



HAL
open science

Field methodology and food studies in Pacific islands. From ethnographic to quantitative methods

Christophe Serra-Mallol

► **To cite this version:**

Christophe Serra-Mallol. Field methodology and food studies in Pacific islands. From ethnographic to quantitative methods. 5th Asia Euro Conference “ Towards an International Network for Studying Food Habits ”, Association Internationale Des Sociologues De Langue Française (AISLF), May 2014, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. hal-04049686

HAL Id: hal-04049686

<https://hal.science/hal-04049686v1>

Submitted on 28 Mar 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**5th Asia Euro Conference /
Association Internationale Des Sociologues De Langue Française (AISLF)**

« Towards an International Network for Studying Food Habits »

**« Field methodology and food studies in Pacific islands. From ethnographic
to quantitative methods. »**

Christophe SERRA-MALLOL

Associate Professor, Sociology and Social & Cultural Anthropology

Université de Toulouse 2 Le Mirail, Toulouse (France) - CERTOP UMR 5044

CNRS

Key words: Food studies, Fieldwork, Methodology, Pacific islands, French Polynesia

Ethnographic methods permit to catch the system of meanings in the lives of a cultural and social group, using empirical data on societies and cultures. It appears very useful to build or improve a quantitative questionnaire, but also to analyse these data. Ethnography is not only used by anthropologists, but also in some social sciences, in sociology particularly. From Broslinaw Malinowski ethnography needs fieldwork, staying several months or years participating and learning from the social and cultural group chosen, studying the social groups from the point of view of the subject.

Nowadays, sociology and social & cultural anthropology use ethnographic methods, which means a holistic study of the social groups, from the point of view of the subject. Methods of data collection are various : one-to-one or collective interviews, participant observations, fields notes, photo, video or sound recording...

Ethnographic methods constitute the core of anthropological fieldwork, but it may offer a complementary way of collecting and understanding data. In order to make a quantitative field and the questionnaire applied to real practices and meanings, ethnographic methods are necessary before any quantitative field of any importance, and useful during the quantitative field, as feedback knowledge and tools improvement.

Food is complex and multidimensional object. Its study appeals multiple methods of investigation, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, from ethnographic approaches (one-to-one and collective interviews, "life interviews", participant or not observations...), to qualitative (punctual interviews, focus groups...) and quantitative (using statistical methods as...) methods. It allows cross-evaluation of collected datas, and improvement of its fiabiliy.

We use these combined methodological approaches in some fields. A recent have been conducted between 2009 and 2011 in Society Islands (Tahiti, Moorea, Raiatea) and during seven months in 2010-2011 in Rapa island (Austral archipelago), one of the most isolated Pacific island. The aim of this field was to understand both Tahitian and rapa food system (from food production to consumption), its representations, and the link of subjective well-being¹.

We use different data collection methods. The main method was participant observations of daily activities and events: food production (including fishing, hunting, gardening, harvesting...) and exchanges and cooked or not food preparations. One-to-one and collective interviews have been used with more than 15 years old residents, adding up more than 80 persons interviewed. A quantitative survey has concerned 157 persons (71% of more than 15 years old Rapa residents), and 120 rapa people living in Tahiti and Moorea (Society islands).

These results are compared to a precedent results published in 2010 about Tahitian (Society Islands). Two fields are compared: one in a rural and isolated island (Rapa) where property is collective, and a urban one (Tahiti).

Using at the same time sociological and ethnological tools and methods, mixing and combining its respective data, analyse the whole in a holistic and interactionist way, have many advantages.

It completes and adjusts official data from reality met during the fieldwork: the difference between food declared during an interview and food really eaten (cognitive dissonance), what kind of food is forgotten or under-valued according to cultural meanings, differences between food bought and food consumed, importance of gifts and exchanges especially in rural and traditional areas, various and undervalued occasions of food grasp...

It highlights well-known sensibility of food matters within stranger people, the material and daily question of purity and danger, food matters needs security and confidence, and the signification seen in the way of acting. Observer influence is positive here : it may help become visible and sensitive some normative or symbolic signification. It allows to give evidence to emotions and thrills linked to actions, culturally constructed (Appadurai 2005 : 216).

It may also show material consequences of social and unconscious norms, for instance the influence of self-categories ("meal", "family", "work"...) during elaboration of questions, which may be differently perceived by answerers. The meaning of answers becomes clear and significant, which may help different phases of the research: elaborate the questions and analyse the answers, and to put them in global view and knowledge of the social group.

¹ This work « Qualirapa » has been granted by Agence nationale de la Recherche (ANR, French public research council).

An ethnographic approach, because of the time necessary to the fieldwork, takes time. It shows difference between occasional questionnaire and longitudinal approach living with the people observed: it permits to minimize observer influences and improve the knowledge of acting “really”. It may also show that some emotion or way of acting as socially un-acceptable (“tense”), or misunderstood (“work”, “leisure”, “individual or active leisure”...).

Reflexivity, is a way for the researcher to try to understand the influences his involvement in the group create, as to minimize internal and external biases. The implication of interviewer bias, being a male, white, French researcher (France being clearly perceived as the land of Gastronomy) with continuous risks of under-evaluating French food in declarative answers or way to cook or eat during observer stay, is evident.

The process of globalisation, and the growing and general flow of money, item, people, information and ideas induces a phenomenon where spatiality and temporality are ambivalent : the “local” is un-territorialized, and universal time and intimal time are lived together. It gives interest to the study of ways of thinking temporality and spatial relations. Reflexivity is also often by the world, by relationships across the community, the cultural group or social class, it belongs also to people observed, and must be taken in account in each fieldwork or its analyse.

Globalization, human migrations and information flows from various medias (television, movie, internet...) and its recent acceleration, has created a modification of mental representations and concrete practices. Local representation of what is Tahitian or what is Rapa is widely influenced by what others, insiders (migrants) or outsiders (tourists or employers), would think of it, and what identity one want to build through or within external looks.

Food can be read as a point of convergence of global and local influences. These influences, and its interactions, must be taken in consideration to understand the way of thinking and living of people from a given social and cultural group. Practices and representations, but also values and beliefs, subjective worldview and well-being, are taken in interest in a “holistic” and collaborative ethnographic pool of methods.

An ethnographic approach allows researchers to integrate a social agent in its context, social and cultural nearness and global (international national or regional) influences. That approach permit also social researchers to reach a daily and concrete reality, collective and intimal, that statistical data won't give : locally used categories, expressions and way of thinking, cultural background which constitute the basement of expressions and actions.

Un monde globalise où les individus et les groupes produisent localement de l'ethnicité et du sens.

Les groupes produisent du sens même de façon déterritorialisés, grâce à la multiplication des échanges permis à la fois par les migrations et par l'accélération des flux d'information : ils utilisent l'imaginaire pour reconstruire un "local" déterritorialisé

Le rôle de l'ethnographie aujourd'hui consiste à savoir quelle est la nature du local en tant qu'expérience vécue dans un monde globalisé et déterritorialisé (APP 96)

Mieux comprendre les conditions sociales, historiques et culturelles dans lesquelles se déroulent les modes actuels de consommation : l'inculcation du plaisir de l'éphémère au cœur du dressage du consommateur moderne (App 138)

HG :

Décisions de l'enquêteur ("règles de codage") quant à la manière dont les réponses effectives des personnes interrogées sont considérées comme des "réponses aux questions" : vague et imprécise "future état des choses possibles" car impose une pré-codification et une analyse "au moment où ils se présentent" (177-178)

De la même façon, quand au cours d'un entretien ouvert, l'enquêteur gère le déroulement de l'entretien de manière à ce que l'entretien ne se dirige pas dans des dimensions inconnues et non souhaitées : il le fait non de façon délibérée et calculée mais pour satisfaire leurs espoirs et leurs attentes quant aux réponses attendues (178-179 et Robert K. Merton et Patricia Kendall, 1946, "The Focused interview", *American Journal of Sociology*, 51, 541-557).

Donner du sens rétrospectivement à des actions réalisées avant l'analyse de l'entretien, et détermine ensuite comme "but de l'action" (179) : sur la rationalité pré-conçue de l'enquêteur, et sur ses conduites jugées donc irrationnelles ou a-rationnelles.

Les résultats proposés comme fondement pour des inférences et des enquêtes ultérieures (185) : id. En anthropologie

References :

Appadurai A., 2005 [1996], *Après le colonialisme. Les conséquences culturelles de la globalisation*. Paris, Payot & Rivages (Modernity at large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization, University of Minnesota Press)

Garfinkel H., 2007 [1967], *Recherches en ethnométhodologie*, Paris, PUF (Studies in Ethnomethodology, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall)

Malinowski B., 1963, *Les Argonautes du Pacifique occidental*, Paris, Gallimard