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## Ethnography as Re enactment : Performing Temporality in an East African Place of Science

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## **Ethnography as Re-enactment: Performing Temporality in an East African Place of Science**

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Ethnographic fieldwork is performative: the anthropologist plays roles, acts as an other, engages props, rehearses speech, positions himself. It also performs time: to enable inter-action, it construes temporalities – relations to and between past, present, and future – through engagements with landscape and objects, artefacts and documents, and with people of different generations and of different historical experiences and relations. Such ‘re-enactment’ (Agnew 2004; Schneider 2011), in a broad sense, is a critical register of the performative work that anthropological fieldwork always is. Through it, temporalities can be agreed between actors, opposed and contested, or engaged across difference. By consciously enacting temporality, ethnographic fieldwork prizes open time as co-constructed and performed, to anthropological scrutiny and reflection.

This paper explores re-enactments of temporality in an unusual ethnographic fieldsite: Amani Hill research station is an over hundred-year-old scientific laboratory in forested mountains in North Eastern Tanzania, which hosted first botanical and forestry research, and later tropical medical science, passing its apogee in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, activity – scientific and otherwise – is largely suspended, and while the station continues to exist, hardly any medical science occurs. A field site with little present and an overabundance of pasts; its unusual dearth of social activity, and its deep history, allow us to narrow in on the temporal aspects of ethnographic presence.

In relation to the subject of this conference, biomedicine in Africa, the case does offer some broader insight. While Amani indeed is an unusual site – almost a ruin of past biomedical science – practices of biomedicine in sub-Saharan Africa are today everywhere situated among the remains, of the ruins of a century of biomedical intervention and institution building, and subsequent decay. And even in the most modern hospital or transnational research site, the past is sedimented in architecture, landscape and apparatus. Such traces of biomedical pasts engage with medical practice and everyday life in the present. For people who have been there for a while, traces are ripe with meaning, while for those who only recently arrived, they appear as mere waste or are simply overlooked. Material objects like an old, decaying, high modernist hospital building, or a once state-of-the-art, now broken therapeutic tool, capture the

contradictions of global health and the history of biomedicine in Africa. And it is through them that African doctors, scientists and patients engage with the past, and link the past to the struggles of the present.

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## **1. Introduction: Making Temporality**

Nicht alle sind im selben Jetzt da. Sie sind es nur äußerlich, dadurch, dass sie heute zu sehen sind. Damit aber leben sie noch nicht mit den anderen zugleich. Sie tragen vielmehr Früheres mit, das mischt sich ein. Je nachdem, wo einer leiblich, vor allem klassenhaft steht, hat er seine Zeiten. (...) Verschiedene Jahre überhaupt schlagen in dem einen, das soeben gezählt wird und herrscht. Sie blühen auch nicht im Verborgenen wie bisher, sondern widersprechen dem Jetzt; sehr merkwürdig, schief, von rückwärts her.

Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (Bloch 1962; 1973)

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a near-forgotten scientific field laboratory – active since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – in north-eastern Tanzania: Amani Research Station – this paper offers some reflections on the intersection of temporality and materiality, and how time is made in anthropological fieldwork. One of the achievements of the 1980s ‘critique of anthropology’ was its insistence on the contemporaneousness – ‘coevalness’, as Johannes Fabian had it – of the

anthropologist and the ‘other’, the people under study (Fabian 1983). In our ethnographic representations, Fabian admonished us, we were to represent the other *as if he were* in the same time as the ethnographer – assuming that this actually is the case. Of course, one would not contest the validity of this claim in a physical, or indeed in a political sense. The critique of cultural description and its pitfalls, voiced 30 years ago by Fabian and his contemporaries, remains valid (indeed, it sometimes seems increasingly pressing). However, the ‘writing culture’ critique addresses primarily a problem of *writing* time, and helps us less with the problem of *being in* time, that is the enactment of time in life, among people and humans and between their surroundings – and in fieldwork, being in the field.

In this paper, I argue that rather than taking contemporaneity – being together in one time – for granted as simple material fact, it may be more fruitful to start out from the assumption that we, in a specific sense, are *not* in one time; that we each run on different, heterogeneous and shifting temporalities. And that we therefore continuously constitute temporality in our engagements with the material world, and with each other. Our temporalities are occasionally synchronised (cf. Koselleck 2002; Jordheim 2012), but such synchronisation is an exception rather than the rule, and it is a product of social labour and specific agreements and narrations. The modern fantasy of progress is one, particularly forceful and effective, synchronising mode, as are millennial, chiliastic movements. Explicit temporal framings such as progress, revolution (or apocalypse) – overall rare in human history – can achieve a broad and lasting sense of shared orientation in time, as well as group antagonism and conflict, and they are often stabilised through group performances and rituals, landscaping and architecture, or institutional, bureaucratic frames. By contrast, the general state of affairs is much more messy, producing less totalising temporal frames, more like engaging with time as one goes, and as one engages with others, human and nonhuman (and, of course, even modernity itself is never quite as totalising as it purports to be).

The different, often anachronistic temporalities that arise from our entanglement with and movements in the world, are not usually a matter of coherent ‘times’ – historical eras or cultural time zones – that is, temporalities that are shared by groups, periods, cultures (or, nowadays sometimes: ‘ontologies’), as, e.g., in the old anthropological tropes of ‘linear’ and ‘circular time’, and resulting images of cultural juxtaposition and encounter (James and Mills eds. 2005); or like more recent notions of ‘neoliberal presentism’ or ‘postcolonial nostalgia’ (Piot 2010; Lachenal and Mbodj 2014) that seek to describe specific temporal orders. And accordingly they do only sometimes result in ‘encounters’ between incompatible notions of time, or in ‘regime change’ between temporal frameworks. Most of the time, temporalities are heterogeneous, disjointed and unstable. They are enacted socially, in being with things and others, in affective and effective engagements

with the world – human and nonhuman; objects, vistas, concepts. And it is in such concrete actions that ethnographers can explore them. One additional question to ask in one's fieldwork is then: how do people make temporalities, and how do we participate anthropologically in their making? Such fieldwork, in turn, is not so much about coevalness, being in the same time with the other, but in the best case about shared efforts to make sense of time, occasionally meeting one another, searching for synchronisation, through shared narratives or shared attachment to objects and spaces, sometimes playing at temporal positioning, or challenging each other's conflicting temporalities.

## 2. *Aftertime*

The question of how time and material are linked by way of affective engagement dates at least back to the end of the 19th century, and is probably as old as modern perception itself. Walter Benjamin's interest in, among other things, modern urban form and the temporality of the commodity took inspiration from Marcel Proust's notion of 'involuntary memory', and triggered in turn generations of scholarship, and literary work that seek to understand how humans, engaging with the material world around them, engage with the past, and more generally with their being in time. It does appear, though, as if this particular mode of envisaging time is of special interest to us, today. The messy, often surprising and conflicting multiplicity of temporality that becomes visible through attention to material affect – rather than, say, chronological historical narratives or political abstractions of historical process – seem to tickle our sensitivities in the early decades of the 21st-century. This awareness of, even attraction to, the plurality of coexisting temporalities – 'layers of time' (Koselleck 2002), 'Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen' (Bloch 1962) – might be linked to what Francois Hartog referred to as a 'crisis of time' – more specifically a crisis of modern universal and unidirectional time (Hartog 2012). Our sense of time is challenged; modernist temporal contraptions, in their various guises, lost traction; and the things they were anchored in – architectures, infrastructures, institutions – fall apart. And, importantly, we do no longer simply enjoy the 1980s post-modern liberation from 'grand narratives', but we also realise more clearly now the loss that it entailed. We live in what one, borrowing from Scandinavian's languages '*eftertid*', might call an '*aftertime*': an era that is overdetermined by a sense of something having passed, under the shadow of past futures. The aftertime is not so much a label for a new period – after the modern era – but a description of a range of sensitivities that arise from the idea that what is crucial and powerful has already passed, as well as an opening towards radical poly-temporality (Jordheim 2014).

While this sense of aftertime is experienced in many societies and population

groups – including probably even the most self-assertive newly economically progressive societies of the world – it is experienced with violent acuteness among those ‘postcolonial’ peoples who failed to join in wider visions of progress and development, that is precisely those whom Fabian had told us to consider part of our time, and whom Eric Wolf and others, for that purpose had brought into the purview of history (Wolf 1982). This paper contributes also to our understanding of this postcolonial ‘aftertime’ in 2015 – after the vectors of nationalist aspiration and social and economic progress have petered out; when independence does not want to end (Lachenal and Mbodj 2014); and when history does not even seem to repeat itself any longer. This condition is not a new ‘regime’ of time, but marked by the (temporary?) absence of such a cohort regime. As such, it offers an opportunity to prise open the diversity of affective experiences of temporality that play out against one’s material world, human and nonhuman. Experienced and enacted in multiple, inchoate and ephemeral engagements, these affects are heterogeneous and fleeting – though of course not random, as they are produced in a larger historical force field – and we should try to refrain from the temptation of orderly representation, scholarly recuperation (see e.g. Stewart 2011). Instead of feeding historical narration, temporality is articulated in minute pulses, surges, moments of contact across time that are woven into the tissue of the everyday – making the present and one’s being in time.

Why is this important to global health and questions of biomedicine in Africa, the topic of this conference? For once, science and biomedicine are imbued with a specific temporality, forward-looking, aiming for betterment and progress – a quintessentially modern way of thinking and practice. Much medical anthropology from the 1980s onwards has critiqued precisely this linear and narrow understanding of biomedicine – which then was commonly discussed as a powerful and dominating discourse and institutional practice, especially in postcolonial contexts like Africa (Comaroff 1993). Now, what happens when the overarching vision of societal progress and, as part of it, public health, of progressive ordering including the ‘health system’, falls apart? When the faith in linear progress, as well as in the diagnostic and curative prowess of biomedicine and its institutions become spurious? And when doctors and patients engage biomedicine in malfunctioning, crumbling hospitals (Wendland 2010; Livingston 2012), in laboratories filled with the broken remains of aged apparatus (Tousignant 2013; Droney 2014)? What do these buildings, tools and routines do in their everyday attempts to care (Langwick 2008)? How do they shape their memory and, more importantly, the understanding of their place in the present, and their hopes for the future? If biomedicine, rather than being an externally imposed dominating regime of knowledge and practice, has become a trace of itself, how are the traces of past future-making engaged in contemporary struggles to create near futures, to heal

and to live? (see Geissler 2014; Geissler et al.2016)

### 3. Returns – Enacting Time

In this paper, I begin to explore how we engender time through our material being in a landscape of remains and traces. I use a particularly apt site: a remote and today very quiet scientific laboratory on a mountain in the African rainforest: Amani Research Station – once a key centre of scientific medical research under the East African Research Organisations and the Tanzania National Medical Research Institute (NMRI) (Nowell 1933; Ghyselen et al.2017). Amani is a place of science and as such imbued with a specific historical temporality, transformative and progressive. A site of condensed modernity, it is today a place in almost perfect temporal equilibrium. It is not progressing at all, but almost not decaying either, carefully maintained by the staff of the NMRI, where action is limited to the growth of roots and fungus, the dripping of rain and the movement of insects and worms, as well as the careful movements of a duster over ancient glassware and laboratory benches, and occasionally the gentle rhythm of manual lawn mowing. This is a unique place for ethnographic fieldwork, where almost nothing happens. It sheds particularly pure light onto the ethnography of temporality and the material, but I believe it does have wider purchase for our work in medical and Africanist anthropology.

A good place to begin this exploration of the material ties between past and present is this quote from the autobiography of one of Amani research station's leading British scientists, Dr Mick Gillies, who made his name in Amani in the 1950s and 60s:

*'After 12 miles we reached the foot of the main mountain mass and entered the forest. We stopped to stretch our legs and one point when I noticed some pug marks in the dust. I asked the driver what animal had made them. 'Simba'(lion) was the disconcerting reply. After another seven or eight miles of steep gradients and hairpin bends the cooler air of the mountains began to come in through the windows. We soon emerged on the open grassy slopes and found ourselves among the neat bungalows of the research station.'*

*'We moved into our bungalow that first evening. Like many other senior staff houses it was perched on top of a narrow ridge. At the back, we had a monkey's eye view of the rainforest from which we were separated by a steep-sided little valley.'*

(Gillies 2000: 129-30)

This scene of arrival describes a particular moment in historical time – 1951 – but the experience of the rough road, the changing climate and vegetation, the sense of ending a long journey in the beautifully landscaped enclosure of the

research station, have been recounted by numerous travellers since, and had not changed much, save the lion tracks, when we arrived almost to the day 62 years later, for our forays into the aftertime of 20<sup>th</sup> century tropical medical science.

Like Gillies and his wife, we arrived after driving some 300 miles in a Land Rover across East Africa's Savannah, dusty and thirsty we appreciated like them the coolness, humidity and scent of the rainforest, and the peculiar homely order of the lawns surrounding the station that it gave way to. We arrived at the century old guesthouse, sharing the Gillies' bungalow's views over carefully planted rolling grassland and ancient trees, that recreated a Constabl'ian homescape for weary (especially British) travellers. We unpacked our clothes into Victorian chests of drawers, arranged our toothbrushes beside subtly cracked Armitage Shanks basins, and spread our notebooks on ornate, leather topped Wilhelminian desks.

As the evening's rain began drumming on the ancient tin roof, we assembled for our supper (cooked on a collapsing 'Britannia' cast iron stove) in the dining room, complete with watercolours of English country churches, and bookshelves with mouldy 1940s, adult novels: 'Love in a cold climate', 'Remembering England'. As our main collaborator, a Tanzanian medical anthropologist, was yet to arrive, we settled as a group of foreign visitors on one end of the main dining table, while our driver and a young local man sat down at a different table. After an awkward first course on separate tables, it was us to ask them to join us at our table. We began to talk about the place, and its history, and after supper the young man, whose name was Alois – recalling first German occupants of the hills, who had arrived at Amani in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – pulled out an envelope replete with photographs and letters, that had been sent to his grandfather, father, and brother by the descendants of the research institute's first British director, Major Bagster-Wilson, Gillies' boss in the 1950s.

He explained the two families' intertwined relations of service and support, since his grandfather had worked as a botanical gardener in the station's plantations and later as cook and 'garden boy' to the director. Alois' father had, supported by the director's family and several scientists, undertaken medical training and risen from laboratory attendant to clinical officer, and had educated most of his children – again with financial support from the late director's children – to levels above his own. Spreading the images and well worn letters across the table, he displayed his own knowledge about the station, and his deep personal attachment to the place. On the one hand this underlined his historical expertise concerning the past, lending credibility to his role as our research assistant-to-be; on the other hand, Alois shared this information to solicit our support to re-establish contact with the late director's family (which he had in vain sought to contact on Facebook), in view of finding assistance for his own further education. Before he left us that evening, we agreed that he would assist us in our research

for a specified number of days, paid for at the rate that he usually charged for guiding the tourists that occasionally visited the forest. In a very temporary manner (and, mind you, not offering a lifelong contract, welfare and pension scheme), we had unlike our colonial forebears re-established the researcher-assistant relation that had run in his family, and had more broadly shaped life in Amani Research Station for at least three generations.

From the moment of arriving at Amani research station (and in a sense already in our anticipation of the journey and the site we were to visit), we engaged with multiple – colonial and postcolonial – pasts.<sup>1)</sup> We relived other's memories, reviewed their vistas, engaged with spaces and objects from the past, and enacted roles that often uneasily bridged past and present. These roles were part chosen, part given, part aspired to, part recognised in hindsight, some embarrassing, others secretly romantic, guiltily nostalgic. At times we were critical analysts, seeking distance from our colonial forebears, at others we found inspiration in their critical questioning of colonialism, and the intentional and pleasurable transgressions against racist regulation that some of them had committed especially in the 1960.

These roles did not cohere into stringent characters, but collided, stumbled and jarred. The characters made up their parts as they went, often in fact struggling against their role, adjusting as the play went on, improvising over missing props or lines, reinterpreting, losing the thread, rediscovering it. There was no mutually agreed overarching script to this re-performance. Rather, each actor shaped his or her own performance, positioned the others, played with and against the material surroundings, and attributed it particular, idiosyncratic meanings.

One could use experiences, such as the description of our arrival at Amani, above, familiar to many postcolonial fieldworkers, as an occasion for 'reflexivity', embarrassment and apology, or as a complement to the 'actual' ethnographic or historical research work. In this paper I want to go a different way, shifting attention away from the writing of ethnography, and to the conduct of fieldwork itself. I would like to move the performative dimension of ethnography and the enactment of temporality in fieldwork practices, to the centre of anthropological attention. Ethnography's grounding in presence and participation is of course always performative, playing at being the other, learning roles, using props, rehearsing lines. My point here is that this enactment includes also the making of temporal relations: ties between past and present, through engagement with artefacts, and through historical narratives, positions in generational relations, and with respect to historical experience. Such temporal engagements, as noted before, do not cohere in stable 'temporalities' or are communicated and reconciled between separate temporal 'regimes'. Rather, they produce ephemeral, but affectively charged and thus effective moments of engagements across time, which are powerful and politically potent, precisely because of their diffuse articulation

across ordinary engagements.

#### 4. Amani – Peace

I explore the possibilities of the ethnography of temporality in an exceptional field site, a scientific research station in Africa. Founded over 100 years ago by German and British colonists, Amani was eventually taken over by the government of the Republic of Tanzania (at first called Tanganyika). Its apogee was in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, before and after Tanzania's political independence in 1963, when the station was world leading in research on malaria and other tropical diseases.

Amani is an impressive collection of buildings in mountainous rainforest. Laboratories and offices lie at the apex of the hill, the African workers' quarters on lower laying slopes, overlooked by groups of (formerly European) scientists' bungalows on hilltops and ridges. These buildings are surrounded by 100 year old botanical gardens and English lawnsapes that create a distinct sense of beauty, and they are functionally integrated into a self-sufficient infrastructure, with water, gas and power grid connecting inhabitants irrespective of race – materialising post-World War II civic and welfare ideals.

Once an island of progressive imagination – producing science, and modern lifestyles – Amani today is a space of apparent stasis, seemingly frozen in time. While the station formally continues to exist, scientific activity that once was the station's purpose is suspended. Action across the site is limited to basic routines and minimal maintenance, accompanied by the slow pace of plant growth, erosion and decomposition. Amani is a site of uncanny beauty, ripe with traces of a forgotten future (and with comparatively few present or current futures). Amani feels unreal, and may be atypical, and yet it represents an important dimension of 21<sup>st</sup>-century African landscapes. By allowing one to foreground the theatricality of fieldwork, and the performance of temporality, Amani allows one to attend to this residual dimension, to the traces of the past, and make them central to ethnographic work.

Against the quiet backdrop of the station-in-stasis, I pursue in this paper 're-enactments' of different levels of specificity and artifice. These are progressing from our ordinary, unintended engagements with temporality, to experimentally contrived, theatrical on-site performances of scientific practices. Although stage and actors are out of the ordinary, I believe that some of the experiences are generalisable, concerning the ordinary affective trade between present being and traces of the past, or the enactment of time – notably around biomedical practice.

## 5. Movements – Making Contact with the Past

The unusual ethnographic stage of Amani, ripe with historical materiality, but deprived of action, posed a challenge to ethnography. When nothing happens, what sort of ‘social’ is one supposed to participate in or witness? Partly owed to the unusual silence of our field site, the composition of our group – which, during successive field seasons changed, including European and Tanzanian social scientists, artists and natural scientists – and our joint being in the place became an object of observation and reflection itself. One group member particularly confused conventional renderings of fieldwork as composed of clearly separated field and worker: Dr. John Raybould, an octogenarian British blackfly specialist and naturalist who was in and around Amani known as *Kidevu*, ‘the bearded’, and widely and fondly remembered as an eccentric, kind and trustworthy character. Now retired in England, Raybould had lived in Amani during his most active years between the 1950s and 70s, conducting research on onchocerciasis and related fly and crab species. His presence in our field complicated conventional relations of ‘participant observation’ and immediately drew our attention to the production of temporality in relations: he was neither ethnographer nor local, both a stranger and belonging to the place, one of us foreign visitors and a scholar, but of a different generation – belonging here and there, to present and past. On top of this, he was an unusually curious and, it seemed, universally well-liked character, and as such he had probably been slightly atypical even in the past, among his scientist colleagues. Challenging boundaries, between past and present, here and there, but also within the hierarchical structures of the past, and between academic disciplines in the present, Raybould was exceptionally well suited to the role of our Vergil on this journey.

Our first attempt to produce some movement in an otherwise inert place, was to go for extended walks together with John, passing through houses, gardens, laboratories and extensive forest that once was a botanical garden. During these walks, triggered by features of the landscape, or unfolding a narrative along the path, John shared memories, often occasioned by features and artefacts that we stumbled across. Beyond simply ‘triggering memory’, these walks brought us together in place and in particular positions. We shared sensations, affective responses to our surroundings, experiences both of beauty (framed by shared as well as a dissimilar cultural, social and generational aesthetics), and of regret, occasioned by the obvious decay and loss (again, framed differently by our age, profession, origins, places of residence). Take, for example, the emerald green of the dew-covered extensive lawns that had been planted after WW2 with ‘Kikuyu grass’ (*Pennisetum clandestinum*) imported from Kenya, where tropical lawns had been a feature of the British plantation economy. During our early morning walks,

these grasslands gave rise to pleasure and homesickness, interspersed by botanical observations, as well as regret over the thorny shrubs and weeds that progressively encroached upon the now poorly maintained greensward. We also shared more elementary experiences of weather and temperature, ground profile and texture, and smell, re-sensing temporal references in a historically sedimented landscape. Experiences that could trigger involuntary memories, or merely stories about memories and the idea of remembrance.

Sometimes, this intertwined process of movement, reflection and conversation yielded factual information of general import or of more personal nature: ‘this grass was planted by the first director... the institute then had 130 milk cows.... we used to provide subsidised milk to all workers’; or: ‘under this bridge my aunt had drowned, and John Raybould, this man here, he dived to recover her body. I was not born then, but I remember’. At other times, it triggered bewilderment and speculation: What was this object? Was there not a building here? Why did they change this place? Encountered in motion, the traces revealed contingent insights.

At the same time, our peregrinations around the station reiterated older circulations and social hierarchies. Originating from the apex we explored the slopes and valleys below. As foreign visitors we rummaged around the station at will, free to enter even personal spaces or restricted rooms under lock and key. Our freedom to move unhampered by institutional rules and privacy, echoed century-old social distinctions and privileges, afforded to science over citizens (and to the descendants of the colonizers over those of the colonised).

## 6. Encounters

Moreover, our movement occasioned encounters. Thus, we met the old men, who had 50 years earlier worked with John, as what earlier on had been called ‘fly-boys’ and had been renamed ‘assistants’ under his tenure. We visited the families of research staff who had been buried on the station’s land, and who accordingly considered themselves natives of the area and raised claims to its land. We spoke to old men who held onto the keepsakes of their youth, partly as souvenirs, but also in the (unlikely but never impossible) case that time might return. We also found young people, born long after the last Europeans’ departure, who had heard stories about Raybould, the man with the huge beard, and the other figures that long ago had populated the colonial stage. Perturbing these personal ties between past and present further, many confused the bearded ethnographer with the old retired scientist and, realising the error, assumed that one was the son of the latter, valuing the presumed son’s interest in his father’s life and memories.

Occasionally these encounters lead to more less spontaneous demonstrations of past practice: a former lab assistant of Raybould’s, happening across some of his

half-century old tools, demonstrated specimen collection procedures on his own skin; or Dr. Gillies' 'houseboy' of many years, visiting for the first time after 40 years the now ruined bungalow where he once worked, performed how he would have carried food from the kitchen and served every household member in order; a former 'head driver' donned his tattered uniform, issued in the 1970s, carefully attached the brass symbol of the Institute on his cap, and saluted with a mock British accent. A most peculiar re-performance occurred when the abandoned former director's house – a dark, German-built multi-storey mansion – was temporarily reprocessed by a British Kenyan family, whose young blonde daughter, visiting from her prep school, immediately invited the European visitors in for tea, and whose father relished the opportunity to extend hospitality to 'like-minded' visitors in this lonely place, and to discuss colonial building and gardening styles (as well as what it meant being an African, today).

The sensations and thoughts, triggered by these encounters and re-enactments did not congeal into one overarching representation of the past, or indeed of its relationship to the present. Rather, they created ephemeral constellations of affective time, which only in some moments came together as groundings for shared understandings (and misunderstandings), and action.

## **7. The Draw of the Past**

We realised that these returns of the past – or rather, our fleeting brushes with the past through its material remains – did not rely upon the presence of old people like John or other time witnesses. Indeed, the draw of the past affected us even when facing the landscape on our own: On one occasion, we bathed in the secluded rock pool, where, 60 years earlier, Gillies and Raybould had swam with their families after fieldwork, when a group of passing old men, upon seeing the ethnographer, exclaimed: 'the bearded (*Kidevu*/Raybould) has returned!' And even when we walked around alone, for example when exploring the largely ruined colonial homes and gardens, which once had been tended by Mrs Raybould or Gillies (and their helpers), we imagined domestic routines, refurnished half empty living rooms in our minds, recognised exotic garden plants carefully planted a long time ago, yearned for the comforts of cast iron bathtubs and log firewater heaters – mixing recollections of historical images and biographical quotes, with perception of traces, views, atmospheres, and reverie and fiction.

Even our basic scholarly work in the station's extensive library and archive was colonised by the past – not so much in the sense of it 'haunting' us (see Edensor 2005), but rather through the wanderings of our own minds, extended through the materials we handled and spaces we moved in. Beyond the collection of archival documentary evidence on the colonial and postcolonial past, our presence in the

century-old, quietly abandoned library building, sitting around the same large table around which Gillies and colleagues had sat during the meetings, drinking coffee and smoking; leafing through books that Gillies wife, as voluntary librarian, had ordered; or discovering stacks of now exotic interlibrary-loan request cards that once had been exchanged with institutions in Siberia and Latin America; we experienced moments of time travel, imagining a past beyond our reach, imbuing bureaucratic documents and mildewed box files with fictions and affect. We read through personnel files that contained entire lives from British prep schools to pension fund settlements, while moving in the spaces that these lives had played out in. We reconstructed the comforts of past institutional life from its mundane remains, such as stacks of milk receipts, water bills or requests for new uniforms and house repairs. And we discovered detailed accounts of labour conflicts, and enduring and humiliating personal confrontations between scientists and African technicians, together with the protagonists and their descendants. Trying to move beyond the recuperative impulse of the archive historian, we attended instead to the materiality of the archive, appreciating its own material processes – the work of termites, water, mould, fire, laying archival documents to waste, transforming the order of deposition, and creating remains in its own right.

## 8. Re-performance as Everyday Work

As we carefully explored the temporal registers of being an Amani, allowing ourselves to be drawn across boundaries of present and past by the people we met, and by the objects and landscapes that surrounded us and them, suddenly many of the practices that people in Amani engaged in in 2015 became recognisable as re-performances, referencing a past ‘reality’. The employees’ work itself looked increasingly like a re-enactment, engaging with materials of the past, reiterating habits and movements, recreating circulation and a modicum of rhythm, without necessarily engaging in what one could call purposive action or productive labour.

Across the station, people arrived on time for work, kept regular lunch breaks and left precisely on the hour without doing anything apart from a little tidying; they opened rooms that had remained unused for decades, but were immaculately tidy, ready to be taken into use. They maintained, as good as they could, and guarded apparatus that once had been valuable, but which they, in some cases never had witnessed in operation. These enactments of what appeared to be futile work – also, of course, to many of the workers themselves – and the question of how this continued performance of scientific institutional routines might be motivated and linked to other practices of everyday future-making, will occupy me in a different paper. The point to make here is that people like the young caretaker of the electric power station, which had ceased to operate in the 1970s, still fill

their position, inhabit a designated staff house, and attend regular staff meetings, although the machine they guard has scrap value at best. The former shopkeeper of the cooperative consumer goods shop (closed after the end of Tanzania's socialist period), still keeps and proudly displays the signboard from his former shop, partly to reminiscence what for him was an age of bounty and personal status, but also as a sign for how things could be. And the football field created in the 1950s for staff football matches – that then were part of countrywide league table competitions between groups of state employees, creating 'working class' consciousness, as well as national identity – still serves local football teams as training and match ground.

Some of these re-enactments of past routines are not particularly remarkable – for example, the congregation of a range of different Christian churches, which over more than a century have accumulated in this original mission site – others have practical reasons – such as the location of the milk collection point, inherited from the research institutes' original dairy herd, and practically motivated because of the reasonably reliable power supplies at this infrastructural node. Some other re-enactments, on the other hand, may surprise a visitor. Thus, the entirely ruined, boarded-up formally European staff club on the top of the mountain – overgrown tennis courts, tree roots penetrating fireplace and bar, moss covering the darts board – is occasionally transformed into a thriving party space. It is still here that local, educated middle-class families – in this relatively affluent community of farmers and government workers – hold wedding celebrations or other major events. Despite its appearance, the ruins of the European club are still considered respectable and somewhat 'beautiful' (and they have a level dancefloor, sheltered from the rain).

I will attend elsewhere to the question of how engagements with the place and its buildings and other remains, relate to contemporary practices and concerns with the small and steady progression of life, to people's efforts to make a future for themselves and their children – which obviously does not exhaust itself in affective engagements with the past. The workers' and other inhabitants' reiterations of past predictabilities and regularities may fulfil many different purposes – drawing a small income, utilising formal and informal resources, maintaining networks – and are motivated, variously by personal aesthetics and subjectivity, utilitarian strategy, family traditions, or lack of alternatives. I will explore people's lives on the detritus of the past elsewhere. It suffices here to underline that re-enactments of the past, as in diverse, often short lived, even coincidental, engagements with its traces, are an integral part of people's lives in this key site of past biomedical futures, this abandoned high-modernist hill station (as well as, I would argue, anywhere else).

## 9. Relational Histories

Opening our senses to the enactment of temporality, we realised in hindsight how the fieldwork that had preceded our journey – extended visits to elderly British and East African former scientists and technicians in order to elicit what we had initially thought of as their ‘oral histories’ and to view private documents and pictures – had been filled with performances across time. Far from simply collecting stories and materials ‘from the past’, our being with these elderly people in their old houses, had constituted and played with fleeting, often contradictory, affectively charged ties between past and present. In many ways, these were like visits to one’s grandparents, homely but also a bit awkward, sometimes boring at other times surprisingly intense. Some of the elderly people had had lives that a 21<sup>st</sup> century junior academic might dream of – adventurous, self-determined, successful, or modestly self-content – others betrayed a sense of failure, looking at the visiting younger academics as fulfilments of what they in vain had aspired to, or indeed as those who had enjoyed opportunities that rightfully should have been their own.

Searching through dusty carton boxes of correspondence in elderly peoples’ attics, overwhelmed by the bewildering state of their personal archives and memories; sleeping in their now elderly sons teenage bedrooms; sharing drinks before supper and partaking in the calm regularity of their pensioners’ lives; learning their, and their former friends stories and expressions, and progressively helping them to reconstruct their past, we became enveloped in generational relations, engaged with the past through ordinary everyday gestures. We related to each other in formal, yet affectionate ways, leading both to Christmas cards, and to the characteristically intergenerational bad conscience about neglected obligations.

## 10. Staging Re-enactment

So far, I have in this paper examined what one might call ordinary fieldwork: looking for the production of temporality through our everyday engagement with the field, its inhabitants and materials. During our Amani sojourn, driven by our recognition of re-performance as a theme running through the site – and through our engagements with it – we went beyond mere witnessing and conducted re-enactments as purposive ethnographic experiments, restaging the past in intentionally anachronistic ways (provoking more of the affective collisions and engagements, that initially had arisen by themselves), moving progressively from naturalism to artifice.

First, we asked Raybould and his former local assistants to re-enact the scientific method sections of research papers that they had published in the 1960s

(e.g. Raybould 1967). We described these experiments, focused on scientific practice and cooperation, in a different text (Geissler and Kelly 2016). These re-enactments of written scripts from past served us not so much to add tacit, embodied, emotional and relational dimensions of documented past events (see e.g., Kneebone and Woods 2012), but to shed light on the ethical and political tensions in our relationship with the past, and to reflect upon lasting issues of research ethics, as well as on the seriousness of scientific labour, and the experience of loss and decay.

Then, following on from this very literal re-enactment, we endeavoured upon a biographical encore: two years later, I went on a second journey to Amani with Raybould, staging – if this indeed is the word – the last blackfly expedition to Amani. This time, we pursued an actual scientific aim: after attending the British Simulium Group’s definitely last meeting in 2015 (Davies 2015), Raybould had been given the task to collect, should an opportunity arise, once more some blackflies from Amani for a colleague’s genomic research. Our project brought this unlikely opportunity about. By contrast to the previous re-enactments, this collection was mandated by a scientific organisation, albeit one that, according to its own last ‘Bulletin’ had concluded that on account of dwindling membership, ‘there was little point in continuing the group’ (Davies 2015).

This revival of scientific work complicated the notion of re-performance: what did we actually observe when the five old men, one more time, and presumably the last time, did what they once had done together? While this was not a mere demonstration, it was replete with references to the past, as well as anticipating itself as future past, as the last time. The presence of an acclaimed photographer (however, one without naturalist leanings), complicated this further, making the protagonists lapse in and out of demonstration mode, alternately concerned with the verisimilitude of their actions to an older ‘reality’, and with the quality of their future specimens for future scientific discovery, which technically was beyond their own expertise.

During these re-enactments, as well as during parallel archival research, the notion of ‘serious work’ had emerged as a central category in the relations between scientists and assistants, and in the fieldworkers’ biographies (Geissler and Kelly 2016; Poleykett and Mangesho 2016). The explicit re-enactments had made this particular dimension hard to recuperate – they were, obviously, not ‘real’ work, although as described elsewhere, Raybould attempted to conceal this from his erstwhile assistants (Geissler and Kelly 2016). Further interrogating the question as to what constitutes re-enactment, and what actually is re-performed – past movements, past imaginations, past relations – I went one step further and scripted a fictive though serious and systematic piece of ‘scientific’ labour: a regular workday of thorough work in the laboratory, involving the four elderly previous

laboratory assistants, and an elderly secretary (who managed to find and bring back to life her 1970s typewriter); together they photographed and listed each of the thousands of objects found in the large laboratory that they had worked in their youth, and that hardly had changed since Raybould's departure (see Geissler et al. 2016).

This experiment, in addition to the question of labour and seriousness, and to the pride that the assistants took in some of the objects, their detailed knowledge about them, and the work they had been able to do with them, drew painful attention to the experience of loss, and to the limits of memory, as well as to the tense relations between scientists – re-enacted by ourselves – and local scientific staff. The progressed state of decay of some materials dissolved boundaries and made objects mix, and raised the question what an object is. This was compounded by the lack of understanding of many things – if you have no idea what belongs together and what is separate, then what is an object? What does such an inventory do? List the original components of a laboratory? Or register the waste products of its dissolution?

Is a cupboard full of half-eaten 1960s files full of faded, mouldy laboratory forms one object or a myriad? Upon closer examination, files stuck together by bat excrement and time become re-differentiated, referring to different decades, different projects and diseases, different scientists and assistants. Should objects be counted in groups or classes – glass cylinders, used test tubes, meteorological day records – or should each be described in turn? What if objects break up, if parts are found in different places, or when notebooks dissolve into waste, are chewed and digested by rats who subsequently died of the anti-fungal agent in the covers? What if objects cannot be named and nobody recalls their function? Or if an object requires a long story: 'Glass ball, approximately 3-inch diameter, used to bundle daylight for detailed examination of morphological patterns on mosquito wings'? And what about objects that don't belong, or offend sensitivities and disturb remembrance: three mummified dead rats in a drawer, behind a cloud atlas, and an early 1950s rainfall notebook?

The inventory progressively breaks apart the sedimented whole of the laboratory into fragments – into the original components and objects, and beyond that into the products of their decay.

The ambiguities of these materials, and as a result of the task, made the work challenging, and strained the relationship between the ethnographer as instigator and those who were asked to do the work – quite possibly reiterating similar tensions, in the past, in naturalist research work trying to collect, catalogue and understand confusing and unyielding natural entities such as tiny mosquitoes, birds or parasites. How thorough could one actually do this work? What would count as a mistake? And: did this actually makes sense? The personal discomfort that the

recreated situation caused to all participants, and the chaotic juxtaposition of sedimented objects and materials, deepened our understanding of the work of traces, and the effects of decay. But it also raised questions about the situation's political and moral justification. The power differentials and enduring, if not exacerbated economic inequalities, and the (somewhat unexpected) state of decay of the remains in drawers and boxes, as well as the equally unexpected personal nature of many of the objects retrieved (notebooks, field tools etc.), made this re-performance of listing and ordering into an inventory of personal loss and humiliation, which had not been intended. It does underline the potential of re-enactment to transgress its boundaries, produce excess, but also proved morally excessive and ultimately not justified.

## 11. Ethnography and Art

This, in my view failed, conceptual experiment was partly encouraged by our collaboration, at the time, with two visual artists, who had accompanied our travels to Amani, Mariele Neudecker and Evgenia Arbugaeva. The two pursued what could be said to be diametrically opposed, though at one level similarly romanticist, methods of engaging this quiet, and to both artists unfamiliar field site: one by attentive staring, the other one by staging her dreams (see Geissler 2016).

Mariele, an installation and video artist who takes inspiration from German romanticism (Blayney and Young 2004; Neudecker 2015), took long still videos, and static photographs of quiet rooms, seeking to capture their silent life in the manner of 17<sup>th</sup> century *vanitas* still lifes. What is performed here is the stage of the past itself, without the added ingredient of historical characters and action. Movement is in these images reduced to the distant passing of a car outside the frame, a rooster from a nearby village, a fly crossing the room, dust sinking on the windowsill. Mariele combined these with a series of seemingly spontaneous, enigmatic yet mundane, Polaroid shots with their characteristically faded, nostalgic out-of-focus look. Evgenia, an acclaimed travelling photographer who made her name with pseudo-documentary, highly artificial portraits from the Arctic (Arbugaeva 2016), on the other hand, overcame the (postcolonial) scruples that caused Mariele's productive passivity, and embraced instead radical intervention. Working mainly together with one of the elderly scientific workers that had earlier worked with Raybould, she staged people, objects, buildings, plants and animals to (re-)create fictionalised dreams, and nightmares, of science.

These works have a life of their own and are not extensions or complements to scholarly, ethnographic research. Yet, both artists pursued a similar line of enquiry to our ethnography of re-performance, above: attending to what the materials of the past do in the present, exploring the affective pull they exercise on

those who confront them, handle them, inhabit them, or project their longings upon them. While they lie outside the frames of ethnography (and some would argue that even some of our ethnographic experiments do) (but see Marcus 2010, and Ssorin-Chaikov 2013), they help delineating a field that ranges from (almost) inadvertent everyday engagements with traces – treading the same paths one has walked through one’s live, sweeping the same floors, touching the same door handles – to the explicit, staged, even museal, exposition of traces as aesthetic form and objects of contemplation.

## 12. Conclusion: the Pull of Biomedicine’s Past

In this paper, I explored the enactment of temporality in ethnographic fieldwork, along a continuum from involuntary and inadvertent performances of temporality, and engagements between past (and past futures) and present, to the experimental and contrived purposive staging of anachronistic practices that engage elderly actors and young participants, landscapes and objects, imbued with past but materially present, in practices and events that could never have occurred without fieldwork taking place. This continuum of re-enactments, or performances of temporality points in spite of the exotic and idiosyncratic appearance – strange people moving on a strange stage – to a dimension that can be found in any fieldwork: the resonances and balances of the past, by way of material affect, as part of ordinary everyday engagements; open-ended, momentary, surprising, contingent – and yet by no means random, since they are generated in a larger historical and political-economic force field. This temporal affect is not merely a complement to documentation and the recuperation of history (*adding* feelings, intimacy, encounters and relations to the written documentary evidence, revealing a tacit layer of history). Neither should it be harnessed into coherent historical narratives about a new temporal regime after the modern, which would ignore the inchoate and ephemeral nature of one’s (and the other’s) everyday brushing with the past. Instead, it opens up to reflection about the relation between continuity and discontinuity, attachment and rupture, positioning in time, and towards others in time, fundamental anachronism and practices of synchronisation (see also Lachenal 2017).

Moving beyond the narrow confines of postcolonial science and medicine, this exploration of enactments of temporality destabilises also taken for granted ethnographic assumptions about shared presence in the field. A generation ago, Johannes Fabian admonished us, rightly, to acknowledge the coevalness, the presence within the same time, evidenced in participatory fieldwork. This critique was directed predominantly at the writing of ethnography, and not at the practice of fieldwork, and the modes of attention deployed in it. Without questioning his

actual argument, one might wonder whether ethnographic fieldwork, simply does take place in one time, and if temporality indeed is a shared experience and orientation, apart from brief moments, which have to be achieved rather than assumed. As the German Philosopher Ernst Bloch wrote half a century ago:

*Not everybody is present in the same now. They are physically visible today, but that does not mean that they live in the same time as the others. Instead, they carry the past with them, and it mixes with the present. Depending on where somebody stands materially...., he has his times. Several years beat in the one that currently is counted and rules.... They contradict the now, strangely, as if from behind.* (Bloch 1973: 104, author's translation).

If people indeed do not inhabit stable or shared temporalities, but continuously achieve these, sometimes intentionally, but never free of constraints, then the making of temporality is a crucial dimension of ethnographic engagement with other humans and their material surroundings – the spaces and objects, traces and remains, in which shared fieldwork takes place.

This observation about the making of temporality in everyday engagements with the materials of the past contributes also to our understanding of biomedicine in Africa today. To understand how biomedicine's practitioners and patients navigate a world without overarching, generally agreed *telos*, making do with remains and leftovers, rather than aspiring towards radical innovation or definite solutions (Langwick 2011; Wendland 2010), it will be helpful if we, in our ethnography of biomedicine in Africa, include attention to the intersection between materiality and temporality. This means, for the anthropologist, not just that historical knowledge of local institutions, sites and practices is a prerequisite of ethnographic understanding, but that engagements with the material remains that make up the present – starting from the anthropologist's own engagements with and responses to these materials – should be an integral part of ethnographic participation. This does not mean that all past is present, or indeed that all present is preoccupied with the past: forgetting and repression of memory are part of this, as much as is involuntary memory and commemoration; some people, sometimes engage with the traces of the past, others can't or don't want to establish such ties. For an elderly head radiologist with decades of experience in a national teaching hospital, the modernist buildings, whose opening he witnessed, and the once novel radiation machine might epitomise hope, and the loss of it (see Mikka 2016); for a resident, two generations his junior, they are depressing symbols of deprived state institutions, in contrast to newly established private hospitals, and they are what has to be used to make do – generating, variously, cynicism and political claims (Wendland 2012); for the young patient they are the only, if minimal, hope for the future. Carefully disentangling whether, and how, the materials of the past that the

present consist of feature in contemporary practice and imagination, will help us to better understand biomedicine in Africa, at this point in time.

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## Notes

- 1) Amani seems to stimulate trans-temporal peregrinations. The first times I had heard about Amani were, 30 years ago, from a Danish entomologist who had grown a bushy moustache and taken to Harris tweed after his sojourn there, and, later, a student at the London School of Hygiene, who recalled, haunting dreams of Nazi officers from her stay at the German-built guesthouse (ignoring that German occupation had ended in 1919).

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