

## Social Roles in the Ethnographic Fieldwork

*Desalegn Amsalu*

*Assistant Professor of Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia*

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the concept of social roles in ethnographic fieldwork, its place in the global literature discussing qualitative research methods, and its application in the Ethiopian ethnographic fieldwork. I discuss that social roles are all about seeing one's role and status, in this case, as researchers, in the social structure of a society or community we do the ethnographic research. Based on my own experience and the experience of other ethnographers elsewhere, I argue that a conscious use of our social roles is a *sin qua non* for successful ethnographic fieldwork. However, this concept has been given less emphasis in the literature of qualitative research methods. Social roles in the ethnographic fieldwork are especially less known in the Ethiopian ethnographic research experience.

**Keywords:** social roles, ethnography, fieldwork, Ethiopia

### 1. Introduction

At any level (complex or simple; macro, meso, or micro) and no matter how much dynamic or static it may be, a society's or a community's social or cultural system is composed of a social or cultural structure. In turn, the structure constitutes statuses and roles. People occupy status but play a role (Macionis 2017). For example, women who hold the social or cultural status of "mother" are expected to act or not act in particular ways- play a role- in line with expectations of motherhood from a given society or culture unlike, women who are not married at all. To give more examples, to be a teacher, doctor, priest or a ritual leader is to occupy social or cultural status so named and there are particular ways of behaving- playing a role- corresponding to a particular status. A status is a position in a social or cultural structure, but a role involves thought and action. And people differ in how well they play the roles that go with various statuses they occupy (*See also Geldenhuys and Bosch 2019, Bennett and Sani 2004 and, Lopez and Scott 2000*).

Whether anthropologists should play a social role during their fieldwork is debatable among scholars. Some reject that anthropologists do not have to assume any role other than their own predetermined role as researchers. For example, Shuttleworth (2004:46), from his own research experience among disabled people, advocates that "role flexibility both enriched my understanding of the sexual situation of disabled men and led me to question the conceptual assumption of both disability studies and anthropology". Contrarily, Pawluchet *et al* (2005:95) on their part warn that "It's okay to be a helper, but don't adopt the role of a *worker*" (emphasis original). They suggest researchers resist assimilation to social or cultural roles by a) "giving repeated verbal reminders", and b) "setting up the research as a discrete entity".

Whichever direction we may argue, one thing to be noted in the first place is to recognize that social or cultural role is an important methodological enterprise for a researcher who confronts a society's or community's structure during fieldwork. Like any other methodological issue, it is something which affects positively or negatively the quality of our ethnographic fieldwork. But it does not seem to me contestable to say that this topic is less represented in the anthropological literature dealing with issues of ethnographic fieldwork methods and techniques. For example, Payne and Payne (2004) never mention social roles in their book called "Key Concepts in Social Science Research". Bloor and Wood (2006) in their book "Key Words in Qualitative Methods: A Vocabulary of Research Concepts" also misses a concept or term relating to social roles. More specialized books on anthropological research methods also have not addressed this issue. Bernard (2006), in his widely referred book in research methods in modern anthropological research, i.e., "Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches", also misses the concept. As far as I was able to search, the only unique contribution to "social roles" is a book by Adler and Adler (1998) with the title "Membership Roles in Field Research". There are also other works mentioned on social roles throughout this paper, but these all taken together make an inadequate contribution to the topic of social roles, compared to a flurry of literature on research methods in social sciences in general and anthropology in particular. Besides, the existing literature is more on the sociological paradigm of social roles than anthropological. A noteworthy contribution on an anthropological perspective of social roles is an edited volume from which most of the articles are taken for review in this paper: "Anthropologists in the Field: Cases in Participant Observation", edited by Lynne Home and Jane Mulcock. One may double the claim on the dearth of scholarship on social roles when speaking of the Ethiopian context. "Social roles" is little known and/or little used in the landscape of anthropological exercise in the country.

Based on my own experience and the experience of other anthropologists, this paper intends to advise, not warn, on the importance of social or cultural roles for anthropological fieldwork. The order of presentation of my argument is as follows. First, I will present my own fieldwork experience among the Gumuz since September 2008 albeit intermittently. Second, I will review some anthropological works to understand how other anthropologists or sociologists have positively manipulated or have overcome the challenges of multiple fieldwork social or cultural role expectations and associated subjectivities. Following this, then, I will enter into exploring the landscape of anthropological researches in Ethiopia, to show how we may have really missed the importance of assuming social or cultural roles in our anthropological research endeavor. Finally, I will give some concluding remarks. Data collection for this paper was conducted from 2008 to 2010 among the Gumuz of northwest Ethiopia. Ethical clearance for the involvement of research participants was made the Research Committee of Addis Ababa University, and prior, free and informed consent was secured from each participant during the fieldwork.

I want to make a couple of remarks before I close this introductory section. The first one is with regard to concepts relating to “social” and “cultural” roles. But what is “cultural” and what is “social”? This is a problematic concept which extends to understanding the difference between “social” and “cultural” itself. For the purpose of this paper, for example, “motherhood” in a traditional community can be cultural status and acting in accordance with expectations from such a mother is a cultural role. On the other hand, a “doctor” in a modern hospital can be an example of social status and the way he or she acts accordingly can be a social role. However, there is no strict boundary. The conceptual problem should not hold back my progress. From here on, I take “social roles” and “social status” to be broader concepts which also include cultural status and cultural roles. “Social role” is a sociological concept that has been in use since the 1920s (Hindin 2007), but in a theoretical interest in understanding social structure. On the other hand, “cultural role” seems to be less used, less written, and less theorized concept.

Another issue is also with regard to the operationalization of concepts and is about the place of “social roles” in relation to other research concepts particularly participant observation. When I talk about social roles, I am talking about *participant observation*. In a particular sense, I am talking about a particular mode of participant observation, an in-depth participant observation that requires assuming a social role of culture for the benefit of one’s ethnographic research. How a researcher can make participant observation has been inadequately clarified in the literature and the idea of social roles is a piece of blatant advice to a mode of participant observation where an ethnographer should involve himself or herself in participation, in a structural rather than incidental way. Adler and Adler (1998:8) say “Critical to these roles, which differentiate them from mere observational forms of field research, is their *insider* affiliation”, that researchers take on a “*membership* status”) (emphases original).

## **2. From *shuwa* to *mijim*: my experience among the Gumuz**

Particularly from September 2008 to June 2009, I did ethnographic fieldwork in northwest Ethiopia, to study the dynamics of an interethnic relation between the Gumuz and the Awi, two ethnic groups who share contiguous and mixed settlement in this region. It was the research that intended to investigate a changing pattern of interethnic relation between the two groups, particularly in the context of changing political ideology since 1991. Hence, in order to collect data for this research, I had to socialize myself with both ethnic groups having strikingly mutually different cultures and languages. While it was easy for me to socialize with the Awi due to my prior knowledge and socialization among this group, my contact with the Gumuz was mainly for the first time. During my childhood, I was told that these people were “aggressive” and this notion, at least to some extent, was also in my mind when I went for the fieldwork.

However, as “aggressive” as the Gumuz seemed to me, they had also a very profound and reliable social structure to accommodate an “outsider”. Indeed, different societies have different

ways of handling acquaintances and relationships with people “outside” their culture. As cross-cultural contact is inevitable, it is also inevitable to find implicit or explicit rules of a culture governing the relationship between its people and that of “outsiders”. Such social relationship rules may range from a mere rejection to an inclusion (Wondim 2018, Desalegn 2010: 40–41, Tsega 2006). The fear I had when I went to the fieldwork among the Gumuz also gradually dissipated because of a social structure the Gumuz had to accommodate me by means of assigning a given set of role expectations.

To begin with, among the Gumuz, any outsider is, at first, glossed into a category of people called *shuwa*. The Gumuz classify human beings into two categories. The first one is *shuwa* and the second one *biga*. *Shuwa* refers to the category of people who have a relatively fairer complexion. *Biga*, on the other hand, refers to the Gumuz themselves. So the category is apparently guided by color difference. It is the label used to dichotomize between the Gumuz, who are “black” and *shuwa* who are the so-called “red”, including the Amhara, Agaw, Oromo, and Shinasha ethnic groups which live mixed with or contiguous to the Gumuz. The dichotomy is, however, more profound than its mere suggestion to the color. Historically, the category *shuwa* is associated with exploitation. The Gumuz believe that the highland Amhara and Agaw caused them suffering by working for or backing the central state which was engaged in incorporation of peripheral peoples. Socially, the dichotomy also suggests, though rapidly changing since 1991, almost a naturalized hierarchy between the two groups of people. Even the Gumuz themselves believe *biga* belongs to an “inferior” race while the *shuwa* are “superior”.

When I arrived in the field during September 2008, I entered into this complex social structure. At first contact, I could not help but be just identified with the “shuwa”. The fact that one is labeled a status as “shuwa” means, traditionally, the Gumuz would, at best ignore him/her, and at worst, they are good spearmen and would kill one. For me during the fieldwork, it was frustrating not to get answers as elaborate as I wished during the interview, or even sometimes not being willing to be interviewed at all. A frequent reference to *shuwa* appeared in the conversation of the Gumuz with my translator who was striving to establish a rapport with proposed interviewees.

The good news is there was a more favorable mechanism of integrating outsiders than being labeled as a *shuwa*. *Wodaj* is an Amharic word which refers to a person having an “acquaintance” with another. In the usage by the Gumuz, it refers to a person’s relationship with the “other” groups, just at the level of acquaintance. Individuals, one of who is a Gumuz and another *shuwa* may come to know each other in an incident such as in a marketplace and subsequently meet repeatedly. In the form of a salutation, these persons would just call each other “wodaj” (Wondim 2018, Desalegn 2010: 41, Tsega 2006). It is a slight and none or less institutionalized acquaintance between a Gumuz and an outsider.

At this stage of the integration, a researcher such as me or any other “stranger” would enjoy only casual greetings, receive an approach in a familiar spirit, and could have avoided any danger of having been attacked. However, there is not yet a heartfelt and institutionalized friendship created and hence not much trusted is the affiliation. The importance of this stage of relationship for anthropological fieldwork by an “outsider” may be the fact that one can collect data from mere occasional and informal conversations with one’s Gumuz *wodaj*

There is still more good news, however. There is another most intimate relationship one can create with the Gumuz, called *mijim*. It is an institutionalized friendship between two individuals and families one of which is a *shuwa* and another Gumuz. It is the stage where the Gumuz turns to “outsiders” rather than turning on them, as they would do during a person’s status notably as *shuwa*. *Mijim* refers to a kind of intense and trusted relationship between a *shuwa* and a Gumuz, both at the level of individual friends and their respective family. While the *wodaj* relationship may be temporary, *mijim* is established on the basis of the conviction that it would last forever. A relationship which would begin as a casual acquaintance may grow to a *mijim* relationship.

Any interested “outsider” may take any opportunity to introduce him/her with a Gumuz and establish a *mijim* relationship. After an expression of interest by the former has been accepted by the latter, a date is fixed to organize a ceremonial event symbolizing the formation of a *mijim* relation. On this day, five elders from both sides are nominated to witness the ceremony. Both sides contribute materials for a feast of the event. The “outsider” who requested the relationship may present to the event anything he can (it is the male members who form this relationship), usually a goat or chicken to slaughter. On the other side, the Gumuz usually present *bordy* (a traditional Gumuz drink), foods and other local items. In the event, the chicken or goat (whichever the initiator can offer) is slaughtered. As the blood from an animal flows, both parties join their thumb, plunge them into the blood, and then shake each other. This symbolizes the fact that the two persons are tied by blood and no situation that may break the survival of their relationship be accepted. They both take an oath each pledging to maintain the bond with the other. From this day on, the *mijim* relation is expected to remain securely fixed and pass down to the generations of both families (Wondim 2018, Desalegn 2010:96, Tsega 2006).

There is a strong social role expectation of mutual support among the persons in *mijim* relationship. The Highlanders would present cloths, salt, and any other items to the Gumuz *mijim* counterpart. On the other hand, the Gumuz *mijim* would give land or any other thing to his *mijim*. Even more, in the case of war and insecurity, they have to protect each other. For example an informant to Desalegn (2010:96) states

...the Gumuz family brought their children to the Awi [*mijim*] home when they were nominated for enslaving. The holes were dug in the coop with the size and length of the proposed slaves. The wooden planks were placed over them. Over

the plunks, the place was cooped and the goats and sheep were kept over it. When the raiders come, they check the entire home to find the fugitives. They check for all corners and went back without finding one who had been hidden in the coop hole. They [the Awi *mijim*] also used to hide the children in a granary, bed floor, and other secret places.

As a researcher who was able to establish a *mijim* relationship, I used to discharge a social role by carrying clothes, small food items such as salt, sugar and the like to the Gumuz family with whom I created the relationship. The Gumuz *mijim* also invited me to his home, and I enjoyed foods and drinks offered to me abundantly. The relationship would become full of gifts and caring. What matters was not the size of a gift, but how to learn to respond.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that some violations of role expectations did not occur. But they are even positively interpreted, and one would enjoy the Gumuz teaching social roles to an apprentice *mijim*.

Obviously, one can imagine the importance of *mijim* relationship for ethnographic fieldwork. For me, it offered utmost openness from the part of interviewees and the *mijim* family during data collection. It also offered me protection from any risk of attack from other Gumuz villagers. The *mijim* would be around me during the fieldwork, introducing me throughout the neighboring villagers and offering security. In a few weeks, I enjoyed the relationship with the Gumuz during the fieldwork growing from a mere *shuwa* to a *mijim*.

### **3. Formally or socially defined roles? A review of the experience of some anthropologists**

If the social role is an important mechanism to develop rich data in the anthropological fieldwork, what will be an anthropologist's ethical standpoint? It is needless to cite evidence of anthropologists in the literature who advise keeping a certain distance from the community we study because they fear that the more we are "insiders" the more we may become personally, not scientifically influenced. In other words, a conflict between different role expectations would be inevitable and this may affect the anthropological data.

In addition to my own experience described in the preceding section, there are four articles I reviewed on the experience of anthropologists in order to back my argument on the importance of social flexibility in social roles during the anthropological fieldwork. The first article is "Role Boundaries and Paying Back: 'Switching Hats' in Participant Observation" by Jacqueline Wade published in 1984. The second article is "Wife, Widow, Woman: Roles of an Anthropologist in Transylvanian Village" written by Diane Freedman, published in 1970. The third one is "Kapluna Daughter" written by Jean Briggs, published in 1970. The last article is

---

<sup>1</sup> See Desalegn (2010) on how the *mijim* institution can be manipulated by highlanders. The latter create this relationship merely to secure land from the Gumuz. Hence, the Gumuz have become increasingly disinterested in this type of relationship with the highlanders.

“From Being ‘Other’ to Being ‘Mother’: an Ethnographer’s Experience of Otherness” by Jean Lydall, published in 1998.<sup>2</sup> I review each below in order.

As Wade tells us her experience in “Role Boundaries and Paying Back: ‘Switching Hats’ in Participant Observation”, to begin with, she was a student affairs administrator at the University of Pennsylvania. Her study was conducted at the same university she was working. The research subjects were black students whose academic and social conditions differ from that of white ones. Wade’s experience focused on shifting roles (i.e. “switching hats”) in the field relationships with her study subjects. Wade went to study the socio-cultural and academic experiences of black students at the University of Pennsylvania. Students who knew her as a university official posed her different expectations beyond her pre-planned role as a researcher. Moreover, as a black staff of the university, the black students among which she was doing the research posed some expectations based on the same racial allegiance. In dilemmatic choices between her original role as a researcher and new roles as per expectations from the students, she was “switching hats” from her role as a researcher to that of an official, a teacher, an informant and an administrator.

In her “Wife, Widow, Woman: Roles of an Anthropologist in Transylvanian Village”, Freedman tells us her experience. To start with, Freedman taught courses in research and critical thinking at Temple University. She conducted research on dance and gender roles in a Romanian rural village. But when she went to the research village, she faced a different role expectation from the community instead of her own pre-planned role as a researcher. Freedman’s professional role as an anthropologist in the field on the one side and the impact of her expected roles as a wife, a widow and a woman among the Romanians on the other put her in role contradiction. First, while she had been a married woman, she assumed roles that a wife should play according to the culture of the people under study. Cooking meals, sewing, gathering, and washing clothes were some of the roles. Moreover, there were social roles that she shared with her husband, Robert. For example, they distributed clothes to the villagers for they thought this role would help them enhance their rapport with the local people. They also purchased goods to some of the local people that were not available in Romania; they attended rituals in a church with their host families though they were Jewish in their religion. Second, upon her return for the second time in a status as a widow after the death of her husband, she was expected of another new social role. For instance, in addition to wearing black clothes, she was expected not to involve in playing music, dance and other joyous experiences. Besides, she was expected to tell the natives all about the death of her husband, and she was expected to listen to stories of past sorrows of the natives in return. Third, after she came to be a single young woman, which was another phase of status among the Romanian village, she “could participate in a wider variety of village events” as a single woman (p.351). She was allowed participating in various activities that the Romanian young girls would participate. For example, participation in dance in order to

---

<sup>2</sup> Full citation for all review articles is found in the “References” section

attract men as dance partners and husbands were one of the roles she played. Moreover, exchanging pleasantries, participating in wedding events and soliciting husbands were the other roles she played as a single woman. All these were responded by the villagers in different ways. Regarding these successive roles, Freedman witnessed that her “fieldwork was enriched by the experience of participating in the society in a variety of social roles” (p. 336).

The third article which is “Kapluna Daughter” tells us the experience of Jean Briggs. Briggs was a professor of anthropology at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. She published papers on various aspects of Inuit (Eskimo) psychology and socialization on which this review article was also made particularly among Utkuhiksalingmiut, a small group of Eskimo who lived in the Canadian Arctic. “Kapluna Daughter” mainly deals with the author’s adoption as a white “daughter” in an Utkuhiksalingmiut family. Upon her arrival, she had a status of a “white person”, “stranger” (p.39). Then, mainly based on her request, she came to be *kapluna* (“daughter”) of a hosting family. Accordingly, she was expected to accomplish certain corresponding tasks of daughterhood. However, she was put in a dilemma between her role as a researcher and roles assigned by her adoptive family. Resisting local roles in favor of her role as a researcher, she unmet the expectation of her role as a daughter; and as a result, she was assigned another status of “simpleton”, “bad”, and “crazy”. The story illustrates certain complexities that can develop in field relationships between anthropologists and their hosts. The article shows some of the difficulties that the Utkuhiksalingmiut hosts encountered in incorporating an anthropologist of very un-Eskimo temperament into the role of “household daughter”, and vice versa. It also illustrates mutual efforts and negotiations to create a compromise to differently defined roles.

The fourth article which is “From Being ‘Other’ to Being ‘Mother’: an Ethnographer’s Experience of Otherness” tells us the experience of Jean Lydall who has spent a considerable effort studying the Hamar of Ethiopia, together with her husband Ivo Strecker. When Jean and Strecker arrived at a Hamar village for research, they were received by a local status as an “other”. This category not only affected them as it allowed the natives to steal their possession but also was difficult to integrate them for research at any level. As a result, the field workers needed to get out of this negative category of *edi ab* (translated as “other person”) by establishing, maintaining, and enhancing personal relationships with the people. Fortunately, there were a number of institutions that helped the researchers incorporate themselves to the local life with different statuses and corresponding roles. To create an intimate relationship and to change the status of “otherness” they found some ways out. At first, they came into contact with Garsho, a resident who was recommended as an informant whom they provided him with food (spaghetti) and helped his family. They also gave gifts of different goods to their neighbors. Second, their integration into the society grew closer and they established personal relationships with individuals in the form of *misso*, a hunting friend. In this way, they established a familial relationship with a native known as Balbambe, his family, and others. This relationship

particularly bestowed roles of “mate-ship”, “of going far afield, sharing adventures, and weathering all dangers together” as Baldambe did adventure traveling to Europe with Strecker. Through the *misso* relationship with Strecker, the two wives (the wife of Baldambe and Strecker’s wife, Lydall) were elevated to the status of *misso*’s wives. Third, they established *bel* relationship, a status of special friend. It is established by the mutual exchange of valuable things such as transfer of cattle (hence cattle *bel*). This relationship is also established by giving gifts where Strecker was able to create it by giving female goats for a number of women of Baldambe’s family. The special friendship in this institution lies on the fact that it bestows mutual special treatment as tick friends. Fourth, they created a *mago* relationship, an institution which is established with a person and someone he or she gives their name to. This is one of the closest relationships creating institutions whereby the related persons are addressed each other as *mago*, namesake, and are considered related in kinship. In this way, Strecker gave his name to Baldambe’s brother’s son, and addresses this boy’s mother as “mother”, and Lydall addresses the mother as “mother in law”. Lydall became the “mother” of Baldambe and Baldambe became “son” through Dan who is Baldambe’s *mago*. At this level, their relationship was elevated to a relatively wider scope, closer relationship, and strong mutual commitment. Lydall says, “There is no relationship which is closer in Hamar than that of mother and child” (p 74). In this way, the two anthropologists changed from the status of being “other” to being “mother” with corresponding statuses and roles at each successive stages of integration as *misso*, *bel*, *mago*, and *indo*.

Reading the articles shows us, as I indicated at the beginning of this paper, two existing directions of approaching the subjects during fieldwork as far as the social role is concerned. These are from the expectations of researchers and that of the subjects. As Wade in the given review article says, existing knowledge emphasizes formally defined role choices. The literature tries to equip researchers with a defined set of formal roles the researchers are recommended to follow. However, it is the lesson of the review articles that the formal approach may not be necessarily fruitful. Researchers can get defined roles for them by a host community and thus one-way definition may not always be effective. Therefore, the lessons we take up from these readings is that to be able to be equipped with scientific, formal procedures of researcher roles alone may not be always adequate for successful fieldwork. Researchers need also to prepare themselves for the roles that would be assigned by the subjects and should follow flexible approaches. The social role may not be always defined in a way *we* choose what it must be, but it would also be what the subjects choose it should be.

From this review, then what do we learn about role conflicts and subjectivity of data? In particular, what are the advantages and disadvantages of role flexibility? Let me discuss the advantages first. One, we can learn from the articles that role shift from an original plan as researchers and further internal flexibility into more than one role in the field gives us unexpectedly rich data. This is witnessed by, for example, Jacqueline Wade who states that her

shift from one role after another gave her richer data than she expected to collect. Two, role flexibility avoids the risk of getting blocked from undertaking intended research. Unless researchers assume a certain kind of role expected by natives, it may be interpreted by them as if researchers are disrespecting local norms. This ultimately has the risk of denying the chance to enter into a study area. Third, role flexibility helps researchers build mutual trust. Natives may not be always irrationally imposing their role *alone*. There is a possibility that they can recognize the role as researchers too. Therefore, willingness to take natives roles may create a sense of confidence and mutual trust, thereby makes field relationship doubly advantageous.

Being flexible in the field also has, of course, some disadvantages. In the first place, it is time-consuming. For example, as Wade was involved in more and more roles, she spent more and more time. This affected her original plan of time and became more time consuming than she expected. In the second place, role flexibility has also other social costs. By this, I mean that as researchers are involved in the social life of the community, they have to satisfy societal requirements of a certain role in addition to time cost. As a mother, Jean Lydall, for example, had to meet the level of care expected of a mother; as a child, Jean Briggs, for example, had to satisfy requirements of being a daughter. As a result acting or not acting in some way to fulfill expectations of a “mother”, “daughter”, “widow”, “married woman”, etc costs behaving or not behaving some way rather than another for which one has to learn of such expectations, spend money, give reputation, extend caring, etc. It demands devotion, as can be termed here, a social cost. In the third place, it may sometimes assign *only* submissive role; expects role *only* from the viewpoint of subjects. For example, adapting role as a child for Jean Briggs requires acting like a child, such as not to interrogate “fathers”, and puts her only in the recipient role. In this case, it even denies the chance for enriching one’s data as one is confined to a specifically prescribed role. In the fourth place, there is a possibility for subjectivity for too much association of researchers with the subjects. There is a risk of biased interpretation of data that arise because of the inability to keep an ethnographic distance from one’s subjects.

#### **4. “Social roles” in a landscape of anthropological research in Ethiopia**

Gebre (2006) indicates that anthropological training in Ethiopia began in 1991 with an MA in Social Anthropology at the Department of Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University. Furthermore, Gebre reviewed a thematic and spatial distribution of the MA theses researches between 1993 and 2005. He has not, however, reviewed methodological concerns of those anthropological researches.

In order to understand whether the idea of social roles is known and/or used in the anthropological researches in Ethiopia, I made a review of randomly selected works representing anthropological articles, MA theses, book chapters, and a few books. The time span of the reviewed materials was from 1993–2014. With regard to the number of materials reviewed, it

was twenty from articles,<sup>3</sup> thirty from MA theses<sup>4</sup>, and twenty from book chapters<sup>5</sup>, totally seventy materials.

The review showed that the concept of social roles in Ethiopia is less known or, even when it may have been known, less or not used. I found no research talking about social roles. While there are more awareness and reflection on the position of the researcher as an insider or outsider, the social role in the field assumed by the researcher is not explained explicitly. Other almost indispensable methodological issues mentioned in the works are about the type of methodology used, starting from the choice of qualitative approach to the techniques of qualitative research.

The result of this review seizes one's attention to think about implications for anthropological qualitative research training in Ethiopia. I propose that qualitative research methods are not fully grasped in the anthropological training of methods. We seem to rely only on research methodology courses we take or give only during our training for an anthropological degree, which makes the research skill less than adequate. Besides, there are no on-job research skills training for researchers offered in Ethiopia.

## **5. Conclusion**

Depending on how we are able and willing to use it, it seems to me that social role flexibility is one of the most powerful techniques in conducting successful anthropological fieldwork. It gives rich data through the insiders' perspective. It is not just enough to conduct participant observation whereby the researcher observes or makes participation at the shallow level. When necessary, one has to take a social role and *live* they way natives "live". This gives one almost a complete mastery of data and a comprehensive understanding of "others'" way of life depending on a time span spent on fieldwork. And it is not to be forgotten that sometimes natives may have the cultural category of "researcher". In this case, luckily, there is congruence between expectations as set by researchers themselves and by the natives. But, where there is no this scenario, role assumption is expected from researchers at whatever level somewhat somewhere. Social role flexibility is not a problem in its own.

As already indicated, but it is not without challenges. It may be time-consuming and there may be biases and subjectivities involved in manipulating social roles. But, even this can be overcome by ethnographers' personal skill in adaptability and negotiation. Either to be distanced from it or get assimilated into local roles is not tenable in practice for researchers. It is important to be flexible to the extent possible and to the extent necessary. I argue that ethnographic fieldwork is a personal craft as much as it is scientific. In one's personal skill, one has to learn to

---

<sup>3</sup> This includes articles published in local and foreign journals.

<sup>4</sup> The MA program of Addis Ababa University in Social Anthropology has yielded in about 210 theses by the end of the 2014 academic year.

<sup>5</sup> Edited volumes on Ethiopian anthropology either by Ethiopians or foreigners is still limited (Abbink 2011:111).

make a delicate balance between subjective and objective endeavors depending on one's fieldwork situation. It is a matter of playing in the middle ground between objectivity and subjectivity. Whenever important, one may need to enter into a subjective enterprise for an objective anthropological goal.

This being the case, I believe that existing knowledge on the importance of social roles in the field is inadequate. This claim can be doubled when it comes to the Ethiopian reality. My attempt to review existing anthropological researches shows that the idea of "social roles" is little used or not used at all; or else, may be known but not used. This shows a clear gap in the terrain of knowledge and skills of methods in anthropological research in Ethiopia in particular, and it needs to be a work to do in the future.

## References

- Abbink, Jon. 2011. "The Anthropology of Ethiopia 1999–2011: Highlights and Trends." *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* XLV: 103–147.
- Adler, Patricia and Peter Adler. 1987. *Membership Roles in the Field*. Sage University Paper series on Qualitative Research Methods (Vol. 6). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Bennett, M., & Sani, F. (Eds.). (2004). *The development of the social self*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Bernard, Russel. 2006. *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Lanham, New York, Toronto, Oxford. Altamira Press.
- Bloor, Michael and Fiona Wood. 2006. *Keywords in Qualitative Methods: A Vocabulary of Research Concepts*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi. SAGE Publications.
- Briggs, Jean. 1970. "Kapluna Daughter." Pp 19–46 in *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), edited by Peggy Golde. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Desalegn Amsalu. 2015. "From Integrative Traditional Institutions to Exclusionary Ethnic Federalism." Pp 1010–115 in *Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement: Proceedings of the 18<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* Volume II, edited by Eloi Fiquet, Ahmed Hassen, and Thomas Osmund. Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies and French Centre for Ethiopian Studies.
- Desalegn Amsalu. 2010. *Awi-Gumuz Relations: The Dynamics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag.
- Freedman, Diane. 1970. "Wife, Widow, Woman: Roles of an Anthropologist in Transylvanian Village." Pp 294–333 in *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), edited by Peggy Golde. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gebre Yntiso. 2006. *Anthropological Training in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, Department of Social Anthropology
- Geldenhuys, Madelyn and Anita Bosch. 2019. "A Rasch Adapted Version of the 30-Item Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI)". *Journal of Personality Assessment* 1-12.

- Hindin, Micelle. 2007. "Role Theory." Pp 3959–3962 in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, edited by George Ritzer. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Linton, Ralph. 1936. "Report on Fieldwork Expedition in Madagascar." *American Anthropologist* 29: 292–307.
- Lopez, Jose and John Scott. 2000. *Social Structure*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Lydall, Jean. 1998. "From Being 'Other' to Being 'Mother': An Ethnographer's Experience of Otherness." *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* Bd. 44, Anthropology and the Question of the Other: 69–75.
- Macionis, John. 2017. *Society: The Basics* (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.) Boston: Person.
- Pawluch, Dorthy *et al* (Ed.). 2005. *Doing Ethnography: Studying Everyday Life*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, Inc.
- Pyne, Geoff and Judy Payne. 2004. *Key Concepts in Social Science Research*. London, Thousand Okas, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Shuttleworth, Russell. 2004. "Multiple Roles, Statuses, and Allegiances: Exploring the Ethnographic Process in Disability Culture." Pp 46–58 in *Anthropologist in the Field: Cases in Participant Observation*, edited by Home, Lynne and Jane Mulcock. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Tsega Endalew. 2006. *Inter-Ethnic Relations on a Frontier: Mätäkkäl (Ethiopia), 1898–1991*. Aethiopistische Forschungen 69. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Wade, Jacqueline. 1984. "Role Boundaries and Paying Back: 'Switching Hats' in Participant Observation." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 15(3): 211–224.
- Wondim Tiruneh. 2018. Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Relations, Peaceful Co-Existence, Conflicts, and Peace Building Mechanisms between the Gumuz and Non-Gumuz Communities (1961-1974). *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 38:17–31.