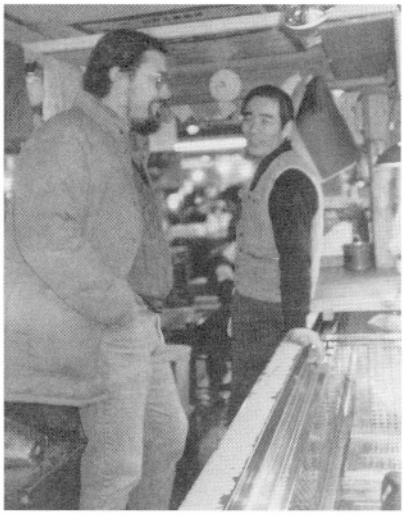

Theodore C. Bestor talking with a tuna wholesaler at Tsukiji, ca. 1995.

THEODORE C. BESTOR

Inquisitive Observation: Following Networks in Urban Fieldwork

Finding and Following Networks

Finding my first field site was a daunting task. The second time, my site eventually found me, but it took me quite a while to realize it.

At the start of dissertation fieldwork in 1979, I spent several frustrating weeks searching for the perfect Tokyo neighborhood in which to study community institutions and local social networks. Finally, a fellow graduate student, Christena Turner, suggested I should "choose a network, not a neighborhood."[1] Her excellent advice was right on target: determine where my contacts are strongest and where introductions from existing contacts could be most effective, and go there; don't try to find an "ideal" place and *then* try to find a connection into it. I realize now that networks choose me (or choose to accept me) much more than I can possibly select them. The trick to fieldwork is figuring out how to harness networks that present themselves, as well as how to expand upon (and sometimes escape from) them.

During my research on Miyamoto-chō in 1979–1981 and in many return

visits over the years since, my networks have snowballed because I more or less put myself in the path of contacts. I had the good sense (or good luck) to follow up what serendipity offered at the start. I "found" Miyamoto-chō because Dr. Machida, a friend with whose family my wife and I were staying during our search for a field site, suggested that we look at the place where he himself grew up. Through a chain of introductions—starting from Mrs. Machida, through a PTA friend of hers who was a real estate agent, finally to a local shopkeeper, Mr. Fukuda, who was himself close to Dr. Machida's father and brother (but *not* to the Mrs. Machida we knew)—we ended up renting an apartment above the Fukudas' shop in Miyamoto-chō.

So we started with a handful of contacts, but these quickly expanded as we encountered people in varied settings: sometimes spontaneously, sometimes by design. A week or so after we moved into the Fukudas' apartment, the neighborhood association held its annual *Bon Odori* festival, a midsummer outdoor dance at the local elementary school. The Fukuda family took us along and introduced us to a dozen local leaders, but the formal greetings were stiff and, no doubt, so was I.

I started to make informal contacts the next morning when I ventured up to the schoolyard early in the morning to photograph the festival lanterns on which donations by local residents were listed. While I was there, three guys arrived to take down the stage and lanterns. Feeling somewhat shy about my own presence taking pictures of an empty schoolyard, I went over and said hello. They started pulling the stage apart, and I lent a hand. A couple of hours later we were done, and they invited me along for lunch and a beer back at the neighborhood association hall. This chance to get to meet people came not from any conscious planning on my part but from being willing to pitch in unasked and stick out a morning of manual labor. Two of the guys I met that morning became extremely close friends over the years and introduced me in many ways into their own circles of family, friends, and contacts. (Twenty years later, my closest friend of the three is dead—a sad reminder that fieldwork takes place in real life, grief included. Andō Yoshifumi, to whom this volume is dedicated, died in early 2001. Nothing I can say can express my feeling of loss at his death.)

Another casual encounter brought me into contact with someone else who has remained a close friend ever since: Mr. Kuroda, a shopkeeper who had married into a local family (as a *mukoyōshi,* or adopted son-in-law). We met because I went to almost every local event to take pictures, and he was a camera buff. At the elementary school's athletic field day in October of my first year of fieldwork, he came over to chat casually about my camera equipment (which didn't hold a candle to his own). He mentioned that his three kids talked about the young foreign couple in the neighborhood. At that point I didn't have a clue who his kids were, but he invited Vickey and me to share the picnic lunch his wife had prepared. When we saw his wife, we immediately recognized her and their kids from many other neighborhood outings. Thereafter, Mrs. Kuroda frequently invited us to join her family for casual dinners, and Mr. Kuroda and I became regular drinking buddies. He was a friendly guy and would always help out with local events if asked, but he kept to himself and figured the business of the neighborhood association was really in the hands of local big shots, not him. The Kurodas became our informal sponsors into local circles quite distinct from the neighborhood association, those centered on the elementary school and Mrs. Kuroda's networks of childhood friends.

Increasingly, I met people through casual local interactions as well as through actively participating in any event or activity to which I could legitimately get access. Anthropologists often describe the fruits of this kind of connectedness as "participant observation," but the term is too vague to convey much about what actually takes place during ethnographic research. In reality, I cannot simply decide to participate and observe. It takes a long time to develop the access to be a "real" participant in local social life. Most fieldworkers legitimately cannot assume the social obligations or relationships required of "real" participants. Furthermore, "real" participants in most settings do not systematically compile information on the passing scene. Finally, observation is too passive a term to describe the activity of constantly asking questions about what's going on. So I prefer to think of what I do as "inquisitive observation."[2]

When I started my research in Miyamoto-chō, I had a topic in mind and found networks (and they found me). In a later research project, networks led me to the site, the Tsukiji wholesale seafood market in central Tokyo—the world's largest market for fresh seafood—and only then to the realization that I had found an ideal project.

I first visited Tsukiji to interview a few wholesalers about their connections with retailers and to ask them questions about supply and demand and market access, in connection with research I planned on the distribution system. Earlier, I had done research on distribution channels for whale meat, examining the routes along which this now controversial delicacy travels from small coastal whaling communities, like Ayukawa in Miyagi Prefecture and

Abashiri in Hokkaido, to regional markets for local consumers, and to metropolitan markets for the restaurant trade.[3] From these local markets I began to understand how a national network of markets was integrated through daily business ties. And people in the whale business introduced me to a few Tsukiji traders whom I could interview about the structure of the market at the top of the heap. I began to look around for more information about Tsukiji from a wider perspective.

An official I knew at the Tokyo Metropolitan Government suggested I meet a colleague, Mr. Shimizu, who was a senior administrator at the marketplace. Mr. Shimizu was a career bureaucrat who had rotated through dozens of positions, landing in the marketplace only a year or so before my visit to his office. He was a newcomer himself and appeared to be still fascinated by the world in which he found himself a powerful figure. Even more, he seemed happy to find me sitting before him, a younger foreign researcher asking him to explain the market.

What began as background inquiry for my research on shopkeepers along dozens of shopping streets dotted across Tokyo's landscape abruptly shifted —foreground and background reversing irreversibly—as I sat in Shimizu's office. He outlined for me a brief history of Tsukiji and explained the basic patterns of transactions that ebb and flow among the market's seven large auction houses and its hundreds of small-scale wholesalers, and among these small wholesalers and their clients, the fishmongers and sushi chefs scattered across the city who were typical of the shopkeepers I had been studying.

Gradually, his matter-of-fact recital caught my full attention. Details snapped into place, and Tsukiji came into sharp focus. What particularly struck me was the interplay he described between a complex economic system (in this case the market's auction system) and the market's small-scale wholesalers—*nakaoroshi gyōsha,* or intermediate wholesalers—and the ways in which the development of market institutions had affected and modified the balance of power over time between large corporations and family enterprises. Mr. Shimizu's explanations suddenly anchored my still-unfocused ideas about the social embeddedness of the distribution system into a tangible social world that I could explore.

Excitedly, I accepted his offer of introductions, and within a week I met officials of a major trade federation that represents the 1,677 stalls occupied by intermediate wholesalers. Federation officials were polite and helpful and showed me around the marketplace. I doubt they expected me to show up again and again, but when I did they rewarded my enthusiasm. Extraordinarily, they gave me access to documents, showed me around the marketplace, arranged interviews for me, and introduced me to many of their members. However, I was aware from the outset that the market was an enormously large and complex institution—market administrators estimate that some sixty thousand people work or do business there each day—and I wanted to avoid being somehow boxed in by reliance on a single source of access.

My desire to find other points of entry was not motivated by an attempt to try to cover everything in this vast place. Even in the early months of fieldwork, I realized that the intermediate wholesalers occupy a particularly pivotal role in the day-to-day operations of the marketplace, both buying and selling within the space of a few hours. Any anthropological research necessarily takes a group or groups of actors as occupying center stage; the stage set by immediate wholesalers frames the "point of view" of my work at Tsukiji. Another researcher approaching Tsukiji with different questions could just as easily focus on the role of workers in the marketplace, the structure of the Japanese fishing industry, the political influence of fishing interests in affecting policy-making, or the impact of consumers' and environmental movements on food distribution. I started—and continue—with the attempt to understand the market as it appears to those who show up each morning at the auctions with money to spend.

My networks of contacts in Miyamoto-chō expanded in part by playing the role of participant-observer. As a bona fide resident of the neighborhood I had both ample opportunities and a certain legitimate standing to play just that role. Guys in Miyamoto-chō were happy to let me share in the drudgery of cleaning up after festivals. In contrast, however, in a busy marketplace there is no legitimate participant-observer role for a wannabe researcher. No one at the Tsukiji market was going to let me carve a tuna or cast a casual bid into the auctions just so I could experience it myself. (At Tsukiji I first realized that the accurate label for my ethnographic technique is "inquisitive observation," since opportunities for "real" participation were limited.) So my networks had to be created through more formal introductions. And although many of my networks at Tsukiji expanded in snowballing fashion just as in Miyamoto-chō, I self-consciously worked on a technique for gaining access to people at Tsukiji by what I call "parachuting," dropping into the midst of things from multiple entry points.

In addition to my introductions from Mr. Shimizu to the wholesalers' federation, I went back to my whaling connections and followed out a cou-

ple of lines of contacts through that avenue. I sought out help from people in Miyamoto-chō. Mrs. Machida, my early guide to Miyamoto-chō, knew a woman (through the PTA for their daughters' exclusive private school) whose husband owned a Tsukiji stall that dealt in dried fish. The owner of the sushi bar where I went drinking with Miyamoto-chō's leaders introduced me to some of his suppliers. The vegetable dealer around the corner from my apartment took me through Tsukiji's vegetable auctions one morning. I sought out multiple entry points from as many angles as I could muster. Some led me only short distances, others proved to be gold mines. And I could never predict which would lead me where.

My entry into these networks was based on introductions from outsiders who only knew intermediaries or one or two possible entry points into Tsukiji. Nonetheless, I was able to follow these leads to a social space where the connections among people were overlapping, diffuse, multidirectional, and multistranded. In other words, at the outset, the people who were providing me with introductions really had no idea where those introductions would lead me, nor did I. Of networks there can be no end, certainly no single end, but I realized I had made it to a sufficiently *inside* place when I found myself in the midst of a highly interconnected social world in which most of my contacts all knew each other in many different contexts. Because each was closely and complexly interconnected to others in this tight social nexus, once I began to circulate in these circles, it ceased to matter very much the order in which I was introduced to them or by whom. And, through these chains of introductions I also gained access to several locations where I could hang out more or less on a daily basis—the offices of a social club run by a talkative old woman, Mrs. Yamazaki, who was visited every day by a couple of dozen traders, and several stalls in the market place where I could sit asking questions, sipping tea, and watching what people were doing. In settings like these, vouched for by the networks that had led me there, I could hang out, inquisitively participating, engaging in apparently casual, apparently unstructured interviews with whomever showed up. (I also found places "offstage"—a couple of coffee shops in the outer market—where I could retreat to write notes, think about questions, or just get out of the way when my presence obviously was not wanted.)

I worked hard to expand my networks among intermediate wholesalers and discovered that the face-to-face business they were in—with its strong orientation toward introductions based on prior interactions—made it easy

to approach them, easy to establish connections. I cultivated more and more focused networks as my research led me to understand the position of intermediate wholesalers, and as these networks picked me up and passed me along, the centrality of this particular stratum became more self-evident to me. Thus following one sort of network determined that my research project would see the marketplace from the perspective of intermediate wholesalers. This is not to say that I necessarily accept or agree with their own interpretations of what goes on, but that I take their place in the market as a starting point for understanding the whole structure. If I had expanded my networks among supermarket buyers or sushi chefs, auctioneers or truck drivers, provincial fisheries cooperatives or day laborers, government bureaucrats or executives in large fisheries corporations, undoubtedly the point of view of the study would have been different.

These network choices do not result in ethnography that is incomplete, in the sense of lacking something that additional fieldwork could have provided. On the contrary, both my study of Miyamoto-chō and my study of Tsukiji—like any ethnography—are necessarily partial.

Reading the Labels

Exploring a research setting—figuring out what its social dimensions and boundaries are—is always a challenge. I often start out with the feeling that I am standing on a tiny outcropping of known territory, surrounded by huge white spaces. Fortunately, I can take advantage of the fact that Japan is a well-labeled society. Signs are everywhere and often on almost everyone. From these, I can collect rough-and-ready information on the local social environment, a sort of ethnoscience of categories. What kinds (categories) of people are here? What are the jobs or social roles they fill? What sorts of organizations exist? What are the social, political, or geographic boundaries where one institution leaves off and another picks up? A lot of this information is written on the surface of social life.

Take doorways, for example. Walking slowly down a side street in many neighborhoods, glancing at doorways and shop entries, I can pick up a lot about the character of local social life. Family names on small tablets by the door give me clues about multiple-generation families. If several households of the same surname live directly adjacent to one another, it's a reasonable starting assumption that the land has been in the same family for some time,

perhaps subdivided several times with the passing of generations. Some doorpost plaques announce almost universal things like the payment of NHK fees; others tip off political party membership. Some announce that the occupants hold some local leadership position; others reveal that a death has occurred within the last year. The amulets or charms that decorate doorposts may demonstrate affinities for particular shrines or membership in specific religious groups.

Other streetscape hints can be equally telling. Before an election campaign officially begins, posters for local candidates may suggest the rough outlines of political support networks. Where styles of decorative street lamps or cheap, seasonal plastic decorations along a shopping street change abruptly, a neighborhood's economic boundary may run. Where the lanterns hung to celebrate a festival end, there may be a shrine parish boundary.

I pay attention to little things: styles of dress, uniforms, company badges, signs, logos, decorative motifs, even spatial orientations. At Tsukiji, I gradually learned that I can tell what people's jobs are and what organizations they belong to by the hats they wear. Literally, the colors and styles of baseball caps distinguish their wearers as auctioneers, buyers, or regulators, and also differentiate them by company and commodity specialization. In Miyamoto-chō, I could recognize at a glance local school uniforms. In other settings, I memorize company lapel pins to keep track of who's who in large meetings. And almost automatically, I count the people in a meeting and try to figure out whether their seating arrangements and demeanor toward one another indicate anything about relative social status (usually, it does).

Of course, learning to attach the proper significance to such indicators takes a long time, and these data are not ends in themselves. Looking for signs is a good way to gather material for later questions. The labels of Japanese daily life are not always self-explanatory, and it requires a great deal of patient ethnographic research—including interviews and local inquisitive observation—to decode and then contextualize the signs, labels, and other visual cues that present themselves. But once their significance becomes clear, a lot of social data are out there in the open, and I can roughly map a social setting with quick visual inspections.

In Miyamoto-chō, I spent many afternoons studying the inscriptions on various monuments at the local Shinto shrine, such as the stone guardian lions donated by the local volunteer fire department in the 1920s inscribed with the names of all its leaders and members at the time. I pored over several dozen stone fence posts carved with the names of local residents who donated money for the shrine's rebuilding in the 1970s. These inscriptions, along with other data from interviews, helped me put together a broad generation-to-generation picture of families' involvement in community institutions—a who's who carved in stone.

Information is on public display in many other settings as well. In many sushi bars, for example, large, wooden frames (called *senjagaku*) hold sets of decorative plaques given by people close to the shop's proprietor. Some of the individual plaques are contributed by long-time patrons of the sushi bar; others—marked with the distinctive calligraphic swirl of *uogashi* (fish quay), the traditional logo of the Tsukiji marketplace—are donated by a chef's suppliers. For people in the trade, the chef's professional and personal affiliations are splashed prominently across the wall for anyone to read and interpret if they care to pay attention.

In both Miyamoto-chō and Tsukiji I found that bulletin boards and *kairanban* (circulating message boards, passed from household to household or stall to stall) contain enormous amounts of local institutional information, often quite detailed. (In Miyamoto-chō, the local photo shop owner benignly regarded me as a nondemanding profit center for all the rolls of film I "wasted" on bulletin boards; now that I have a pocket digital camera, I regularly take snapshots of every local bulletin board I see.)

Sometimes learning to read relevant orthography requires special effort. At Tsukiji, to figure out what companies people were talking about, I had to learn rebus-like logos (known as *yagō* or *kigō*) that wholesalers use both as trademarks and as company names. Many people are familiar with corporate names like Mitsubishi (literally, "three diamonds") and its trademark of three diamonds, or Mitsui (three wells) represented by the character for "three" surrounded by the character for "well." In the fishing and food industries, these kinds of symbols are everywhere: one of Tsukiji's large auction houses is known universally as Marunaka because its logo is a circle *(maru)* surrounding the character for middle *(naka);* a stall known as Akiwa symbolizes itself with the elegantly simple logo of an *almost* complete circle (an "open" *[aki]* "circle" *[wa]*); a broker whose logo consists of three triangles does business as "Mitsuuoroku" ("three scales," the triangle being the conventional icon for a fish scale *[uoroku]*). Learning this specialized iconography of business symbols was an aspect of the market's visual cues that was essential for me to decipher Tsukiji's social world. And once I began

to master it, the understanding provided me information, conversational fodder, and a degree of insider knowledge I could parlay into still further information.

Mapping the Scene

Just as looking for labels has helped me to figure out the categories of actors, institutions, and experiences in various social settings, so, too, understanding the spatial layout of ordinary events helps me grasp the significant activities, their organization, and their relationship to one another and to particular groups of actors.

At the start of my research in Miyamoto-chō, an important clue to the structure of neighborhood institutions and their boundaries came on the very first day my wife and I walked through the area, looking for an apartment. I was paying careful attention to street addresses and knew that we were walking around Yanagi 4-chōme, but within the space of three blocks, we came across two separate buildings labeled *"chōkai kaikan"* (neighborhood association hall), one bearing the name Yanagi 4-chōme Chōkai Kaikan, the other bearing the name Yanagi Miyamoto Chōkai Kaikan. I was intrigued, and once we had settled into the Fukudas' apartment building, I set out to find out the significance of what appeared to be overlapping institutions. The answer to the question eventually led me to understand the conflict between government definitions of communities (the larger Yanagi 4-chōme being the creation of the government) and local residents' definitions of community as expressed through their local institutions, including the separate and non-overlapping territories represented by the Yanagi 4-chōme chōkai and the Yanagi Miyamoto chōkai.

At Tsukiji, signs identifying shops and businesses as members of particular trade federations provided me with some of my first clues about the organization of the marketplace into dozens of trade communities, each with its own rules of business, its own specializations, and its own organizational infrastructure. During the first several months of fieldwork at the market, I constantly was on the lookout for organizational names on signs, bulletin boards, doors, and posters. This inventory of associational names (which eventually totaled more than fifty) then became the basis for innumerable interview questions as I sought to identify each of the groups and their particular niches within the marketplace as a whole. And as this inventory became more detailed, I quite quickly was able to identify the organizations

most crucial to my own goals of understanding the key institutions that governed the transactional structures of the auction system and that coordinated the interactions of different sets of economic actors as they moved from place to place around the market. Tracing the spatial layout of the dozens of auction pits in the Tsukiji market and being able to connect each of them to different constellations of organizations was a set of steps in understanding the institutional structure of the market.

Along with a thousand other as yet unasked questions about details of Tsukiji's operations, I wondered about the arrangements of the stalls. For the time being, I loosely surmised that the visible jumble of specialties was probably the result of little more than historical accident, the random outcome of hundreds and hundreds of individual businesses, each evolving along its own trajectory over generations.

Then one day, a few weeks into my research, Mr. Kurosaki, a wholesaler in dried squid who had been introduced to me by Mrs. Machida from Miyamoto-chō, took my wife, Mrs. Machida, and me on a tour of the marketplace. After an hour's stroll and conversations about dozens of topics, I casually asked, "Why aren't there separate sections for, say, tuna or dried fish? How can anyone find what they are looking for? Why are the stalls all jumbled up like this?"

"Everyone asks that," he smiled. "We used to be divided like that, but now we're all mixed together."

"So, how long have all these stalls been where they are now?"

"For about four years," he answered.

Startled by this response, which neatly demolished my tentative hypotheses about collective continuities amid historical trajectories of individual change, I asked the obvious next question. "What happened four years ago?"

"Oh, that's when we held the lottery to reassign stall locations. We do it every four or five years."

I was stunned by this totally unexpected piece of information. Kurosaki outlined briefly a complex system of lotteries that shift wholesalers from good to bad or from bad to better places in the market, regardless of their specialties, size, or social influence. I was staggered that 1,677 stalls could change places without a total breakdown of trade, and even more skeptical that the system could possibly work as evenhandedly as he described it. Surely, in a society where connections accomplish almost everything and where there is a public face and an inner reality—a *tatemae* and a *honne*—to every level of social interaction, highly competitive wholesalers would not

voluntarily let their fortunes ride on a lottery that might assign them a stall next door to bankruptcy.

Kurosaki's comment put me on the trail of a critically important aspect of the market's social structure. It took many months of research, including extensive interviews with market officials and wholesalers, as well as a great deal of digging through marketplace records on stall locations over the past generation, to understand how this system works and its relationship to the social structure of the marketplace. In a nutshell, the periodic relocation of stalls through the lottery system smoothes out inequalities among traders as one element in a complex system of equalization that is at the heart of the collective governance of the marketplace as a form of socially constructed "common property." My attention to the geography of the market's layout led me to the first steps toward figuring this out.

Cueing up Conversations

Another key to my research is that most people are pretty comfortable talking about their own lives. But they don't generally volunteer information about their own social environments if they don't have reason to think that I also find it particularly interesting or significant. Successful fieldwork, therefore, requires me to explore a social environment on my own—through mapping, studying labels, and so forth—to become familiar with the features of the local scene that may turn out to be significant once I get people talking about them. My job as an ethnographic researcher is to get them talking by being interested, but, even more important, by asking questions that prod people to think about (and to talk about) the mundane aspects of their lives. If I have explored the local social environment on my own, it helps me to pose better questions, to convey to my informants why I think the place or the activity is significant, and to prompt them to tell me about what they think about the subject at hand.

Dr. Machida didn't think his own "hometown" neighborhood was worth my attention until I had explained several times that I was looking for a very "ordinary" urban place; it was my fault that I didn't understand beforehand how hard it would be to explain the sort of research setting I was looking for. By the time I met Mr. Kurosaki a decade or more later, I had learned that a constant flow of questions from me could usually elicit some interesting leads. Mr. Kurosaki would never have mentioned the lottery system for stall locations—why would a foreigner (or any outsider to the market) want to know about that?—unless I had pressed him to explain what seemed to me to be the inexplicably random distribution of stalls in the market.

Once they are cued to the fact that I am interested in the mundane, day-to-day patterns of life, often people will talk about them at great length. After all, their own lives are generally interesting to them, and my interest is generally welcomed, if sometimes puzzling. One of the virtues of ethnographic "inquisitive observation" (in contrast to more structured interviews) is that I can turn on the spot to someone beside me and ask, "Why are we doing this?" For example, I learned a lot about community boundaries, the dynamics of leadership, and the sense of obligation to neighbors by asking such simple questions while helping a pesticide-spraying crew in Miyamoto-chō during many smelly Sundays spread over several summers.[4] Since much of people's own experience of daily life, social activities, local institutions, and so forth, is shared by many if not most of their family members, coworkers, neighbors, or whomever, there really aren't a lot of people with whom they talk who don't already understand the ins and outs of their lives. So, as a foreign researcher and patient—if slightly prodding—listener, I often find that interviewees are almost eager to tell me about their lives since everyone *else* they know either has heard the stories already or doesn't care much about them anyway.

This is especially true at Tsukiji. People at Tsukiji are very proud of their occupations, their market, their way of life, but since it is a socially isolated place (isolated in part by the hours of their jobs, which get many people up at 2:00 A.M. and in bed by 6:00 P.M.), they don't interact a lot with people from other walks of life. They can't tell each other how interesting the place is, since all their buddies already know (and do) the same things. Along I come, and with some gentle prompting, people are happy to explain even the simplest things. Part of this, of course, is the time-tested advantage of being an ethnographer in a culture other than one's own. I can ask about the simplest things, things that even a six-year-old child ought to know, and very rarely does any one think it odd that I am asking.

Never hesitate to ask trivial questions, even sometimes in very formal settings. They can lead to interesting discoveries. Several years ago I interviewed officials of a tuna producers' federation to discuss international environmental regulations. In the federation's board room was a large poster with a colorful cartoon of a tuna. The poster caught my eye and I commented on it, whereupon my hosts called up the marketing office, which sent someone over with a copy of the poster for me, along with a set of souvenir postcards,

all of which were produced to promote Maguro no Hi—Tuna Day—on October 10. As the woman who delivered the poster and postcards started to leave, I asked—with no particular intent, but simply amused at the whole idea of Tuna Day—"Is there some special significance to October 10?" It turned out that October 10th was the date of the first reference to tuna in Japanese literature, in the *Man'yōshu,* the eighth-century collection of classical poetry. This answer itself provided me with a trivial, but unexpectedly useful, factoid that sustained a general idea at the heart of much of my research: the uses of "tradition" as a discursive space within which to situate contemporary social, political, and economic practices. My question and interest in their campaign also broke the ice and stimulated the marketing people to provide me with still another set of materials on their advertising strategies, something I had not come to ask about but was very happy to gain access to.

Often, seemingly unlikely people will turn out to have incredible amounts of information. Once on a dock a manager with whom I was talking casually introduced me to a hanger-on, a guy who looked like the most down-on-his-luck day laborer I had ever seen. I would never have even bothered to ask who he was or what he did there until we were introduced. After a moment's conversation, however, I discovered that the guy was a researcher culling genetic material from tuna. The lab he worked for was developing DNA tests to determine the intermingling of tuna stocks in the Atlantic Ocean (which is actually a very hot topic, with major political ramifications), and he gave me a quick explanation of how the magnetic patterns in tuna otoliths (bony structures in the inner ear) can be used to trace migration paths. Another time at Tsukiji, I struck up a casual conversation with a sweeper who called out *"Haroo"* as I passed by him one morning. A few days later, I ran into him again, not with a broom in his hand but cutting up fish to load into the back of the tiny, open-sided van that he drove around the Tokyo suburbs in the late afternoon, after finishing a full day's work at the marketplace. Meeting him a second time in this new light gave me the chance (because I had said hello to him the first time) to learn much more from him about peddlers and about the chancy occupational perch between manual labor and entrepreneurship.

My ability to take advantage of chance encounters or the opportunities to pursue a trivial question in the midst of a formal interview depends on my capacity to create a framework in which it is both logical and legitimate that I ask questions. This seems like a simple (or simpleminded) point, but presentation of self is tricky. Especially at the beginning of a research project, when I am uncertain about where the project will go, about the reception I will receive, and about whether there are explosive issues or trip wires I don't know about yet, introducing myself and my interests is usually difficult. Part of the problem is to create a persona as a researcher (not a typical social role in most people's lives) that is authentic in the eyes of those around me and comfortable to me, as well. It is a real effort to overcome my own shyness when I begin research.

Convincing myself that I can legitimately ask questions is always the first step. After that, being seen interviewing, taking notes, taking photos, hanging around, and so forth, begins to construct the social role of researcher as an expected one for those around me.

The other closely related aspect of establishing myself as a bona fide researcher is to be able to explain what I am interested in and to offer some plausible reason why. Given my general focus on mundane practices and relationships of daily life, I am used to getting incredulous responses when I explain my research: "You can't be interested in *that!*" I try to work out a couple of sound bites that sum up the gist of any project that I am working on, and since my fieldwork per se rarely involves lots of discussions with other academics, I try to keep my explanations rather straightforward and nontechnical. Usually, the observation that whatever it is I am looking at is different from the situation in the United States or some other foreign country is sufficient rationale for a project to most people, at least in a casual, observational context. I can watch auctions at Tsukiji for days on end with the simple explanation (frequently repeated) that there are not auctions like them in the United States. Few people need more explanation than that.

More intensive interaction, either through participation or focused interviews, requires more detailed explanation, but not always a lot more. In my research on neighborhood social organization, I generally explained to people that I was interested in community associations that brought people together for common, local purposes, and the social networks that residents formed in, through, and around these organizations, because (a) they seemed to be important in daily life, and (b) in American urban society, neighborhoods did not often have such active and intense local activities and interpersonal ties.

Since most of the people among whom I was doing research also believed that local groups and activities were important in their own lives, they were willing to accept my interest as understandable, although perhaps a bit

overblown. I was frequently kidded by people in the neighborhood about whether I could really be writing a doctoral dissertation about such a mundane subject as their community. (Years later some of them take a perverse pleasure in introducing me as the *chōnaikai hakase,* the neighborhood association Ph.D.)

Interestingly, up the social and intellectual ladder, I sometimes encounter greater difficulty getting people to understand the social reality of my research. I once was introduced to an eminent Japanese economist who, upon learning that my research was about neighborhood associations, flatly declared that they were extinct. They had disappeared after World War II, and everyone was delighted they were gone, he told me. I have learned over the years that people (both in Japan and in the United States) are often eager to offer definitive statements about social and cultural phenomena about which they know little or nothing. University professors, intellectuals, and government bureaucrats are often the happiest to provide (mis)guided tours of social reality. So it is important to be able to smile politely, change the subject, and note down as an important piece of social and cultural data that "experts" sometimes portray the world quite apart from the lived experiences of other members of their own society.

At Tsukiji, a fairly simple explanation that the place is—as market denizens already know—the world's largest fish market and that there were no markets like it in the United States was often sufficient rationale. The fact that the place has a long and colorful history, a complicated social structure that many outsiders do not fathom, a massive niche in Japan's economy, and a product line—seafood—that is richly saturated with culinary folklore made it simple to explain why the place was interesting to me and why it was worthy of study. Other than one trader who remembered reading *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski 1922) in college, no one at Tsukiji has ever asked me to explain my research in terms of theoretical rationales or hypotheses based in economic anthropology.

In the case of Tsukiji, however, misinterpretations of my role and motives caused occasional problems. It was hard to explain why an anthropologist would be doing research on a market, since most Japanese, like most Americans, think of anthropologists—if they think of us at all—as studying isolated, "primitive" societies. Many people at Tsukiji assume that I am an economist or a market researcher. This isn't usually a big problem, although one interviewee once was rather irritated by some questions about institutional history and food culture since—as he chided me—it was not directly relevant to understanding contemporary supply and demand curves, which was the topic I had come to talk to him about. From then on, I learned to introduce my interests and topics of questioning with somewhat broader—perhaps vaguer—definitions.

In retrospect, I realize I had defined my interests to him narrowly out of a misguided sense of insecurity. In setting up that interview, I was anxious not to appear too naive about the topic and so had quickly focused on a very specific issue that interested me (but it wasn't the only thing I was interested in). This is a fundamental dilemma in conducting fieldwork, especially when my research brings me in contact with many people I have not previously met.

Almost every day I have to explain myself to someone new, and with each person I start off as something of a blank slate. Even when I have been introduced by a mutual acquaintance, the person I am just meeting will not know much about me and often may fall back on the comfortable assumption that as a *gaijin* (foreigner) I simply don't know anything.

This is tricky to play out in an interview. On the one hand, I am quite comfortable listening to interviewees explain to me something that I think I already understand quite well. Often, in fact, in the course of hearing something for the umpteenth time, I will pick up some new fragment of information, and particularly will get to see it from the point of view of a different actor in the setting. So, it is valuable to travel over familiar terrain from time to time, and I sometimes play rather dumb while doing it, to draw out my interviewee further. Also, playing a little dumb can be a ploy, so that as the discussion moves to a central issue that I am interested in, I can sometimes pose a provocative question or elicit a frank comment that I might not get if I started out sounding extremely knowledgeable.

The other side of the coin, however, is that one eventually does want to cut to the chase, and I am always anxious to cut through the inevitable framing of the *gaijin* experience. It is always a balancing act to know how much of my own knowledge I want to display; too much knowledge can turn off the discussion or make the interviewee defensive; too little knowledge may relegate me to the *gaijin* visitor role.

At Tsukiji other misinterpretations of my role came up as well. Because the international seafood industry is highly competitive and Tsukiji is a major world market, a few people assumed that I was working for (or at least on behalf of) trade negotiators. Others, seeing me as a bearded American college professor, assumed that my interest in the market was motivated by sympathies for Greenpeace or other environmentalist groups that have

attacked the Japanese fishing industry (most notably the whaling industry, of course) for what these groups regard as unconscionable activities against the environment.[5]

In such cases, I have often been able to avoid misunderstandings by referring back to the networks of introductions that have led me to the present interview, activity, or interaction. Throughout my research, the social sponsorship of people who have befriended me along the way has been critical repeatedly, to get me started, to pass me along to others, and, occasionally, to vouch for me when questions arise.

Conclusions

Ethnographic research is inherently open-ended and multifaceted. Given its avowed goals of enabling a researcher to participate in, record, convey, and analyze something of the complexity and coherence of ongoing social and cultural life, how could it be otherwise? Any set of ethnographic research techniques is therefore necessarily partial, just as the results of ethnography necessarily reflect a point of view developed in the course of research. One important difference between my research in Miyamoto-chō and at the Tsukiji market was, of course, that one is a residential community and the other is a workplace. The opportunities for participation, for observation, for inquisitiveness are necessarily different. Another, equally important difference in the research I could do in both places is that in Miyamoto-chō, I had my family with me on many occasions, and my wife—Victoria Lyon Bestor—contributed her observations and insights, had her own experiences and networks of contacts in local social life, critiqued my ideas, and frequently pointed out things I had overlooked. During a later stay in Miyamoto-chō, in 1988–1989, when our son Nick was a toddler, we experienced very different aspects of neighborhood life because we saw it for the first time through the eyes of parents, and, equally importantly, our friends and neighbors saw us for the first time as a complete family. At Tsukiji, however, the social facts of "participant observation" could not accommodate a family or involve them in my research. In the end, fieldwork and ethnography are shaped, for better or for worse, by many factors irreducibly connected to both the research setting and the researcher's personal circumstance. No two projects can ever be the same.

I have outlined some of the techniques or perspectives that help me make the most of informal interactions and casual opportunities to collect information about life in urban settings. In some ways, these techniques are ideally suited to urban contexts in that they mimic (or use as protective coloration) some common characteristics of urban social life: fleeting, fragmentary, quasi-anonymous, and fast paced. It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that my research relies solely on these techniques. I see these as a means of getting started and keeping going, getting information on the move. And, in the final analysis, momentum is the key to starting and finishing a piece of research.

Notes

The research discussed in this chapter spans more than twenty years, from 1979 to 2001, during which time I have incurred innumerable debts, most importantly to the many residents of Miyamoto-chō and the many proprietors, officials, and workers at Tsukiji who have graciously endured my questions, have tolerated my presence, and have made me feel welcome far beyond reasonable expectation. I am also grateful to numerous institutions for supporting and facilitating my research, including the Japan Foundation, the Fulbright Commission, the Social Science Research Council, the National Science Foundation, the Abe Fellowship Program of the Center for Global Partnership, the New York Sea Grant Institute, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Geirui Kenkyūjo, Tokyo Tōritsu University, and Japan research funds from Columbia and Cornell Universities.

1. See Turner (1995) for an excellent account of her own fieldwork among Tokyo labor activists. I describe my initial criteria for selecting a neighborhood in T. Bestor 1989a, 1–11.

2. Whether one calls this participant observation, inquisitive observation, or hanging out, it is important to remember this is only one aspect of doing ethnography. Inquisitive observation is the necessary prelude and cross-check for many other types of intensive research, including systematic formal interviewing, administering questionnaires, digging through public archives and statistical data, charting organizational structures, and carrying out detailed historical research (both oral and documentary).

3. In 1988 I was part of a team of anthropologists that conducted research on Japanese coastal whaling villages to assess the social impact of the moratorium on "small-type coastal whaling" imposed by the International Whaling Commission, and in 1989 I made short research trips to several whaling ports in Hokkaido; see Akimichi et al. (1988) and Takahashi et al. (1989).

4. My evident enthusiasm for this toxic activity prompts neighborhood leaders to invite me to participate in spraying whenever I am in Tokyo during the summer, even many years after my first fieldwork.

5. For the record, my research at Tsukiji is not (and has never been) connected with, supported by, nor sponsored by environmental activists, trade negotiators,

or commercial fishing interests. The research project in 1988–1989 on coastal whaling was commissioned by the Japanese Institute of Cetacean Research (Nihon Geirui Kenkyūjo) to generate data for reports submitted to the International Whaling Commission on the community-level impact of the cessation of Japanese local whaling.

Related Readings

I have written extensively about Miyamoto-chō (including T. Bestor 1989a, 1989b, 1996), and there is also a video documentary about my research in the community (Media Production Group 1992a). Research at Tsukiji appears in T. Bestor (2001, 2004). My web site lists other research and publications: www.fas.harvard.edu/rijs/Bestor.

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Media Production Group. 1992a. *Neighborhood Tokyo.* Documentary video produced by David W. Plath, distributed by DER, Watertown, Mass. [www.der.org]