

## Priest, development worker, or volunteer? Anthropological research and ascribed identities in rural Mozambique

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Over the last two decades anthropologists have devoted increasing analytical space to questioning, challenging, and reflecting on how different identities and positionalities structure power relations and shape social interactions in a diversity of research contexts. Many of these works reveal how identities are constructed, contested, and negotiated through the process of conducting research. During 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork in central Mozambique I was mistaken for a priest, alleged to be a spy, and assumed to be a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer. In this article, I explore how my identity, and the identities ascribed to me, shaped my interactions with people living in rural Mozambique and structured the types of relationships and data I was able to collect. My experience highlights the contextually grounded and negotiated nature of identity construction and how individual identities are understood and interpreted through broader historical, political, and economic contexts.

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### Introduction: priest, development worker, or volunteer?

During my first week of living in Sussundenga, numerous people greeted me in Portuguese by saying “*bom dia padre*” or “good morning father”. I usually smiled and also greeted them with “good morning”, but why did they call me father? I was terribly perplexed by the use of the Portuguese word for priest (*padre*) to refer to me. It was not until three weeks later that I learned that one of the priests for the Catholic Church in Sussundenga was French. The priest shared several physical and social characteristics with me that people used to interpret and understand my arrival in the town. In terms of our physical qualities, we were both white and had a beard. More importantly, we shared several social attributes that linked me to this gentleman in ways I had not anticipated. We were both single men living under the care and guidance of local residents. The priest lived in a small convent run by Mozambicans, and I stayed with a Mozambican family heavily involved in the Catholic Church. We also shared the distinction of speaking not only Portuguese, but also Shona, the Bantu language spoken throughout central Mozambique and east-central Zimbabwe. According to numerous residents, few foreigners ever made an attempt to learn and communicate in the local language. Therefore, many people assumed this new foreigner living in the town was a Catholic priest assigned to the local church.

Early in my fieldwork, my white skin relegated me to the following two categories: priest or Peace Corps volunteer. If I was not greeted as a priest, I was greeted as a teacher (a role I felt a little more comfortable with). But people mistook me for a new United States Peace Corps volunteer placed in Sussundenga to teach English or biology at the secondary school. This category provoked questions such as which subjects I taught or how long I planned to teach in Mozambique. Until the very end of

my stay, some people still perceived me as a teacher/volunteer, while people soon realised I was not the new priest after several Sundays had passed without any formal introduction in the church.

As I conducted research, the categories I fell into became more complicated and shaped my interactions with people in different ways. Most people were not familiar with the identity of “anthropologist”. I was routinely mistaken for a development worker or agricultural extension officer due to the nature of my research. I had selected Sussundenga as a site for examining changing patterns of use and access to land and water resources. I was particularly interested in women’s access to land and wetland areas, which are important sources of dry season irrigation. Crops grown in wetland areas, known locally as *matoro*, provide critical micronutrients for the household as well as income generation opportunities for women, who have more control over the money earned from the sale of fruits and vegetables in local markets. Conducting fieldwork on this issue involved spending time with people in their fields, identifying land and water resources, documenting crops grown, gathering information on local markets, and facilitating interviews and focus group discussions around the themes of access to land and water, agriculture, and development. Consequently, many people thought I was there to help them “improve” their agricultural techniques, conduct farmer training seminars, or offer them agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, watering cans, and water pumps. On most occasions, after some lengthy discussion, I was able to explain what I was doing and why I was conducting research. However, understanding and accepting my presence did not remove me from other ascribed identities and power relations.

During 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork in central Mozambique, I was given several identities. Furthermore, a local family adopted me by providing food, shelter, and care, thus incorporating me into a network of fictive kin entailing certain obligations and responsibilities. In this article, I explore how my identity, and the identities ascribed to me, shaped my interactions with people living in rural Mozambique and structured the types of relationships I was able to form and data I was able to collect. I begin the paper with a brief overview of recent scholarship on the construction of fieldwork identities, highlighting the ways in which identity is negotiated, contested, and forged in the practice of ethnographic encounters. Next, I provide a short history of central Mozambique with a focus on foreign intervention in the region and how my presence in Sussundenga was understood against the background of these socio-historical changes. Finally, I draw on my positionality as a white, American man to illustrate how these social attributes shaped my relationships with different people in my field site, and in one case, led to accusations of espionage. In the last section, I include a discussion of my research assistant, Nelson, and his background, to exemplify the fluidity of identity construction and how social relations are reconfigured in specific social interactions. My experience reflects the contextually grounded and negotiated nature of identity construction and how individual identities are understood and interpreted through broader historical, political, and economic contexts.

### **Negotiated identities: power, positionality, and the practice of ethnographic fieldwork**

Feminist scholars, both within anthropology as well as from other disciplines, have been influential in questioning, challenging, and reflecting on how different identities

and positionalities structure power relations and shape social interactions in a diversity of research contexts. Many of these works reveal how identities are constructed, contested, and negotiated through the process of conducting research. Feminist critiques of “traditional” scientific epistemologies and practices have been influential in shaping how anthropologists and other social scientists have begun to rethink issues of power, objectivity, and neutrality. Particularly important to these discussions has been the work of Sandra Harding (1991) and Donna Haraway (1988), which recognizes that scientific research is a socially embedded activity and inescapably tied to one’s cultural biases, influences, and prejudices, and that knowledge is partial and inextricably linked to social positioning. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) contend that from the onset of a research project, the researcher incorporates her own values, theories, ontology, and epistemology regardless of whether the researcher recognises it or not. These insights have led to new questions surrounding fieldwork identities and the power relations inherent in these constructions.

Feminist scholarship that questions conventional tenets of social scientific research such as value neutrality and objectivity is not mutually exclusive from the period of growing reflexivity and introspection that has occurred within anthropology since the early 1980s. The “crisis of representation” described by Marcus and Fischer (1986) has generated important debates that problematise research methods and ethnographic writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986). These discussions, and the ethnographic work accompanying them, have emphasised the fractured and contested terrain of culture, the politics of representing cultural difference, and provoked a critical analysis of how anthropologists translate their observations and experiences into ethnographic accounts. Feminist anthropologists have incorporated many of these insights to examine the positionality of women, the process of knowledge construction, and how the inequalities inherent in fieldwork are produced, contested, and reproduced. The theoretical and epistemological shifts taking place within anthropology and related disciplines have focused more attention on the identity of the anthropologist or researcher and the social positioning of the people with whom she works.

Power relations shape the fieldwork and post-fieldwork process (Wolf 1996). The power relations embedded in ethnographic research derive from multiple sources: the different positionalities of the researcher and informants; the researcher’s ability to define the research questions and structure research-related interactions; disparities in access to knowledge and resources; the researcher’s ability to choose what to represent in text and how it is represented; the inequalities inherent in knowledge production. However, these positionalities are not fixed and are always in the process of being negotiated. Naples (1996) argues that we are never fully outside or inside a community and our relationships with people in the course of research are continually negotiated and re-negotiated in particular social contexts.

However, the process of identity construction and negotiation does not occur in a socio-historical vacuum, but rather is embedded in a specific historical moment and grounded in the fabric of cultural politics. Bourdieu (1977:72) refers to the “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” or *habitus* to probe the “dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality”. Long and Long (1992:20) incorporate Bourdieu’s insights by articulating an approach to understanding social change and interaction that “stresses the interplay and mutual determination of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ factors and relationships, and which recognizes the central role played by human action and consciousness”. In

Sussundenga, both “external” and “internal” factors were important for how people identified me, how I identified myself, how people perceived Nelson, my research assistant, and our ability to interact with people and conduct research. In other words, we positioned ourselves, and were positioned by others in the discursive and material practices of ethnographic fieldwork.

Over the last three decades, in conjunction with the theoretical shifts within the discipline, anthropologists have begun to reflect on what have often been considered the more “unspoken” aspects of ethnographic research. Anthropologists are now writing about topics and personal experiences that at one time did not feature prominently, if at all, in ethnographic accounts. Within the growing body of literature on conducting fieldwork, anthropologists and other social scientists are including discussions about the intersections of fieldwork, multiple identities, and power relations (Amadiume 1993, Hapke and Ayyanketil 2001, Naples 1996, Whitehead 1986); how to undertake research in contexts of violence and conflict (Kovats-Bernat 2002, Lee 1995, Sluka 1995); speaking openly about romance, love, and sexual encounters in the field (Kulick and Willson 1995, Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999); the importance of research assistants to the production of anthropological knowledge (Schumaker 2001); collaborative and participatory action research (Gatenby and Humphries 2000, Greenwood and Levin 1998); and research ethics (Kirsch 1999, Scheyvens and Leslie 2000). This literature highlights not only the reflexive turn in anthropology since the 1980s, but also the realities of conducting fieldwork in an increasingly globalised world that calls into question longstanding dichotomies such as local/global, fieldsite/home, and researcher/informant. In addition, this literature demonstrates how identities are shaped and reshaped through the practice of ethnographic research and embedded in the contours of the lived experiences of the people who become incorporated into the domain of anthropological fieldwork.

### Mozambican encounters: histories of connection and interaction with “foreigners”

Mozambicans have a long history of interacting with *estrangeiros* or foreigners. This history informs perceptions and understandings of European and American presence in the country today. Sussundenga is a small rural town in Manica province of central Mozambique. Historically the area has been occupied by Shona-speaking lineages that migrated from larger state complexes on the Zimbabwean plateau further west from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. From the 1830s until 1895 (the end of the Gaza empire), Nguni populations migrated from present-day South Africa and subjected the area to a new system of overrule. Under Gaza Nguni rule, Shona-speaking populations paid tribute to the Gaza ruler and the men served in the military ranks, but many local political structures and local social organisation remained in place. In addition to being incorporated into larger polities, people of central Mozambique also have a long history of trading ivory, gold, and slaves with Portuguese, Arab, Indian, and Swahili merchants.

Following the European “scramble for Africa”, at the close of the nineteenth century, the *Companhia de Moçambique* (Mozambique Company), a Portuguese charter company, governed central Mozambique from 1891 to 1941 when its charter expired. However, company rule did not vastly change the political and economic logic of the countryside. The company recruited labour and demanded taxes from African populations, but company administrative structures were weak and labour recruitment

and tax payment varied widely throughout company territory. Africans living in the area of present-day Sussundenga were largely shielded from company labour recruitment through an agreement that local chiefs made with the administration. Chiefs agreed to supply labour for periodic public works projects if company labour recruiters refrained from conscripting labour in populations under their jurisdiction (Allina-Pisano 2002). Thus in Sussundenga it was not until the 1950s that Portuguese colonial rule interfered directly with people's livelihoods, access to resources, and settlement patterns.

The Portuguese colonial state encouraged settlement in present-day Sussundenga in the hopes of building a viable commercial agricultural zone. The government supported and financed an agricultural settlement, known as a *colonato*, near the banks of the Revue River, as part of a broader development scheme for the Revue river valley. Sussundenga's temperate climate, fertile soils, and sufficient rainfall made it an attractive site for commercial agriculture. Settlers, with the support of the colonial state, built roads, constructed water infrastructure, cleared land, and pegged farms, displacing African families and usurping their land rights. Africans were prohibited from cultivating or residing inside the areas demarcated as settler farms and many were conscripted into six-month labour contracts, known as *chibaro*, working on neighbouring farms or distant plantations.

Following independence in 1975, the ruling party Frelimo (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*) embarked on a socialist vision of development that involved converting former colonial holdings into state farms and cooperatives and resettling rural residents into *aldeias comunais* (communal villages). From the new Mozambican government's perspective, communal villages facilitated the delivery of health clinics, schools, and water and sanitation services, and served to facilitate collective forms of production as articulated in Frelimo's national development strategy. The government established several communal villages in Sussundenga in 1979 and 1980. During this time foreigners who were sympathetic to the Marxist government, known as *cooperantes*, assisted in the areas of health and education. However, foreign aid and intervention were not limited to programmes and activities in support of the ruling party, but also directly opposed to it. White minority governments in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa recruited, armed, and supported a rebel group (Renamo) designed to destabilise the newly independent country. During the 16-year civil war that ensued, many foreign relief organisations provided food and aid to Mozambicans displaced by the fighting. Following the end of the war in 1992, many of these organisations switched their missions from food relief to "development" and have continued to maintain a presence in the rural areas.

Thus my presence in rural Mozambique was not particularly uncommon from the perspective of many Sussundengans who had grown accustomed to Euro-American relief work and development interventions echoing Long and Long's (1992:20) contention that "All forms of external intervention necessarily enter the existing life-worlds of the individuals and social groups affected, and in this way are mediated and transformed by these same actors and structures". Sussundengans interpreted and re-interpreted my research activities in light of this history of colonial settlement, foreign assistance, and development work. Consequently, I had to engage with them on terms and understandings forged through this history of outside intervention, particularly the more recent "development" interventions and programmes that have grown since the late 1980s. As a result, it is not surprising that people often perceived me as a development worker or linked me to an international non-governmental organisation

(NGO), which have become part of the social and economic landscape of central Mozambique. My actions, statements, and research activities were often interpreted based on prior experiences with development workers or agricultural training seminars. Sussundengans and I negotiated the pre-established structures of social interaction characteristic of how previous visitors had engaged local residents. For some, participating in semi-structured interviews or group discussions was a novel experience, while for others it was reminiscent of early encounters with researchers, development workers, or government officials.

### **Who are you? Negotiating ascribed identities in the field**

In the context of fieldwork, people's perceptions and images of you can be vastly different from how you perceive yourself (Whitehead 1986). When Ifi Amadiume returned home to conduct research in Nigeria, she brought with her a number of subject positions which included, but were not limited to, membership in the village where she conducted research. Perceptions and expectations of her differed from that of a researcher arriving as a "stranger", yet she was also "different" in many ways (Amadiume 1993). Hapke and Ayyanketil (2001) reflect on their experiences as researcher and research assistant through their gendered interactions with informants and highlight how their positionalities changed as their friendship evolved into a relationship and consequently, how people reacted to them differently once they were married. Whitehead (1986) examines various aspects of his positionality, noting the importance of gender, class, and ethnicity, while conducting fieldwork in Jamaica and how these aspects of identity influenced people's interaction with him. Like these examples, various aspects of my positionality such as being white, man, student, and American influenced how I interacted with people and the types of relationships I was able to form, and how people understood and perceived me and my research in Mozambique.

Anthropologists may come to represent, in the eyes of the people living around them, the most positive or negative aspects of particular countries, regions, or "cultures". Just as anthropologists have been accused of essentialising other cultures, people living in these "cultures" are not immune from essentialising foreign anthropologists. As a white American man, Mozambicans most often associated me with wealth. Relatively speaking this was certainly the case. My monthly living stipend provided by my funding sources exceeded the yearly household income of an average Mozambican family several times. Though I was always conscientious about how I presented myself, including visual displays of wealth, most people's initial perceptions equated me with wealth and privilege. Furthermore, my receding hairline provided further evidence of my wealth. Numerous Mozambicans, in both rural and urban contexts, commented that the way in which I was losing my hair was an indication of both material wealth and also wealth in terms of experience and friendships. People referred to the money it must have taken for me to travel to Africa and the stories I told about living and working in other countries of Southern Africa as proof of their assumptions. As if my white skin was not enough, my status as a wealthy foreigner became inscribed on my head! Subsequently, numerous initial conversations centered on economic disparities, which Mozambicans are acutely aware of, between the United States and Mozambique. Within the context of these discussions questions emerged about how I obtained the money to come to Mozambique, how much I was "paid" by the university to do the research, and

whether I would make money off the work that I did there. These questions demanded honest responses and spoke directly to some of the inequalities inherent in conducting ethnographic research. But perhaps more importantly, they provided a context for discussing with Mozambicans how my research might be used to benefit people living in Sussundenga.

Being a relatively wealthy foreign man facilitated access to particular types of knowledge and people while restricting my research activities in other ways. The majority of my closest informants were men. At times this became problematic due to my research interests. Access to land and water is often mediated through household gender relations and thus to understand how people claim, contest, and negotiate access to productive resources, it is crucial to examine household and community gendered power relations. Although I interviewed numerous women, I was unable to develop the type of relationships and rapport with women that I was able to with men. It would have been inappropriate for me to spend considerable time alone with women, which would have aroused suspicions regarding the nature of my relationships with these women. The one exception to this rule was that I was able to develop a strong friendship with my *mãe Moçambicana* or Mozambican mother whose household I lived in while conducting fieldwork. Though she is only six years older than me, our relationship always reflected that of a mother and a son. I always addressed her as *mãe*, *amai* (Shona word for mother), or *senhora*, and she referred to me as *meu filho branco* (my white son), or *mano Michael* (brother Michael) in referencing me to her children. My *mãe Moçambicana* taught me a lot about the gendered division of labour, the challenges women face, kept me up to date on local gossip, and provided invaluable insights into some of the gendered dynamics of Sussundenga while not provoking accusations or suspicions of improper behavior.

In other ways, my lack of access to women distorted particular types of data. Early in my fieldwork, while conducting socio-environmental history interviews with elders and local leaders, I was unable to arrange interviews with elderly women. For my first interview, I talked with the *secretario de bairro* (neighbourhood secretary) of the area in which I lived, and then asked him to refer me to other elders with knowledge of Sussundenga's history. The list of names he provided contained only men. Likewise, when I interviewed the nearest *regulo* (traditional authority or chief), he also suggested other men I might want to speak with. Incorporating elderly women into my interview schedule became difficult because men always recommended other men under the assumption that men would know the "real" history of Sussundenga. Consequently, in my notes on the history of Sussundenga women's voices are largely silent.

While my identity as a wealthy, white foreigner structured the types of interviews I attempted to record, it also shaped how I was able to participate in people's lives. Because I was interested in access to land and water, I imagined myself learning about agricultural practices not only from interviews and observations, but also through participating in agricultural labour. However, I soon realised it was not the place of an educated, wealthy visitor to perform such tasks. In fact, the household in which I lived hired seasonal workers to cultivate and manage their fields and a domestic worker to help with everyday household chores. During visits to people's fields or while conducting interviews I offered to assist people in whatever work they were performing when I arrived to compensate for the time they offered me. People were sometimes surprised and always refused my offers, with exception of the few times I was allowed to peel maize or search grains for weevils. Although I was unable to

participate in agricultural labour in the ways I imagined, I participated in people's lives by going to church services, attending weddings, celebrating holidays, sharing food, watching Brazilian soap operas, and exchanging experiences. My power as a wealthy foreigner was often circumscribed by local agency. Not only was my participation shaped in ways in which people wanted me to participate, but I was also heavily dependent on Sussundengans for my stay, health, and well-being.

My identity as a wealthy foreign researcher often proved powerless when attempting to arrange interviews with district and provincial officials. Government employees evaded my attempts to arrange interviews, cancelled meetings, and sometimes refused to answer sensitive questions. This is not to suggest that they were unwilling to work with me or unhelpful. In fact many district and provincial government employees were patient, helpful, and taught me a lot about the challenges of their work. This example illustrates the contextual nature of power relations. In some circumstances, my identity as a foreign researcher conferred special privileges such as exemption from agricultural labour, being served food first, or offered the best seat in a given household, whereas in other contexts my power was curtailed and directed by others. Despite my various subject positions such as man, researcher, and American, Mozambicans exert their own power and agency in how they interact with others and are not simply passive informants to someone's research agenda. These various aspects of my identity structured how Mozambicans interacted with me, what types of relationships I was able to form and with whom, which ultimately shaped the types of data I collected.

### **Espionage and a case of embedded identity**

Though Sussundenga has a history of Portuguese settlement and a recent influx of white Zimbabwean commercial farmers, I was only mistaken for a white commercial farmer on one occasion. However, it proved to be a very important case of mistaken identity. My physical appearance and my Zimbabwean Shona shaped how I was perceived by an important traditional authority early in my fieldwork. After our introductions and a description of my research, he questioned Nelson, my research assistant, about my true motives. Through his interrogation and change in demeanour, it became apparent that he thought I was a spy. He alleged I had come from Zimbabwe to steal Mozambicans' agricultural knowledge. Ironically, Zimbabwe, at least up until 2000, represented one of the most highly mechanised and productive agricultural economies in Southern Africa. Why would Zimbabwe desire the secrets of its poorer, less mechanised neighbour? I told him I would return next week with more documentation from the Mozambican university supporting my research. I initially could not make sense of his accusations.

However, as we walked home that evening, I began to see his fears as more understandable. He had direct experience of land and labour being appropriated from his subjects by white settlers half a century ago. Under Portuguese rule, colonial officials used traditional authorities as the instruments of indirect rule, situating them in a precarious position between the colonial administration and their subjects. In the 1970s the white minority government of Southern Rhodesia authorised its elite fighting unit, the Selous Scouts, to launch incursions into central Mozambique to disrupt the Zimbabwe National Liberation Army's training exercises, destroying people and infrastructure inside the country. In more recent memory, numerous NGOs and development organisations descended on Sussundenga with promises to alleviate



poverty and improve living standards, though many Sussundengans express frustration that their material circumstances have not matched the rhetoric of modernity, progress, and development.

The fact that the traditional authority questioned my “real” intentions is more intelligible when read from this context. Was I just another foreigner promising to deliver things I had no intentions or capacity to deliver? Moreover, I was interested in questions concerning land, water, and authority. Was my presence somehow related to the increasing arrival of white Zimbabwean commercial farmers to Sussundenga who were now securing access to large tracts of fertile soil? Broader political and economic events spanning the last half century structured his perceptions and understandings of me. It was only after repeated visits and conversations that his fears subsided.

### Insider/outsider: social positioning and belonging in the field

Throughout the majority of the time I worked in Sussundenga, I was accompanied by a research assistant, Nelson. Nelson was born in the north-central province of Zambezi in the early 1980s. Shortly after his birth, Nelson and his family left Mozambique because of the war and settled briefly in Malawi, before moving to Zambia. In the early 1990s, his family moved to an area outside of Harare, the capital of neighbouring Zimbabwe. During the Zimbabwean presidential elections of 1995, his family returned briefly to Mozambique. After the election and the reduction of government rhetoric against immigrants in Zimbabwe, his family returned to Zimbabwe. Nelson continued to live in Zimbabwe until 2005, when he came alone to Sussundenga to live with his aunt and uncle. Like many Zimbabweans, Nelson came to Mozambique to seek educational and economic opportunities that simply no longer existed in Zimbabwe.

I provide a short sketch of Nelson’s history to illustrate the complexity of deciphering who is inside and who is outside a given “community” as well as how identity is negotiated and forged in practice. Nelson is Mozambican by birth, but spent the majority of his life growing up in English-speaking, neighbouring countries. However, he retained kin-based social networks in Mozambique to which he one day returned. Because he is educated and lived the majority of his life outside Mozambique, he is comfortable speaking English, Shona, Sena, Nyanja, and Portuguese. On numerous occasions many people with whom we worked assumed Nelson was born and raised in Sussundenga. People were often surprised when they learned he arrived in Sussundenga more recently, because of his command of the Chiteve and Ndaue dialects of Shona as well as Portuguese. However, other people who knew that he had lived the majority of his life in Zimbabwe associated him more with the recent influx of Zimbabweans. Additionally, though members of his immediate family are also multi-lingual, Zimbabwean Shona is the language spoken within their household.

Like my positionality, Nelson’s positionality was also in a continual process of negotiation and renegotiation. Not only did he negotiate his identity as a Mozambican who grew up outside of Mozambique, but also as a research assistant and someone strongly associated with my presence. Nelson’s new job aroused suspicions as to how much money he was making, and accordingly requests for *ajuda* (help or aid) or *apoio* (support) increased. People also requested things from me indirectly through Nelson

and the family with whom I stayed. Thus how people perceived Nelson and me as well as how we positioned ourselves depended on numerous contextual factors.

In some regards, Nelson and I were understood as being insiders (to use Naples' 1996 terminology). He lived with his aunt and uncle, spoke the dialects of Chiteve and Ndaú, and was actively involved in a local church, while I lived with a highly respected family, spoke the local language, and outstayed many foreign visitors. Over time many Sussundengans began to separate me from the volunteers, development workers, and foreign visitors. However, in other ways we were understood as outsiders. Nelson's command of English was well-known, and he did not have a long history of residency in Sussundenga. People knew I would one day leave Sussundenga and return to the United States. Despite my attempts to eat their foods, speak their language, and behave in culturally appropriate ways, I was always understood to be an American or a foreigner. It was only in relation to other *estrangeiros* that some people conferred upon me a temporary insider status, or through the social networks in which I was intertwined as result of my status as an "adopted son". Within my networks of fictive kin, I was referred to as *mano* (brother) or *filho* (son), signifying an insider status and situating me within a specific family history.

## Conclusion

At times throughout my research I was considered a priest, a teacher, a volunteer, a development worker, an adopted son, a wealthy foreigner, a spy, a friend, a neighbour, and a researcher. These categories are neither mutually exclusive nor static. In some ways my identity embedded me within the social fabric of specific families, kinship networks, and places within Sussundenga, while in other ways, I was located on the margins of the nodes of power. The numerous identities people ascribed to me, the ways in which they were negotiated in practice, and how they shifted over time, reflects the contextual nature of identity construction.

In this context, historical, political, and economic dynamics are influential in how Mozambicans interpreted my research and ultimately who I was. From many Mozambicans' perspectives, my work on access to land and water resources is inextricably linked to the history of development work and volunteerism in postcolonial Mozambique. The identities Mozambicans ascribed to me are embedded in this history. For one specific local leader, my presence invoked memories of dispossession and uncertainty as to my "real" intentions. For others, my identities reflected the complex social relationships that I became immersed in while conducting fieldwork. For the family I lived with, I became an adopted son, a big brother, foreign guest, and a constant source of interest from neighbours and extended family members. For the Sussundengans I developed deeper relationships with through the course of my fieldwork, I became an anthropologist or researcher as opposed to the vague description of development worker. To others I remained a symbol of wealth.

The process of identity construction, negotiation, and renegotiation through the practice of ethnographic research reveals the importance of human agency in understanding, interpreting, and expressing multiple positionalities. This not only refers to the agency of researchers, but also the agency of the people with whom we work. While this article has largely focused on the identities Mozambicans ascribed to me, Mozambicans also embody multiple identities and negotiate their own positionalities in the context of interacting with an anthropologist. Sussundengans also

structured many of our interactions, allowing me to participate in ways they found appropriate and desirable. Thus how we understand identity construction in the process of ethnographic research needs to be situated in broader political, social, economic, and historical contexts, while being attentive to the ways in which people interpret, reinterpret, and assign their own values, meanings, and understandings of fieldwork and the discourses and practices that constitute anthropological research.

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