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Questions and Answers

An ethnography of evaluation in Afghanistan

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INTRODUCTION

WAS THE DUTCH MISSION IN URUZGAN SUCCESSFUL OR DID IT FAIL? WHEN THIS mission in the southern Afghan province drew to a close in 2010 after four years of military and developmental presence, this question was asked by Afghan and Dutch policy makers, academics, journalists and aid workers. The Dutch embassy in Kabul tasked an Afghan research organization with evaluating the mission's effects. The report the evaluators wrote raised as many questions as it answered. What did the results really mean? Were the research protocols properly followed or were they tampered with? The report served its purpose as a tool for political communication, and subsequently lost political and public attention. Today, ten years after the Dutch sent 1400 troops to the southern Afghan province, these questions spark a debate again, as journalists and policymakers want to know what is left of the Dutch efforts in Uruzgan and whether the mission was worth its costs.

In this thesis, I examine the evaluation of the Dutch mission again, drawing on my work in the evaluation project as one of the evaluators of the mission. The present study is the result of an intricate process of acquainting myself with the methodologies of evaluation research. I examine how the specific evaluation research was done in the Afghan and Dutch context and what it entailed — in practice — to draft questionnaires, do interviews, analyze data, write reports, stipulate conclusions and present recommendations. I investigate how Uruzgan came to be known in the meeting of contexts of war, linguistic and cultural differences, infrastructural disconnection, expectations of and for Uruzgan, and research technologies. Based on this empirical work this thesis challenges the research process as something that is clear and confident. However well drafted, methodological protocols simply cannot address and anticipate all possible practical problems that surface in the real world where they are put to use. The products of this evaluations research — the

numbers, reports and presentations — do not show traces of their intricate and puzzling contexts of production. Yet, they are made to serve goals of accountability, allow experts to tell us who the Afghans are and inform political ambitions for the future. If evaluators themselves find it difficult to disambiguate the meaning of evaluation data, how can the reports that are written about these be used to account for a military intervention? This thesis comes from a tradition that turns this question into an empirical one. There is a politics to doing so, to which I will return in the conclusion. In the mean time, this thesis wants to invite the reader to keep this question in mind and help articulate an answer.

The messiness and uncertainty of research is not something that is unique to doing evaluation research but something that pervaded my own trajectory as an anthropologist who wants to understand evaluation practices as well. Sometimes I found myself being skeptical of evaluation research, at other times I trusted the reliability of evaluation's protocols. Disentangling the specificities of anthropology and evaluation research necessitated me to *do things again and again*. It required a continuous comparison and contrasting of the methods I encountered and employed. These have been ethnographic methods, analytical techniques developed within Science and Technology Studies and methods from evaluation studies. From asking, engaging, thinking, writing, participating and observing, again and again, I have therefore gained insights not only into the research methods that formed the object of my study but also into those put to work in undertaking this study itself.

SET UP OF THE RESEARCH AND METHODS

In the fall of 2006 I started graduate studies at the New School for Social Research in New York. In 2008 I was accepted into the PhD program with a project on Dutch soldiers in Afghanistan. The context for this was that since 2006 the Dutch had a military and developmental mission in the Southern Afghan province of Uruzgan. This was the first big Dutch military mission after the 1995 massacre of Srebrenica where a Dutch battalion under the command of the UN failed to prevent the deaths of more than 8000 people, which had deteriorated the already bad reputation of Dutch soldiers. While the Uruzgan mission sparked a big domestic debate in the Netherlands about the figure of the Dutch soldier, internationally its unique combination of development, diplomacy and defense received much acclaim. I was interested in this paradoxical figure of the soldier who needed to reconcile the demands of being a humanitarian and a war worker. I began planning my fieldwork on the military base in Uruzgan to ask how soldiers handled this tension.

In February 2010, while I was negotiating permission to go, the Dutch cabinet collapsed. The

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question of whether or not to extend the mission in Uruzgan had led to irreconcilable political tensions. As a result, I was no longer welcome on the military base in Uruzgan, as the Dutch forces were now packing up, cleaning up and getting ready to leave and had no time for my questions. My contact person in the ministry of Defense put me in touch with an Afghan research organization that was commissioned to evaluate the four-year Dutch presence in Uruzgan. They were looking for an intern who could join the Uruzgan team. In the hope this would still get me close to a few Dutch soldiers, I went to Afghanistan in June 2010. In the process of realizing that it was impossible to continue my project on the Dutch soldiers, I became more and more intrigued by the worlds of evaluations that I was introduced to.

Over the course of a year, I was employed by the Afghan research organization and worked both in and out of Afghanistan, first as an intern, and later as a research officer. As part of this work I collaborated on several projects. The most notable was the big project commissioned by the Dutch embassy evaluating the four-year presence of the Dutch mission in Uruzgan, but there were also smaller projects such as evaluations of agricultural, educational, and health care developments, or quarterly updates on the province as a whole. Most of these reports were intended to provide evaluations, others were research projects exploring transportation or the state of the police in Uruzgan, or were about putting together all available knowledge in a provincial profile of Uruzgan. I participated in the design of questionnaires, conducted interviews, analyzed data, wrote reports and was present during several presentations to our commissioners. I traveled to Uruzgan, worked and lived in Kabul and worked from Amsterdam and The Hague. I collaborated mostly with Afghan colleagues with whom I shared an office, as well as lunch, taxis, or interview settings. But there were also a handful of international colleagues whom I lived with and went out with after office hours. During my year-long contract I conducted only a few formal interviews, no more than ten, with Dutch embassy officials, other NGO workers, and my direct colleagues in order to understand or double check the facts and values of evaluation work. In 2012 I switched from the New School of Social Research to the University of Amsterdam and started the PhD project of which this is the result under the supervision of Professor Annemarie Mol, Dr. Oskar Verkaaik and Dr. René Gerrets — with a grant from NWO. In the thesis I have written since I have drawn on my memories, interview notes and recordings, information stored in emails, drafts of reports, comments in the margins, excel sheets, Skype chat conversations, note books, and photographs.

PhD theses discuss their methods, it is a requirement. It is for that reason that I mention what I did as part of my fieldwork, the amount of interviews I conducted, or where I stored my field notes. An account such as the previous paragraph relies on the stability of the classic anthropological figure of the participant observer who silently and reflexively collects data, analyzes it, and writes it

down in a thesis. This account doesn't capture, however, the tension I myself felt between my two research commitments. During my work and fieldwork I wanted to be a good anthropologist and understand what it entailed to be a good evaluator. At the same time I wanted to be a good evaluator and understand Afghanistan well for which I kept turning to the methods I had been taught during my anthropological training. These, however, were not the methods that were used by the research organization I worked for. In other words, studying methods of research while applying other methods was an unsettling affair.

This tension reared its head on many occasions during the evaluation research's trajectory. In the writing phase of the evaluation project and in the design of the questionnaires for another research project, I was struggling to not see evaluation research as a flawed version of anthropological research. It was not always difficult to be a good anthropologist. I didn't, for example, have an anthropological alternative to challenge the numbers that were part of the data analysis, so at first I took them for granted. There also seemed nothing particular to tell about the meetings organized to discuss the evaluation research's results. One explanation for this is that anthropologists are so familiar with the way in which meetings operate that they remain ethnographically intractable (see Riles (2000) and Brown, Reed and Yarrow (forthcoming)). Meetings seemed so naturally ordinary, and subservient to the topics addressed within them, that their format and practices didn't initially register with me as a topic of research, let alone as a point of entry for the exploration of the differences between anthropology and evaluation practices.

In order to untangle the confusion between different kinds of knowledge production styles and between different forms of knowledge I had to revisit and rethink my own data and stories with a symmetrical approach. In evaluation research this process of revisiting and rethinking is called data cleaning. In the present project I call this method for knowing methods "doing things again and again." It has required me to engage again and again, in different practices of knowledge production in order to differentiate knowledge practices. It has, for example, required me to write draft after draft after draft, both of the evaluation report itself and of my article in this thesis on evaluation report writing, in order to understand the specificities and merits of evaluation writing on their own terms rather than as deficient compared to anthropological writing. Doing again and again doesn't just refer to collecting more data. It also entails thinking again and again. This long and windy road of analytical tinkering is not often discussed in methodology sections. Doing things again and again doesn't assume either that the initiative for knowing lies with the researcher only. Engagement in a research situation requires being attuned to the specificities of the other participants, human and non-human, which can lead to surprising analytical redirections.

How is this different from the reflexive participant-observer? It is different because this reflexive

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figure assumes a unified subject whose boundaries of knowing are stably drawn around researcher, knowledge and research protocol. Doing things again and again, on the other hand, assumes that the researcher and her knowledge multiply in engagements. This methodological insight that doing and knowing are profoundly intertwined makes for a recursive, rather than a reflexive research protocol.

ON AFGHANISTAN

How people know crucially matters for what they know. This is the central tenet of this PhD and little reflected on in studies on Afghanistan. I start this section about work on Afghanistan with texts that were produced in the early 19th century by adventurers, as they were still called, soldiers and diplomats. As “non-western” work on Afghanistan is hardly available to me, what I learn about Afghanistan is already limited. These 19th century figures like Alexander Burns, Charles Masson and Mountstuart Elphinstone wrote about espionage, the Anglo-Russian rivalry, but also about their knowledge of the ethnic, linguistic and religious groups in Central Asia. In their times their work became the go-to studies of Afghanistan. Even if they wrote their work as travelers and explorers, their “intimate knowledge of the other” (Stoler, 2002) paved the way for imperial expansion in the region of Afghanistan and Central Asia (Bayly, 2013).

It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that Afghanistan became a topic for anthropology. However, the anthropologists who travelled there came equipped with topics and models from other places where anthropologists were conducting research. And so, Ferdinand wrote on “nomads and commerce” (1962), L. Dupree on “the land, the people, the past and the present” (1973), and Ghani on “Islam and state-building” (1978). Afghanistan came to figure in a structural-functionalist model — a model that explained why societies function the way they do — that had been developed elsewhere. It hasn’t changed much since, one could argue.

What did change with the Soviet invasion into Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent turbulent times of the mujahidin, the Taliban and the US and NATO interventions was the accessibility of Afghanistan for people who wanted to live there and study it. Edwards (1994) reflected on the need to shift focus to refugees and the Afghan diaspora as this topic was still accessible for fieldwork. He relates how frustratingly untruthful it feels to tell the partial stories of so many people that are not in the place they are supposed to be in, including himself. His desire to tell “the whole story, that is not confined to any one point in time or space” (Edwards, 1994: 346) and the patchwork of vignettes of different times and spaces that he ends up presenting is an interesting consideration of

what kinds of stories one can tell as a result of being or not being in a place.

The debate around the Human Terrain System is about the ethics of using knowledge collected in a specific place for the purpose of warfare. Since 2000, many social scientists concerning themselves with Afghanistan have become occupied by the war and the intervention. The vast majority of them produce their knowledge in one way or the other for the thriving business that research and aid organizations have become since the international intervention (Monsutti, 2013). One very distinct form has been the embedment of anthropologists in the Human Terrain System, a US military support program applying anthropology to improve the military's understanding of the local context and thereby aiding the effectiveness of the counterinsurgency. This embedment in the Human Terrain System sparked a huge debate among anthropologists revolving around the ethics, perils and opportunities of this affiliation (McFate and Laurence, 2015; Gusterson, 2010). One side argued that embedment generated knowledge that was useful in improving the international intervention. The other side contended that this knowledge was collected under false pretenses and, furthermore, used in warfare.

Most social scientists working on Afghanistan are nowadays, however, employed by Non-governmental (NGO) or International Organizations. The knowledge that is produced in this environment is contested but not in the same way as the Human Terrain anthropologists. The work that is produced in this environment is dominated by a concern with certain concepts such as insurgency, state-building, capacity building, security and reconstruction. Moreover, it is subjected to a project-based temporality on research and writing, and a logic of accountability that influences the way in which problems and recommendations can be articulated. Monsutti (2013) argues that the form and content of this work tends to evoke a return of the modernization theory in which states, people and politicians are scaled somewhere on a continuum between backward, corrupt, misogynist, religious, tribal and traditionalist on the one hand, and progressive, democratic, egalitarian, modernist, emancipated and educated, on the other. The analyses, he argues, dovetail easily with models for peace- and nation-building and inform the horizons for the development programs to be implemented.

Adjoining the more applied social scientific work produced in the industry of international intervention, there is a mix of academic work and investigative journalism sometimes crossing over into op-ed and political analyses. The majority of these attempt to explain present day, conflict-ridden Afghanistan through the rise of the Taliban, such as Rubin explaining "the rise of the Taliban in the power vacuum left by the Soviet's withdrawal" (2013), Barfield "situating the Taliban insurgency in the developments since the sixteenth-century Moghul empire" (2010), Rashid "bringing the shadowy world of the Taliban into sharp focus" (2010), and Gopal on the "effect of the

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American war on terror on the rise of the Taliban” (2014). Others explain or show Afghanistan’s conflicts through the poppy economy (Goodhand, 2005), warlordism (Giustozzi, 2009), class and competition for employment and education (Dorransoro, 2005), or Karzai’s political role (Dam, 2014). It is not always a set of internal issues that explains Afghanistan’s state of disorder. Other people scrutinize the effects of the international intervention and its reconstruction efforts such as Goodhand and Sedra on the “complex bargaining process between aid actors” (2010), Suhrke on the “internal contradictions of the international intervention” (2011), and Coburn on the “the intricate dynamics of the intervention and its bureaucracy” (2016).

This was one way of relating what has been written about Afghanistan. I chose the authors because they are part of a canon on Afghanistan that many in the development industry, political analysis and academia turn to. For the purposes of my argument, these texts reflect particular conditions of possibility for knowing, which, at the same time, remain by and large unacknowledged. What if we pick up the problem of (anthropological) intervention in Afghanistan *again* and ask the question slightly differently? Rather than asking what we know about Afghanistan, this thesis will investigate how we know about Afghanistan and how this knowledge is situated in research practices that make possible and restrict the ways in which Afghanistan is known.

ANTHROPOLOGY OF DEVELOPMENT, DEVELOPMENT ANTHROPOLOGY

As is well told by many (Asad, 1973; Mosse, 2013; Rottenburg, 2009; Cooper and Packard, 1997; Edelman and Haugerud, 2005), the history of anthropology is rooted in colonialism. Through the frame of modernization and global inclusion of the colonies — and soon thereafter, their independence — anthropology became engaged in the project of knowing and transforming the Other, known as international development. Broadly speaking, this engagement expanded into two views. First, there were the modernists who believed in the possibility of moulding and creating societies with the right tools and efforts which have been changing over the past decades. The Marshall Plan in the aftermath of World War II marked the start of the “era of development”, combining humanitarian goals with political and economic growth. In the ‘80s the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund took a neoliberal turn with structural adjustment programs. These were supposed to orient what were then called developing economies towards “the market” as this was understood as a way to reduce poverty and stimulate economic growth. The turn of the millennium saw the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals, which later transformed into Sustainable

Development Goals and the Human Development approach. These initiatives shifted their focus to the enhancement of human capabilities rather than economic growth alone. Alongside these approaches there has been greater emphasis on evaluation and results based management in international development. The idea of Theory of Change was developed as a particular methodology to plan and evaluate development projects and to communicate effects between the compliance side of aid programs and the technical and programmatic side. Some argue that the balance has been off between doing development and accounting for it: “measurability should not be confused with development significance...” (Natsios, 2010, p. 9).

The second view on development is a critique of the first. This position developed with dependency theory in the ‘50s and ‘60s, and considered international development to be a world system by which poor states were systematically enriching richer states at the expense of their own prosperity. Out of this approach grew a postmodern understanding of development that critiqued international development’s discourse for the uneven ways in which it imagined, created and managed what was then called The Third World. Some see this position of “post-development” in relation to development as an opposition between academic anthropology concerned with revealing the power relations concealed by development discourse on the one hand, and applied anthropology in support and service of the development industry, on the other. As Escobar, who has been a central voice in post-development theory (1997) puts it,

[w]hile development anthropologists focus on the project cycle, the use of knowledge to tailor projects to beneficiaries’ cultures and situation, and the possibility of contributing to the needs of the poor, the anthropologists of development centre their analysis on the institutional apparatus, the links to power established by expert knowledge, the ethnographic analysis and critique of modernist constructs, and the possibility of contributing to the political projects of the subaltern. (1997:505).

Post-development theory, also known as critical anthropology of development, or just anthropology of development has been applauded for making visible the politics of development. Escobar (*ibid.*) and Ferguson (1994), among others, have shown that as a discourse, development revolves around the idea of a deficit of underdevelopment to be remedied by development intervention. This idea enabled and encouraged development intervention as something good, while disguising the uneven relations of power implicit in the intervention. Moreover, post-development criticized development efforts for the process of othering that turns the underdeveloped into a deficient and arrested version of oneself,

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converting what could be geo-cultural differences into developmental stages (Ziai, 2015).

This post-development project of critique has also, however, become itself an object of critique. Some argue it rejects the possibility of development too unconditionally; it doesn't offer clear alternatives, or it is paternalistic in its unjust romanticization of development's beneficiaries as noble savages who have no interest in development aid (Ziai, 2015).

In addition to the group of believers and the group of critics, recently there has been a third group that doesn't want to either subscribe to or be critical of the big ambitions of international development agencies, but wants to do an anthropology of the practices through which development happens. They argue that both development anthropology (approach 1) and anthropology of development (approach 2) offer an understanding of development as a discourse that conceptualizes the world as a series of rational interactions. Understanding development as a form of discourse has led to analyses that ignore the relations and practices through which ideas of development are practically enacted (Venkatesan and Yarrow, 2012). Policy ideas do not just transform into practices in the field, as development models want us to believe. It requires a lot of work of translation and coordination and cohering to connect the world of policy to the world of implementation (see also Van Gastel, 2011; Mosse, 2004, 2005).

This translational space is what interests many of those who take up this third approach. Lewis and Mosse (2006) call it the interface, Rottenburg (2009) calls it the interstices, and Jensen and Winthereik explore it through infrastructure (2013). In these inter-places, development roles are not so much replicated as functionalist theory would have it, nor locations where power manifests itself as post-developmentalists would argue. Instead, this is where connections are made across difference. This is the space of translation and composition (Donovan, 2014) and brokerage (Lewis and Mosse, 2006). A development ideal as stipulated in development policy is not handed down from The Hague to Uruzgan as easily and transparently as development models want us to believe. Policy is made to work, made real and constantly altered and adapted between hands in a chain of translations. In the work of Mosse (2005) and Rottenburg (2009) the practice of translation in development is not a free for all, but one where representational coherence is strived after in order to secure development's continuation. For Mosse, coherence comes with the recruitment for support of development policy. Translation is the mutual enrollment and the interlocking of interests that produces development as a reality. For Rottenburg, coherence is the effect of a metacode that guides collaboration and gives people a sense of purpose.

Others argue that when it comes to research there is not always a translational space. This work takes a formal approach to knowledge practices to investigate the power of form on the way people know and distinguish. Riles' (2006) edited collection investigates documentary practices and

thematizes the proximity of anthropological styles of documenting and the documentary practices in a host of other environments. The distance anthropologists once held up between themselves and their objects of study, and between the things that they study and the frames used for this, has collapsed. To study other people's documentation practices has become an investigation into how ethnographers themselves know. A similar collapse between means and end informs Jensen and Winthereik's (2013) study of aid information infrastructures that are constructed to enhance accountability and effectiveness in development aid. Jensen and Winthereik approach these infrastructures as phenomena, as analytical category, and as methodological orientation. They argue that central to the monitoring movement is a collapse between means and ends, where aid information structures are not just considered to enable the making of knowledge about aid, but come to figure as aid in their own right.

This thesis joins others interested in development who have turned to practice and translation to find a way out of the opposition that exists between development practice and the anthropology of development. It does so while envisioning a particular type of practice that is crucial in development practice, even if it is shaped after the fact — that of accounting for success and failure. What if we pick up the issue of the relation between practice and theory again and examine it through the lens of the relation of proximity between anthropology and development rather than through a critical lens?

ACCOUNTABILITY

How we know matters for what we know, but does it also matter for how we account? The Dutch mission had to account for its efforts and for the losses of the lives of Dutch soldiers. The evaluation report was commissioned to serve this purpose of accountability. Was this purpose served? Many authors argue in one way or another that that question is a complicated one as accountability is not so easy to grasp in practice. The study of accountability more generally followed upon the expansion of audit practices and the effects of the technologies of accountability. One of the first people to systematically investigate the explosion of auditing systems in British society was Power (1997). He noted that audits were mere rituals of verification. Many dimensions of everyday life were turned into protocols of measurements and rankings and administrators started to follow these protocols as ends in themselves rather than as means for improvement. Power argues that as trust and judgment came to be replaced by auditing protocols, levels of mistrust rose. Several authors have investigated these claims. For example, Strathern (2000) argues that science has lost its

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unquestioned authority to explain society due to the switch from considering science and society as two different domains. Without the possibility of referring to the capacity for authoritative explanations of science, trust in it has withered and constant inspections into science's adequacy and ethics are conducted. Shore and Wright (2015) emphasize that auditing has in fact become a central social organizing principle with a double function. It operates both as an instrument in the internal management of organizations and as external proof of their quality, efficiency and accountability. As such it allows for organizational reform to happen while transforming what are profoundly political programs into mundane administrative and technical matters to be dealt with by experts as mere technicalities. These three authors all agree that accountability is hard to pin down. It disappears in technicalities, mere rituals of verification or in mistrust requiring ever more inspections.

Numbers, indicators and rankings are excellent entities for both showing and doubting the presence of accountability as Porter claims in his pioneering study of numbers (1995). Much recent work focuses on numbers either as political technologies that reduce complexity to make visible otherwise obscured social trends, or as representations that conceal the underlying theories of social change or what should be counted (Merry, 2011; Sauder and Espeland, 2009; Shore and Wright, 2015). Verran, on the contrary, brings out a way to understand how numbers contribute to the confusion between the technical and the political. She approaches numbers not as passive symbols amenable to being used by people and their agendas, but instead points to their active participation in the making of our worlds (2001, 2012; see also Lippert forthcoming; and Neyland forthcoming). Their varied capacities to order and value have different material, practical and semiotic effects which enables not only critical appraisal of numbers as end products but also a careful assessment of the worlds that emerge alongside numbering practices.

A third series of studies on accountability investigates how requirements of accountability are negotiated in the specific context of health care. Accountability is not just a practical concern that is added to health care; its practice modifies health care practice. Mol (2006) contrasts accountability practices and their standardized formats with health care workers' tinkering practices that are aimed at figuring out what kind of care works for which patient. She argues that a focus on the former compromises the latter. Jerak-Zuiderent (2015) adds that care and accountability may not relate as just two opposed logics. Situating both care and accountability in a specific healthcare practice, she shows that accountability "from somewhere and for someone" relates to care in generative ways. Her concept of "narrative work" allows her to address the interweaving work that health care practitioners do to interrelate accountability and care. Pols (2006) adds that while practices of accountability and care will mutually constitute one another, this new ensemble, in order for it to be considered to be good, may also rely on new forms of care or reflexivity that escape the framework of accountability.

Singleton (2012) brings the issue of accountability back as an issue of visibility. She describes the way farmers tack back and forth between legislative contexts and local contexts of animal care. This process requires “touch”, a careful tinkering that connects both logics. This requirement of tinkering demands us to revisit our understanding of the relation between legislation and care as hierarchical. Making the tinkering visible allows us to see that legislation doesn’t happen “from above” but requires investments, work and collaboration from all to make it work. Maintenance and repair studies make a similar point about the coexistence of different models for understanding the world around that are not visible to the same extent. This field argues that social life relies on so many infrastructures that may go unnoticed to most people most of the time, but are the object of attention and intervention for the maintenance and repair workers who keep these infrastructures afloat (Denis and Pontille, 2015; Bowker et al., 2010; Graham and Thrift, 2007). Denis and Pontille (2015), for instance, have meticulously described the work that goes into subway signage, which largely remains invisible to subway users (see also Star and Strauss, 1999, and Suchman, 2007). They point to the co-existence of both versions of objects: the one users know as stable and durable, and the other that maintenance workers know as vulnerable. Making maintenance work visible may have an important effect both on the work conditions of maintenance workers and on the capacity to care for the objects themselves, Denis and Pontille argue (*ibid.*)

This thesis offers another ethnography of accountability as it takes shape within the specificities of the evaluation project. Or, should I say, how it doesn’t take shape? What if we bring to bear the issue of accountability’s illusiveness and its tendency to disappear in technicalities or in the extended network of people whose investments are necessary to make it work, on Afghanistan’s mode of existence and its capacity to be known?

The rest of this thesis is made up of four articles and a conclusion. Following standard practice I offer a short preview of each here. Before I do so, a note on the names I have used throughout the text. I have anonymized all the people in the text, as well as the name of the organization I worked for. The reason for this is less to disguise and protect the people and organization I worked with, as the case is so specific that people who are connected to the story in one way or another will immediately know of whom I speak. Rather, by using a pseudonym for the organization, I want to underscore that the story I tell is not particular to this organization or its people. Rather, it exemplifies the (evaluation) research industry in Afghanistan. I take this point on pseudonyms and exemplification from Suchman and Bishop (2000) who make it in relation practices of innovation in technology companies.

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6.15% – Taking Numbers at Interface Value

This article discusses a number, 6.15%, as it comes into being in the course of the evaluation study of education in Uruzgan. This number indicates that out of 100 school-aged girls 6.15 go to school. While this kind of number may invite reflections on its epistemic accuracy, more often it draws attention to its inherent negative—the girls that do not go to school—substantiating a need for sustained international commitment. As this article will show, numbers work to establish girls as research entities, as part of populations, and as a concern for the Afghan government and the international intervention. This interfacing work of numbers—between girls, states, interventions, and research protocols—is often absent from academic work that takes numbers to be stable and passive tools with which the world can be known. This article, instead, takes numbers to have an internally complex multiplicity and to actively engage with their environments. I use the interface between numbers and environment as a space for ethnographic exploration of world-making. By describing three moments in the lifecycle of the number — data cleaning, analysis and presentation — I will describe three distinct moments of interfacing in which the number comes to act in three capacities: effecting reference, constituting proportional comparison, and evoking doubt and certainty. Detailed understanding of numbering practices provides an opportunity to not just critically assess numbers as end products but to carefully assess the worlds that emerge alongside numbering practices and the ways in which numbers contribute in processes of governance.

Crafting Coherence: On Writing an Evaluation Report in Afghanistan

This article is about the writing of the evaluation report that the Dutch embassy commissioned with the Afghan research organization that I worked for. Whereas anthropological interest in writing usually focuses on the representative qualities of a text, this article builds upon literature that examines the production of the evaluation report and the socio-material work that goes into it. I explore the writing of this report in and across three layers: writing infrastructures, writing format and authorship. In these contexts, writing turns out to be an attempt to solve the tension between a heterogeneous input and a unity into which the input needs to be transformed. The tensions, heterogeneities and coherences that this case offers will be discussed in the last part of this article.

Meeting with Success and Failure: Presenting Afghanistan in the Netherlands

This article is about a series of meetings organized around the presentation of the evaluation report in 2010. I describe four meetings — a press conference, a meeting about ongoing development, a lobby meeting, and a round table discussion — to specify the different ways in which meetings bring certain versions of developmental success and failure into being. The ethnography intends to expand Mosse's claim that success and failure are conceptual achievements oriented towards maintaining policy coherence rather than practical achievements in the realm of development operations. While it may indeed be the case that the realms of development policy and development operations work according to distinct logics, to argue that success is a conceptual achievement is to underestimate the amount of practical work that goes into the conceptual and the other way around. I will use the meeting as an analytical lens to show how success and failure are done in ways that are simultaneously conceptual and practical, according to logics of accountability, exploration and political lobby.

Asking Again and Again: Questions in and about Development Research in Afghanistan

This article is about asking questions in a study about transportation in Uruzgan. The article follows two trajectories. One is the process of understanding transportation in Uruzgan. The second is the transformation of an anthropologist *in* development research into an anthropologist *of* development research. The article starts with an exploration of the worlds of transportation that are brought into being, first, in questionnaires and, second, in interviews. What follows is a discussion of how the questionnaires and interviews became critical stakes in the relation between my supervisor and me. This article borrows from academic reflections on the relation between development theory and post-development theory to consider this relation beyond critique. Moreover, it considers movement as part of the method of asking questions. Following a move from the research organization in Kabul to an academic office in Amsterdam, I revisit the questions asked in and about development research. This analytical move of 'asking again' questions the bases of critique, as it opens up the similarities and differences between anthropology and development research as modes of engagement that attempt to understand, represent and work within a complex world.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Conclusion

In the conclusion I will discuss the evaluation situation as an analytical device to rethink the evaluation project according to several elements: 1) research technologies, such as numbering practices, asking questions, writing and meetings, that actively participate in the coming into being of research objects, 2) constant work to secure the research object and its representability, 3) contexts, and 4) the researcher. Considering how evaluations are done in the meeting of these elements, again and again, allows us to situate our knowledge of Afghanistan: how we know Afghanistan matters for what we know and an awareness of this may help to bring different kinds of Afghanistan to take shape. This situated and recursive understanding of the research method and object helps to understand, in addition, that knowing the international intervention and development is a form of doing them, and, that how we know accountability as analysts ourselves may matter for how and where we situate it.