



Fieldwork and COVID-19: After a ‘Corona home run’ from Indonesia

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March 16, early in the morning I received a Whatsapp message from my student Shannon: ‘We received a letter from Campus saying that all students overseas should return home. What do you think?’ Wow, I thought, this is getting serious. There were already some Corona casualties in the Netherlands, mainly in the province of Brabant. Outside the Netherlands mainly Italy and Spain were hit by the virus. Since 9 March we had stopped shaking hands, and between 12 and 15 March the so-called intelligent lockdown started. Initially until April 6, a week after the students were scheduled to return home from fieldwork.

The university was acting quickly, I thought. I remember being on fieldwork myself in Indonesia in 2003 when SARS was hitting the world. We did not have to repatriate, the only thing I witnessed were more people with mouth masks in the streets of Jakarta and in airports. But now, should my two students in Indonesia – Shannon on Ambon, East Indonesia and Evelien on Bali – return immediately? While we did not know yet how the virus was going to act?

COVID-19 turned out to be another size and enemy than SARS. Within a week the situation worsened resulting in more infections and deaths and with air travel slowing down and coming to an almost complete standstill. Governments repatriating its citizens from all over the world.

In this turmoil and fast succeeding new regulations both, Shannon and Evelien, managed to return home. For them it felt like a home run: trying to be at the home base as fast as possible. Evelien traveling from the tourist island Bali through Taipei in an airplane with everybody wearing mouth masks. Shannon first had to cover two time zones between Ambon and Jakarta and wait another week to catch her rescheduled flight to Amsterdam, luckily she was staying with relatives. The Whatsapp contact with both of them was intensive during their last period in the field before their ‘Corona home run’. We finally could meet again – virtually of course – to talk about the fieldwork and their Corona home run. Both from Indonesia, but from very different places.

Shannon: Returning from lively Ambon to an empty Jakarta

The first time I heard 'Corona' on Ambon I literally thought: 'Corona? Since when do they have that beer here?' Only a few days later I realized that Corona was actually happening in the world. I was doing fieldwork on the Moluccas (specifically the region Ambon and the Lease islands in the central Moluccas) for my Master's Degree.



Business as usual Tulehu Harbor. Photo by Shannon van Leeuwen

The situation on Ambon differed very much from what I encountered in Jakarta. In Ambon the fear of the virus was – at least in my surroundings and to my knowledge at that time – not very much present. Information about it was spreading, but measures were not taken yet and everyday life continued as normal. I learned most about the virus through information I got via Whatsapp. Family-members back in the Netherlands sent me pictures of empty shelves in supermarkets, while family-members living elsewhere in Indonesia, in Jogjakarta and Jakarta, sent pictures of empty streets. Most reactions on the outbreak of the virus on Ambon and the Lease Islands were a mix of explanations based on religion, traditional beliefs and superstition. Sometimes leading to funny situations. One evening, for example, a message was sent through social media that everybody had to boil an egg and eat this before midnight as this would ensure your safety against the virus. Although many did not trust the message, many others believed it, until the next day the person who shared this information confessed it was a hoax.



Stall at Mardika market Ambon: no social distancing. Photo by Shannon van Leeuwen

Although I planned to come back to Jakarta at the end of March before leaving for the Netherlands, I went to the capital city one week earlier. The situation in Jakarta was completely different from Ambon: empty streets, almost no traffic and masks and hand sanitizers everywhere. To illustrate the lack of traffic: normally the drive from Sukarno-Hatta International Airport to my place of residence takes over an hour, whereas now the drive was just 25 minutes. The taxi driver also explained that the lack of passengers was unreal: on a regular day (pre-Corona) the bookings could exceed ten a day, yet during the Corona-crisis he was lucky if he got any bookings at all.

An explanation for the difference between the reactions to the virus in Jakarta and on the Moluccas could be that Ambon and the villages on the island are quite remote whereas Jakarta is a hub for international traffic through which the spread of the virus could happen faster. Another explanation could be that on Ambon there were not yet identified Corona cases, whereas in Jakarta the number of patients was already growing rapidly.



Empty shopping mall Senayang city Jakarta. Photo by Shannon van Leeuwen

In a way I felt that if I stayed on Ambon, I would be safe, but all in all I am also happy to have been able to return to the Netherlands safely.

Evelien: **The virus on Bali – shifting from surf talk to corona conversations**

I was having dinner after a day of surfing at a warung in Ungasan when a friend pointed out the recent decline in the number of tour buses. Normally they bring, mostly Chinese, tourists to see the fire dance at the temple or the beautiful sunset at Uluwatu. She goes on: 'Did you notice? It's because of the corona virus. There are less people traveling from some countries. In France it's getting worse, but I don't want to go back. I feel safer here.' We talk about the situation in Europe, the measures that are being taken and how we feel comfortable in Bali, since there are no cases of the virus identified. At the time I didn't realize that this was the first 'corona conversation' of many, many to come. It would end up being the one subject that would take over all conversations, even the ones about my research topic – surf – and change our feeling of safety and comfort completely.



Bali Beach. Photo by Evelien van Overveld

Shortly after this conversation, I had to go on a 'visa run' to Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), in order to extend my permit to stay in Indonesia. In Malaysia the temperature of passengers was measured with heat cameras but on the way back to Bali I merely had to fill out a form to declare that I was healthy. Pretty easy, no stress – this contributed to my feeling of being safe. Not as bad as in Europe, right?

Then I noticed some Italian, Spanish and French friends getting overwhelmed with messages from home: 'Come back', 'stay there'. This marked the start of an uncertain time, what to do? Soon my family, friends and the university urged me to come back too. It became the topic of the day. We were all hiding in denial and looking for excuses to stay. Mainly because of the virus had not yet hit Bali and of the rising fear that it had Europe in its grip. I remember saying to my best friend at home that I wouldn't mind sitting this one out under the sun while surfing in Indonesia. She, rightly so, questioned my reasoning.

Then new uncertainties started to come every day: less flights to Europe, the first corona cases in the Bukit, beaches closed and a ban on new visitors to Bali. Finally (and luckily) fear took over motivating a lot of people to go home and leaving the waves behind, including myself.

Looking back I see a lot of naivety in my decision making. But at the other hand these times are unlike anything else I ever experienced. There was no way to be prepared for this situation. For Bali, I hope the tourists and locals will respect the measures imposed by the authorities so the island will overcome this health, and consequently economic, crisis and remains as beautiful and welcoming as I have experienced it.

Returning Home

Doing fieldwork is always an adventurous period for master students. Discovering the field and being confronted with yourself. The corona-crisis created an almost spectacular closure for this year's masters fieldwork. Shannon passing the time zones through cities she has never seen before, and Evelien ending up in a rollercoaster ride of thoughts and feelings after the first signs of a decline in the number of buses bringing Chinese tourists. Both were thinking about their own safety and balancing what it would mean to return home or to stay. Luckily both were able to come back safe and share their experiences. I am sure that, further in their careers as anthropologist, they and the other master-students will think back to this fieldwork experience and see it as an intensive moment of participant observation in the world we are studying.

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