

First Contact with the Field: Experiences of an Early Career Researcher in the Context of National and International Politics in Kenya

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Abstract

Fieldwork is arguably the most exciting phase of a doctoral research degree. As a first timer in the 'field', fieldwork can be a daunting task due to the dilemmas faced. In my practice note, I have focused on the various identity dilemmas and challenges I face during fieldwork within the context of the ongoing international human rights-related trial and investigation process of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Kenya. The presence of an international process can shape research and create dilemmas for an individual researcher. These dilemmas were based on my various identities as an insider and outsider female, Kenyan *Mugikuyu* researching on Kenyan politics. In the note I have discussed how creativity is important in addition to prior training in methods and ethics, and the need for experienced researchers to share with first-time researchers subtle experiences which are mostly learnt in the field. This practice note discusses how I ensure my safety and negotiate access in the field especially in the context of the ICC trial which has shaped human rights-related research in the counties where I am researching.

Keywords: creativity; dilemmas; identity; International Criminal Court

Introduction

Going to the field was going home

I arrived in Nairobi, Kenya's capital, from the United Kingdom where I am pursuing my studies on 30 July 2013. As a Kenyan citizen, I was excited to be back home having spent the last 10 months away for the first year of my doctoral studies. I am not sure I can identify one definitive moment which I can call my first contact with the 'field' because just being immersed in Kenyan political debates upon arrival was, in a sense, contact with the field. Kenyans like to discuss politics in public and private spaces and I could not avoid the 'field' as such as long as I was immersed in this environment. Deliberations on imminent cases at the International Criminal Court (ICC) relating to the president and deputy president, scheduled to start in September at The Hague in the Netherlands, were very popular at that time. The discussions took centre stage in all forms of media, in public spaces such as *matatus* (the main public

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transport mode in Kenya), bars, restaurants and at home with friends and family.

After obtaining the necessary research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation at the Ministry of Education in Nairobi, I set off to Uasin Gishu County, a six-hour drive from Nairobi, for my first formal contact with the ‘field’, feeling excited and nervous to start my fieldwork. Though I had previously conducted short research projects in the field for my previous qualifications, this was my first lengthy academic engagement. I also had considerable experience carrying out advocacy-driven research for a national human rights non-governmental organization (NGO). Did this advocacy-driven research experience prepare me for academic research? To a certain extent it did as far as familiarizing myself with useful contacts in the field and providing me with experience on conducting human rights-related research in the Kenyan context, but less so in providing the rigour needed for academic research. The NGO advocacy-driven research experience also helped me appreciate the challenges an individual researcher faces when conducting human rights-related research during an ongoing macro-human rights process such as the ICC trials and investigations. My practice note will mainly focus on this issue. I illustrate the identity dilemmas I face as a national researching their home country within the context of ongoing international level human rights trial processes like the ICC. Additionally, I focus on how I am constantly negotiating other issues such as gatekeepers, safety and ethics in the best way I can.

Background

My research question was motivated by the Jubilee coalition win in the March 2013 presidential elections. The Jubilee coalition was comprised of Uhuru Kenyatta, the current president of Kenya, and deputy president William Ruto. They formed the coalition after being charged by the ICC with crimes against humanity in 2010, when they were ministers in the coalition government of President Mwai Kibaki’s Party of National Unity (PNU) and Prime Minister Raila Odinga’s Orange Democratic Party (ODM). Despite the ICC charges, and warnings by local, regional and international actors on the diplomatic, political and economic challenges likely to face Kenya, the Jubilee coalition won the presidential election in March 2013.

This win has raised questions on how international criminal justice processes such as the ICC process in Kenya are perceived and interpreted at the local level. I sought to assess this issue in Uasin Gishu, Nakuru and Nyeri. The first two counties were chosen because the victims of the cases before the ICC are drawn from there. Nyeri was chosen as a non-hot spot area with a largely homogenous ethnic population.

I arrived in Eldoret, the administrative and economic capital of Uasin Gishu, in early September. I would be based there for the next three months before moving to the next case study in Nakuru County. Uasin Gishu is a high

altitude area located north-west of Nairobi in the former Rift Valley province with fertile soils and reliable rainfall. The penetration of the railway line, favourable weather patterns for commercial agriculture and political patronage networks opened up Uasin Gishu to other ethnic groups in addition to the hosts, the Kalenjin, who claim the county as their original homeland. This has invited unending land crises, most obviously during elections culminating in the post-election violence in 2007–8 as documented elsewhere by [Ajulu \(2002\)](#), [Kanyinga \(2009\)](#), and [Lynch \(2006\)](#), among others.

Kenya's vice-president, William Ruto, arrived at The Hague in the Netherlands to start his trial on 10 September 2013. Ruto, from the Kalenjin ethnic group, is accused of organizing post-election violence in 2007 against perceived supporters of the Party of National Unity (PNU) in the Rift Valley province, while the president, Uhuru Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, is accused of organizing retaliatory violence against perceived supporters of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) in the same region. They were both charged by the ICC with crimes against humanity in 2010. I planned my fieldwork to coincide with Ruto's trial in September.

Fieldwork dilemmas

Training vs. creativity

During the first year of my doctoral study, I took a few courses in preparation for fieldwork. I took one general research methodology course and another that was specific to my epistemological inclination: critical and interpretive methods. I also attended additional short methods courses on anthropological methods for research, designing questionnaires for interviews and surveys, and historical methods. These courses were useful in designing my research and choice of methods of data collection and analysis. I consulted research work informed by the interpretivist turn carried out by scholars on critical research methodology such as Moore (1984), [Geertz \(1973\)](#), and [Yanow and Schwartz-Shea \(eds. 2006\)](#). According to Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow (2013), an interpretive research approach focuses on understanding context-specific meanings rather than seeking generalized meaning abstracted from particular contexts. Unlike positivist researchers, interpretive researchers do not bring their own concepts and perspectives to the field to test their scientific accuracy. Instead they allow understandings of certain concepts to be informed by evidence from the field. Interpretive research also emphasizes the agency of those studied and it demands egalitarian relational field interactions guided by ethical concerns which emerge throughout the project, as opposed to a set of rules designed before entry into the field ([Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013](#)). The terms 'subjects' and 'respondents' are seen as denying those involved in the research their agency, and 'research participants' is the term used in interpretive research and also in my field notes. This training was

useful in helping me understand the epistemological and methodological basis for research design.

Despite the classes attended and books read, I have found that much of the practice of ‘how to do fieldwork’ is learnt from the practical application of the methods in the field. Experience teaches you how to be creative, flexible and use your common sense. For instance, a useful practical skill/question that I am still working on is firstly, how to recognize what would be considered an obvious observation as important evidence for my research, within the confines of ethical guidelines and informed consent. Secondly, when and how do you inform the other participants of your identity as a researcher in natural settings, to ensure the setting is not disrupted but also that there is informed consent in line with the ethical guidelines. This cannot be learnt theoretically, but with humility, common sense and flexibility one can start to recognize these moments. One such example is my experiences during the first months of my research when I observed every day elite condemnation and support of the ICC in the media which often led to discussions in public spaces where I was present. I would sometimes ignore these discussions as normal political debates which are commonplace in Kenya. Sometimes I would get drawn into the debates and was unsure at what point I should let other participants know about my multiple identities, which included being a researcher on the topic we were discussing. As soon as I had a good rapport with the participants, I immediately let them know of my researcher role. If I needed to use information given by someone during the public dialogues, I would approach them individually asking them for permission and an interview if necessary.

Although certain aspects of research cannot be taught theoretically, there is space for experienced researchers to share their experiences with early career researchers on various topics such as how to conduct interviews; how to know an observation is valuable to your research; how to introduce a sensitive research topic; how to read non-verbal signs from participants; when to stop and reflect in the field, and so on. These practical skills could be learnt through researchers’ sharing of their experiences in the field, through role play and other innovative methods.

Gatekeepers and access in the field

Gatekeepers can advance or sabotage your research and finding a balance on how to work with them is important, especially in a post-conflict environment that is politically tense. A ‘gatekeeper’ in research is a person who has power to refuse the researcher access to informants or one who has power to influence them to cooperate as argued by Patrick Christian. I had several incidents where gatekeepers have allowed me access and denied me access to informants. Government officials for instance have sometimes given me access to ‘security’ meetings and sometimes denied me access to others in equal measure, even when I have an invitation from another government official who does not term it a security concern. Civilian gatekeepers can also

influence your research by determining who you meet. For instance, one of my research assistants who was also a former political contender denied me access to meeting his political ‘enemies’ because, according to him, ‘they don’t have anything important to advance your research’(conversation on 19 December 2013). Others will deny you access based on the historical mistrust between the gatekeeper’s people and the people you want to research who could be of a different identity, such as ethnicity in the Kenyan case. It is important for the researcher to be aware of a research assistant’s/gatekeeper’s biases before contracting them.

There is need to watch out for gender dynamics when dealing with ‘gatekeepers’. I had an experience during a focus group discussion with a local peace committee in Nakuru County where an elderly man who took leadership of the group would decide when each of those committee members would speak. The only woman present in the focus group discussion had a different opinion on an issue that I was interested in and I decided to follow up with her by planning a one-to-one interview. She did not have a mobile phone and my only access to her was the elderly man who said he would need to be present at the interview if I needed to interview her because ‘as a woman who had been affected by violence she may say outrageous things’ (telephone conversation with the elder on 30 November 2013). I was in a dilemma on whether to find an alternative way of meeting the woman alone or to negotiate with the gatekeeper who is an opinion leader in a highly patriarchal society whom I may need for further access. I chose the latter. Such incidents point to the power of gatekeepers and the need to be aware of their background and biases. Through these experiences on access to the field, I learnt that acquiring a ‘social permit’ while carrying out interpretive research is perhaps more important in addition to the legal research permit which I had obtained from the government and first time researchers should strive to acquire the social permit by being sensitive and respectful, in the process creating a healthy relationship with the participants who include the gatekeepers.

Identity

As a Kenyan national from the Kikuyu ethnic group and a youngish woman based in a foreign university researching my country, I am constantly negotiating between my multiple identities as a Kenyan insider in certain spaces and an outsider in others, as explained in this section. My identities are complicated by insider and outsider perceptions specific to the Kenyan context.

A Kenyan insider

My identity as a Kenyan has been helpful in ensuring I am considered an authentic insider or ‘one of us’. This has helped me get access to information from leaders and individuals at the local levels because they see me as their daughter who has succeeded in a prestigious university abroad, regardless of my ethnicity. Compared to foreigners researching on similar issues of the post-

election violence I find myself able to use my identity to negotiate the political space as a legitimate actor among local elites, especially in Uasin Gishu, whereas foreigners, notably from Europe, were perceived to be ICC investigators at the time when I was based there.

An outsider in Uasin Gishu and Nakuru counties

Conversely, my ethnic identity and where I come from geographically has sometimes been ‘baggage’, as I am considered an ‘outsider’ by some potential research participants. Three ways in which I can be considered an outsider are outlined below. First, I come from an ethnically homogenous county, Nyeri County, which has not experienced cyclic post-election violence on the scale experienced by Uasin Gishu and Nakuru. As a result, some people perceived me as an outsider who may not understand the violence and political compromises that Kenyans living in these two counties have had to make.¹

Second, Nyeri Kikuyu such as myself are perceived by other diaspora Kikuyus in Nakuru and Uasin Gishu as fanatical supporters of the former president, Mwai Kibaki, and unwilling to cooperate with diaspora Kikuyu for political advancement of the ethnic group. This perception can cause mistrust. Some Kikuyus in Nakuru and Uasin Gishu reminded me of this division between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Third, I am a Kikuyu researching among Kalenjin people in Uasin Gishu and Nakuru. Kikuyus in the two counties are perceived to be politically conservative voters who refuse to vote with their host community, the Kalenjin, in the former Rift Valley province. The majority have consistently voted for someone of their ethnic group as is evident from the 1992, 1997, and 2007 presidential election results in the region (Kanyinga 2009; Klopp 2002; Orvis 2001). As a result, the Kikuyu are considered untrustworthy as a collective and an individual researching on the politics of the ICC is likely to be viewed with suspicion. Despite the partnership between President Uhuru Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, and William Ruto, a Kalenjin, in the Jubilee coalition government, ethnic suspicion still exists due to the failure of the past and present regimes to address the root cause of violent elections in the region caused by historical injustices concerning land (Kanyinga 2009), and interviews held in the county between September and November 2013 allude to this. I have taken measures to mitigate these perceptions. Practical measures I have taken while researching in ethnically divided counties like Uasin Gishu are working with research assistants from both ethnic groups and identifying local leaders who were perceived as neutral to act as key informants.

1 Nyeri County is located in the Central Highlands, north-east of Nairobi, with a largely homogenous Kikuyu population. It is considered the original Kikuyu homeland along with the neighbouring Murang’a County. After the Central Highlands were annexed by the British for settler farming and rebranded the White Highlands, many Kikuyu people moved to the Rift Valley to evade hut tax imposed by the British and acquire land for farming. Generations of these Kikuyu are now settled in the Rift Valley and are called diaspora Kikuyu.

A research student from an outsider university

A final outsider perception is based on my affiliation to a foreign university based in the United Kingdom at a time when ‘westerners’ were suspected of assisting the ICC investigations. I experienced mixed reactions as far as my institutional affiliation was concerned, from those who were interested enough to know it. On the one hand, knowing that I will take my findings to a foreign university far away from the ‘field’ was reassuring to some participants due to the safety and anonymity they thought this would provide. I assured them about confidentiality and anonymity as dictated by ethics guidelines. On the other hand I am sometimes viewed with suspicion in comparison with other researchers from local universities since my university is based in the United Kingdom and could be working in cahoots with the ‘imperialist ICC’, as one potential interviewee told me. To counter this kind of perception I explain to research participants in detail my research student status and show them my research permit from the Kenyan government, to disassociate myself from the so-called ICC investigators. This is often sufficient, but I don’t always succeed. These experiences illustrate how macro human rights research/investigation processes affect the context for others researching in the same field on related issues—researchers need to take such processes into consideration.

A female outsider researching sensitive insider ‘male’ politics

As a younger woman researching political developments in Kenya with regard to the ICC, I am sometimes considered an outsider in certain spaces. I am an outsider when I am seen as a young woman who in Kikuyu culture cannot be trusted, according to some elders (discussion with a male interviewee in November 2013). There were several informal Kikuyu elders’ meetings which I was interested in attending, but from which I was excluded. I was advised that if I had been an elderly woman or man I could have been invited, although sometimes participants did later share with me the deliberations of the meeting informally. This shows how peace and security issues which are core to my research topic are gendered as male issues and a woman, especially a younger one who is not considered an elder, is likely to be treated as an outsider researching on sensitive issues that should be the preserve of men.

In conclusion, constant reflection about our positionalities is critical to interpretive research. It is evident from my experience that being both an insider and outsider may enhance or constrain an individual researcher’s agency and access and there is need to be alert to this dilemma.

Safety

During my fieldwork in November 2013, the Uasin Gishu County deputy county governor, Daniel Chemno, ejected officials from the British High Commission in Nairobi who were attending a civil society forum organized by local civic groups, on the basis of allegations that they were collecting evidence for the ICC (Lesiew and Oele 2013). I had a similar incident while I was

researching in a politically tense location known as Burnt Forest in Uasin Gishu, during the ICC trials. This area has been a post-election violence hot spot since 1992. On 4 October 2013, my research assistant and I were followed by three men for some time after we arrived at a shopping centre. After meeting the research participants with whom we were scheduled to have a focus group discussion, the three men apprehended us asking us to identify ourselves and our agenda in Burnt Forest. The men were known to the local community leaders we were meeting, who explained to them the purpose of the research. My middle aged male research assistant spoke to them and they did not follow us again, though they warned that they did not want investigators of the ICC in Burnt Forest. We moved on to another less obvious location in the same town.

I enhance my safety in a number of ways such as carrying out a formal risk assessment, obtaining my research permit from the Kenyan government and ensuring I get relevant security permits from the local county government. I also spend time meeting local leaders and attending meetings with local opinion leaders to build rapport and obtain a ‘social permit’ to conduct research. My choice of research assistants is also important. I have found that working with older respected men and women as research assistants in post-conflict areas is beneficial because they are able to help me negotiate the social and political terrain better.

Compensation and exchange

My fieldwork involves interviewing people at a local level including women, youth, village elders, local chiefs, religious leaders, local political leaders and internally displaced persons (IDPs) and victims of the post-election violence in 2007–8. The victims of the post-election violence are either currently living on their original land, as integrated IDPs with their families, or in transit camps where they hope the government will compensate them. The interviews with the IDPs involve the participant’s life history and they often give details of traumatic events they experienced during the post-election violence. Fatigued by interviews about their plight, some of the interviewees demand to be paid. They argue that ‘we will share our misery, nothing will change for us. Yet you researchers will benefit by getting a degree or selling this information and I continue being destitute’ (interview with victim of the post-election violence in December 2013). These are practical realities of potential research participants in the field. Ethically, paying compensation turns participants into informants who are paid for participation, but on the other hand, when researching people within post-conflict settings with dire challenges, pragmatism and sensitivity is needed to guide a researcher’s actions on compensation.

There are other creative and practical ways of giving back to the ‘field’ in my experience, especially when researching among non-elites, such as providing them with information, contacts and opportunities for their political and socio-economic advancement (see Browne and Moffett, p. 223; [Schwartz-Shea and](#)

Yanow 2013; Rabinow and Sullivan 1985; Schatz 2009). My status and position as a doctoral student, and more so from a prestigious university, provides me the opportunity to interact with local and national elites in the three counties where my case studies are based, and I take these opportunities to let the elites know about local concerns from the 'field'. For instance, in partnership with a women's network of peace activists we developed content for their website, and through my former contacts in Kenyan civil society I have introduced them to national civil society organizations and funding organizations that can support the work they do. The challenge with this is that the researcher runs the risk of raising unrealistic expectations with participants, though this can be resolved through frank discussions on expectations. I constantly convince myself and my participants (hopefully) that through my research findings I will amplify their voices.

Conclusion

Fieldwork is arguably the most exciting phase of a doctoral research degree. As a first timer in the 'field', fieldwork can be a daunting task due to the dilemmas faced. In my practice note, I have focused on the various identity dilemmas and challenges I face during fieldwork within the context of the ongoing international human rights-related trial and investigation process of the ICC. These dilemmas were based on my various identities as an insider and outsider who is a female *Mugikuyu*, Kenyan national, researching on Kenyan politics. I have discussed how creativity is important in addition to prior training in methods and ethics, and the need for experienced researchers to share with first time researchers those subtle experiences which are mostly learnt in the field. This piece discusses how I ensure my safety and negotiate access in the field, especially in the context of the ICC trial which has shaped human rights related research in the counties where I am researching.

In conclusion, after seven months in the field I have found that the 'how to' of fieldwork is best learnt in the field. For sustainable relationship building, especially in interpretive research, there is need for a mixture of preparation, creativity, flexibility, patience, respect and awareness of the cultural context in which one operates. I have learnt that research ethics should not only be a set of rules one carries from the academy to the field but a relational experience that ensures mutual respect and sensitivity to my fellow research participants on an everyday basis (Darling, p. 201).

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