Multi-sited Ethnography
Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research

Edited by

MARK-ANTHONY FALZON
University of Malta, Malta

2009

ASHGATE

Chapter 7

Follow the Missionary: Connected and Disconnected Flows of Meaning in the Norwegian Mission Society

Ingie Hovland

George Marcus (this volume) reflects on how and why multi-sited ethnography can claim to be ethnographic. Its particular claim does not lie in the sustained examination of a single (geographically bounded) site, as in traditional Malinowskian fieldwork, but rather in its return to – and reconfiguration of – some of the key tenets that have become associated with fieldwork, such as a commitment to 'the native's point of view', that is, engaging with and working through subjects' points of view, an interest in how these subjects imagine and act within their (multi-sited, distributed) worlds, and a concern with one's own situatedness, partial insights, and accountability in the midst of research. Marcus is especially interested in how this modality of multi-sited ethnography can be used to understand contemporary social and cultural formations, such as various effects of globalization.

These formations might be akin to what Appadurai (1990) terms 'scapes' – 'ethnoscapes', 'technoscapes', 'finanscapes', 'mediascapes', and 'ideoscapes'. Two examples of multi-sited ethnographic research that examine such contemporary scapes are Bestor's (2001), which follows the transnational commodity chains of the trade in Atlantic bluefin tuna, and Rotenberg's (2005) work on the transnational connections forged through podcasting. In this chapter I am concerned with some of the same underlying topics – including connections that cross national boundaries, and how these connections work through flows of communication and meanings between sites. Bestor (2001) examines relations between fishers, traders, entrepreneurs and sushi consumers; Rotenberg (2005) examines connections between podcasters, producers, advertisers and listeners. Importantly, however, the connections that they examine also function through – and set up – non-communication and new disjunctures. In Bestor's case, the disconnections emerge for example in the ways in which Japanese traders remain incomprehensible to many North American fishers; in Rotenberg's, disjunctures are revealed in the inequalities of access and power in the podcasting world, and in how podcasters set up alternative bases of power within neoliberal regimes. My work similarly focuses on transnational linkages that work through both connections and disconnections. It differs, however, in that I have not examined these connections in relation to previously 'unconnected' people

(such as tuna fishers and traders; podcasters and listeners); rather, I have examined connections and flows between people who are already connected within one organization – within one 'ideoscape', if you like – though operating in dispersed geographical sites.

There are two strands of thought that weave through this chapter. First, that multi-sited ethnography should not claim to be a sort of über-triangulation that gives the researcher a 'complete' ethnographic understanding. Rather, it can in certain cases bring out a still partial but better understanding. I would not have been able to pay such attention to connections and disconnections within the organization I studied – and the significance of these connections to the people concerned – had I focused on a single site only, and in this sense multi-sitedness gave me a deeper understanding. But it did not provide a 'complete' picture.

Second, there is a certain analogy to be drawn between the organizational staff described in this chapter, and ethnographers. Both groups grapple with questions around localization, and how best to establish one's local commitment. While the staff described here may not have found any more durable and satisfying answers than the ones currently tried out by multi-sited ethnographers, their questions alert us to the fact that grappling with multi-sitedness is a facet of research that can be responded to in a variety of ways, and in a variety of discourses. Let me turn now to the organization.

NMS: A 'Spread Out' Organization

In 2003–04, I spent a year doing fieldwork with the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS). NMS is an international Christian mission and development non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Norway, with field operations in 12 countries in South America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The organization has been active since 1842, and its work entails supporting local churches and funding development projects related mainly to education, health and agriculture. At the time of my fieldwork it had about a hundred field staff stationed in these countries. The field staff are called 'missionaries' – and, as will become evident through the rest of this chapter, the missionary is both an important and a contested figure in NMS. In addition to being 'spread out' across the world map, NMS is also 'spread out' across Norway. The head office, with around 70 employees, is located in Stavanger on the west coast, but the organization relies heavily on funds raised by a network of thousands of members and supporters, who are located throughout the country in nine local offices and around 2,500 local 'mission groups'.

In addition to this plethora of geographical locations that goes into making up the organization, there are also historical 'locations' that matter. In NMS, the struggles of previous generations of missionaries are still remembered – or rather, they have been transformed into particular organizational memories – and past missionaries are usually presented as heroes and adventurers, people of strong

faith and generous of heart. In this way the cherished memories of the past serve as one of the 'glues' that bind the current organization together. As my fieldwork got under way, then, I began to feel that my 'field' was not a normal one at all, but rather was 'here' and 'there', 'now' and 'then'.

I have elsewhere written about one aspect of this multi-sited exploration, namely how linguistic questions in NMS reveal underlying organizational contests over how to conceptualize the world, or the 'ideoscape' that missionaries operate within (Hovland 2009). I have explored how mission metaphors, as well as the term 'heathen', are used with different meanings in different 'sites' within NMS. I have also argued that multi-sited ethnography, when used to understand a dispersed organization, should not be viewed as a method that simply adds perspectives together (as in one site plus one site plus one site equals multi-sited ethnography); rather, it should pay particular attention to the site and system awareness of the research subjects themselves, and to the kind of associations and connections that they make. In Marcus's terms (this volume) one might say that I tried to map my (multi-sited) field as it was found in the field itself, among the people I studied. In this way multi-sited ethnography does not just add together perspectives that the researcher encounters, but instead prompts the researcher to change perspective. Multi-sited ethnography then is not a question of comparing like categories across different locations, but rather a matter of questioning the way that these categories are constructed.

This is the (related) theme I now explore. I shall examine the various meanings that are attached to the idea of 'the missionary' in different parts of NMS – in other words, how people who are differently 'sited' within the organization relate to the organization's field staff, namely the missionaries. 'The missionary' is a complex figure in NMS, and, at the time of writing, at the heart of much tension and uncertainty within the organization. I argue that multi-sited ethnography brings this out in ways that single-sited ethnography cannot, within this 'spread out' organization. My point of departure will be the NMS head office, from where I shall proceed to NMS meetings held at other NMS 'sites' in Norway, before turning to some illustrative episodes from the missionaries themselves in Madagascar. Finally, I shall discuss the implications this multi-sited approach has for ethnography in general.

The Missionary Hero

In November 2003, the NMS head office organized a staff retreat and hired in a management consultant to talk to them about organizations. The consultant first made a point about an organization's consumers, and asked the assembled staff what NMS's consumers were called. This led to a brief, awkward silence, since NMS's primary consumers are that large and amorphous group that used to be called 'the heathen', but that now, for various reasons, is no longer supposed to be called so. (I discuss this incident in Hovland, 2009). The consultant then

asked a second question: 'And what do you call the organization's heroes, the people who deal directly with the customers?' This time there was no pause – 'The missionaries', somebody immediately replied.

This image of the missionary as the organizational hero has deep roots in NMS. When NMS was founded in 1842, it was with the explicit aim of educating and sending Norwegian missionaries to 'far off' places such as Africa. And although the organization's strategy has shifted considerably since, and now involves far more partnership with established African churches, the basic idea of a Norwegian missionary travelling to the other side of the globe still evokes a rich emotional resonance in the organizational imagination. It is therefore not surprising that the head office staff at the retreat did not have the slightest difficulty identifying the organization's heroes.

About two weeks after the retreat, I was having lunch in the NMS canteen. The staff at the head office usually eat lunch together and then listen to a brief devotion, which is delivered by one of them. This time the person holding the devotion planned to do something unusual: he was going to call one of NMS's missionaries in Thailand. He had arranged to put him on speaker telephone so that the whole canteen, in Stavanger, could hear him. He asked him to talk briefly about what his family and himself were doing. The missionary talked about what he and his family were doing for a Norwegian Christmas in Thailand, and also about the preparations that were taking place in the local Thai church that he was a part of, where they were busy organizing Christmas visits to each of the congregation's members. He then referred to a verse from one of the Gospels. The conversation did not last long and concerned mostly mundane matters, yet as the staff left the canteen, I noticed a ferment in the air. Two of the women whom I had shared a table with were smiling and commenting on this special kind of devotion, and had clearly been touched by the experience of hearing the missionary's voice 'live', as it were. This experience was confirmed by many other encounters that I had with the head office staff. Many of them sought to learn the names of all of NMS's current missionaries; they had pictures of the missionaries hanging in one of the head office corridors; news from the missionaries was distributed around the head office; and any especially urgent or important news from any of the missionaries would be announced in the head office canteen during lunch.

Now, if the nature of my research project had only entailed participant observation in one site, among head office staff in Stavanger, the matter of the missionaries might have stalled at the point at which, among the majority of regular staff at the NMS head office, the image of the 'missionary hero', although not completely unproblematic, is still highly meaningful and a source of inspiration. The thought of the missionaries provides important motivation for most head office staff. However, because my research project involved a multi-sited approach, I soon became aware that this was only a small part of a much bigger story concerning the figure of the missionary within NMS.

The Recalcitrant Missionary

Let us first follow the idea of the 'missionary hero' up two flights of stairs, from the staff canteen to the NMS leadership offices. In some ways I came to view the top leadership of NMS as a separate 'site' within the organization, even though their offices are located in the same office building. This was partly because those in higher positions sometimes referred to the missionaries in a somewhat particular way. They were always careful to emphasise that the missionaries were 'human beings too' – with various issues, emotions, and uncertainties, just like any other. But from the leadership I also heard frequent references to the organizational problems that surrounded this particular group. First, the leadership were more or less agreed that over time they wished to reduce the number of Norwegian missionaries that were sent out by NMS – partly for financial, partly for strategic reasons. They wished increasingly to channel NMS's mission work through partnership with local churches and through local capacity development projects, rather than pay for Norwegian personnel to travel across the world. While they still thought it necessary to hive off missionaries to a number of strategic positions, they did not particularly wish to foster the image of the missionary hero. Nor did they wish to equate 'mission work' with 'sending Norwegian missionaries', as they thought that mission work could just as well – and perhaps better – be carried out by local personnel.

The missionaries posed organizational challenges in other ways. From time to time I heard the leadership express their frustration when missionaries 'in the field' did not understand, or flatly refused to follow, head office policy, or to join in new initiatives. I also heard leadership staff try to figure out how to get missionaries to take up offers of supplementary courses, which the leadership thought the missionaries needed, but which missionaries themselves apparently did not see the need for. The leadership also tried to organize curriculum vitae (CV) training sessions for missionaries who had come to the end of their contracts, the concern being that after having worked for NMS in Africa for long periods, the missionaries might not know how to put together a CV for the job market in Norway. All in all, this image of the recalcitrant missionary who needs further training but does not acknowledge this, or who does not know how to put together a CV, is a far cry from the image of the 'missionary hero'. From the point of view of the leadership 'site' in NMS, the missionaries were still respected and appreciated, but the challenges that they posed (including how to reduce the number of Norwegian missionaries) and the problems that they caused for the organization (including partially implemented policies and additional costs), were also strongly felt.

Missionaries as Adverts

In keeping with the project of following the missionary, let me now add another layer of complexity by taking my inquiry to a third site, namely that of NMS's local

members and benefactors in Norway – the people, that is, who donate funds to the organization. The regional meeting that was held in June 2004 about an hour's drive outside Stavanger, was fairly typical. Around five hundred people had come together for a day for this annual meeting, held specifically for NMS members and supporters in the local district. The vast majority of those attending were over 60 years old, which is typical of NMS supporters in Norway. The programme for the day included biblical study, the election of the new chair of the regional committee, an accounting exercise of how much money had been collected and spent, an overview of the previous year's activities in the region, mission news, and presentation of missionaries from the region who had recently returned to Norway or who were about to leave for the 'mission field'. The General Secretary of NMS had been invited from Stavanger to address the meeting. One of his duties included chairing the session that was devoted to thanking the missionaries who had recently returned to Norway. He introduced the session by saying:

> The mission is God's mission. None of us own it. God sent his Son, and then in the next round he sent us. It is God's mission. But he needs people to carry it out. Therefore we have missionaries … and therefore we have staff [in Norway].

This was a careful blend of strategy and public relations. On one hand, the General Secretary subtly emphasised that Norwegian missionaries were not the only tool that God could use for his mission. On the other, he wished to inspire members and encourage them to continue to donate funds to the organization, and one of the most effective ways of doing so within NMS being to make the work tangible and personified in the figure of the missionary. Which is why he then proceeded to invite the ten or so young and middle aged missionary couples who had completed their sojourns to come on stage, couple by couple, as he read out their names. Once they were standing in front of the audience, he repeated that 'The mission has not been yours, it has been God's. But in order for Him to carry out His mission, He has called some, and you have been a part of that'. He then gave a gift to each of the couples, and was about to end the session by calling a round of applause. One of the local organizers of the meeting, however, clearly felt that the crowd needed a higher pitch of emotional intensity, and he gestured for everyone to give a standing ovation. He then declared that the anthem of NMS should be sung standing up and looking towards the missionaries on stage.

Following this performance, one of the missionaries, a young woman whom I had previously met, walked past me and pulled a face, indicating that she was glad to exit the limelight. I later asked her and her husband what they had been given. He pulled out a cake knife and added, in jestful but ironic nature, 'Maybe we should have knelt down to be knighted'. He clearly felt that the applause and the singing of the anthem had taken it all a step too far; he wished to be thanked for his work, but he most certainly did not relish this 'hero' treatment. Later his wife told me, also smiling and shaking her head at the whole ritual, that she had found it a bit over the top. I observed that it had been an acclamation for the heroes.

She agreed and said she thought it was the outcome of a 'cultural clash': what the General Secretary had said was fine, but the local organizer's antics showed quite a different frame of mind. The latter was used to the 'old way of thinking', she said; he had attended gatherings in the olden days when missionaries were presented while the NMS anthem was sung. 'Still today for many of the regionals', she added, 'the missionary is the very personification of the mission, of what they give money to'. She expressed her dissatisfaction with this idea, explaining that in her view the missionaries in NMS should no longer embody this all-important role. Today they ought to work as part of a team, together with local churches and local staff in whatever country they are sent to – which is what she felt that she had done as a missionary. The very thought that she should be made to play the exalted role of the 'missionary hero' made her laugh.

I had similar experiences at other local gatherings, where one or more missionaries were held up as examples – as personified 'adverts', if you will – for the mission. It is usually clear that this is exactly what the assembled NMS supporters want. They want to know that they are giving money to a tangible cause, something that can be personified, something familiar – and the figure of the heroic Norwegian missionary, who travels overseas to help people, delivers the goods. If the meeting facilitator wishes to play to the crowd, the missionary figure is always exalted. From time to time, however, I also encountered the kind of sceptical, bemused reaction shown by the younger missionary couple described above, from other individuals at these meetings.

At another meeting, a former missionary to Madagascar was presented in typical heroic fashion, the audience being told that he had spent 'years at the forefront of the spiritual battle in Madagascar'. In this case, the missionary himself responded favourably to this presentation, and also recounted to the audience a number of fine deeds by missionaries whom he named individually, in order to give a glimpse into the mission work in Madagascar. His drift was the bravado of living in remote rural areas, surviving exotic illnesses, establishing new schools against the odds, and devoting one's entire life to being a missionary. His narratives resonated well with the audience and he was rewarded with a hearty round of applause.

Afterwards, however, one of the very few audience members who was under 60 years old, indicated to me that he was not sure that this was the way the mission ought to be presented to supporters. He had thought a great deal about NMS's shift in strategy away from the strong reliance on Norwegian missionaries, and felt uncomfortable with the strong personification of mission at this meeting, and the way that it was centred on the Norwegian missionaries. Another former missionary, also relatively young, expressed her dissatisfaction that people in these kinds of groups always seemed to think that missionaries were doing the work on their own. She said that people had asked her and her husband, when they were missionaries, 'Are you really all alone at the [mission] station?' She shook her head in disapproval at this kind of question; she and her husband had always worked in tandem with the people around them. 'But that's how they phrased the question', she complained.

These episodes render the figure of the missionary within NMS complicated. On one level, missionaries are used as personified adverts of the mission work, in order to keep funds flowing from the local supporters in Norway. At the same time, this image is far more than just that – it also represents a worldview. The image of the exalted missionary carries with it the implication that the missionary travels to exotic locations in order to work, single-handedly, with people who badly need help because they are sick, uneducated, unenlightened, irreligious, or in some other dire predicament. There is little space in this worldview for equality and interrelations between Norwegian missionaries and local people. Some of the missionaries I spoke to identify with this worldview, and look upon the idea of the heroic missionary as an image that truly conveys some of the underlying reality of the world as they see it. Others, however, disagree, and treat the exalted image of the missionary with irony and amusement. It is, however, difficult for them to challenge outright the ingrained image of the missionary hero, and to project their own version of the modern, team-working missionary instead. The regional members and supporters of NMS across Norway frequently prefer and cultivate the first type of image based partly on historical precedent and also perhaps in order to lend legitimacy to the work they are donating funds to.

In fact, the will to maintain this particular image is so strong among the grassroots members and supporters of NMS, that they will sometimes explicitly defy the NMS leadership over the matter. This was most clearly expressed at the General Assembly in 1999, where the leadership of NMS proposed a reduction in the relative number of Norwegian missionaries. The delegates to the General Assembly, most of whom were representatives of local mission groups, held a long debate over the matter, and in the end voted against, noting that NMS should work instead to *increase* the Norwegian component. The leadership of NMS subsequently had to overrule the vote in order to be able to continue with their strategic shift towards partnership modes of working, with fewer Norwegian personnel (for example, NMS 2000).

The contested image of the missionary has far reaching (in more than one sense) implications in NMS. In order to seek to understand these implications, we now travel to a fourth site, namely the 'mission field' in Madagascar.

A New Kind of Missionary

In 2004 I visited Madagascar, with the aim of talking to as many as possible of the 35 Norwegian NMS missionaries and volunteers stationed there. On one of my first days in the field I went to a Sunday service held by the mission. I sat down next to a friendly-looking missionary and asked her about her work. She told me about it, and then, perhaps because she had heard that one of my research questions was about how NMS had changed over the past century, she proceeded to tell me all about how, in her view, missionaries had changed. Previously, she said, missionaries felt they were called by God to travel to Madagascar and to

stay there for a substantial part of their life – in other words, for several years. Now, however, missionaries stayed for shorter periods, typically two to four years. Besides, she added, they seldom learned to speak Malagasy fluently, and would even go back to Norway on holiday maybe once a year – something that was previously unheard of. The new missionaries, she mused, felt that these new and shorter periods of time more accurately reflected their missionary calling. My informant was not quite sure how to explain this significant shift in what it meant to be a missionary, but hazarded that it seemed very strange that God's calling should so move with the times, so to speak.

Later that day I sat outside with some of the younger Norwegian missionaries. We joked about which came first to Madagascar: refrigerators or Norwegian brown cheese. (It is not uncommon today for Norwegian missionaries to take a supply of brown cheese with them to the field.) They smiled at the humorous suggestion that perhaps missionaries in the past had refrained from lugging cheese around, because this would have been a 'luxury' that would have ill-fitted their ideas of the hardship and sacrifice of a missionary calling. One of the young missionaries intoned, 'Yes, because they had a different understanding of the calling', and everybody laughed. The parody conveyed a sense of how these younger missionaries perceived their situation: they did in fact feel that their understanding of God's calling was and should be different today, and they did not wish for a return to the (sometimes self-imposed) hardship and sacrifice that they thought had characterized previous generations of missionaries. Perhaps too the parcels of brown cheese also signified their shorter sojourns in, and therefore commitment to, the field in Madagascar. At the same time the situation threatened towards the accusatory: they were wary that they might be accused of not being as tough, as committed, and as admirable, as the Norwegian 'missionary heroes' of old. Their laughter suggested both recognition, uncertainty, and the relief of being able to poke fun at an uneasy issue.

During my interaction and interviews with the missionaries in Madagascar, I repeatedly encountered this streak of uncertainty concerning the missionary role. For some, it had to do with the changes they perceived among the 'newer' type of missionaries, who went back to Norway once a year, who signed a contract for perhaps two or four years in Madagascar, and who transported brown cheese in their luggage. For others like our young jokers, the uncertainty manifested itself as a source of some discomfort, as they felt they could potentially be measured against an older yardstick and be found wanting.

Finally, a common concern for all of them was the fact that the NMS leadership was reducing the number of Norwegian missionaries in Madagascar. They were already fewer than they had been a few years earlier. Many of them wondered if the leadership at the head office in Norway was intentionally slowing down recruitment to Madagascar, and they felt somewhat in the dark as to what exactly the purpose behind the reduction in missionaries was, and what the leadership wanted from them. There were feelings of vulnerability around whether or not the leadership in Norway really appreciated their efforts. Many of the missionaries felt that since they were the field staff, they should be regarded as the ones who

were 'doing' the mission for NMS, and that NMS's leadership in Norway ought to function simply to service them; this, however, was not always consistent with what they saw happening at NMS. Most of the mission work carried out directly by staff from the NMS head office, such as partnership agreements, did not really figure in the missionaries' representation of what mission work was about. For most of them, their own role, namely the role of the missionary, was central. This left them in a tricky position, and slightly at odds with NMS's official strategy, which was to reduce the number of Norwegian missionaries, and no longer to regard a high number of Norwegian missionaries as a sign of success.

Conclusion: The Missionary as Equivocal Input

How do we make sense of the different and complex images encountered as we followed the missionary through the spread out organizational structure of NMS? How do we interpret the connections between all these images within NMS? The list of suitors is long. There is the image of the missionary hero, that of the missionary whose voice over the phone is the inspiration of head office staff, the recalcitrant missionary and the one who needs to be taught how to write a CV, the exalted missionaries on stage at a regional meeting, the young missionary who pulls a face at me as she walks past, the irony and bemusement that is evoked in some when they encounter the exalted missionary role, the seriousness that is evoked in others, the importance of the Norwegian missionary as a personification of mission in relation to NMS's supporters, the uncertainty of missionaries in Madagascar who see 'newer' missionaries do things differently, the uncertainty of these newer missionaries who are not sure if they are measuring up, the uncertainty among missionaries regarding what the purpose of a reduction in missionary numbers is, and their feelings of vulnerability in relation to the NMS leadership in Norway.

As touched upon in the introduction, the flow of meanings surrounding the idea of 'the missionary' within NMS works through both connections and disconnections. To my mind, my multi-sited approach brought this out more clearly than a single-sited one ever could. Across the multiple sites, the complex combination becomes apparent – the missionary images that are used in different sites carry over similarities and take shape in relation to one another, while also expressing quite different perceptions of mission strategy and even differing worldviews. The missionary has always been an overdetermined phenomenon in NMS – that is, there are more causes that act to produce this behaviour than are necessary for it to occur. Multiple layers of causes have been in operation in relation to the behaviour of sending missionaries. Some of the past and present causes include the wish to spread the gospel, a feeling of being called by God, a desire to help people in need, a sense of adventure and a wish to explore uncharted territory, a wish to spread Norwegian Christian values, a wish to share the experience of one's own Christian conversion with others, requests for Norwegian missionaries from local churches, a theological understanding of the responsibility of the church to come to the aid

of other churches, a need to legitimate NMS's existence in relation to its donors, and a need to spend the organizational budget. It follows that the significance of this practice – sending missionaries – is also plural and equivocal within NMS.

Seeing missionaries as an equivocal input in NMS implies that there are different strands of meaning attributed to the image of 'the missionary' (see Weick 1979). These should not be conflated, even though they all refer to the same term – 'the missionary'. Precisely because it is an equivocal input, the image of the missionary may be given more attention within various sites in NMS than if it had been perceived as an unequivocal phenomenon. Especially among the leadership, among the missionaries themselves, and among former missionaries, this seems to be the case. The fact that the image of the missionary is an equivocal input also means that it is potentially more adaptable. Again, the leadership and some of the missionaries, especially the newer arrivals, seem to be able to experiment with alternative interpretations of the missionary role in NMS today, and no doubt over time some of the images will change further. They will probably not, however, converge on a single, unified image of 'the missionary'; if they did, it would be a sign that the organization had become much smaller, that the multiple sites of the organization had lost their flexible connection to each other, and the organizational creativity had been stifled. In the same way as Bestor (2001) and Rotenberg (2005) found that the transnational connections they examined were constituted through flows of both communication and non-communication, connections within NMS retain the same double-sidedness.

Let me return now to the two underlying lines of thought that I briefly touched upon in the introduction. The first concerns the method of multi-sited ethnography. In a case such as the one described here, where multi-sited ethnography is meant to facilitate an ethnographic understanding of an idea across several sites, it seems to me that it is important to keep the open-endedness of the method in mind. There is a temptation, when dealing with connected sites, to treat them as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle – to try to 'fit' the ideoscape together. Then the aim of the method becomes to force the pieces into perfect connections to each other, and to form a 'complete' and understandable whole. I would argue, however, that richer ethnographic material can be generated when the sites are not treated as jigsaw pieces, but rather as aspects of an incomplete whole (see Puget 2002) – a more shifting, distributed ideoscape.

Laurel Richardson (1998) has called this attitude 'crystallization'. Crystallization recognizes that the research topic – like a crystal – has many sides, a complex web of reflections from any light that hits it, and is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down to one accurate description. 'Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know' (ibid., 358). In some ways this is a reaction to the research method of 'triangulation', which can at times (though not necessarily) come to be used within a positivist frame of reference – for example looking at different research sites in relation to one research topic in order to validate the consistent 'facts' across the sites – and hints at the possibility of drawing up a

'complete' ethnographic view. As Des Chene (1997) has observed, this builds on a laboratory understanding of the field, and is an extension of the idea of the single bounded field site, rather than a step toward multi-sited understandings.

In sum, it seems to me that when trying to follow the idea (or ideas) of 'the missionary' within NMS, the outcome is neither jigsaw nor triangulation, but rather a deeper understanding of aspects of an incomplete, shifting, transnational organizational ideoscape. This partial and multi-sited understanding can in certain cases enable us to return to some of the core tenets of fieldwork: to better engage with and work through subjects' points of view, and to address the question of how these subjects imagine and act within their multi-sited, distributed worlds, while keeping in mind the partiality of our research (Marcus, this volume).

The second underlying line of thought that has woven through this chapter concerns the analogy between missionaries and fieldworkers. Ethnographers who attempt multi-sited research may find themselves wondering about the exact nature of flows and connections between sites, and how best to localize their research within these flows, while knowing that to some extent their siting will be both arbitrary and contestable. The mission organization that I studied grapples with some of the same type of questions. My informants, like us, pay careful attention to different sites, and argue over the best localizing strategy for their staff and work – even as localization remains contested and somewhat arbitrary. Their wish to retain deep local commitment in their work, while gradually shifting away from the idea that such commitment has to be personified in a 'hero' who travels to a locally bounded site and remains there for a lengthy period of time, is reminiscent of anthropological debates around how to retain local commitment if this is not tied to the fieldworker's presence in a bounded site for a certain period. Historical images (the missionary hero, the intrepid fieldworker) may be difficult to dispense with; new images (the team-working missionary, the multi-sited ethnographer) may not carry the same symbolic weight – and may solve some problems only to cause new ones. In the midst of this multi-sited awareness and questioning, siting operations stand to remain equivocal for some while yet, whether in missionary or ethnographic circles.

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