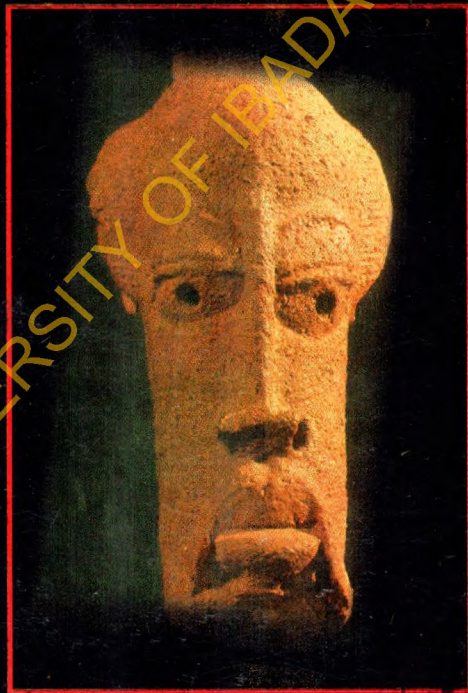


**A Handbook of
Methodology**

in

**African
Studies**



Edited by

Dele Layiwola

A HANDBOOK OF
Methodology
IN AFRICAN STUDIES

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FIELDWORK EXPERIENCE AND THE DOCUMENTATION, MEDIATION AND ANALYSIS OF DRAMATISED CULTURE

DELE LAYIWOLA

5

The nature and extent of fieldwork for researchers of African Studies are changing with the times. Historical, 'linguistic'¹ and behavioural problems are therewithal precipitating an underlying sub-culture that informs the outcome of any field event or its research. One rather cursory but intensely fundamental factor is that mentioned by the doyen of African Art history, Roy Seiber, in a 1992 interview:

The old scientific view was that you got your evidence, and from your evidence you built your hypothesis. Now we are expected to have a hypothesis and then go out and look for the evidence. [1992: 51]

In view of the implication which this kind of contemporary attitude imposes on field investigation and derived results, this paper will address three distinct issues. The first is the sphere of authority in scholarship; the second is the medium of analysis; and the third is the problem of false consciousness in the 'adult learning' process. As I shall presently contend, the first is historical, the second linguistic and the third behavioural.

There is a sense in which communities and cultures with a longer history of oral tradition (or orature) than that of written tradition have become unique sources of information and data, especially in the field of visual and performance research. But we must remember that twentieth century researchers, by the mere incidence of the *written word* possess a high degree of intellectual arrogance, even arrogance, through the facility to 'affirm' or accentuate observation in their own words or printed letters. Hitherto, societies without the magisterial art of the *written* alphabet often own ideas and artefacts communally (and in trust) rather than individually. But the importation of written literature has brought with it a phenomenal shift of emphasis in the arrogation of the authorial 'I' to things and to the territory and landscapes of the mind. That authorial 'I' is the assertiveness that has characterised the whole enterprise of colonialism – the intellectual claim to the property of 'others' as opposed to ours. This is the reason that post-colonialism has always manifested as neo-colonialism even among kindred group and nationalities.

If, by the foregoing, we affirm that textual strategies have given a new power to the author and researcher, then the world is changing relative to that shift and position of power. The opportunity to (re)search in the field becomes the mapping out of a designated and 'captured' world in the sense of a *subject*. Here then is the point of contention. Studying and writing have become power-sharing processes or power-play instances in the modern world.

The expanse of the field in, for instance, an African or Pacific settlement is a whole wide world to which the researcher or critic applies himself like a text. This world, to borrow a phrase of Edward Said (1979) "is a text that incorporates speaking and writing, reading and telling" which "accepts as inevitable not the separation between speech and writing, nor the disjunction between a text and its circumstantiality, but rather their necessary interplay" [p. 170]. This interplay of medium is the undoing Aurora which dazzles and perplexes many a brilliant researcher who may return to their desks conceited with scientific facts that are no more than jack o' lanterns. A few interesting instances of what Roy Sieber had identified as establishing hypothesis before evidence is well illustrated in Mallory Wobber's *Psychology in Africa*.

There are also isolated occasions when an enthusiastic learner of an indigenous language 'invents' a wrong interpretation, or infers a wrong meaning from words used in established contexts [Achebe, 1975, 1982, p. 6]. We all know too well that language often

encapsulates cultures and worlds, and where we get field guides and interpreters, there are still knotty issues we cannot afford to gloss over. Roger Arnaldez and Edward Said, paraphrasing Ibn Hazm, remind us that language has two apparently conflicting characteristics:

first, that of a divinely ordained institution, unchanging, immutable, logical, rational, intelligible, and second, that of an instrument existing as pure contingency, that is, as an institution signifying meanings anchored in specific utterances [Arnaldez, 1956: 80; Said, 1979: 170].

The real historical point, however, is that before the enterprise of colonialism, African (or untranscribed) languages tend to maintain speech and writing as inseparably imbricated. It thus means that there was no conception of 'telling' or speech as inherently separate from that of inscribing or writing. This, from a stochastic rather than from an empiricist point of view, is responsible for the relative tonality of many African languages whereby what is said (or intoned) is what is written (or inscribed).

The above point has far-reaching implications if we ponder the reason for the apparent absence of musical/dance notation and scores in the corpus of cultures with vast traditions of folk music and dances. It is, of course, understandable that where there is a rich and extensive tradition of learning and recounting by rote; where historical records are committed to memory, there almost always exists a performative as well as declamatory approach to oral renditions, chants and recitals, even if only as methods of *aide memoirs* which are largely intuitive. It is therefore not difficult to tolerate the sometimes intrusive musical notes which abound in the names of objects as well as the numerous instances of tonal counterpoints and puns based on musical and melodic notes. If language is to encapsulate worlds, indices of knowledge and boundaries of culture, then it must retain a high level of vibrancy and elasticity within its own fold. Much as this factor can be an asset in the documentation and cipher of knowledge, it may become serious impediments for persons seeking to relate to those cultures for the privilege of research 'entry'. This is known to undo both indigenous as well as foreign researchers. The case, already cited above, which Achebe documents is very pertinent:

He published a long abstruse treatise based on an analysis of a number of Igbo proverbs most of which, it turned out, he had so completely misunderstood as to translate 'fruit' in one of them as 'penis' . . .

It is interesting to note that misunderstanding need not come through the medium of language alone. Otherwise brilliant historians and culture analysts have been caught in the same kind of cultural slips. In his authoritative research on dance drama in East Africa between 1890 and 1970, Terence Ranger came to rather startling conclusions which would seem to affirm that the field researcher made tendentious, legislative comments on the cultural inclinations of the community under study. I quote him:

When we read of 'light comedies' being put on to illustrate black-white relations such a brief time after the ravages of the war, we may well deplore the lack of a well-developed political consciousness thereby displayed, or feel urban Africans had been culturally or intellectually emasculated under colonialism [Ranger, 1975: 76].

In the same breadth:

But we can hardly deny admiration for the survival capacity of these young men of the towns [*Ibid*: 76].

Statements of this kind are often rife with the arrogance of a researcher dealing with his 'subjects and objects' of study. The impression given is as if "these colonials must subject themselves to the view and scrutiny of the scalpel-happy researcher doing for them what they are incapable of doing for themselves!" Consequently, the same assertion is soon riddled with contradictions and over-generalisations. However, we must honestly acknowledge that even scholars indigenous to the culture sometimes unwittingly fall into such errors of presumption. Issues of racial and class origins can often be secondary or ancillary. The real point is that the control of the apparatus of research, study, and more appropriately, of *Ecriture*, may give the illusion of powers that we, as researchers, do not actually possess. The result is that a lot of nineteenth, and some twentieth, century ethnographies are laced with assumptions and arrogance which are lacking in humility and defective as scholarship in the true sense of the term. In spite of this, they have come to influence many writers and researchers.

The above statements would seem to reveal that *escritorial* engagement engenders assumptions and attitudes which portray the "writer" as educated, and possessing a measure of power and control over the "speaker" or informant who may have become a "mere object of study" devoid of will, soul or a driving principle. It then shows that our designation as scholars and researchers may constitute not only an

attitude of taste and of outlook but may be an overriding sub-culture; even an anti-culture.

More recently, two former students of Roy Sieber, Sidney Kasfir (1988) and Cornelius Adepegba (1996), have indicated that the tension from a 'holistic' or interdisciplinary study of African Art has not helped to defuse the widening tangent of individual perspectives. For instance, one would think that the study of art by both anthropologists and art historians would be complementary in the interpretation of cultures. Instead, tension continues to generate between scholars depending on which of the disciplines they practice. Anthropologists continue to concentrate on the study of institutions whilst art historians continue to dwell on forms. There is no doubt that the field would be richer if we continue the study of cultures from a multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional point of view, agreeing on mutually convergent methods. We must, of course, remember that only a first-hand experience of cultures can guarantee against such misinterpretation as we have often had in the past. Quite frequently, prejudices have been the basis for such misinterpretation. A case in point is the 'myth' that was spun around Ekoi and Ejargam masks as recalled by Adepegba:

For a long time before the kind of skin used as the cover for the skin covered mask was ascertained to be that of an animal, the skin cover was always said to be that of a human being, used for providing the masks with human attributes. Any second thought was not even suggested by the fact that the masks are in both human and animal forms and that the skin might have been employed to conceal possible cracking of the wet wood traditionally carved into masks and figures in Africa (p. 6).

The truth is that informants in the field are eager to tell researchers what they like to hear! Any researcher in search of exotic ideas will eventually help his informants to ascribe same to the processed text. The irony of this being that the researcher loses control over the mill of his own ideas and product, and returns to his desk with the illusion of ostensive power. In the same vein, Pierre Verger had recorded an instance where trustees of an indigenous institution confessed that whenever curious researchers ask incisive questions, they tell them stories they like to hear (Verger, 1965).

The aforementioned tallies with the point too well adumbrated by Michel Foucault that "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a

certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality" (1979: 216). These will thus continue to be a perpetual power play in the relation between "verbality" and "textuality". But we must bear in mind that this is underscored by the simple fact that the informant in the research field, or the 'subject of study' perpetually thinks of the investigator as a poacher, an uncertified intruder whose business is always to break down; to analyse and to vandalise for the purpose of academic (in)digestion. This assumption is, certainly, not unfounded especially as our mien as researchers and poachers as knowledge would often impose airs of virtual superiority, of investigators, physicians, midwives, and even contractors. The impression the other party gets is that we pretend to have all the tools and he is a lessee being understudied in an 'agreement'; the substance of which he neither drafts nor controls. How then do we overcome the tension of the superiority/inferiority relationship in circumstances of research otherwise supposed to be neutral, objective and results-oriented? Does this involve the empowerment of the subject and object of study? If so, how do we and who determines the parameters?

Ecriture and Authority

There is absolutely no doubting the mission of ethnography as a pervasive influence on culture and its intellectual analysis for the purpose of study. The writer's particular experience in the study and documentation of dance ethnography will not be different from those of anthropologists and others constantly foraging the 'field' for ancient and new ideas and ways of representing them in the context of African studies in the modern period. As has been recorded earlier, there is no 'divine' format on methods of field investigation. However, in the realm of values, ethnography is a sphere of influence for an upper hand in the post-colonial scramble for space appropriation and dominance. In the semantics of John Frow: 'Who speaks? Who speaks for whom? Whose voice is listened to? Whose voice is spoken over? Who has no voice? Whose claim to be powerless works as a ruse of power?' [1996:16]. This set of questions helps Frow to push the point already echoed by Linda Alcoff in her essay on "The Problem of Speaking for Others" [1992: 5-32] which stresses that meanings change as often as the vantage positions of who speaks or seeks to make the meaning. This is, of course, a philosophical axiom which ties down interpretation and meaning to relative geographical and

ideational space. For it is impossible to transcend one's *a priori* point of view in the representation of facts and meaning in an intellectual space. There is also the imputation of identity and class as sub-structures of value formation but we can avoid those for now and just concentrate on the hegemonic references. It is clear that unless one undergoes a particular condition, it is impossible to describe that condition with perfect objectivity (or even subjectivity). If a researcher or writer represents a human condition, it is almost certain that he is speaking or writing from a position of secondary elevation; and may thus be speaking *in spite* of him. The result of his findings are always *on behalf of* rather than *of* or *for* a particular group or culture. If it is impossible to attain the objectivity or the truth that scholarship aspires to, then we, as researchers, stand in a degree of ambivalence to our work and to the ethnography that we purvey.

The contradiction cited above would seem to be that we researchers are 'impostors' claiming to 'speak' or 'write' on behalf of chosen peoples and communities whilst we actually vend half truths and assumptions. Etymologically, therefore, we cannot really be authors as we often claim to be but can be better described as interpreters and translators of some reputed ideas. Though the argument is plausible that we put these propositions across the grid in matters of degree rather than with any absolutism; but the real dangers are quite visible that studies akin to truth and objectivity are often not so. It also becomes clear that as double personalities, researchers must begin to fashion new tools and devise new methods which can continue to sharpen the frontiers of knowledge acquisition. This is necessary because we stand the risk of making a culture out of a forced method of ethnography.

Conclusion

One can safely assume that for the discipline of oral and dramatic performance, there is an added layer of illusion generated by the very nature of performance itself. There are, thereby, four levels of meaning running concurrently: First, there is bare narration which either the performer or the field research recalls as primary text. Second, there is the level of analysis which appears as improvisation for the performer but as imposed theory for the critic or analyst. Third, there is that affective layer of embellishment which is often intuitive to the performer. Finally, there is the real objective meaning that exists irrespective of perception. It is an enhanced state which engenders cultural meaning as the grimace on the face of a mask but which can

often deny analysis on the part of the researcher. Where there are no firm methodologies, the analyst, who is 'outside' of the context of play may assume *authorship* and *authority* and begin to adapt meanings and orientations which are ultimately misleading but which he purveys as scholarship. Knowledge thereby becomes an ideology and a political motivation. At this point, neither the author, researcher or reader can ever hope to advance the true study and understanding of culture that is, after all the whole basis of assiduous field research and representation.

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