

When I initially met one of my first informants, Thomas, he was very curious and skeptical about the research project, and also about myself as a person. He wondered what an anthropologist was, and what exactly I could possibly want from him. We talked a lot about how participant observation might be like. I proposed several temporal frequencies for our meetings, and he proposed to let all plans go and simply meet whenever he felt like talking to me. Thomas was surprised that I agreed with this vague appointment schedule. He was even more irritated that I was willing to let him choose the topics he wanted to talk about: “But then you cannot guarantee what you’ll deliver in the end. You do not know what I will say.” No, I said. We talked intensively about the reasons for explorative long-term fieldwork and its differences from clearly delineated research. Thomas became less skeptical, the more he grasped the aim of the whole study. Finally, he concluded: “So you don’t know yet what you find out, but generally you want to know what it means to die.” I thought a little, then nodded, being a little ashamed about this very ambitious and very naïve aim. Indeed, basically I grounded my idea about researching dying on not knowing what the outcome would be, and on being radically curious about what dying means. Thomas pointed this out better and more succinctly than I had ever dared. Hopefully, the study at hand would have met his expectations.