# BECOMING AN 'INSIDE-OUTSIDER'

This essay approaches anthropological fieldwork in terms of 'participant immersion' rather than the more usual 'participant observation'. Clearly this methodology is not practicable for the majority of students to imitate, primarily because of limitations of time and material resources. It demands a considerable commitment of one's self and optimally requires an existing network in the field that is accessible to, and willing to incorporate, the researcher.

I have been asked to share my experience because of its different perspective on the study and chronicling of cultural and social history. It seems to me that my long-term immersion in the Kongo milieu considerably altered my earlier observations. The first part of the essay will briefly describe my particular field situation, and my methodology. I will then indicate what to me now seem to be the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of experience and type of approach, and what in retrospect has appeared most useful for me in writing up my fieldwork. Even for those who do not have the opportunity of remaining or surviving in the field for so long, some of these reflections may be helpful in suggesting different approaches to complement their own fieldwork. At the end I will suggest possible ways in which such researchers might tap, at least vicariously or at second hand, the experience of long-term residence through persons they might meet in the field. I will

---

This essay is based on a paper prepared for the workshop on 'Christianity and Social Change in Africa' convened jointly by Professor T.O. Ranger and Dr Phyllis Ferguson at St Antony's College, Oxford on 27th May 1989. It draws on fieldwork carried out by the author while living in Lower Zaïre between 1980 and 1988.

also point out some sources that might complement observations and inquiries necessarily made within a more limited time-frame.

### *A Description of One Fieldworker's Experience*

My point of insertion in 1980 into the micro-society that I was to study was as a member of a religious congregation already long established in Lower Zaïre. From this perspective, I was received and accepted as an 'insider' (though I was in some respects also regarded as an 'outsider'). When I left the field in 1988, the composition of the Zaïre Province of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur numbered approximately one hundred sisters: of these, over eighty were Zaïreans (almost all kiKongo-speakers), twelve were Belgians, five Americans, and one Swiss. The first missionaries had arrived in the region in 1894 and since there were no Americans in the group until 1969, the old-timers - both Belgian and Zaïrean - consider the Americans, as recent arrivals, to be in many ways 'outsiders'. According to my own observations and the reports of others, new sisters coming to Zaïre are not normally accepted as full members of the Province until they have served one or two three- or two-year terms. Similarly, in the village the Kongo talk about the importance of 'testing people' (*kutonta muntu*) before trusting them. So on all of these counts, initially I was an 'outsider'. However, as a member of the Congregation myself, from the outset, I was given access to being on the 'inside'.

From the beginning, my intention was to do a field study of the social and cultural history of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Zaïre, particularly of how the African members were reconstructing the Catholic Sisterhood out of their experience as Kongo women. It was for this reason that I had been invited to go to Zaïre by the Provincial Superior, Sister Mbwanga. Since it had been decided that I would spend at least three years in the Province, she accepted my request to begin by simply living in a community with the sisters and serving in a school as most of them do. For the next five years I worked in rural secondary schools (three as a teacher, two as a principal) and lived in three different communities - all of them in an area with a radius of about eighty kilometres. During my last five years I was based in the headquarters and novitiate house about fifteen kilometres from Kinshasa while I was editing my notes and drafting an internal report on my findings for the Province itself. During this time I spent several stints of weeks, or even months, back in my earlier field sites to fill in and check data.

*Posture of Fieldwork: 'Participant Immersion' (Methodology)*

An important factor in my becoming an 'insider' was my insertion into an existing role as a functioning member of the group in terms both of living situation and of work. Like other members of the community I had a full-time job as a teacher. And so, although I was not 'doing' fieldwork a hundred per cent of my time, through my work I was given a total field presence - albeit in a specific, recognized niche. I think many of the sisters were vaguely aware that I had been invited to Zaïre by the Provincial Superior for a specific reason, but hardly any seemed consciously to view me as being engaged in a study of the Province *per se*. I was simply a sister among sisters and a teacher in the school, which gave me a rather low-key presence among those with whom I was living and working. I reinforced this field posture by making an effort not to be too forward in posing questions, especially initially and in group settings, and by doing my note-jotting unobserved in my own room.

Earlier in this century, the Lower Zaïre was closely studied by the Jesuit missionary ethnographer Joseph van Wing. Belgian colonial ethnographers also examined facets of the *coutume indigène* in the interests of establishing a form of indirect rule. Whereas the Kongo people will sometimes refer to the explanations of these writers about their customs, they have come to associate anthropologists with persons who are interested in their lives for ulterior motives. They still enjoy recounting how they successfully fooled colonial ethnographers and administrators in order to mislead them with regard to the character and functioning of Kongo chiefship. Needless to say, I was not too eager to put myself forward as an anthropologist, but was quite happy to be related to in the more common role of a *maseri* (from French *ma soeur*) and of a teacher. Clearly, this defined and limited the 'slice of life' to which I was exposed, as I will discuss in the following section. None the less, through these roles I was able to slip into an existing local niche that in my own case was very congruent to my interests. It gave me an opportunity to 'eavesdrop' on a wide range of relevant and revealing settings. This type of unobtrusive presence facilitates a greater 'contextualization' of information and data, it seems to me, than collecting through the mediation of an informant. Without a doubt, it is far more time-consuming and circumstantial. Obviously, in a long-term field experience this is not so much a problem or concern as for the researcher who must work under more limited conditions.

*Assessment of Experience and Methodology*

For the fieldworker there are considerable advantages, but also problems and limitations, in experiencing long-term 'participant immersion'. I will first explore how the posture may limit the

researcher's mobility and access to information in the field, and then how it may make facets of writing up the material more difficult.

One of the most obvious limitations is the fact that the researcher becomes associated with a given role. As a result, his or her field of vision and experience may become very much confined to only that particular role. Further, in my own case I had to recognize that pursuing certain questions too overtly would have jeopardized my relationship with my sisters, and with the people as a teacher. Because of the people's earlier experience with missionaries and colonial ethnographers, there were domains that they, for their part, would have judged out of bounds for me to explore too far. Two examples will serve as illustration here: 1) the relationship of the people to the ancestors, which the missionaries had first considered idolatrous; and 2) the role and function of the female counterpart of the chief, the *ndona nkento*, whom they viewed as a *nganga* (diviner, healer). These were consequently rather delicate areas to investigate for any expatriate, but even more so for me since I was clearly associated with the Mission. I could pursue them only gently and cautiously. Both questions, which were of great interest to me, I was eventually able to explore informally with village friends who trusted me. In those cases, I felt obliged not to show to others either my interests or even my partial knowledge.

The researcher has to deal with another set of problems on return from a long-term field stay. Such an 'immersion' experience tends with time to render so many of one's observations banal. With this goes the related problem of retracing and unpacking what have become almost 'second nature' understandings. After a while, the researcher may as easily reply to questions with 'That's simply the way it is' as informants often do. For myself, I am grateful that I paid so much attention in the early part of my field stay to description and to noting how I myself was reacting to the new environment and what seemed to puzzle me. By choice, from the very beginning I did not record my more 'objective' descriptions of events and how I was 'subjectively' reacting to them in separate places. Instead I clearly indicated these different types of entry by codes. This method later helped me to 'track' the evolution of my understandings and to identify more important sources of clarification.

As for all field researchers, there remains always the challenge of translation. I am certainly aware that I can too readily take for granted the context from which I am translating. In this case also, my earlier field notes are of more help to me than my subsequent ones. My later observations, however, had more depth in analysis and are more useful in relating parts to the whole. Becoming fluent in a given social context is similar to learning another language. In the very beginning the student is not only aware of a new vocabulary, she or he is very often baffled at the great differences in thought pattern and grammatical structures. Gradually the person begins to think in the new language.

The longer one lives in another environment the less one will even unconsciously be translating the once new social milieu back

into terms that were meaningful - and more appropriate - to her or his 'home environment'. The new reality begins to speak on its own terms. Even short-term fieldworkers know how difficult it can be on their return to find the vocabulary to translate words for very simple things and objects, such as local taxis, foods, or everyday expressions. One's removal from one's own former milieu does make translation difficult, although eventually it gives a certain freshness to the translated text.

In the field, many of these difficulties are reduced by periodically distancing oneself from the immediate local setting of insertion by changing milieux. This is true both over time and in space: I personally found it immensely helpful to let my field notes 'age' before re-reading them. On occasion I was also able to distance myself from the immediate situation vicariously. After several years in Zaïre, I twice lived in community with a sister who was a 'newcomer' from the United States. Watching and hearing her talk about her experience helped me step out of my 'immersion' and see the local social environment again from without.

Perhaps the greatest limitation of a long-term field experience is that one becomes very much identified with the situation and the persons among whom one has lived. As a result, it seemingly becomes increasingly hard to generalize because the researcher has come to know at close hand so many specific cases and exceptions. On the other hand, the breadth of experience sometimes allows a sharper perception of the degree to which one may generalize by distinguishing which areas and questions seem to be more idiosyncratic to individuals.

For me personally as a member of the same religious congregation as the sisters whom I was studying at the request of my superiors, there is the added problem of my on-going relationship with my colleagues. This was delicate for me both in the field and on my return. My first writing up of material was, in fact, for internal circulation among the sisters themselves. Redrafting my research now for the academic community has not constrained me in the same way, but this is still a consideration. Not unrelated to this question is the important concern for all fieldworkers of respecting confidentiality.

I turn now to the advantages of a lengthy 'participant immersion'. Reflecting on my own experience, the longer I was in the field the more I seemed to have a 'sixth sense' for predicting behaviour and reactions. As a result, I could more easily flow with situations and knew where to look for the 'action'. This allowed people who were around me to become less conscious of me, since I could follow what was unfolding with little prompting. In a way this seemed to render me less visible.

By virtue of the fact that I was a recognized member of a local group and was serving in a fairly common role, I certainly had ease of access to a wide range of situations where I could simply be present without causing any concern or comment. With time, naturally, as my web of relationships expanded, the level of trust that I could enjoy also increased. I could then pursue questions informally and explore matters without people feeling I was intruding or being threatening. This was particularly valuable in helping me get out

of the real messes that I easily fell into often enough. As most field researchers quickly find out, mistakes can be extremely enlightening experiences, albeit painful and awkward. One small example of this was how my mispronunciation of the French word for ant, *fourmi*, got me into a rather lengthy discussion of swear-words in the local language. The way in which I had said the word was, in fact, a very impolite and most insulting expression for me to be using among kiKongo-speakers.

Living over a period of time in a field situation also provides ample opportunity to test out emerging insights by wide and varied sampling. I always had more confidence in understandings which were borne out in several conversations than ones which were derived from discussion with a single informant. This, in my view, is one of the greatest advantages of this type of fieldwork. The researcher does not have to become so dependent on only a few informants, which may easily make one more susceptible to individual bias.

Certainly, the greatest advantage of the 'inside-outsider' is the facility of 'privileged eavesdropping', that is, of unobtrusively just being around. In writing up my research now, it is this that I value most. My experience of 'participant immersion' gave me the opportunity to listen in on conversations in which people were 'explaining themselves to themselves'. When a person comes to be taken for granted, others feel quite comfortable in simply carrying on in their presence. Very often, the most illuminating experiences for me were literally hearing what I was seeing and often puzzling about being spoken of by Kongo among themselves, using their own metaphors. I am sure that often, the language had in fact passed me by or been around me many times before. The time factor greatly helped me register what was being communicated on its own terms, since I gradually became more conversant with the social environment, and with how different facets of life were socially perceived. The importance of this point leads me to cite a few examples.

Overhearing the conversation of a mother and her small child on the road in Lemfu revealed to me that the population regarded the sisters much more in terms of maternity than in terms of the idea of sisterhood more usual in the West. The woman, who was quite unaware even of my following her on the road, explained to her son: 'The sisters (*bamama bamaseri*) are mothers, but not like I am for you. They are mothers of us all.'

Whenever strained relations developed between Zaïre and Belgium, the sisters - as also the villagers - would talk about the matter thus: 'Our uncles are disputing again, but when the heat settles down they will arrange their difficulties. Just be patient and don't add wood to the fire.' This explanation was given to calm down a visitor who was anxious about the cancellation of her flight to Brussels (at the time Zaïre had grounded Sabena's plane in Kinshasa, since Belgium had impounded an Air Zaïre one in Brussels).

The sisters would periodically remark: 'One's mother always remains one's mother.' This was particularly so when a sister was describing her mother's need for hospitalization or even home repairs. Eventually I came to understand this as meaning that a person's

obligations to her family were permanent.

A large, overarching metaphor that englobed the sisters' understanding of their relationships to one another in the community was revealed by the way in which kinship terminology was adapted differently for use within the group (addressing one another as *yaya*, 'elder sister') and when speaking of or to one another outside the community group (referring to or addressing each other as *mama*, 'mother').

It seems to me that the listening in on how people explain themselves to one another is particularly valuable in identifying significant shifts of meaning and understanding in times of social change. Such conversations, as most effective modes of communication, are a medium for moving from the known to the unknown. They involve a translation of experience.

### *Tapping 'Inside-Outsiders' as a Way In for Shorter-Term Researchers*

As stated at the beginning of this essay, very few field researchers have the possibility of long-term presence on the ground. Most must adjust to the exigencies of coping with a more limited period in the field than that described here. Anthropologists may find in their locales other long-term expatriate residents apart from missionaries, such as traders and teachers. My specific intention in this discussion is to point out the possibilities for drawing on the experience of the former, and suggest how mission sources might be tapped for cultural and social history. As with any other informants and sources, the researcher will have to weigh the data received in terms of other inputs and observations.

Many religious congregations require every house to keep what in our tradition we term 'annals', which contain notes on all the significant (and often insignificant) happenings: detailing activities, major events, minor crises, the comings and goings of members, and so on. They are a 'house log'. Depending on who is the responsible scribe, this type of record may include quite valuable material and elaborations not only of events, but of the involved parties' view of them as well.

I would encourage students to exploit missionary diaries when they exist and are accessible. Understandably, these are not always available. My impression is that few religious communities, at least amongst Catholic congregations, are aware of the value of preserving this kind of day-to-day account, which is usually recorded from a highly personal point of view. Often, however, the correspondence of missionaries, particularly with their religious superiors, may be found in the archives of congregations. These letters can be a valuable source of information on local customs and events of the time, missionary attitudes and practices, and their relationships with local people and other expatriate groups. Some religious orders publish magazines and newsletters to keep their benefactors and other parts of the order informed of their work. The quality

of and detail in this type of publication naturally vary greatly.

My own work in the archives of the Congregation's Mother House in Namur, Belgium, was a very helpful complement to my fieldwork. As an illustration, the preserved correspondence of the sisters and the copies of house annals provided me with a wealth of information on a wide range of topics, such as the devastation of Lower Congo caused by an epidemic of African sleeping sickness at the turn of the century, and how the local population interpreted this catastrophe; the attitudes of Kongo chiefs and villagers towards the missionaries; copious descriptions of houses and the lay-out of villages, of local crafts, and of earlier funeral practices and rites; evidence of missionary attitudes towards the local people and their philosophy of work; and useful statistics on the missions, the incidence of disease, and school attendance. With this material were considerable contemporary photographic records, and some local news clippings.

The locally held archives of missions and religious houses - whether of missionaries or local congregations - might additionally include internal communications between communities, the correspondence and directives of superiors, reports of meetings, newsletters, and jubilee and anniversary programmes. The latter often include historical résumés and speeches with reminiscences. Another source that might help illuminate the question of local metaphors are the word-lists composed by or for newcomers and later revised in the light of their experiences. All of these might serve as ways to tap the experience and memories of the 'old-timers'. For some types of research, mission dispensary records might be a valuable source for much useful information on birth and mortality rates, population density, birth control, the incidence of disease, treatments, and other vital statistics.

If a researcher does have the occasion to enjoy the hospitality of a mission, a browsing of reading material on the bookshelves might prove interesting. For those interested in the evolution of missionary attitudes, such material can be quite illuminating.

## *A Tentative Conclusion*

At the risk of undermining the credibility of all that I have said, I will now summarize what I see was the value for me personally of living for eight years in the field. At the end of my first three years, I had come to be quite comfortable with the predictability of the social environment in which I was living. This was borne out when, in that year, I went to live in a different community about sixty kilometres distant (but 120 by road). After a further year, I began to be more attuned to the shifting contexts and levels of meaning. Only at the beginning of my fifth year in Zaïre did I read through all my notebooks, classifying them and identifying both emerging foci for writing and obvious lacunae. As I then started to tackle the material and tried to make sense of it, I realized how very partial my understanding was. The more I wrote and then

returned to my earlier field sites the more I became aware of the fact that there are no simple, singular explanations of social experience - be it another's, or our own. Rather, it seems that there are whole ranges of meanings, and veritable constellations of understandings - all of which contribute to illuminating different facets of experience. The emphases of these different explanations can change frequently and significantly. Events, personalities, conflicts, crises may occasion a burst of insight and create a myriad of refractions of great brilliance: but these are always partial, even as our efforts to capture them are no more than approximations.

The longer one remains in a given context the more aware one may become of these multiple dimensions - sometimes, but not always, simultaneously. And so, it seems to me, the more I come to know the less I think I understand. But at least the pieces do seem to hang together better on their own terms. The question remains, how to translate the patterns that emerge?

JOAN F. BURKE