LOCATING THE FIELD: THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF MEDICAL RESEARCH IN AFRICA

An exploratory conference
Kilifi, Kenya
December 4th – 9th 2005

CALL FOR PAPERS

Field research in Africa
Medical field studies in Africa have for long provided a laboratory for biological, medical and administrative knowledge and practice. In addition to the development, testing and dissemination of measures to control and alleviate ill-health, these studies have generated networks of social relations between researchers and researched people, among scientists and within study communities and the wider public. Linking different and disparate people, things and places, these networks transcend the neat scientific separation between subjects and objects of study to form wider collectives of knowledge production that embrace ‘study populations’ and ‘scientific communities’.

Despite their academic interest and applied relevance – not least in relation to the ethics and politics of overseas biomedical research – these social processes of scientific fieldwork in Africa have scarcely been studied by anthropologists. This conference attempts to consolidate and delineate this potential field of anthropological inquiry, in order to differentiate it from, as well as to link it to, efforts by other disciplines to understand the social and practical concerns of medical research in Africa. Moreover, the conference will help to develop a research agenda that can contribute to and challenge international debates on the practice and ethics of overseas medical research.

Ethnographies of medicine and modern Africa
The ethnography of medical research in Africa is linked to at least three principal areas of social and cultural anthropology: Africanist ethnography, medical anthropology and science studies. Africanist ethnography – in particular the study of social change or ‘African modernities’ – emphasises the historicity of present African social life and explores creations that arise from modern institutions, capitalism, and colonial and post-colonial transformations. The anthropology of medicine in Africa has sometimes ventured into similar terrain, but has often a more localised and bodily focus, and a more emphatically ethnographic mode of study. Both forms of Africanist anthropology contribute to the understanding of African bodies, persons and changing sociality. Together they lay the ground for the study of medical field research as social process.

Ethnographies of science
The third relevant area of anthropological inquiry is the ethnographic study of scientists at work. Most anthropological and sociological ‘science studies’ focus on Euro-American scientific institutions. Taking the ‘science studies’ approach out to African field research sites changes the perspective: In addition to the scientists and their laboratories, science studies’ field of research includes here also the African communities, which social anthropology originally studied. These communities’ notions of person, body, relations and knowledge often differ from those of the natural sciences, leading to mutual misunderstandings and creative reinterpretations. The objects of laboratory work, which ‘science studies’ focused their interest upon, and the human subjects of field studies get entangled with each other in African trial collectives. Scientific work and everyday life of all members of these collectives present themselves as one field of anthropological inquiry.

This conference will bring together Africanist ethnographies and anthropological studies of science, in the hope that this will inspire both, and help us to learn about scientific work and about African sociality and post-colonial African societies.

Histories of medical science in Africa
While anthropologists only recently discovered medical research as a subject, it has been studied for some time by historians of medicine and colonialism, sometimes using anthropological methods and theory. Given the significance of colonial and post-colonial history for the character of tropical medicine and for contemporary research projects in tropical Africa, historians will play a major role in this conference and in guiding the ethnography of medical research in Africa.

Conversations between sciences and humanities
These are the main themes that this conference will bring together to debate medical field research: Africanist ethnography interested in modernity
and/or medicine, the anthropology of science (in Africa), and the historiography of medicine and science in Africa. This dialogue would lack orientation were it not to take into account clinical and scientific researchers – essential interlocutors in this debate – health policy experts, and the social scientists, philosophers and doctors who have engaged in discussions on the ethics and politics of overseas medical research. This conference will engage anthropologists and historians with these innovative, often interdisciplinary, researchers, in order to find out what anthropology could learn from and contribute to their debates, and what medical scientists and policymakers expect from anthropologists.

The conference should contribute not only to improved anthropological understandings of medical research, but also to better theories and practices of medical research. The fact that this conference will be held in the KEMRI/Wellcome Trust Research Laboratories in Kilifi, one of the major long-term medical field research units in sub-Saharan Africa, and one with particular interest in research ethics at that, is a particular asset in this regard.  

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Few anthropologists have so far conducted ethnographic fieldwork specifically on medical research in Africa. We therefore also invite anthropologists and other social scientists, who have worked in health research, or have found medical researchers in the communities they studied, to turn their experiences into ethnographies by adding theoretical reflection or fieldwork. Secondly, we call upon anthropologists who have studied medical research elsewhere, to share their insights apply their ideas to the African situation. And we invite scholars from other disciplines including the medical sciences and bioethics, to contribute to this conference, in order to draw upon, utilize and guide the anthropological study of medical research in Africa. Last, but not least, we invite students and junior scholars with an interest in Africanist anthropology, medical research, medical history or bioethics to participate and shape their research plans in this new and exciting field.

The papers should take up the leads from one or several of the areas outlined above (the anthropology of Africa, medicine or science, or the history of medicine in Africa), combine them, where appropriate, with reflections on the ethics, politics and practical challenges of research, and apply them to concrete ethnographic material. The range of possible areas of study is wide. It could reach from the ethnography of an ethics committee to that of computer modelling of disease, from village conflicts triggered by field studies to family life among cosmopolitan scientists, from the realities of international research collaboration to the relationship between faith and science, from mosquitoes in the bush to mouse-models in the metropolitan university. This field is defined by its links to a particular knowledge-practice – medical-scientific fieldwork in Africa – and not by disciplinary or geographical boundaries.

The conference programme will consist of longer lectures, short presentations and discussions of original research (papers are previously circulated), and interdisciplinary roundtable discussions. These will be grouped in broad one-day themes of both applied and theoretical interest, such as, for example, knowledge and communication, consent and cooperation, policy and politics, transactions and benefits, or history and memory (themes will be identified based on the submitted abstracts), which will facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue and link theoretical and more applied approaches.

Field science in Africa makes new and surprising connections. It is in this spirit of exploring new links that we call for innovative papers from everybody concerned, irrespective of disciplinary background, to engage in an interdisciplinary anthropological and Africanist discussion.

Please send your 3-400 word abstracts, a short description of your research and a 1 page curriculum vitae to us before the 1st of April 2005. We will review all applications in April and make the programme. All participants’ papers (4000-8000 words) must be submitted by 1st of October 2005, and will be circulated among the participants before the conference.

If you are in doubt, whether your interests are relevant to this conference (and vice versa), please contact the organisers.

Due to funding limitations, only a limited number of applicants can be invited and even fewer can be (partially) funded. Please indicate on your application, whether you would be able to fund your own participation or part of it, specifying what kind of material support you would require in order to be able to participate. The organisers will make an effort to provide support to suitable applicants.

Please send inquiries and abstracts to: trials-ethnography@lshtm.ac.uk
(Catherine Molyneux & P.Wenzel Geissler)