredited the permits that I had obtained from civilian officials, at times they ignored requests of the federal ministry, and thus undermined their bureaucratic efforts, and at times they decided how to read or execute documents.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, the pervasive element of uncertainty and insecurity resurfaced as a dominant force, both for me *and* for the officers.<sup>18</sup> For my part, I was being cast in a context in which I felt unsafe and insecure, in which the breaking of rules was threatened to be punished but in which the rules were, by and large, being made, or at least conveyed, situationally. After all, as the major and the colonel had declared, *they made the rules* and I would have to bear the consequences if I infringed *their* rules. The officers, on the other hand, were apprehensive of spies, public disorder and foreign intrusion or interference. All officers justified their engagement with reference to the safety they were bound to provide, even though those of different ranks argued in line with different objects of safety. The inspectors especially, i.e. lower duty officers, argued that they were responsible for *my* safety, whilst conversely Colonel Zahid emphasised that they had to ensure the security of the *country*. He justified their interference with reference to the NOC from the MoI, which routinely conferred to his agency the 'mandate' for supervision.

<sup>17</sup> Bhan (2014) argues from a similar vantage point that such cases disclose the "arbitrary nature of the military's authority on the borders, and also the fragile relationship between the civil state and the military" (ibid.:23). At the same time, individuals like the bureaucrat – who had repeatedly involved the intelligence agencies and thus had equally undermined the federal ministry and the regional administrator's efforts – apparently transcend this gap between military and bureaucracy, probably when collaboration may promise benefits or satisfaction. The bureaucrat, for example, might have attempted to secure or bolster his position in the regional administration or acted out the affront that I did not centre my research or residence according to his expectations.

<sup>18</sup> As far as I know, my interlocutors were contacted only rarely. Pressure was exerted mostly on my hosts, confidants, with whom I had contact beyond a singular interview, and me.

Nonetheless, while the agency officers' justifications meandered between measures for my safety and measures for their country's security, their activities rather seemed to aim at re-establishing order in terms of cultural logic and local social practices, which I apparently transcended.

The most significant aspect which determined the officers' reactions to me was gender.<sup>19</sup> Many people to whom I talked were puzzled that I was a young woman doing research on my own. It was also the main argument my confidants referred to when they tried to make sense of the overt surveillance that most considered inappropriate and against the agencies' mandate. They reasoned that this circumstance, and the sexual frustrations of Pakistani men/officers, made me susceptible to the interventions. As I can deduce from rumours and conversations, for the officers my gender and the possible reactions of men towards me seemed to pose a double threat: one to me as a single woman who might be assaulted and also to public security, which might be undermined by an uncontrollable female. Correspondingly, the restrictions imposed on me by the intelligence officers seemed to aim at both monitoring the foreigner *and* controlling the female, an assumption that may explain a number of paternalistic restrictions like prohibiting me from being out after nightfall or meeting persons for 'private purposes' etc. Their restrictions paralleled the constraints that most Pakistani women face in their daily lives – constraints designed to preserve *pardah* and thus the women's and their family's honor, as well as public morality. Especially in the beginning, the officers made it a point to curtail close contact with people or families in Gilgit, just as, for example, university security staff made it a point to curtail contact with male lecturers.

On the basis of the agency officers' involvement and my own aspirations to live up to local expectations of 'proper' behaviour for women, I became increasingly reserved, demure and casual, as well as apolitical, in order to avoid more suspicion despite the adverse effects on my work process. And yet this push towards informality is one that is related not only to security concerns, but also to – sometimes implicit, sometimes made explicit – social and cultural norms for women. Reading Katrin Gratz's (2006) ethnography on women's lives in Gilgit, some similarities are striking.<sup>20</sup> In both cases female ethnographers doing fieldwork in Gilgit were expected to confine themselves

<sup>19</sup> My being a woman was given much more importance than I or my supervising professor, and even people in Gilgit, had anticipated. Apparently the conception that female researchers are rendered 'genderless' in '*pardah* societies', i.e. societies in which the realms of women and men are rather strictly assigned, is widespread. Yet, it may be a misapprehension to assume that the intentional or unintentional defiance of local gender boundaries would render foreign women 'genderless', as I discuss elsewhere (Grieser 2014). Correspondingly, I examine the ambiguous status and hypersexuality attributed to single foreign women in Gilgit and the influence gender had on the fieldwork in Gilgit.

<sup>20</sup> When Gratz approached women for interviews, she was repeatedly rebuffed. Since the women felt uneasy and therefore unable or unwilling to participate in conversations that they understood as 'interviews', Gratz resorted to participation, observation and natural conversations; she too became increasingly 'casual'.

to what is equated with the realm of women, i.e. the informal and the non-political. Driving forces in Gratz's case were her local female interlocutors, in my case the officers and in both cases aspirations to fit in. Nevertheless, regarding our different topics this meant a very different outcome regarding our methods, in that while for Gratz this resulted in mostly participant observation, for me close observation and participation were largely impossible. Instead, I had to resort to what the officers expected, namely detached and topically limited conversations.

In addition, the intelligence officers apparently were not comfortable with the ambiguity inherent in the 'open' ethnographic approach. Although I was, after all, allowed to do my research, disapproval, suspicion and attempts to control my work process were strong. The idea of 'natural conversation' as a research tool appeared absurd to the officers (and some interlocutors), who apparently expected me to unpack a ready-made questionnaire for 'expert interviews'. To them, therefore, common ethnographic approaches such as spending time with 'common people', 'hanging around', sauntering through neighbourhoods or establishing 'meaningful relationships'<sup>21</sup> were apparently deemed as highly ominous, suspect and – especially for a woman – inappropriate and potentially dangerous. The officers seemed to be wary of an ethnographic approach departing from the idea that the ethnographer has to strive to be free and open regarding what to do next, where to go, whom to talk to and what to focus on, and to be to some extent non-committal and not preassigned. Against the officers' positivistic understanding of science and their clear preference for standardised methods and theory-led hypothesis testing, I repeatedly had to justify the open nature of ethnographic fieldwork. The usefulness and legitimacy of my approach thus had to be confirmed and explained by the university liaison officer.

Lastly, the officers' interventions were connected with a social environment in which loyalties are always doubted and where rumours and gossip easily undermine trust.<sup>22</sup> All along, local confidants had warned me not to trust people and not to give away too much about my research. All were of the opinion that my initial openness about my research had made me an easy target for the intelligence officers, and all had warned me of 'other' people, although hardly anyone was able or willing to substantiate their admonitions. Therefore, initially, I took these warnings as reflecting general stereotypes or antipathies which I, as an 'outsider', could easily overcome. Only with the passage of time did some of my confidants specify their warnings and inform me that, for example, the bureaucrat was spreading malicious rumours about me. Based on such information I slowly discontinued contact with a number of people. For many months, I was very alert and suspicious of almost everyone: of people I had known for a long time as well as new acquaintances, including people I interviewed. I developed

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<sup>21</sup> E.g. Bornstein describes "meaningful relationships" as relationships that "overflow the boundaries of [the] research" (2007:485).

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Varley (2008) on the difficulty of navigating trust and proving loyalties in the context of sectarian and familial tensions in Gilgit.

practices and attitudes of mistrust very similar to those nourished and practiced by the people around me.<sup>23</sup>

As also in many cases of surveillance studies, the criteria, depth and nature of surveillance, as well as the criteria or rules as to whom and why some and not others are singled out for suspicion, remain to a certain extent opaque. However, we can make out some major factors through which the standard covert monitoring of me as a foreigner turned into surveillance and direct contact. Concerns regarding safety and security are as significant as are different ideas about the 'appropriate' sphere of women, diverging understandings of science and research approaches, as well as personal vested interests of different officers and the bureaucrat. Ambiguous, non-committal or uncontrolled people are difficult to tolerate in a place where national and ultimately also personal security is understood to be unsafe and uncertain; thus, the efforts of the officers were clearly aimed at the (re)production of the local order.<sup>24</sup> As a result, I could not just go with the flow of events as I had originally envisioned. Following up the unexpected, as Behar (2003) or Okely (2012) propose, for instance, in my case applied less to the lifeworlds or expectations of my local interlocutors and more to going with the flow by acknowledging the intelligence officers' interventions, even if this often made me feel like I was wasting precious time and, as Begley (2009) also writes, failing as an anthropologist.

With the restrictions they set for me, the officers effectively became 'gatekeepers' in the classical sense, denying access to persons, public spaces, public events and organisations. During the second and longest of the four fieldtrips I had to prepare biweekly interview plans that robbed me of immediate control over my own movement and activities. And the officers profoundly influenced the collection, or rather production, of data, not least by also affecting my emotional state. Trustful relations were not impossible, but they were difficult to achieve – not least also due to growing fears and mistrust on my side. I felt insecure and unsafe. Especially during the first two fieldtrips I felt haunted and observed, and during all of them I was afraid that I might unexpectedly be forced to leave and that my physical safety was not guaranteed – a notion that was reinforced later on by the warning of one host that it would be advisable that I do not keep liquids in my room unattended, so that no one could attempt to drug or poison me.

From analysing accounts of fieldwork under surveillance we can understand that challenges in fieldwork under surveillance can become very intense. In my case, the surveillance and interventions of agency officers had a whole range of effects. In essence, it yielded methodological and personal challenges, prevented me from immersing fully in the proposed research about water resources management and influenced my understanding of the field and my conceptualisation of the resulting ethnography.

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<sup>23</sup> This does not mean that I became completely distrusting or unsocial; for instance, my husband and I met during fieldwork and we got married after I had concluded the fieldwork.

<sup>24</sup> Surveillance studies treat surveillance as a "fundamental social-ordering process" (Lyot et al. 2012:1).



As a result, I ended up with a dataset that was very different from what I had expected and led me to conceptualise my findings via the concepts of insecurity and uncertainty. However, to a great extent, fieldwork under surveillance poses the same challenges as any fieldwork does. Methodologically, there are challenges in gaining access, establishing a rapport in ethnographic relationships, enduring and making sense of fieldwork. Later, there are representational choices, in that we have to test what we write “against our personal comfort levels” (Varley 2008:152), and of course it is imperative to safeguard interlocutors as far as possible.

The restrictions that the officers imposed and the self-restrictions they incited almost prevented or perverted the ethnographic process. Yet, fear of unforeseeable negative consequences made me surrender to their perpetually changing rule, while constant promises of smooth fieldwork kept me going. Submitting to their rules allowed me to stay in Gilgit, to carry out fieldwork and return to Gilgit time and again despite suspicion on all sides. And it allowed me to obtain a number of different but related datasets – data on small-town water management, urbanisation, sectarianisation and surveillance in fieldwork –, even if the efficiency of data collection/production and the density of the data I was able to acquire were affected by multiple shifts in the fieldwork and the limitations that the agencies imposed.

## Conclusion

To date, ethnographic contributions to fieldwork under surveillance are rare. Yet, ethnography is not just a publication of detached findings but a process resulting in the publication of emerging insights. Therefore, for a thorough understanding it is necessary to contextualise the circumstances of the research as they emerge during fieldwork and to analyse decisive contexts, in order to assure the reader about how the author arrived at the resultant text, which is, as I believe, true even in the face of surveillance.

Regarding my fieldwork in Gilgit-Baltistan, the surveillance and interventions of the intelligence services represented a decisive feature in determining ethnographic process and ethnography. They unsettled both the common dyad of the researcher and her counterparts as well as the position of power that the researcher supposedly occupies regarding the terms of research, the encounters themselves and/or ethnographic relationships. As I suggested at the beginning of this article, bureaucratic organisations, powerful institutions or individuals influence the ethnographic research process and resulting ethnography experiences, as do our own aspirations to fit in and to not rock the boat – in my case manifesting in not only methodological and representational, but also very personal challenges: fears, restrictions and reservation in interactions, questions of how to navigate expectations so as to remain inoffensive but do the work, and fears and feelings about being unsafe and insecure. This encourages thinking about ethnographers and the practice of ethnography in terms of both power and powerless-

ness. Of course, I was not rendered completely powerless or fully externally controlled, but going with the flow, paying attention to the unexpected and relinquishing one's will, as, for example, Behar (2003:16) advises for ethnographic research, may take a totally different, utterly unexpected and unwanted shape.

Although some academic colleagues suggested that a discussion of the circumstances surrounding the surveillance and interference of intelligence services should not be revealed, I conceptualise it as an essential part of the emerging ethnography. However, I also take it as a reminder that questions of power are not only connected with publications, but they also lie in the day-to-day business and ethnographic relationships that develop during fieldwork – situations in which the power differential is not necessarily in favour of the ethnographer, irrespective of whether they study up, down or sideways.

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