Local and Transnational Identity, Positionality and Knowledge Production in Africa and the African Diaspora

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Abstract

How does shared identity between researcher and the researched influence trust-building for data generation and knowledge production? We reflect on this question based on two separate studies conducted by African-based researchers in sociology and political science in Nigeria. We advanced two interrelated positions. The first underscores the limits of national belonging as shorthand for insiderness, while the second argues that when shared national/group identity is tensioned other intersecting positions and relations take prominence. We also show that the researched challenge and resist unequal power relations through interview refusal or by evading issues that the researcher considers important, but the participant perceives as intrusive. We shed light on the vagaries, overlaps, and similarities in the dynamics of belonging and positionality in researching Africans in and outside Africa as home-based researchers. Our contribution advances the

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understanding of field dynamics in the production of local and cross-border knowledge on Africa/Africans.

Introduction

How should researchers engage with those researched, and what does it mean for knowledge production and sharing of findings? Specifically, how do researchers' identity and multiple positionalities manifest in the researcher–researched relationship, trust-building, and field access for data generation and knowledge production? This article reflects on these questions based on two separate studies conducted by Nigeria-based researchers as part of their doctoral training in sociology and political science at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

After African researchers wrestled anthropology from the claws of the colonial virtues with which the discipline was framed and associated in the early years, the ethnographical method has been widely deployed to understand African peoples, cultures, and society (Munthali 2001). With this shift, many questions have been raised to interrogate the notion of objectivity in knowledge production (Ferdoush 2020; Hoogendoorn and Visser 2012; Simandan 2019b; Todd 2021). They are centered around how field research and data interpretation are largely influenced by researcher multiple subjectivities (Henry 2003; Narayan 1993). In other words, researchers' identity and positionality can perform the dual purpose of advancing the research or serve as a limitation (Bouka 2013). Identity, defined loosely to mean researchers' ethnic, race, class, religious affiliations or gender and sexual orientation (Bouka 2013), determines the researchers' positionality (Nagar 2002; Simandan 2019a, b). Henry and colleagues say the following:

> Because identity is always grounded, the concept of positionality reflects the situatedness of researchers' identities and affiliations more accurately … in the research context, positionality simply refers to the perspective, orientation and situatedness of the researcher vis-á-vis the researched. (Henry et al. 2009: 468)

Simanda (2019b: 130) proposed four epistemic gaps in developing Donna Haraway's arguments on positionality and situatedness of knowledge claims, arguing:

> [O]ne's knowledge is inevitably incomplete and situated because information about the world always reaches one through a channel that is constituted by four epistemic gaps: "possible worlds versus realised world," "realised world versus witnessed situation," "witnessed situation versus remembered situation," and "remembered situation versus confessed situation.

Thus, the research process is predisposed to sociocultural positions and emotional state that influence the designing of the research problem, the methods used in assessing data, and how data is interpreted (Pratt 2009; Proudfoot 2015; Todd 2021).

In another vein, the positionality of the researcher poses challenges in data access, as it can influence the disposition of the research participants toward the researcher. For instance, if the positionality of a researcher is at variance with the research participant, it could determine the quantity and quality of data that would be made available. The concept of "elite interviewing" best demonstrates this point. Simply, elite interviewing reflects a setting in which the researcher's background is not elevated or is relatively weak. According to Glas (2021), Morris (2009), and Batteson and Ball (1995), interviewing various types of elites, such as those in positions of authority and those who are educated, is often affected by positionality and power relations, which may impede data access. These elites can influence encounters through "intent and disinterest" (Glas 2021: 440) while their power and positionality can easily sway the directions of the research. Such participants can also exude influence by attempting to proselytize the researcher to accept a particular perspective (Marie 2005), thereby making knowledge socially produced and located in power networks (Simanda 2019b). Implicit in all of these is the agelong insider–outsider debate in ethnographical encounters.

The discourse on the insider/outsider binary focuses on conflicting epistemological standpoints and methodological approaches about the researcher and the researched (Naples 1996). The assumption is that researchers' affiliations to a group privilege them to extract in-depth knowledge about that group. On the flipside, Fonow and Cook (1991) argue that outsiders can be viewed as neutral between two contending groups (Abu-Lughod 1988; Hill-Collins 1990). This view is based on the belief that people are more likely to share information with a stranger than with friends and acquaintances. However, the binary construction of insider/outsider has been refuted largely because of how it views insiderness as "fixed social location" and neglects the "interactive processes through which 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' are constructed" (Naples 1996). Indeed, what decades of "insiders looking-in-research" showed is that insiderness is not automatically ascribed as the status of a researcher can turn the familiar into the unfamiliar and vice versa (Adeniyi-Ogunyankin 2019; Chege 2015; Mandiyanike 2009; Oriola and Haggerty 2012). Further, intersectional categories that define local and global societies complicate presumably straightforward identities (Yacob-Haliso 2019).

However, few studies have focused on African scholars' positionality. "Even in studies that focus on African societies, African scholars' positionality is marginalized" (Mwambari 2019: 3). The loudest response to this clear gap in scholarship has emerged from African academic "homecomers" (Adeniyi-Ogunyankin 2019; Chege 2015; Mandiyanike 2009; Oriola and

Haggerty 2012). Academic homecomers "are individuals who left home to pursue graduate education in the West, with an eye to returning to their country of origin to conduct research or start an academic career" (Oriola and Haggerty 2012: 2). Still, the intervention of academic homecomers has not accounted for the varied contexts and dimensionalities of border-crossing as they shape the positionality of African researchers. In this regard, we ask the following: What happens with or to identity and positionalities when home-based African researchers do research in their home countries or cross borders to do research among their national diasporas? The present article reflects on this question, using our experiences as doctoral researchers in a Nigerian university.

We draw on two unrelated but methodologically overlapping studies, one focusing on counter-terrorism in northeastern Nigeria and the other on Nigerian diaspora in China. Despite the dissimilarity in their thematic and geographic focus, the studies are similar because of their focus on understanding the experiences of Nigerians, as well as on the account of how the researchers encountered and interfaced with the vagaries of national belongingness in the fieldwork process. We analyze how our identity and multiple positionalities manifest in the field to influence or shape researcher–researched relationship, trust, and access of Nigeria-based researchers to data for knowledge production.

We will advance two interrelated arguments. First, national belonging alone does not determine the relationship between a researcher and research participants. Our joint experiences suggest that, in working with Nigerians as home-based researchers in Nigeria and the diaspora, nationality is often re-calibrated into other politicized oppositional categories that operate dynamically to hinder or facilitate the fieldwork. While similar to Nigerian academic homecomers in this regard (see Oriola and Haggerty 2012), we advanced this argument with a reflection on the dimension that African positionalities take when identity is transnationalized. We show that, because of the border crossing of participants and home-based researcher, the combined contexts of the economy of migration and "illegality"/precarity of diasporization tension researcher–researched relationship, with national belonging itself becoming the basis of suspicion.

The second argument builds on the first by advancing that, when insiderness by shared national (or group) identity is disrupted in the field, other intersecting positions and relations take prominence. In pinpointing their significance in our fieldworks, we contend that positionalities force us to rethink the location and importance of power. Our experiences revealed that power in the researcher–researched relationship takes different forms and is multiply located, such that research participants too exercise strategic agency to determine the processes of the field. We show that the researched do challenge and resist the unequal power relations. In both our fieldworks, power tends to be diffused and situated.

The Studies

The article is based on two doctoral studies conducted in the Departments of Sociology and Political Science at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Both studies involved extensive fieldwork in which ethnography played an important part. The fieldwork for the first study was conducted in 2015. It examined the interface between civil society organization (CSO) and security governance in Nigeria, specifically the post 9/11 international and state-level counter-terrorism laws, policies, and practices (Njoku 2020, 2021). Due to the humanitarian crisis caused by terrorism, many CSOs became involved in diverse capacity building, technical assistance, and advocacy efforts in the Northeast. Although operating in the Northeast, many CSOs returned to their headquarters in Abuja and/or Lagos, Plateau, Oyo, and Ogun states. Likewise, critical state actors from within the civil service and the Nigerian military were in Abuja. Data were obtained through a mixed-methods approach. A total of 234 individuals were involved in the study, including CSOs and government officials like security agencies in selected states. Telephone interviews were also conducted with CSOs and security agents who were still skeptical about the researcher's motives despite assurances. Two research assistants who were familiar with the Northeast were recruited to distribute and collect survey forms, but all in-depth interviews were conducted by the lead researcher.

The fieldwork for the second study was conducted in 2017. The study was framed within the discourse of contemporary Africa–China relations and the resulting flows of Nigerians to Guangzhou city. Owing to the commercial and trading outlook of Guangzhou, more Nigerians have traveled to the city than elsewhere in China, with a growing number residing there permanently with their families, including those married to Chinese women (Adebayo and Omololu 2020; Bodomo 2010). Unlike the first study, a purely ethnographic/qualitative approach was adopted with observations taking place in settings like markets to shops, worship spaces, homes, bars, restaurants, and other public spaces. Nigerian migrants and community leaders, a consular official, and Chinese people were interviewed as part of the research—69 participants in all. The study was conducted in two phases, each lasting one month in Guangzhou. In Phase I, the day-to-day activities of Nigerians were observed on the ground, with informal conversations and interviews taking place in-between. The three weeks spent as a roommate and *sampa*[1] to an informant made it possible to be part of the daily life of Nigerians on Guangyuan Xi Lu. Phase II focused on monitoring transformations, following-up on informational gaps, approaching hard-to-reach groups, and exploring the functioning of the Nigerian community. Bilingual research assistants, two Chinese and a Nigerian student, were recruited to conduct some interviews. In reporting our experiences, we will refer to the first study as the Counter-terrorism Study and

use first-person pronouns or Emeka when referring to the author. The second research will be tagged the Diaspora Study, with Kudus and first-person pronouns used as necessary.

Identity, Positionality, and Field Research in Nigeria

The fieldwork for the Counter-terrorism study took place in 2015, as Boko Haram attacks in Nigeria expanded beyond the Northeast and the nations' capital, Abuja. During the early phase, Emeka was worried that his ethnic identity and positionality, coupled with the difficulty of assessing data on security-related issues in Nigeria, would limit his access to data. For instance, while the research sites and participants were mostly based in the North, Emeka is a single man, an ethnic Igbo Christian from southeastern Nigeria—although born and raised in the southwest of the country. He was raised within the deep-seated ethnic animosity that exists between the southeasterners and the northerners, a consequence of the vestiges of the Biafra/Nigerian Civil War. Although his father, a Biafran soldier, never discussed the war, he heard stories of atrocities and genocides against the Igbo from his mother and relatives. Thus, the researcher is conscious of his identity and how it positions him vis-à-vis some of his research participants. Besides, the expanding securitization architecture of the Nigerian state made counter-terrorism data a specially guarded commodity (Njoku 2020).

In the field, Emeka strategically deployed his identity and positionalities to minimize risk and advance his research. First, he sought the services of an experienced research assistant—who was familiar with the terrain in the northeast—to manage surveys. Second, he enlisted the assistance of co-ethnics in the defence sector: A professor of political science and a senior military officer with links to key players in counter-terrorism planning and implementation in Nigeria. Also, to access Muslim CSOs, he approached a Muslim lecturer at his home university.

In qualitative research, deploying one's identities, relationships, and gatekeepers to assess essential information is vital in the field (Ferdoush 2020; Hoogendoorn and Visser 2012). As Katherine Irwin noted, "outsiders angling for insider knowledge, professionals dependent on personal relationships for data, and members of research settings as well as the academy, field researchers ride the lines between and across multiple boundaries, and the journey, as many have attested, can be emotionally and existentially uncomfortable" (Irwin 2006: 160). Nevertheless, Emeka's reliance on his positionality paid off, as he was able to interview important actors, many of whom are Hausa–Fulani officers.

Moreover, Emeka's singleness and ethnicity shaped field interactions in other ways. First, because of his status as an unmarried Igbo man without immediate family commitment, which should normally constrain him from

taking risks, his northern research participants did not completely trust him with critical information. His interlocutors were almost too curious about where he was from and why he was still single. Second, his ethnicity posed specific challenges when interviewing some senior officers from the North. Having initially agreed to participate, some officers reminded him that he was lucky to have access to them, with additional emphasis on the impact of the recommendation by the Igbo professor and the senior Igbo army officer. Reflecting on this experience, Emeka wondered whether these initial questions and reservations of the officers were strategic and if they had influenced the quality of information given. He also wondered if the context of his access to the participants had prevented them from sharing their critical views on the government's counter-terrorism programs that they are part of. The above reflects the views that the researcher is not always in the position of power in the research process, as respondents have control over the information they provide (Henry 2003).

There were other more specific instances where respondents' power was aptly demonstrated. For instance, despite the recommendations and guarantees of anonymity, Emeka was not so lucky during interviews with northern officers in another location. They were not wholly receptive, and reluctantly granted the interview. They prevented him from recording interview sessions with a voice recorder, and note taking was also resisted. An officer seized and redacted Emeka's written note. This is a clear case of the powers of respondents to sway information to achieve a particularly "political and practical" end and thus influence research outcome (Chege 2015; Shinozaki 2012). It also demonstrates how elites evade probing or attempt to dominate the interactions, either to profit from the interviews and therefore portray themselves in a favorable light, or to derail an interview because it contradicts their perspectives (Batteson and Ball 1995; Glas 2021; Morris 2009).

The performative power expressed by the officers forced Emeka to rethink and provoked a reflection about what kind of information he can/should publish while ensuring his safety. He was particularly conscious of the power dynamics between him and the senior military officers. Unlike the researcher–researched power relations that are commonly portrayed in the reflexive ethnographic literature, there was an unusual physicality to the power associated with the military that posed a danger to Emeka. There was a real existential fear owing to the entrenched culture of repressive civil–military relations in Nigeria. Henry (2003:238) had observed that, at times, respondents engaged in "symbolic violence, trying to dominate the anthropological encounter," and, in this way, research participants cannot be seen as only objects, but as active subjects, who have the power "to shape and control the ethnographer and the ethnographic encounter."

Nevertheless, Emeka's education would mediate and aid his access to data from civil society operators, many of whom had a higher level of

educational achievement. Some of them had completed their Masters degree overseas. Hence, they were receptive to a doctoral student from the University of Ibadan, whose research examines the impact of counter-terrorism policy on CSOs. Even though some of them were northerners, the researcher did not experience animosity, suspicion, or reluctance. Importantly, the nature of the research, which takes a critical approach in examining counter-terrorism polices as it affects the operations of civil society actors, may have also contributed to influencing their disposition toward him. This encounter advances existing arguments that shared positionality encourages research participants to be comfortable with researchers and facilitates easy access to vital information (Henry 2003).

Insiderness and Positionality of a Home-based Researcher in a Nigerian Diaspora Community

The significance of boundary-crossing for African home-based researchers who travel abroad to generate knowledge on their national diaspora has not received the same level of reflection as academic homecomers. What does it mean to be an ethnic Yoruba–Nigerian studying Nigerian diasporic experience in China? How did Yoruba identity shape the context of trust, suspicion, and access in the diaspora community dominated by non-Yoruba Nigerians? The Diaspora Study, in which fieldwork was conducted in 2017, reflects on the context of Nigerianness and fieldwork in China.

At the time that Kudus reached Guangzhou in early 2017, Biafra agitation had reached its climax and was taking a violent dimension in Nigeria. Nigerian diaspora communities, mostly the ethnic Igbo diaspora, were actively involved in criticizing and protesting against the Nigerian state. While in the presence of Nigerian migrants, Nigerianness conferred on Kudus an insider status and opened the field for him, from live-in invitations to access to the space of diaspora interaction (shops, churches, business settings, and home). However, that identity privilege was often temporized and made partial by his Yoruba ethnicity, as the majority of his interlocutors were Igbo. In the interpellation process, some of them reconstructed his identity and chose to relate with him using the lens they had self-designed. Some interlocutors viewed him with critical eyes and called him a government spy who received money from the Nigerian state to monitor them and report back.

Later, in the social space where Kudus spent most of his time, he became familiar with a prominent member of a group that converged along a popular road in the city. With more interactions, he became *Ọmọ Odùduwà*—that is, descendant of *Odùduwà*—to this predominantly Igbo–Nigerian community. *Odùduwà* is a culturally significant appellation used for Yoruba people of Nigeria. These interlocutors preferred his Yorubaness to his Nigerianness owing to the oppressiveness that the latter had become associated. During one

of his evening discussions with them, a member of the group advised Kudus to join *their* struggle. To convert him, they showed the researcher a video of supposed ethnic Yoruba protestors who were demanding for an independent Yoruba Nation.

The Yoruba protest was purportedly taking place in early 2017, the same time when Nigeria was steep in pro-Biafra agitations at home and abroad. To his interlocutors, the video was proof that both Yoruba (i.e., me) and Igbo (i.e., them) people are in the same struggle. The oppressor, they argued, is the Nigerian state that they perceive as being controlled by the Hausa/Fulani people. However, in pointing to researcher–researched affinities, his interlocutors were constructing the researcher as both different from and the same as them. Here, Kudus's encounter in Guangzhou resonates with the experience of a Canada-based Nigerian doctoral student who conducted research in the volatile Niger delta (Oriola and Haggerty 2012), but whose Yorubaness projected him as a beneficiary of the majoritarian politics that had contributed to the abjection of the mainly minority ethnicities in the region, thereby signposting him as part of the oppressor class.

In other situations, Yorubaness mattered indeed, in a positive way, by enabling access to information necessary for having a deeper understanding of intra-Nigerian diasporic life in China. For instance, when probing about the challenges of Nigerians in Guangzhou, a Yoruba participant would say somethings like "*awon boys yen*" or "those boys" when talking about the "illegalities" that some young Nigerians perpetrate to hurt the image of Nigeria. But those boys really meant "those *Igbo* boys," not young Nigerians in general. Some Hausa Nigerians in Guangzhou shared this perception. Kudus sensed that clarifying this point mattered to non-Igbo Nigerians; they felt the need to let him *know* and *understand* this as a matter of "fact." They wanted him to get the point that there is no uniformity and essence to Nigerianess in China.

The above suggests that when we stand outside of it, the field and those we intend to study remain co-constructors who insist on drawing us in regardless of researcher's depoliticized-self, with clear implication for what occurs in the field (also see Oriola and Haggerty 2012: 5). The culture in "shared culture" manifests as many notions in concrete social relations and regardless of one's nationality, researchers often find themselves in "non-shared cultural spaces" (Savvides et al. 2014: 414). Also, in the field, boundaries are "created in a situational manner" (Shinozaki 2012). Kudus was in an unfamiliar territory not only because of geography but also because most of his participants were Igbo. What was uncertain, though, is whether his ethnic Yoruba interlocutors would talk about Igbo–Nigerians in the same way if Kudus were Igbo or Hausa and not a Yoruba.

Meanwhile, with some participants, namely, the more educated, Kudus's education and the degree he was pursuing contributed to the positive reception

he got in the field. For instance, he was able to secure meetings with some of the most successful Nigerians in the city, mostly men, with offices in high-rise buildings far from the hustle and bustle of the markets in Guangyuan Xi Lu. However, this same positionality tensioned his interactions with another group of Nigerians, the "triple illegals" class—that is, those who China's immigration law categorized as having illegal entry, illegal stay, and illegal working status (Huang 2019; Lan 2017). Unlike the more educated group occupying high-rise apartment and office buildings, those falling in the triple illegal category could not comprehend how a Nigerian research student departs Nigeria, travels for thousands and thousands of miles, only to interview fellow Nigerians about their lives. Even more, unaware of the researcher's (im) mobility struggles while planning for the fieldwork in China, the undocumented and immobilized participants believed that Kudus's mobilized condition made him less like them (Adebayo 2020). He was perceived as a freely moving body, or, if you like, a cosmopolitan "super citizen" with a freedom of mobility that was unavailable to them. Consequently, he was asked questions like the following: How are you here just to do an interview? Are you going back to Nigeria? To them, a young Nigerian does not "travel out" just to talk to people. His mobility power increased the suspicious eyes with which some Nigerians viewed him. It did not also help that Kudus was in the field when the Biafra agitation was high and global.

As a migrant researcher, therefore, the positionality of Kudus as privileged draws directly from the reality of the widespread interest and fantasy of Nigerians with the pursuit of greener pastures. A lot of young Nigerians' want to migrate, and they would patronize visa gods to realize that dream (Obadare and Adebanwi 2010). So, they would ask Kudus, how is it that you, a young Nigerian man, came to China to just do interviews and go back to Nigeria?

Conclusion

From the experiences described in this article, we affirm that during fieldwork, a researcher's identity can be redefined. This redefinition can influence data accessibility and knowledge production. Moreover, to be redefined can lead to a deliberate utilization of relational positionalities to advance the research goal. In the security sector, where access to information is often buried in the narrative of national security exceptions, exploiting relational positionalities becomes particularly vital. Also, where power resides, and whether unequal power relations place the researched in an exploitative position, is also important. As Collet (2008) asserts, the potentialities that abusive and exploitative relations may occur in the field make power dynamics critical as it could be a main source of tension. Our encounters in the two studies indicate that power in researcher–researched relations manifests differently in different research situations. In the Counter-terrorism Study, power manifested itself in

physical and symbolic forms, while somewhat of a mobility power was more manifest in the Diaspora Study. In Emeka's interactions with military officers, the latter wielded their powers to limit the quality/quantity of information accessible to the researcher. For the Diaspora Study, mobility power, which was located in the researcher, placed the researcher and the researched in an unequal relationship such that the former became someone to be suspected.

Both our experiences revealed that identity as a categorizing frame is powerful in opening the field to researchers, whether in their home countries or when studying co-nationals or other citizens abroad. However, the intersectionality of ethnicity, religion, and status can transform seemingly shared identity as the researcher moves around spaces of subcommunities locally and transnationally. In our case, our identity as a social bonding mechanism was questioned or resisted. Such resistance poses difficulties in the research process. Our experience, therefore, is that the notion of in-group arising from the account of nationality or other constructed notions, assumes a homogeneity that is fraught and flawed. As with Matejskova (2014) and to some extent Ferdoush (2020), we agree that ethnonationality as a primary signifier of insiderness is reflective of epistemological nationalism because often, the field is concretely laid with the dynamism of positionalities. In essence, the interpellation of the researcher by the researched is crucial to becoming an insider. More importantly, how the researched defines a researcher, as different from how a researcher self-identifies, is consequential. Having said that, we acknowledge that, identity, as it shapes the field and data access, cannot be invoked in a causative manner. This is because, in field situations, other dynamics can give important openings to the researcher, especially when a shared identity as a common ground is absent in researcher–researched relations (Fujii 2009, as cited in Glas 2018).

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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Note

1. *Sampa* refers to boys/young men in markets with unstable employment who can take up the readily available task for new entrants willing to earn a living to merely survive in Guangzhou.

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