Translated excerpt

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Incarnation of an Ape. An autobiography of ethnographic research

Translated by Caroline Schmidt

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INTRODUCTION

Your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be farther removed from you than mine is from me. Yet everyone on earth feels a tickling at the heels; the small chimpanzee and the great Achilles alike.

Franz Kafka

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The ape who wants to become human is me: an ethnologist (from Berlin). "Ape," is what the inhabitants of the Tugen Hills in northwest Kenya called me when I came to them in 1978. "Ape," "fool" or "clown," "witch," "spy," "satanic spirit," and "cannibal," are names given to me on later research stays in East Africa. I would like to give an account of those ethnographic research stays here. My text can thus be classified as an autobiographical field report, following ethnologist "forebears" such as Hortense Powdermaker, Laura Bohannan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Paul Rabinow, Alma Gottlieb, Harry West, and Roy Willis, to name just a few. But whereas in their work the ethnographer in the field often appears as a heroic scientist and master researcher, in this book I discuss in particular the less-than-heroic entanglements and cultural misunderstandings, the clashes and blunders that transpired during my fieldwork in East Africa. It is about the confusions, coincidences, hapless experiences and blind spots, provided I even became aware of them at all, which are almost always omitted from published monographs. Failure is nevertheless an essential part of the ethnographic practice. It is painful and forces the ethnographer to change the course of her research, to seek out a different location, a different "informant," or even a different field of knowledge. But in published texts, failure is most often erased; first and foremost, the ethnographer tells a success story. The productive nature of failure is seldom recognized or reflected upon.

In reality, the confusions, misunderstandings and coincidences substantially defined my research process, since they forced me to think in unforeseeable directions and reconsi-

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der the object of my research time and again.

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Field research always takes its own course, since the local people also have their own interests and projects, in which they seek to involve the ethnographer. “My” research did not belong to me. As I will demonstrate, to a great extent it was determined by the ethnographed; it proceeded neither according to plan nor without conflict. That is because my “will to knowledge” (Foucault) frequently clashed with local interests and ideas about politeness, morality, power, gender, and mystery. Accepting precisely this, being open to discord and reflecting upon it, proved extremely productive, opening up fields of knowledge that I never would have come up with at home. But that also means I am postulating an Other that is not fully merged in its relation to the Self. There is an externality that transcends the narcissistic reflection of the Self in the Other, and breaks the circle of self-reflection.

The trials and tribulations that accumulated “in the field” took an indistinct shape and, as I see it now, like ghosts demanded recognition. This led to the development of an “object,” commonly known as a research topic. It wasn’t simply assigned, but had to be found in dialogue—and occasionally in conflict—with the men and women at the site. As I would learn, in the course of this my conversational partners were highly interactive and far from indifferent; they changed as we spoke. And they changed me; I too am now what they made of me during my research days in Africa.

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An autobiographical account rests on a single name. Because I am the author, narrator, and protagonist of this text, I adhere to the "autobiographical pact" and take responsibility for it. At the same time, however, I depart from tradition: along with the name that guarantees the pact, I have inserted different, alien names. Given to me in Africa by the subjects of my studies, these names are at the center of my autobiography of ethnographic research. They are not flattering names; I don't necessarily identify with them. It is an attempt to heighten my subjectivity to the greatest extent and expand it, by allowing myself to become the object of the ethnographed, by showing how they saw and named me. Against this backdrop, I am wary of stressing the "auto" in autobiography. Isn't the authentic signature of the text broken open, fragmented, expanded and defamiliarized when alien names assume a central place in it? Is a text still an autobiography if it strives to convey elements of an ethnographic description of the Other?

In reality, my text is an attempt to understand how, in the dialogue with the subjects of my research, numerous strange and disturbing "I's" emerged, which caused me to question what truth, what criticism, what promise and what failure were hidden behind the alien names given me. My text is also an attempt to make the—at times very unscientific—ethnographic production of knowledge communicable. Against this backdrop I don't claim to produce a scientific report, since at times, unscientific in the extreme, I insist on both sides of an antithesis, and contradict myself time and again in numerous assertions.

Critical preoccupation with the West's autobiographical tradition—our "biographical illusion," as Pierre Bourdieu refers to it—has prompted me to also pursue the notions of

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(auto)biography, life, and life's course held by the subjects of my research, and to include them in this text.

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In Germany and France there is a little tradition known as "reverse ethnography." Before and after the Second World War, Julius Lips, Hans Himmelheber, Michel Leiris, Jean Rouch, Fritz Kramer and Michael Harbsmeier, among others, became interested in the question of how the experience of being perceived as the Other might rattle the European and—above all—the colonial understanding of the Self. They reversed the perspectives, overturning the colonial dynamic of observer and observed, and in various media considered how the colonized had also turned the colonizers, their way of life and technologies, into the object of their own ethnographies. This figure of reversal, the inverse gaze of the ethnographed on the ethnographer and her research, also underlies and motivates this account. What categories did the subjects of my research use to describe me and my work? What possibilities for integration did they offer me, a stranger in the first instance? When and under what conditions was I accepted or rejected as a person? What boundaries did they set for me? Were there moments when their perspectives met or even aligned with mine? What knowledge, what terms and theories did they give me? What alliances did we enter into, and what resistance arose in them as well as in me? Were they able to recognize themselves in my texts? And how did I deal with the names that they gave me? Ape, fool or clown, witch, spy, evil spirit and cannibal—these jarring designations given to me during my time in Africa unsettled, confounded, and hurt me. What power and dynamic did these names gain

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during my research and in writing about it?

As became clear to me later in the course of my ethnographic work, the names already had a long history. They are more or less classic stereotypes of the foreign, which emerged in intercultural encounters described in travel reports from the 19th century (occasionally much earlier, even), and which the involved parties—the colonized and the colonizers—slung back and forth. (Colonial) ethnologists are not the only ones who carried out the practice of "Othering"; the subjects of their research also "othered" foreigners—ethnologists included. They called them cannibals, had them dance as "foreign spirits" in exorcism rituals, placed them on altars as colon figures, and derided them with names.

The names given me thus provide a view into the experience of being perceived as the Other, and demonstrate how the subjects of my research took possession of me through their categorizations. Contrary to my own self-perception, intentions, and research plans, they multiplied versions of me that, even in dreams, I never would have imagined. But perhaps it's precisely these kinds of destabilizing experiences that enable an understanding of alterity .

I thus present myself to the reader as not so much an autonomous subject as a precisely observed object in a field of coincidences, uncertainties, conflicts, and highly imbalanced relations of power. Nevertheless, I am the one who's writing and describing. I am the one who, as a subject looking back, is in a relation of difference to the many foreign versions of myself. And I am the one pursuing the genre of travel and expedition literature, this "trash literature"—as Lévi-Strauss described it—but occasionally breaking with its conventions or satirizing it, as well. I am both victim and

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actor in foreign comedies and dramas, and I descend, as an ape or a cannibal, into ever-lower genres—without a lofty reversal at the end.

In truth there is more at play here than reversal. The names I was given were not so much an expression of the others' Other, as I assumed for at least the duration of my first research stay. To a much greater extent, they stood for two-way reflections of the Other and the Self. In the long history of colonial encounters and confrontations, the ape was an incendiary, jumping back and forth between various actors. It was both an insult and a subversive figure at once, embedded in a hierarchy of alterities, in a colonial mosaic of attraction and rejection. When the elders of the Tugen Hills called me "ape," it was not only a reference to my ignorant, wild, and apish behavior, as I had originally assumed; it was also a riposte of the colonial degradation and discrimination that they themselves had experienced. The names obviously were no longer anchored solely in what we refer to as "their own cultural context." The ostensibly clear division between them and us, between their notion of the Other and ours, has become instable. One and the other are already intertwined. Thus, in light of the long history of globalization, exchange, and appropriation, the simple reversal of perspectives that I introduced at the beginning of this text has to make room for a range of interwoven alterities; as if in a kaleidoscope, they break, reflect, and swirl around, yet are difficult to isolate and forever give rise to new deviations.

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Bronisław Malinowski, the founding father of modern ethnology, required his students to spend at least two years in a foreign country. My research stays in East Africa were much longer; with breaks, I returned to the same place again and again for a period of seven to eight years. Not wanting to leave my husband and child alone for too long, I usually stayed in Africa for two to four months at a time. The period back at home gave me perspective, I was able to read and think, in order to then go back to Africa with new questions. My disappearing and repeatedly returning to the field site turned out to be an unexpected way to build trust. I didn't leave to never be seen again, but came back; my return was not an empty promise, since I also brought the gifts I had said I would. In terms of coming back, I proved myself dependable. As it was, the back and forth between Europe and Africa gave my life a fixed rhythm of disruption.

While ethnographic field studies can be described as a form of possession—the foreign culture takes possession of me and the subject/object relations partly dissolve—writing the monograph at home entails a recovery of the power lost in the field. Michael Harbsmeier has described this writing act as a "homecoming ritual," through which the repatriate is "cleansed" and reintegrates themselves. While in the field the ethnographer and the ethnographed ideally become close and together invent the culture that is the subject of the ethnography, during the writing process an exorcism takes place, and often enough friends and conversational partners from the foreign country are relegated to the background. One's colleagues, for or in opposition to whom one writes, move into the center instead. By partly editing out her conversational partners from the field, the ethnologist

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claims authorship; she fully and utterly re-enters the academic discourse, which she had never entirely left in the first place. She remains caught in the research report genre, and thus in a written discourse with its colonial and post-colonial hierarchical orders, as well as in or precisely in their inversion.

Nevertheless, in the following I report not so much on the process of ethnographic writing as I do on the afterlife of ethnographic texts. They not only make rounds in academic circles, but also find their way—in translation—back to the ethnographed, as a gift in return. After all, the conversation and the examination don't come to an end once the monograph has been published. The texts, full of the ethnographed's knowledge, find their way back to the source; the subjects of the research will (hopefully) read them and then, if they care to, they can take revenge, air criticism, rewrite the text, assimilate it, or even pick up writing where the author left off.

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Reciprocal information and knowledge about one another have been reaching the peripheries of our world for quite some time. Each region that I completed ethnographic fieldwork in had already been visited and studied by other ethnologists. In the responses of my local conversation partners I therefore was met not only by purportedly authentic knowledge, but occasionally also by the traces of my colleagues. In this way, ethnologists and the subjects of their research are both a priori familiar and known to one another and strangers at the same time. Their histories are already tightly interwoven with the histories of the ethno-

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graphed—they are transformations of one another. In the future our work may be to determine as precisely as possible, in a process of never-ending reflexivity, above all the commonalities between the various versions, as opposed to the differences.

Through the accounts of my four ethnographic research stays in Kenya and Uganda—spanning a period of nearly fifty years—this book also offers a window into the history of ethnology, the transformations within the power structures and debates, and provides a more or less implicit examination of its theories, methods, media, and their critique. It is also an attempt to decolonialize ethnographic work. The (post-)colonial conditions indeed changed radically in the course of those fifty years, but the "weight of the world," as Pierre Bourdieu describes globalization, is far from behind us. On the contrary, we've seen and continue to see the emergence of new forms of dependence and colonialization, which have created a state of destitution that in some regions is perhaps even greater today than it was under classical colonialism. Under these conditions, decolonialization will never be achieved.

Although I present the four different field studies chronologically in their own sections, each individual report itself remains fragmentary, jumping around in time, so that the distant past might occasionally seem nearer than recent history. The individual fragments are like vignettes. Because the monographs that I wrote on my various field studies were published—with an exception—in English (and French), this text is also a return to the German language for me. It draws substantially on previously published texts which, rewritten and expanded, receive a new focus here.

Writing an autobiography means moving backwards to

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arrive at the beginning. That's why the ape has a reprise in the epilogue. It appears once again in its ambiguity, as a "savage," a mimicker, a researcher and an "academic ape"—as Franz Kafka had it in his "Report to an Academy" from 1917.

[...]

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[From "In the Tugen Hills of Northwest Kenya" (pp. 31–37)]

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I first visited the Tugen Hills in 1978. Kenya had declared independence fifteen years earlier. Jomo Kenyatta, an ethnologist who studied and wrote his doctorate under Malinowski in London, became president and, as I learned only later, his vice president Daniel arap Moi was from the Tugen Hills. A mood of optimism (still) prevailed, buouyed by the hope for modernization and development (for everyone).

In accord with the standards of "salvage ethnography" that prevailed then, I was nevertheless interested not so much in an African modernity as in its antithesis, in traditions as untouched by colonialism as possible. That's why I chose an area in the northern Tugen Hills, where residents "still lived as their fathers had." I settled in the village of Bartabwa and began my ethnographic work, clueless and relatively ignorant.

Bartabwa was indeed a colonial invention which had served as a center of trade and administration, but most of the population lived remotely in the hills, in scattered circular homesteads. Bartabwa consisted of a dusty, unpaved road with deep potholes and furrows. Constructed in the late 1950s, in the rainy season it would transform into a barely navigable mudslide. It was lined on either side by "modern" square wooden houses with corrugated metal roofs, recalling a scene from a Wild West town. Some of the wooden houses accommodated small shops selling batteries, flashlights, salt, cigarettes, candles, soap—above all the detergent Omo—and diverse canned goods. Since, barring a few ex-

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ceptions, the customers were very poor, they sold loose or even half-cigarettes. Other houses functioned as small bars serving beer, tee, chapati and bean stew, potatoes and maize porridge. There was also a market square where twice a week women from the area sold vegetables, fruits, and prepared foods. In one house Bartabwa's only corpulent resident, the chief, had his office. In addition there was a maize mill, a primary school, and a health clinic.

Two months after my arrival, Kenyatta died and Daniel arap Moi assumed power. The inhabitants of the Tugen Hills thus became "the President's people." Suddenly large sums of money began to flow into the region, and a rapid development took place. Most notably, an elegant modern asphalt road was constructed, which nevertheless saw more goat traffic than automobiles. It connected the south to Nakuru, the next-largest city. In Kabarnet, the district capital at the foot of the Tugen Hills, three pompous buildings modelled after ancient temples were erected at lightning speed: a post office, a supermarket, and a school, which made the surrounding area appear all the more wretched.

The new president Daniel arap Moi was from a village called Kabartonjo, located approximately at the center of the Tugen Hills, which stretched from north to south. He was born there, and up to there the asphalt road extended, and not a step further. The inhabitants of the north, Bartabwa included, for the most part gained nothing from the new road, the influx of money and the rapid development. They had to serve as the spurned counter-image in a nation-state that propagandized "progress" and "development"; they were still "poor," "primitive," "underdeveloped," and "backward." In addition to the spatial difference a temporal difference opened up. Although inhabitants of the north

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and south existed simultaneously, and although they the occupied a common space, the Tugen Hills, the north was forced into a state of "before," and "not yet." Alongside the temporalization of this counter-image arose a dynamic of negation, disparagement and marginalization, which ultimately—backed by the promise of modernization and progress—slated it for demolition. Here the world was once again divided into so-called developed and underdeveloped regions, the division was confirmed—in distortion and dependence.

The inhabitants of Bartabwa most definitely took note of this. When a few years later they faced a severe drought and the government sent no aid, they referred to the famine as "nyayo." Nyayo was the slogan the new president had chosen for his acquisition of power. It stood for his "philosophy of peace, love, and unity." But the president and his hangers-on not only engaged in a "politics of the belly," of corruption and plunder; in order to stay in power they also carried out a vigorous campaign to politicize and even militarize ethnicity, laying the groundwork for the violent ethnic "cleansings" of the 1990s. In this, the inhabitants of the Tugen Hills were both perpetrators and victims.

It's no coincidence that in the 1980s Bartabwa's residents referred to their own national government as "chumbek," a designation for the Europeans who colonized Kenya and the Tugen Hills. They evidently saw no reason to believe that the period of colonialization, oppression, and exploitation was over. Despite the change in rule, for them the colonial period had never ended. They didn't acknowledge the "post" in postcolonial.

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In Kabarnet my son and I caught a matatu, also called a bush taxi, headed for Bartabwa. It was an ancient, rickety Jeep, the floor riddled with holes; fully loaded, when it veered left or right on the bumpy, cratered road, the respective side door sprung open. As became clear on the drive, the wheels were not mounted properly: studs were missing. We had the safest seats, up front in the middle beside the driver, so we couldn't fall out when the doors opened. The man on my right tried to hold the door shut, periodically sticking his head out the window to watch the front wheel and warn the driver in time. Sure enough, it detached and we had to pull over so the driver could swap it out for another one, which was nevertheless also mounted by only three studs. We drove on until this wheel, too, detached.

Despite these glitches the passengers were in an outstanding mood. They bantered, told jokes, and named the remaining studs after famous warriors known for their bravery—perhaps hoping that the studs would also turn out to be brave and resistant. But the naming ceremony didn't help, and there was no additional spare wheel. We were stranded. Around three hours later, another matatu pulled up and took us along to Bartabwa. We arrived and exited the vehicle. We were visitors, there uninvited. We were foreigners who had to be taken in as guests.

At the time I didn't know what my research permit was worth—if anything at all—or to what extent it would translate into protection and support. I only knew that my main contact person was the government representative, the chief. We found his office on the main road; I showed him my research permit and after briefly deliberating, the somewhat surprised, yet friendly chief provided my son

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Henrik and me with an empty, partly dilapidated hut. Henrik, seven at the time, was a Berlin alternative-day-care kid with an anti-authoritarian upbringing—open, curios, and shamelessly bold. Because up to that point the European visitors to Bartabwa had all been adults—mostly Catholic missionaries—he rose to the level of exotic attraction. The inhabitants of the hills came a great distance to lay eyes on him. Henrik helped out in the small shops, attracting customers; together with the other children he guarded the maize fields, herded goats and sheep, learned to juggle and wield a bow and arrow like Tarzan. He was showered with gifts, was even given a goat. Unlike me, he learned the local language in no time and in the evenings would give me the gossip. They didn't name him after me, as was customary in the Tugen Hills, but called me "Mama Henry," after him.

As I later found out, women and men receive various names throughout the course of their lives. The ritual name-giving is an (auto-) biographical practice. Shortly after birth, a child is given the name of an ancestor in a "little" ritual. Ahead of time the elders consult an oracle to find an ancestor who "led a good life" and is willing to give the child his name. Each lineage has at its disposal only a finite number of names, which circulate among kin, the dead and the living; there are no new names. The names themselves are more enduring than the people who bear them. And they are binding: along with the name, the child as the future assumes the past of one, and thus many, of his ancestors. To an extent, he lives in reverse, since he has to do justice to his ancestor's name, to align his life with his, to repeat it. But the ancestor, whose name is so powerful it determines the life of his descendant, is dead. His "life" belongs to the living; they can bend it and use it to suit their own objec-

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tives. If the relationship between child and ancestor turns out to be unfortunate, the ancestor is swapped out. He has to prove himself to be the right one, by guaranteeing the child's wellbeing. If he doesn't succeed, his name is eliminated and forgotten, and a different ancestor has to step in with his name.

While a child's first name comes from the women, a few years later the men gave him a second one: a "goat name," after the goat that the child receives as a gift. In the course of a lifetime, sometimes the name given by the women prevails, sometimes the goat name. Occasionally, however, the child answers to both names; then the women call him by their name for him, and the men use the goat name.

But from time to time parents give their children yet a third name, referencing an event that took place at the time of the child's birth. Many children are called Kemei, for example—Hunger—because they were born in a time of famine. One child was named Chumba, European, because a European was present for the birth. I met a child whose name was Spoon, because on the day of the birth the parents saw a spoon for the first time.

Whereas the ancestral name integrates the child into the family genealogy as a repetition, the event name (like a nickname) emphasizes his singularity and individuality, the characteristics that distinguish him, but which also—unlike the ancestral name—will disappear at his death.

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Because I returned to Bartabwa regularly until 1985, the elders assigned a young man named Naftali Kipsang to accompany me on all of my undertakings; he was supposed

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to protect me and served as my translator, but above all, he controlled me. Kipsang was also called "Professor"; he was an avid reader and carried around a book as a token of his erudition. A pen could always be found in his hair. Together with the elders he decided what and whom I was allowed to see and what I was allowed to learn. I paid him a salary on par with a local teacher's. But the money hardly guaranteed his loyalty to me, a stranger. I quickly gave up the illusion of having control over my work.

Kipsang, my chivalrous chaperone, became one of the most coveted conversational partners around. When we returned to the village after meeting with one of the elders, he made the rounds. He was invited to beer in exchange for the latest story about me. They were highly entertaining; I heard the roaring laughter follow him from house to house.

In the years that followed, Kipsang and I became friends. He was a skillful mediator who knew how to maneuver between my interests and the varied interests of the elders. He was increasingly interested in his own culture and its rituals in particular, and became an ethnographer of the Tugen Hills himself. We became accomplices and mirrored each other in the various roles that we took on. While he advanced to ethnographer of his own culture, I became the primitive, the ape—but with a potential for upward mobility.

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