

POULTRY STUDIES AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH STRATEGIES

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Abstract

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Poultry are not simply birds; they are also a human creation, a social and cultural practice. The human element is the justification for an anthropology of poultry. Such an anthropology combines the objective research strategies familiar to the natural sciences with what is often called 'subjective' or qualitative research. In the study of poultry management, it is important that both research strategies focus on differences and variation. The subjective approach is particularly useful in identifying and understanding how the motivations and strategies of local actors are dependent on the social positions, which they occupy in their specific societies.

1. INTRODUCTION

What does an anthropologist have to say to a group of veterinarians engaged in research on small-holder poultry production and health? Obviously - at least I should hope that it is obvious - I am not in a position to contribute to your knowledge of Newcastle disease, to the identification of other diseases, to the discussion of parameters for growth and health in different breeding populations. On the other hand, perhaps you will allow my presence to remind you of something which you all know, but which can also easily be overlooked: poultry are imbedded in human society. The health and demography of flocks is ultimately a consequence of human goals and activities. This, at any rate, is what I tell my colleagues. They too have wondered why an anthropologist hangs about with veterinarians. The very idea of an *anthropology* of poultry can seem absurd – until one realizes that poultry management is an entirely *human* activity: a set of learned and goal-directed behaviours and a corpus of knowledge which varies from place to place and from time to time. Poultry practice is both social and cultural – and an anthropology of poultry is no more or less appropriate than a genetics or an economy of poultry.

Today, in this particular context, we are here not for the sake of chickens but for the sake of people. Our joint interest in poultry is its utility, its potential to provide incomes and better diets for the poor people of Africa. Anthropologists seek utility in directions different from veterinarians– we will include the symbolic role which chickens play in hospitality, in exchange and in sacrifice. We will also pay particular attention to the social organization of poultry-keeping and to the social construction of management and ownership, of rights in birds and rights to the labour invested in birds. In particular, we will look at poultry practice as a relationship between people, which takes places in terms of a larger social and cultural context.

2. POULTRY, ANTHROPOLOGY AND SCIENCE

We can agree – I hope – that we are all scientists. However, there are different ways of doing science - and it can be useful every so often to make the differences explicit in order to promote better understanding and, thus, more effective cooperation. In order to introduce the role which anthropology may be able to play, I want to make a distinction between *objective* and *subjective* research strategies in science [1; 2]. Objective and subjective here refer not to the validity of the research but rather to assumptions and conditions under which it is carried out. The objective research strategy is common to the natural sciences, to some social science and to much development research. This is research in the positivist tradition and it involves the radical separation of the observer and her data, the object. Everything in the strategy is designed to maintain this separation: valid results depend on carefully documented procedures, which can then be replicated by any competent researcher. Already we can see that such a research strategy is appropriate when dealing with the outcome of poultry vaccination trials - but it may be less compelling when studying the motives and practices of the owners of the animals.

A subjective strategy is part of much (but not all) anthropological research; it is also found generally in social science, history, communications and much recent development research. Subjective here does *not* mean introspective. The point is rather to recognize that research data are produced in the interaction between self-conscious subjects with agendas, goals and identities. Research in this tradition is a social relationship between subjects, and the results of such inquiries

will never be entirely replicable in any simple sense. Indeed the validity of such research rests on presenting as fully as possible the social context of the research process. Such a strategy is particularly appropriate for investigating situations of some social and cultural complexity –exploring gender issues, for example, may demand *parallel* studies by male and female researchers.

3. COMBINING SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE RESEARCH STRATEGIES

Anthropological research very often involves both subjective and objective strategies. Let me give some examples. There is a developing sub-field called “ethnoveterinary anthropology” (so far mostly concerned with large stock). This field is largely associated with the work of Constance McCorkle and her associates [3; 4].

The sub-field draws much methodological inspiration from older anthropological studies of cognition known collectively as “ethnoscience.” The prefix “ethno-” (as in ethnobotany, ethnotaxonomy, etc.) indicates that we are dealing with an organized, non-western knowledge domain, a system for understanding and classifying the natural world. Ethnoscience methodologies are developed to elicit and describe in detail such domains, ranging from the very “theoretical” (e.g. taxonomies of animals or plants) to more specific knowledge domains (e.g. ecological niches, medicinal plants, fodder and forage resources). Such studies have proved immensely valuable both as a way of appreciating the complexity of human systems of classification and as an insight into the natural world; the approach has very clear implications for research in systems of traditional poultry management.

However, there is at least a potential issue involving intellectual property rights when, for example, the results of ethnobotanical studies are used by western-trained scientists to help business to develop patentable medicines. On quite another level, ethnoscience, with its focus on taxonomies and classifications, can have the effect of separating what is known from social practice – how is this knowledge used? How widely is it held?

The anthropologist Paul Richards is well known for demonstrating the ways in which indigenous agricultural knowledge can be expanded by systematic, goal-directed trials [5]. Recently he has suggested that knowledge-based models may not be the most appropriate way to understand agriculture [6]. Cultivators do have access to a considerable store of agricultural knowledge. However, their world and their work is always constrained – by too little or too much rain, by pests and illness, by emergencies in the home that demand labour and attention. Successful cultivators must negotiate changing circumstances; they cannot simply apply knowledge. In this sense cultivators are more akin to performers, for example itinerant musicians, who have a stock of musical knowledge but who must temper their repertoire to the demands of different audiences and different venues. Performance, he argues, is about coping and adjusting and, in the end, about surviving as best one can. It is not about being the most traditional cultivator and there is often little commitment to a particular crop or indeed - should another opportunity present itself - to agriculture at all.

This is particularly useful to keep in mind when thinking about traditional poultry management strategies. Poultry “performances,” will often be pragmatic, one of a number of strategies for survival. As poultry experts we may be tempted to give a higher priority to our special interest than local villagers do. Yet these villagers are in fact actors (and subjects) with specific agendas and specific constraints. For them, it is the over-all performance that is important and not any particular component. In order to help improve poultry management, we may need to understand far more about the economic, social and cultural contexts for decision-making.

This can all seem a rather daunting project. How can busy veterinarians take the time to discover both local knowledge and local agendas? There is of course no royal road to knowledge, but there are certainly a number of practical starting points for the study of community knowledge and practice. One which I think is well-worth adapting to veterinary use is the version of Rapid Assessment Procedures developed by the medical anthropologist Susan Scrimshaw and her associates [7; 8]. Their series of manuals are designed to introduce elements of anthropological methodology to non-specialists, and to produce reliable data within a reasonable timespan. The handbook on development research methodology by Mikkelsen [9] is also well worth examining.

4. POULTRY AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PHENOMENON: ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

I started out by emphasizing that poultry are a human creation, a social and cultural practice. From countless ethnographic studies - as well as the survey results discussed at the workshop - we know that:

- poultry health and flock demography are social - related to human goals and activities
- poultry have important cultural and social uses - in particular as gifts
- poultry are the small change in social and symbolic exchange - but without change, the economy grinds to a halt!
- poultry are often unstressed in social and cultural terms - not something which people generally believe to be a subject for knowledge.

Drawing on the excellent material presented in this workshop it is possible to be somewhat more specific about poultry management as a social and cultural activity. First of all, we have the survey itself. A lot of effort and a lot of thought have gone into its construction and analysis. It was, however, never designed to be a *representative* survey, to capture the full range of existing practice and variation in each country. First of all, there are far too few observations. In addition, the villages and households surveyed are constrained by the need to be close to a veterinary laboratory. This does not mean that the survey is useless - far from it! - but it does raise issues of interpretation. In particular the survey raises the issue of what to do with the data. I noticed that there were two tendencies during the workshop discussions. Survey data were *aggregated* in order to make comparisons of three kinds: seasonal/ecological (in particular, the effect of temperature and rainfall); country comparisons (Tanzania vs. Morocco, for example); and, by implication at least, scavenging poultry vs intensive management. All of these comparisons are based on aggregation, and they are for the most part, speaking strictly, questionable; the survey was not designed to sample the range of social and ecological variation known to exist.

Survey data were also used to increase our *appreciation of difference*. Many presenters noted that there was greater variation exhibited within the families and flocks from one region and season than that which was recorded between seasons or regions. To me as an anthropologist this kind of intra-regional variation is particularly intriguing. It suggests the existence of specific social and cultural and ecological factors which shape production; it also suggests the coexistence of multiple (gender-based?) poultry management strategies. This in turn implies that there are a number of potential targets for intervention - and a number of interventions appropriate to the different target groups. By aggregating the survey data we risk losing sight of these differences and, thus, missing out on potentially important insights.

Scavenging poultry are frequently unstressed in social and cultural terms. Often poultry management is only one of many activities for most managers - and normally not of overriding concern. Where it may be of more than peripheral importance to a manager, survey evidence suggests that this manager will be a married woman with many other demands and obligations.

Exploring and revealing such different strategies systematically is one of the exciting ways in which the second survey can be used. For example, one could undertake in-depth interviews with families (both men and women where possible) designed to elicit:

- poultry career histories (what have you tried before?) in the context of short life histories in order to examine the ways in which strategies and goals change with age and stage of life.
- poultry management practice (including sale or trade experience) as a response to specific conditions and possibilities.

Interviewers should record (and indeed use where possible) local language terms for strategies; this is a useful way to assess the degree to which practice is explicit.

Such an emphasis would be sure to provide even more examples of difference and variation. Such material can then be used to construct models which become the basis for further study. For example, on the evidence of variation discussed during the workshop, it is possible to identify at least three management strategies:

- “low maintenance” (where poultry is kept as a possible reserve for guests or emergencies but there are no planned sales and little investment)
- “social exchange orientation” (where gifts and loans of poultry and gifts of eggs enable adult social relationships and cement social networks - in particular women’s networks)

- “market-oriented management” (where regular sale or trade is the goal).

It is clear that all three strategies may be practised within the same village - at times by the same individuals. These strategies are, of course, simply illustrations. I do not know that they will exist in the villages and regions that you have studied. But, as an anthropologist, I can assure you that strategies of these types will be practised. Discovering strategies can itself be a very fruitful strategy for research and development, for understanding the different ways in which different groups of people keep poultry - and why they sometimes do not take our advice!

Strategies can be very specific to a particular place and situation - but often the different kinds of poultry management strategies which we encounter are linked to more general problems in villages - to gender roles, to age entitlements, to education, to differentials of wealth and power.

5. STRATEGIES AND SUBJECTS: UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT POSITIONS

Working with strategies in a field such as the management of scavenging poultry involves listening and observation (instead of lectures and demonstrations). As Robert Chambers has shown many times, it involves “putting the last first”, that is to say establishing relationships with poultry-keepers in which *they* are the experts and *their* knowledge and practice is valued [10; 11; 12; 13]. As we discussed in the workshop, this means being aware of how we as researchers shape the answers to our questions. Again a Chambers point and one we all know but sometimes forget: how many times are women poultry managers interviewed by male researchers, often in the presence of male family members? How often are such interviews unsatisfactory because women cannot, in such contexts, explain their specific strategies?

Often such strategic differences are overlooked because we have already placed our subjects in crude categories. They are villagers, often poor villagers (for Danida¹, the poorest villagers), or perhaps simply peasants. But if we are to understand their own motives and strategies, if we are to hear their voices and engage them in dialogues which can be meaningful, then we need also to appreciate that “villagers” do not interact with “villagers” - they interact as wives with husbands, as married women with other married women, as Christians with other Christians. People interact from positions and we need to include this positioning in our analysis. It is another - and very important - argument for disaggregating data.

One good way of exploring the importance of social position for poultry strategies is to make use of that favourite anthropological tool, the genealogy. Figure 1 presents such a genealogy, drawn from my work in Eastern Uganda, which illustrates the ways in which residents of one small neighbourhood are related. In the figure, triangles represent men and circles represent women. The different patterns of the circles and triangles indicate different clan affiliations.

This skeleton genealogy does not reflect some essential social codex. Indeed, genealogies do not generate social relationships but, like the maps which they resemble, they do simplify a complex social reality - and thus make it possible to ask useful questions. From this genealogy (or better yet one which readers draw up from their own research or backgrounds) a number of propositions about difference and position can be formulated.

To the genealogy in Figure 1, we might start by noting that different female positions (“kinds” of women) are shown: mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters, wives and so forth. Most important positions are marked in language and discovering them is easiest when working in the language of one’s subjects. Positions may also be distinguished by custom, for example modesty behaviour in relation to other positions. On the basis of this genealogy, we can see that the in-marrying women - the wives - have responsibilities to husbands and children but also maintain important cooperative and social relationships with the other wives who are neighbours and who, like themselves, are “strangers”. These women also maintain relationships with their birth homes, their brothers and parents. The rule of exogamy which requires women to marry men from the “outside” insures that there will be continuous movement back and forth from married home to natal home. Gifts of cocks and hens express and develop the networks of social relationships, which are so important here and in many other rural societies. Poultry management strategies are aimed in both directions - towards the immediate domestic sphere and the larger social world.

¹ Danish International Development Agency

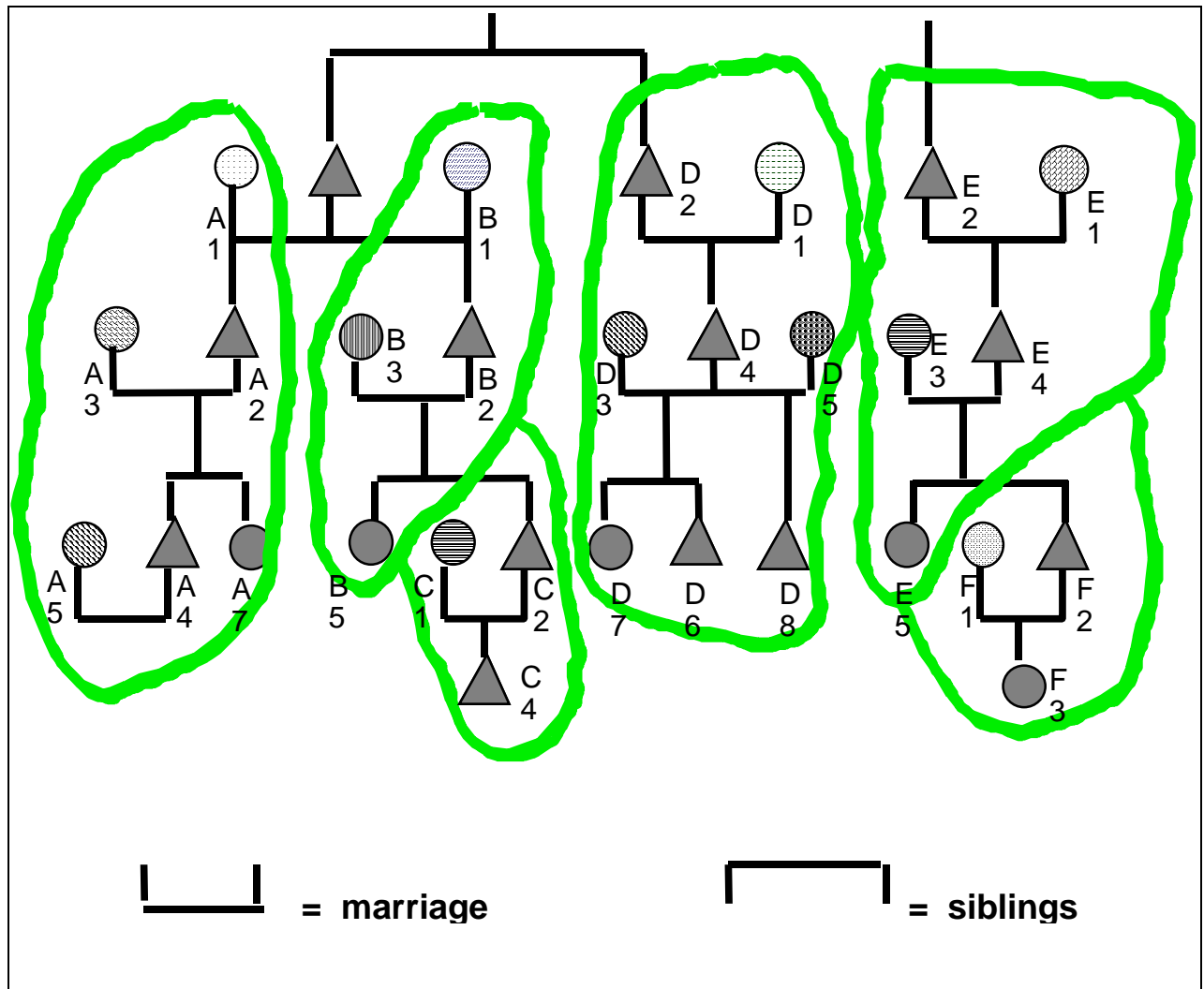


FIG. 1. Genealogy of a rural family in Eastern Uganda (triangles represent men; circles represent women).

Notes with figure 1:

- There is a core of “grey” men, mostly married and “grey” women, mostly unmarried. This is typical for a society which is patrilineal (clanship affiliation transmitted from father to children) and patrilocal (women move to their husbands’ land after marriage).
- The neighbourhood consists of households (circled) which are made up of adult males who are related to one another (grey) and in-married women (different patterns), who are of different clans and who, for the most part, were strangers to one another before the marriages which brought them together.
- Adult men and women are thus quite differently positioned. Men will be related to each other by close clan links: their wives will have diverse clan identities and connections and obligations to separate natal families.
- Men have an inalienable (clan) right to be and to remain in the neighbourhood; most adult women have provisional rights of residence, based on marriage and/or motherhood. In the case of divorce they may be sent to their natal homes - though children will remain.

In the neighbourhood depicted in this genealogy, both men and women come together in groups on various occasions. Men in such groups are brothers, fathers and sons who share common responsibility for the welfare of the descent group. Women too are concerned with responsibility but more often theirs is a responsibility focused on the problems of immediate reproduction - gaining access to a plot of land, pooling labour resources to weed and to harvest.

Such differences - here in one part of Eastern Uganda - fit together male ownership of land and the potentially transient role assigned to the in-marrying wife. In other parts of Africa, other relationships and positions will be more important. My point here is not to provide a blueprint but rather a tool which can help formalize and make accessible the varieties of local knowledge and practice in villages. Genealogy is particularly useful in this respect because it forces the researcher to become "grounded" in local reality.

6. CONCLUSION

I began my contribution by asking why an anthropologist should be talking about poultry - and I hope I have provided some few examples of what my discipline can offer. Now I would simply like to conclude by thanking the participants for contributing so generously to my own veterinary education. I have a much clearer understanding of the complexity of poultry production and the ways in which management strategies and disease may interact. Finally, I look forward to continuing my education and our cooperation.

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