

Fieldnotes, Field Research, and Positionality of a “Contested-Native Researcher”

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Abstract

The article recapitulates field research experiences of a native researcher in Eastern DRC. In many cases, a native is considered an insider. However, the field research took place in an ethnically polarized context where an insider researcher can be mischaracterized and amalgamated to her own ethnic community. Besides polarization, the fieldwork took place in a volatile setting to the extent that it increases security concerns for a researcher who belongs to a “contested community”; meaning, researcher’s position is likely associated with his ethnic community. Based on the field experience, the article shares insights of dealing with this complexity, volatility, and uncertainties. While the article does not claim that insights can be generalized across different contexts, it specifically proposes some attitudes to take when a researcher faces a dilemma of touching the ground realities while he might individually be amalgamated within socio-cultural differences. The article recalls the necessity of understanding the effects of socio-cultural polarization within the academic field.

Keywords

field research, insider, outsider, identities, security risks, positionality, reflexivity

Situating the Field Research Context

The Democratic Republic of DRC (DRC) is among the ethnically polarized countries. Prunier (2009, p. 172) argues that ethnic polarization in DRC is like an “ethnic feudalization.” In an interlocking of motives, Bantu-Nilotic/Tutsi dichotomy and popular prejudice have reinforced the way “enemies of the DRC” are stereotyped. While enemies of the Congo are described as deceitful, cunning with “high cheekbones and hooked noses” (Stearns, 2011, p. 194), the physical features have been characterizing Nilotes/Tutsi in the Hamitic Hypothesis (Sanders, 1969). The Hamitic hypothesis has defined “Bantu” as native while others are seen as strangers (Sanders, 1969). Consequently, mainstream and social medias have been depicting and listing physical traits of the “enemies-invaders” (Huening, 2015). Specifically, invaders are widely referred to as “Rwandans” and mostly “Tutsi.” On the top list of invaders, the Banyamulenge, my ethnic community, is also (mis)represented as such. Following the racial lines of Hamitic Myth, the Banyamulenge have been discriminated against since long ago (Court, 2013; Verweijen & Vlassenroot, 2015; Weis, 1959). A large body of literature has elaborated on the Banyamulenge in DRC; some defining them as “invaders” (Kapapi, 2019; Kibiswa, 2015; Muhindo-Kambere, 1996; Vlassenroot, 2002; Willame, 1997). Members of the Banyamulenge are defined as

cunning, tall, slim body, deceitful (Jackson, 2006, p. 113; Stearns, 2011). These stereotypes and (mis)representations are by themselves a source of insecurity. Consequently, members of the Banyamulenge are largely frightened to freely move across DRC territory. The micro-level field research experience on violent conflicts in Eastern DRC has taken place in such ethnically fragmented context.

The field research took place in North-Kivu and South-Kivu of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between September 2018 and May 2019, a period of volatile political context in relation to presidential and parliamentary general elections organized around December 2018.¹ Four territories were covered in North-Kivu: Rutshuru, Masisi, Nyiragongo, and Walikale; and three in South-Kivu: Fizi, Mwenga, and Uvira.

The research project aims to understand the motivations of ex-combatants to (dis)engage in violent conflicts. The central

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research question is “Why do individual combatants join armed groups and what determines over time their decisions?” Specifically, data on ex-combatants have also covered motives from participation to demobilization. The broader argument of the research considers that relative deprivation explains largely violence intractability in Eastern DRC (Galtung, 1969; Gurr, 1970). Considering the potential richness of the DRC, the research assumes that the discrepancy between expectations and lived socio-economic conditions elucidates the persistence of violence.

Before the field research, I met researchers² who had worked in similar contexts to learn from their experience. Since my fieldwork was taking place during the period of general elections that might be associated with uncertainties, I was advised to get a short and clear written document summarizing what my research is all about; be concise and consistent when explaining my research to different interlocutors but also considering the safety of data collected. Their insights and experience helped to delve into different dimensions of the political climate and challenges ahead (Sluka, 1995). Besides the political context, surveying ex-combatants remains sensitive and requires a research permit. Therefore, I had to undertake the process of obtaining a research permit in Kinshasa, 2000 miles away from the Kivus. The permit facilitated access to the field and in particular meeting with ex-combatant (Glasius et al., 2018). As elaborated below, “personal position” has influenced the decision to undertake this procedure from Kinshasa.

Following an explanatory sequential design (Crewsell & Crewsell, 2018, p. 221; O’leary, 2017, p. 168), the research combined a survey technique and in-depth qualitative interviews. The data collection incorporated a list experiment empirical strategy to measure some sensitive motivations to participate in violent conflicts (Corstange, 2009, p. 48; Kuklinski et al., 1997, p. 327). In a comparative approach involving civilians, the field research collected socio-economic and political information on roughly 1200 participants; of which 60% were ex-combatants. The comparative approach required finding civilians who are likely similar in terms of socio-economic and political characteristics to ex-combatants to serve as the baseline (Bellows & Miguel, 2009, p. 1147). Besides the survey (original version in English translated in French and Swahili), around twenty-four qualitative interviews were administered to key informants. In addition, the research consulted colonial archives to understand the historical pattern of widely discussed causes of violence in Eastern DRC.

The mixed methodology lays the foundation of promising findings (O’leary, 2017). While the data analysis for further publication is in progress, this article aims to share the experience of the field research environment. The environment in which research takes place influences the entire process leading to knowledge production (Roll & Swenson, 2019). Moreover, the research environment can be of hazards and uncertainties (or not) depending on the characteristics of the researcher (Hervik, 1994). Thus, the specifics of the research determines partly the field environment which in turn is interconnected to findings of the research (Begley, 2009; Roll & Swenson, 2019).

Hence, understanding fieldwork environment enhances the process of knowledge production.

The article is a result of efforts deployed by different contributors, including Research Assistants (RAs).³ It acknowledges the contribution of RAs who helped to understand fieldwork’s facets. Rutshuru and Masisi territories had three RAs each because of their weights within the sample. Other territories had two RAs. After the data collection, RAs submitted a short report per territory describing their own experience. Debriefing sessions (1–1.30 h session) were arranged to discuss their impression and encounters, including accommodation and transport.

A similar session was also organized with enumerators at the end of data transcription. Reports and conversations with more than 10 research assistants and enumerators constitute an interesting collection of research’s experiences. On average, I visited at least once almost all the research sites: North-Kivu (Masisi center, Kitshanga-Mweso, Walikale, Rutshuru, Nyamilima-Ishasha, Nyiragongo around Goma city, Rubaya, and Bweremana); South-Kivu (Misisi-Lulimba-Fizi, Mine-mbwe, Uvira-Ruzizi Plain, Mwenga-Kasika. In the sense of Geertz (2005), personal visit of the localities can mean “being there”; and helped to adjoin with local realities.

Drawing from field research experience as a native researcher, and RAs accounts, the article suggests that ethnic polarization permeates and spills over from regular interactions to academia.⁴ Hence, a researcher’s position can affect the findings if participants are reluctant to disclose some information; but also, a researcher might be biased. Next to other techniques used during the research, one of the ethical principles to circumvent biases is to reflect on the researcher’s positionality. The research experience suggests that the use of mixed methods—triangulation⁵—in an interdisciplinary approach has reduced some of these biases linked to the researcher’s position (Attia & Edge, 2017; Crewsell & Crewsell, 2018, p. 216; Johnson et al., 2007). Within an ethnically polarized context, my personal position has motivated sharing this experience. The article contributes to positionality/reflexivity debate, and the researcher’s shifting identities. It highlights challenges of navigating within a volatile and ethnically fragmented setting, and the experience of managing emotional pressure that arouse from the field research encounters.

While this is an experience of a native researcher, it may apply to different contexts and positions (Smyth, 2005). However, a contested-native researcher needs to pay specific attention to some attitudes for his security. On one hand, there is no single and appropriate way of anticipating risks in a volatile context such as the DRC. Pearce and Loubere (2017, p. 158) stresses that “danger is, by its very nature, unpredictable—and dangerous situations often arise quickly and unexpectedly.” While assessing security encounters is key, a contested native researcher needs to be passionate and eager to learn but also anticipate and navigate the risks ahead. Hence, a researcher needs to clearly specify and state the aim of the field research, her identity, and position. A contested native researcher needs

to avoid any impression that attracts attention while relying on ordinary and most used means of transport. While playing a low profile, a researcher in this context is advised to avoid sharing his agenda and programme with (unnecessary) people, including RAs. There are possibilities that unpredictable security encounters will inevitably occur. Thus, a researcher needs to restrain and control emotional pressure as this might cast doubt on her position or leading to other unintended consequences.

The article is structured as follows: Besides the background of the field research, it discusses the reflexivity in a culturally fragmented context; and field research vis-à-vis predatory and bureaucracy encounters in second and third section. Fourth section elaborate on navigating between multiple identities in the volatile context. Before the conclusion, the last section recapitulates examples reflecting how the socio-security context might blur the position of the researcher.

Being Reflexive in Culturally Fragmented Setting

Research and researcher are intimately related during a process of knowledge production. In a back and forth complex process, the researcher's position influences the outcome (Hervik, 1994, p. 92). Therefore, indicating the position of the researcher is highly commendable during this process (Chambers, 2020; Harvey, 2013). Reflecting on the position of the researcher and its implications on the research's outcome is commonly known as being reflexive (Berger, 2015, p. 220). Scholars have underscored the importance and relevance of reflexivity and positionality (Attia & Edge, 2017; Bernard, 2000; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 274). Reflexivity and positionality constitute one of the components of research ethics (Berger, 2015; Forbes, 2008). They help anticipating difficulties and encounters during a research process and fieldwork.

Jonathan Harvey (2013) defines reflexivity and positionality as "situating oneself." Hervik (1994, p. 94) suggests that being reflexive requires a researcher to "... being self-conscious of himself as another ...". More broadly, these refer to *what and how we know* (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 274). Reflexivity imposes a continuous internal introspection over how the researcher's position can affect the whole process and research outcome (Berger, 2015; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Richardson, 2005, p. 308). Berger (2015) indicates that being reflexive recalls one's personal characteristics including gender, race, experiences, beliefs, political stances, ideologies...

Particularly, reflexivity involves two levels of looking forth and back to examine how research and researcher influence each other, namely prospective and retrospective reflexivity; (Attia & Edge, 2017). Attia and Edge (2017, p. 35) suggest that prospective reflexivity implies the influence of the researcher on her research, while retrospective reflexivity is the other way around. In this specific study, the self-conscious examination of oneself meant that personal physical traits and affiliation to a contested ethnic community can lead to mistrust or misjudge participants' (re)actions. Moreover, previous experience can be

used to anticipate possible encounters. For instance, retrospective reflexivity referred to the management of stresses experienced during a previous interview or data collection to a forthcoming research exercise.

Reflexivity and positionality are increasingly debated from different angles (Bagshaw et al., 2007, Attia & Edge, 2017). In situating researchers, the reflexivity debate often refers to two categories; an outsider and an insider⁶ (Kirpitchenko & Voloder, 2014; McKinley-Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). To some extent, scholars have dichotomized the two categories (Merriam et al., 2001; Smetherham, 1978). On one hand, a researcher is viewed as an insider when undertaking fieldwork within groups or participants he belongs to. On the other hand, an outsider undertakes her research within an unfamiliar groups-society (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). Smyth (2005) argues that both positions have limitations and advantages.

For instance, an outsider might consider fieldwork as isolation from her familiar setting. In this line, Begley (2009, p. 3) argues that a researcher is "separated from friends, family and from basic comforts and that cultural differences and being the "Other" all contribute to a frustrating and stressful situation." However, Kirpitchenko and Voloder (2014) emphasize that an insider researcher is knowledgeable when it comes to studying specific groups. Similarly, Breen (2007, p. 163) suggests that "insider-researchers are often intimately engaged with their research domains, and, unlike outside-researchers..." Moreover, Bonner and Tolhurst (2002, p. 13) argue that being an insider has other advantages including among others

a superior understanding of the group's culture; the ability to interact naturally with the group and its members; and a previously established, and therefore greater, relational intimacy with the group.

Nevertheless, being familiar of any research setting induces sometimes researchers to take some realities for granted. Breen (2007, p. 163) questions a strong reliance on researcher's past experience during a process of knowledge production. Kanuha (2000, p. 442) argues that previous experiences can hinder the prospect of opening new horizons. Though debatable, being familiar might undermine an insider's objectivity (Smyth, 2005). Breen (2007) notes furthermore that being familiar of the research context can interfere within interactions between interviewees and interviewer. Moreover, Breen (2007, p. 164) stresses that the process of interviewing can encounter difficulties when informants consider that the researcher knows already some answers to the questions being asked. Nonetheless, an outsider position can sometimes lead into new chapters of the debate (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002, p. 8; Kirpitchenko & Voloder, 2014). In front of an outsider researcher, participants in research are willing to deepen discussions considering that an outsider has limited knowledge of the subject.

As simplified, this dichotomy insider-outsider has been questioned in favor of the multiple faces of a researcher (Smyth, 2005). There have been growing researches stressing the blurred position of a researcher based on her positionality

(Chambers, 2020; Smyth, 2005). Bruskin (2018) and Milligan (2016) argue that the blurred position can display multiple identities at the same time. The blurred position implies that there is no clear cut between insider-outsider (Chambers, 2020, p. 440). The article endorses Merriam et al. (2001, p. 411) who contend that the dichotomy “insider versus outsider” oversimplifies a complex process characterizing researcher’s multiple identities.

The concept of multiple identities of a researcher has recently been given attention. Chambers (2020), and Breen (2007) argue that research is a process that makes one moves forth and back to achieve its objective. Additionally, Thomson and Gunter (2011, p. 18) argue that research is a trajectory of a “continuous shifting relationship.” Therefore, a researcher can navigate between insider-outsider positions, sometimes with a new look. Researcher position is not only determined by the researcher himself, but this might depend on participants’ level of understanding and that of trusting a researcher.

In addition, reflexivity-positionality literature has not yet thoroughly connected multiple positionalities within polarized socio-cultural settings. For instance, James Chambers who resorted to multiple positionalities to access interviewees during a turmoil period in Nairobi, his personal safety was not in significant danger (Chambers, 2020, p. 439). Similarly, Smyth (2005) reflects on multiple identities of an insider researcher in Ireland whose challenges revolves around unfamiliarity of the groups (participants) of the research. Whereas they recognize that local researchers potentially face more danger than external researchers, Pearce and Loubere (2017, p. 164) suggest that training “local people to become community researchers” as means of dealing with researcher’s security encounters. Doyle and McCarthy-Jones (2017) reflecting on junior and senior researcher’s security issues within the volatile context, they mostly recommend communicating adaptive methods when planned research agenda is not fully executed. By discussing fieldwork after conflict, Roll and Swenson (2019) underscore the effect of the socio-security context on the quality of the data collected.

In Eastern DRC, physical and physiognomy traits tend to portray a “stranger.” It largely has originated from the “Hamitic hypothesis” (Jackson, 2006; Sanders, 1969). By being tall, thin coupled with some other physical features can indicate to an observer that someone belongs to the Banyamulenge community, Tutsi, and/or simply a “Rwandan.” Therefore, such descriptions and qualifications are translated into stereotypes. Verweijen and Vlassenroot (2015), and Hoffmann et al. (2016) suggest particularly that the local setting is ethnically polarized. Kalyvas (2006, p. 65) suggests that polarization is located

... at the intersection of structural conditions, political institutions, and the action of political entrepreneurs who succeed in turning real or perceived differences into polarized politics.

Therefore, an ethnically polarized context interferes with participants’ perceptions about the researcher. Based on perceived physical differences, a researcher can either be

identified as such by participants (Smyth, 2005). S/he can be mistrusted based on shared perceptions against any specific group. Sluka (1995) reveals that a native researcher who culturally belongs to any ethnic community, he or she can be amalgamated under this category and face security encounters.

The challenges discussed above permeate the fieldwork process. They are possibly dealt with through a research’s partnership between an insider and an outsider (Breen, 2007). However, there are difficulties to always secure such partnership. Rather, scholarship argues to compensate for some of these gaps by being reflexive (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 416). That is, a researcher needs to discuss questions arising over her personal position to clarify her possible biases and limitations. To fill this gap, the article links an insider researcher working in (post) conflict environment while he ethnically belongs to a contested community. Such a position is framed in this article, as a “contested-native” researcher. Moreover, the article initiates a debate about the connection between research’s environment, emotional pressure, and reflexivity. A detailed account of field research encounters helps to describe the meaning of a contested native researcher while indicating how emotional pressure are dealt with. Being a unique of this kind, the article shares different incidents to support the argument of being a “contested native researcher” and attitudes to consider.

Reflecting on fieldwork experiences constitute a source of inspiration toward knowledge production (Begley, 2009; Brigden & Hallett, 2020; Harvey, 2013, p. 87). The combination of three features constitutes the originality of this article. First, the experience brings insights that might help a researcher to undertake fieldwork within a culturally polarized context coupled with security uncertainties (Chambers, 2020). Second, the article reflects on how the author thinks he was perceived (Hervik, 1994). Borrowing from Begley (2009), Loyle (2016), and Bruskin (2018), the debate discusses shifting identities within a volatile and “authoritarian” context. And third, the article shares the experience of researching violent conflicts while a researcher’s ethnic affiliation is likely contested.

Bureaucracies, Predatory System and “Contested-Native” Researcher

DRC has a history of predatory bureaucracies and institutions (De Herdt et al., 2012; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002, p. 149). Bureaucracy, services delivery, bribes, and authoritarian fields, and volatile settings are intertwined (Rackley, 2006; Glasius et al., 2018; Chama, 2019, p. 169). Service delivery is inherently built within the predatory system (Montague, 2002; Perera, 2017, p. 639; Vlassenroot & Huggins, 2004). These settings require reporting to different officials while delaying plans. First bureaucratic challenges arise at the step of requesting research permit.

A research permit is part of procedural ethics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 263). Guillemin and Gillam (2004) indicate that procedural ethics refer to steps of getting green lights from officials, while “ethics in practice” imply daily encounters when meeting research participants. Compared to Loyle’s

experience (2016, p. 927), requesting a research permit in Kinshasa is a long, complex, fluid, costly, and time-consuming process. It implies making phone calls, knocking on different doors meeting security guards, police officers or foot soldiers asking for something cheaper, as a bottle of water or a cigarette. It is locally called “*mua muke kaka*” or “*mayi ya pamba*”⁷; though contextually expensive for them. Therefore, one needs to be patient and flexible as appointments keep changing. Based on informal discussions, many researchers do decide to circumvent Kinshasa’s bureaucracy and find an alternative at provincial levels. However, my position and research domain indicated the need to have a permit delivered from the central level.

A first application was submitted around mid-June 2018 to the Defense Ministry which oversees the management of ex-combatants (Vlassenroot et al., 2020). Though supported by a friend who lived in Kinshasa, the follow-up needed a support within the military, working within the Office of the Army Chief of Staff (OACS). OACS’s offices are in the same building as the Defense Ministry. Till mid-September 2018, there was no feedback, and personal efforts to locate the letter were in vain. The two friends felt that the Defense Ministry’s bureaucracy would delay in responding; and advised introducing a second letter around 20th September 2018. The new application was addressed to the OACS office with a copy to the military Intelligence Department (DEMIAP). Moreover, they thought that an approval when the DEMIAP is informed would easily work around this topic.

Following different phone calls and approximately six appointments, the permit was handed over to me on 30th October 2018 by the DEMIAP. Besides risks of attracting authorities and intelligence services attention on this project (Glasius et al., 2018, p. 21), the permit from the DEMIAP had advantages. I had to meet local staff (military, police, local authorities, or intelligence staff); thus, a research permit authorized by DEMIAP was considered as reliable. The friends argued that the chief of DEMIAP is highly respected when it comes to undertaking a research with ex-combatants. Once again, a friend helped to link me up with the DEMIAP chief and his entourage; and has phoned to get a notification message of the permit approval.

The permit is largely relevant at provincial and local levels. At each visit, RAs and I had to report to the military units deployed across territories visited. Whenever RAs and I visited any locality, we had to introduce the research with the permit by meeting local authorities, military officers as well as officials from the civilian intelligence department (ANR). All have to sign with visa-stamps and their number indicate the level of bureaucracy (Glasius et al., 2018, p. 21). More often, a stamp visa is implicitly accompanied by requesting “*mua muke kaka*.” “The ink costs money”; a common polite way to beg money. In many cases, we thought to circumvent this challenge by explaining that a student-researcher had limited financial means. Nevertheless, RAs stated that the research permit had played an important role.

During an interview with an ex-combatant Jeannot⁸ in Walikale Centre, I jokingly asked him if we could travel together to Walowa Loanda, his native locality. He laughed to me by referring to his personal security as an ex-combatant who cannot easily travel out there. I then facetiously asked him if I can myself go in this region to interview ex-combatants. He replied, “you can go because you said you know [referring to the research permit] the [DEMIAP] chief” (Translated from Swahili). Such statement implies that if you know the chief, it is easier to be accepted. Though this was not the focus of our debate, Jeannot’s reply implied that being familiar with the DEMIAP chief can open doors to a stranger; specifically, as the DEMIAP chief (RIP) is a native of Kalehe Territory and ethnically-culturally closer to the interviewee.

Despite DEMIAP’s influence, bureaucracy and overlapping departments remains another challenge. Such bureaucratic context coupled with security volatility amplify researchers’ exposure, personal security and involve additional financial costs (Glasius et al., 2018; Loyle, 2016, p. 927). For instance, in Rutshuru Territory, we had to wait for a military officer who had traveled to Masisi territory to get a visa-stamp. While the provincial military commander had approved the permit, Rutshuru territorial administrator advised to have another stamp from the military Operational Sector Commander (OSC). I had to resort to a “friend” connected within the military who agreed to refer to his name to link up with the OSC. During our phone conversation, the OSC suggested to get back to Goma and meet the Sector Intelligence Department (B2). In such encounters, researcher must flexibly adapt his agenda and plans. Therefore, we had to postpone the data collection until we got the stamp from B2. Besides delay in data collection and additional financial costs, traveling from Goma to Rutshuru is associated with security risks of being either attacked or kidnapped; given that the information on our presence in Rutshuru was already circulating.

Despite the permit, a researcher needs to be acquainted with knowledge and understanding of the socio-political context. While in Goma, I requested to access the ex-combatant’s database from the Provincial *Unité d’Exécution du Programme National de Désarmement, Démobilisation, et Reinsertion* (UEPNDDR) for sampling purpose. The UEPNDDR oversees the demobilization and Reintegration program and the coordinator advised to contact UEPNDDR Kinshasa.⁹ I indicated with email messages that I have been in touch with Kinshasa Office around September-October 2018. Despite my efforts to convince the provincial Coordinator, he insisted that I should send an email to UENPDDR staff in charge of statistics. Before getting a feedback to my email sent on 25th January 2019, I was told that the Statistician is visiting Goma. On 3rd February 2019, I managed to secure a meeting with the statistician.

Following our conversation, he suggested to select the sample on my behalf.¹⁰ The suggestion breaks ethical and methodological principles, I unsuccessfully tried to argue against this. He advised to send him an email whenever I feel comfortable with the procedure. I finally disregarded the advice and decided to proceed by working with local community leaders and

ex-combatants representatives. It worked. From my experience with the UEPNDDR Kinshasa, I felt the advice had to do with the Statistician personal stance. On a first place, I guessed the Statistician was possibly trying to undermine my research plan for unknown motives; including my ethnic affiliation. However, informal talks and/or qualitative enquiry with ex-combatants indicated another path. Different accounts, mostly 2017 Ex-combatants, have referred to embezzlement and failure of the DDR program in which provincial UEPNDDR bears some responsibilities (Perazzone, 2017, p. 268; Vlassenroot et al., 2020). Ex-combatants accounts indicate that UEPNDDR is sometimes unwilling to let them openly express their encounters. Though the clear motives to advise so remain undisclosed, my personal position opens speculation that sometimes might be wrong.

In some cases, dissociating predatory behavior from discrimination is tricky. Discrimination is here regarded as political and social exclusion targeting an ethnic community to the extent members of such ethnic group are specifically identified and harassed by state security apparatuses (see for instance Cederman et al., 2010, p. 99). For instance, when visiting Bweremana locality¹¹ early December 2018, I failed to dissociate personal harassment and attempt to prey. Bweremana (North-Kivu) and Minova (South-Kivu) are two sister agglomerations distant of less than a kilometer. While walking towards Minova, one needs to cross a checkpoint designated for taxation or prey on crossing vehicles and motorcycles, a commonplace mechanism in Eastern DRC (Hoffmann et al., 2016). Walking along others, I was the only one beckoned by someone sitting on the other side of the road. I distantly refuted his call; and this slipped into an argument until someone who introduced himself as the chief of Immigration service (DGM) in Minova stepped in. With no clear answer, friends with whom we walked together kept asking the DGM chief the reason behind beckoning one person among many others. I was later told that beckoning signaled someone is suspected and had to prove who he is. However, many of the staff on checkpoints and roadblocks are poorly remunerated and their survival depends on preying.

Similar incidents happened to me more than four times. On 1st March 2019, I handed over my Congolese passport to a checkpoint between Walikale and Masisi territories. A DGM officer asked if I have a visa to travel to Walikale. After an argument and discussion, I was allowed to continue my journey. I later realized that the DGM officer was unable to differentiate between the passport holder's nationality and any visa stamp inside the passport. Similarly, early March 2019, a Congolese UN staff in Uvira insisted that I should show him an electoral card while he had my Congolese passport. In his viewpoint, he insinuated that anyone can have a Congolese passport. Upon the loud argument, A Ghanaian military officer within the Monusco helped to come up with a compromise. At the Goma International Airport, the Immigration Office Director held my passport twice (5/12/2018 and 18/5/2019) while overlooking many others on the queue. On first occasion, I managed to humbly respond to his many unnecessary questions. For the second time, I could not

hold my frustration/anger and told him "you are being driven by discrimination." He stepped back and apologized.

Multiple Identities, Security Risks, and "Contested-Native" Researcher

Next to many other identities, being a PhD researcher in this specific context adds another one. Some interlocutors confuse PhD program (*Doctorat* in French) with a medical doctor. The debate about its meaning ends up with more ambiguity than it solves. Regardless of the skin color, researchers from Western Universities stands as a specific identity within an imbalanced power and social settings (Smyth, 2005, p. 17). Forbes (2008) argues that a PhD position creates an additional identity that involves power structure. Many would expect from a researcher than what he is able to do. The best way to manage these expectations is being receptive, especially in informal settings (Sluka, 1995). Informal settings create conducive environment; and interlocutors can even ask the exact scholarship amount. Some questions are tough and involve future and stability. Though ineffective to rush into quick feedback, these questions sometimes evoke emotional reactions.

During an informal setting with close relatives, I was pushed to tell if my research would halt violence.¹² They thought I could be the right person to accomplish what others have failed to do. Their knowledge and experience about PhD research are very limited. The puzzling question was directed to a native researcher whom they thought shares intimately the ongoing climate of fear and despair. However, it might also happen to an outsider if language barriers are broken (Smyth, 2005). In front of some realities, 60s, 90s and recent waves of violence experience, a researcher is morally disarmed. For decades, violence emerges regularly with similar consequences and I share the sorrow of people being interviewed while their security keeps worsening.

Focusing on shifting researcher's identities, Smyth (2005) indicates that an insider may sometimes become an outsider while researching his own community. Beyond the daily encounters, close relatives were also concerned with my personal security. For instance, I was advised to take care of myself in connection with rumors of people being poisoned. More than once, some would even phone to warn me. During the conversation with relatives, besides the strong warning, their body languages signaled that the doctoral researcher is less vigilant. In my native language Kinyamulenge, the relatives warned by insisting "*abasomye se!*" (i.e. literate people) can underestimate the threat of poison. The final message meant that whenever poisoned, it is over. Though I had to listen, my witchcraft understanding has evolved since years. However, being less vigilant in front of something dangerous was considered by my relatives as a case of shifting identities (Bruskin, 2018; Narayan, 1993, p. 765).

Security issues are unpredictable and sometimes puzzling. While explaining the visit to a military senior officer,¹³ he referred to how my presence can raise suspicion. His statements indicated implicitly that my visit coincided with local

security upheaval. He meant that “some [impersonal formulation] would think of an option to eliminate you for failing to understand the coincidence of your field research within the socio-security climate and the recent moves.” Very fluent in French with an interesting level of understanding research processes, he repeatedly and consistently referred to how his ethnic community is seen as an opponent to mine; something that has even been debated within the army. The Colonel’s message sounded rather threatening. Initially, I even failed to grasp what he meant by “coincidence and recent moves.” However, I had no choice other than looking indifferent but also straight in his face. In such sudden move, it is better avoiding panic. Rather, take time to breathe, and think as if there was no other option. The more pressures appear on one’s face, the more suspicion increases.

I understood the Colonel’s message the next day. Two incidents occurred which I initially failed to notice. On one hand, while busy traveling and meeting respondents in the remote region with limited access to telecommunications infrastructures, I failed to notice an incident that took place on 4th May 2019 midday. In my native region, there have been clashes that killed Kawaza Nyakwana¹⁴ (KST, 2019; Ntanyoma, 2019a). A member of the neighboring community to mine, Kawaza was killed on the day I traveled to this region. Killed by an armed man who belongs to my community, it revived adamant ethnic tensions. Existing tensions are embedded widely in contesting the Banyamulenge community (Jackson, 2007; Ntanyoma, 2019b). Meanwhile, Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda (FDLR), the Rwandan Hutu rebels were also moving in the region across South-Kivu toward North-Kivu and vice versa. Within volatile contexts, researchers can be perceived as spies (Sluka, 1995, p. 283, Stearns, 2011, p. 97); and that possibly was the message of the military officer.

I recalled later how an accountant of the local chieftaincy came to visit the place where I was administering an interview. Amid the interview with an ex-combatant nicknamed Emma¹⁵ at his home, the accountant knocked; entered the house and asked simply “are you still there? Later, Emma assured that “there was no harm intended. This is how they [local authorities] do behave.”¹⁶ Local authorities serve as police and intelligence services. Despite the assurance of Emma, the message from the accountant was not clear.

At some points, my personal security was raised by RAs who advised not to travel to dangerous localities. Within the imbalanced power relationship, a friendly attitude toward RAs is important (Cronin-furman & Lake, 2018). RAs ESh and EMA thought that there were risks for EMu, one of their team members, to travel from Rutshuru Centre (Kiwanja)¹⁷ towards Nyamilima/Ishasha. The large region of roughly 40 kms was militarily controlled by Rwandan Hutu rebels, FDLR. Besides the presence of FDLR, security concerns included kidnapping risks. Emu was hesitant due to his experience; we understood his worries. For cultural similarities with EMu, ESh and EMA thought that I need to consider these concerns and avoid traveling to Nyamilima.

Whether the avoidance would have been part of “dumping research” (Schroeder et al., 2018; Tangwa et al., 2018, p. 51), I felt ethically indebted to support them in these dangerous localities. Besides a moral feeling, supervising their work has enhanced trust over how the survey was being done. While I intended to show my commitment to take risks as they do, I promised to visit them without precise information. Meanwhile, I managed to identify a military commander deployed in Nyamilima and from whom I could obtain security information. Before securing a meeting with the commander in Goma, RAs had to survey the next day in Nyamilima. Their agenda was more influenced by the availability of “gatekeepers.” I had then limited options to decide whether supervise or wait for a meeting with the military commander. As part of my security strategy, I restrained from disclosing my entire supervisory agenda. I only phoned RAs to locate them after reaching Nyamilima.

On my way to Nyamilima, the military commander phoned to check if I was ready to meet in Goma. I indicated that I was on my way toward Nyamilima. He insisted that I should immediately return if not convoyed by the UN peacekeeping Monusco. The commander warned over plots and complicity of motorcyclists when it comes to kidnapping’s incidents. Strangely, a motorcyclist was clearly following my conversation. As we broke barriers by chatting with the motorcyclist, I realized how breaking language barriers is relevant to informally learn. He spoke to me as an insider and shared how kidnapping operates.¹⁸ It mostly targets people for the sake of settling accounts. It anticipates ransoms if a victim is expected to pay enough cash. Kidnapping involves many people, including drivers, motorcyclists, and neighbors, the motorcyclist revealed. He assured that if someone looks ordinarily and had no problem locally, there is limited probability of being kidnapped. Nonetheless, the lesson to learn is to only trust two or three close friends to share the agenda (Glasius et al., 2018, p. 29).

Generally, security uncertainties are numerous and unpredictable when researching the eastern DRC region. The probability is high that unexpected gunmen ambushes might occur at any time. The possibility that a motorcycle will break down while driving in remote localities is too high. Motorcycle transport during long distance such as Walikale-Goma (12 hours) is tiresome and uncertain for a contested insider. In Bwegera, a region known for kidnapping incidents, gun firing¹⁹ took place within meters of where I was conducting an interview. One of the interviewees met that day told me that his young brother was killed in similar circumstances. Whether targeted or not, the field experience suggests avoiding fear and emotional pressure in front of such unexpected incidents.

A Native Researcher: Intruder or Insider

Members of the Banyamulenge community are afraid to travel in remote regions of the DRC. Following the lengthy experience of discrimination and selective killing (Court, 2013; Huening, 2013), their security and safety are uncertain. One can intermittently meet military soldiers in some of the remote

localities. During the last decades, Banyamulenge soldiers have been selectively killed as rebellions erupted in the Kivu (Ntanyoma, 2019b). At present, there is a limited number of (mainly) military officers in Walikale, Ishasha, Kamituga, Nyamilima, Masisi²⁰ . . . They are discriminated against and considered “foreigners” by comrades and generally by the public. Social media and political discourse keep defining Banyamulenge soldiers as “*Rwandophones* as perpetrators” (CRG, 2017, p. 67). These allegations combine with lengthy manipulative campaigns against Banyamulenge and Tutsi.

Due to this socio-security and political context, there are few members of the Banyamulenge employed by international NGOs to work in remote localities of South-Kivu. The socio-security and political context might partly explain why NGOs are reluctant to recruit them. I have been told that in Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira, there are less than 5 Banyamulenge individuals working with international, and UN based organizations in South-Kivu and North-Kivu. Whether discriminated against or not, this has an implication of how the Banyamulenge are perceived. Thus, a researcher traveling in the remote localities is mischaracterized and likened to military personnel. Besides the ambiguous status, a researcher might be victimized following the misrepresentations.

RAs who collected data in Rutshuru had shared their experience on how EMu was treated with special attention in a restaurant-bar; being called “*Afande*.”²¹ Other RAs acknowledged to have been asked by locals if EMu is a military officer. Based on his physical features, “Nilotic characteristics” (Pottier, 2002; Sanders, 1969), CRM has experienced similar misrepresentation in Masisi territory. I came across similar experience at the time of crossing military checkpoints. I was asked if I am an officer or someone working with security apparatuses in Lulimba locality²² when soldiers at the checkpoints read my research permit. How can you travel without guards, they asked? I had to clarify that this is an academic research mission, and the document is simply a permit. Though soldiers were unfamiliar with research permits, they were slightly convinced. They expressed their doubt in Swahili, “*apana, tulisha kuyuwa, hau-pendi tu kujionyesha*” (no, we have already noticed who you are even though you don’t want to disclose your status).

In a similar vein, Captain Amuli introduced himself and fell short to militarily salute. I met him inside the circle reserved to people allowed to enter soldiers’ camp in Lulimba (Fizi territory). I needed to introduce myself to the interim military operational commander. Within a short distance of the military camp, Amuli shyly greeted me and asked: are you an officer.²³ I swiftly said no. He hesitated. I insisted by saying I am not a soldier. Then, he introduced himself, I am Captain Amuli. Nice to meet you, I replied. Immediately, he begged a small amount of money (less than \$1) to pay a motorcycle. I felt this has nothing to do with ethical principles and gave him 1,000 Congolese Francs. In the end, I sensed that Amuli was cleverly avoiding any clash with a senior officer and looked for an opportunity to get help.

Alphamin, a company operating in mining sector, had facilitated my flight from Goma to Walikale (Bisie) on 27th

February 2019. Along with Walikale territorial Administrator (TA), we landed at Alphamin’s aerodrome built inside the Bisie jungle. Alphamin’s staff are always informed about visitors who need facilitation to leave the Aerodrome. I missed the direction because I was told by the staff “we have already organized transport facilitation for you.” Though hesitant, I felt lucky. Mistakenly, they thought I am part of an inspection team working in mining sector who were visiting Bisie locality. On our way to Bisie, I realize this was a wrong direction. Stressed with uncertainties, I was fortunate to reroute to Walikale and found the AT on his way. I asked for the favor of being transported in the AT vehicle. He directly retorted “our mission is to facilitate army officers.”

In such uncertain circumstances, I hesitated to openly refute the “military identity.” I had no clue over how it would look like if I would miss the TA support while mobile communication was largely impossible. In front of multiple questions, instead of responding to his implicit question, I resolved to hand in my research permit.²⁴ Implicitly, I expected the TA to read and consider my research position. I got a positive offer to board his vehicle as he finished to read the research permit. Immediately, I requested an interview with him the next day. I learnt that the easier way to manage such unexpected encounters is to keep calm, contain one’s frustration or anger; anxiety might reveal your profile.

My visit to Kasika locality (Mwenga territory) underscored how my identity was viewed and linked to an “intruder.” Two RAs have collected data in Mwenga. CRM is a Munyamulenge (singular of Banyamulenge) while JNg is Muhunde (singular of Bahunde community). Both have acknowledged how CRM had difficulties to approach civilians in Kasika. The representatives of ex-combatants have warned RAs that civilians are possibly reluctant to work with CRM. Besides unpredictable incidents and volatile circumstances, JNg, and CRM experience had indicated that I would possibly encounter this challenge due to 1998 Kasika’s massacre.²⁵ However, I was curious and eager to visit the region; otherwise, it would have been a form of “dumping fieldwork” (Schroeder et al., 2018).

During an interview, an ex-combatant nicknamed Ilde²⁶ recalled how the Kasika population were butchered by rebels in 1998. “Killers of Kasika were Tutsi,” he expressed. I asked him what he thinks would be the impression of locals in front of a “Tutsi.” He once laughed and then replied “you see; you, native of Minembwe look like Banyamulenge. And Munyamulenge (singular of Banyamulenge) is a Congolese, you see. People here have seen Tutsi’s faces; these were tall faces . . . Then, whenever they see someone who look like them, they can think that he/she is doing “politics,” or something like that . . .” (translated from Swahili). Nonetheless, Ilde stressed that there is limited danger when someone has openly cleared his mission. Otherwise, people can still whisper to one another and consider that a visitor is hiding something. The description of Banyamulenge-Tutsi by the interviewee showed that a researcher can be amalgamated with an “intruder” based on his socio-cultural affiliation.

Conclusion

The article recapitulates field research's experience of a native researcher affiliated to a contested ethnic community. In an ethnically polarized context coupled with security volatility, a native researcher can easily be mischaracterized and amalgamated to his own ethnic community. The article suggests that being a "contested native researcher" adds emotional pressure to existing stresses of undertaking a field research within the volatile context such as the Eastern DRC. Besides reflecting on regular and common encounters, in many cases a contested native researcher is required to hold his nerve. Building on fieldnotes and field research experience, the article gives some insights that might mitigate these concerns. Mitigating these concerns helps to tackle the dilemma between passion to touch the ground realities and the need to cope with specific security challenges. While it is unlikely to anticipate all disruptions in conflict zones, the article suggests some attitudes and measures that can attenuate risks.

In a first place, a contested research needs to strictly comply with administrative requirements to undertake a field research. Flexibility and reliance on networks can create entries within the socio-political setting characterized by bureaucracies and ethnically-based distrust. Obtaining a research permit from top level institutions might help to circumventing bureaucratic encounters. A researcher needs to be consistent in relation to his work; keep a simple, clear, and similar message of his purpose. Due to technology developments in communication, a contested researcher must be aware that minor inconsistencies can create suspicion but also security risks (Sluka, 1995, p. 285). The consistency dilutes speculative interpretations when local population are curiously chatting over the researcher. The article suggests that in a volatile setting which might involve kidnapping, a researcher needs to specifically dress down (Belousov et al., 2007, p. 168); avoid an attitude that attracts attention (Sluka, 1995, p. 282, Cronin-furman & Lake, 2018). I had on my way to Ruzizi Plain or Masisi, implicitly admitted being a cattle herder before familiarizing with a motorcyclist. Following the colonial legacy categorizing cattle herders and agricultural farmers (Lemarchand, 2013; Sanders, 1969), first impression of locals would see me as cattle breeder. Moreover, a researcher needs to carry only necessary in light bags.

Furthermore, the mode of transport is key when undertaking field research in conflict zones. Apart from playing a low profile, it is advisable to use unobtrusive means of transport. In remote localities of the Eastern DRC, a motorcycle transport is sometimes affordable, pragmatic, and used by ordinary passengers. Additionally, an effort to discuss the price of the transport makes a researcher looking ordinarily. Lowering the price is locally viewed as an expression of familiarity and modesty. Whether a researcher uses any transport means, the time of traveling is of importance. His agenda should be shared with limited and trusted individuals. The researcher's safety depends on the screening of information around him. Moreover, researcher's security involves his digital devices (smartphone, digital recorder, or digital camera) which must be off

and only used when needed. Owing digital devices implies privileged status and might be a source of insecurity.

As Cronin-furman and Lake (2018) indicate, one of the strategies to access volatile fieldwork is building trusted networks that can facilitate connection with locals and minimizes risks. Building networks ahead with local populations helps to break polarization's barriers. For instance, having contributed to support in paying schools fees to four secondary students in one of the territories visited has facilitated an easy entry. Networking with influential religious leader even made the RAs feel that this was one of the places where they were mostly welcomed. Otherwise, it would have been uneasy.²⁷ In addition, knowledge of religious practices and biblical verses, which are part of Congolese culture can also break some barriers. Commonly, discussions in DRC keep referring to the bible or at least to Congolese musicians. In one of the localities visited, I inadvertently entered a debate about who might biblically be a role model pastor.²⁸ As the debate was going on, one could refer to X biblical verse and I to another one. From the debate, passengers started to enquire about my status. As we get familiarized, one of them helped finding an accommodation while it was somehow late in the evening. Hence, understanding social beliefs and languages are part of familiarizing with local culture. Both attributes can help to navigate between outsider-insider. While she had language's barriers when doing her field research in Rwanda, Chakravarty (2012, p. 259) reveals how "accidentally accessed findings" contributed to her research. Thus, languages and informal settings can be as source of research data to validate the existing ones.

Loyle (2016), and Cronin-furman and Lake (2018) argue that a researcher must regularly assess the situation; follow and listen to updated news. The article suggests that there are always unintended events regardless of how good a researcher can anticipate. Therefore, expressing one's fear or emotional pressure might in turn lead to unintended consequences. An ideal attitude is to keep calm, check around what others are doing and then consider what to do. In line with Loyle (2016), and Narayan (1993), the article suggests that researcher needs to be perceptive, pay attention to different stories, and avoid frustrating interlocutors for building trust.

In a broader sense, the article draws that discrimination is complex and fluid. It hinders a researcher to safely undertake her research. The hindrance has an implication in the future as it may affect a distinctive group. Consequently, one might fail to research in such volatile contexts for fearing his security while this failure undermines the future. A Knowledgeable University professor in Bukavu told me that within the academia, the Banyamulenge are considered "illiterate" and mostly "warriors."²⁹ He stressed that the Banyamulenge are absent in many of academic debates discussing their situation. I argue that, one of the challenges to embrace academic carriers in Congo is linked to their discrimination. Therefore, the article opens such complex debate around socio-cultural discrimination and its impacts within the academia.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

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- Discussions with SSJ, The Hague July 5, 2018 and with MS The Hague, July 12, 2018. SSJ is an Assistant Professor within the Erasmus University Rotterdam who has extensively worked on Sri Lanka while MS affiliated to The Hague Institute for Economics and Peace with an experience of working with the African Great Lakes Region.
- Thanks to INK, Hka, Ema, CRM, Emu, JNg, ENz, ESh, Sha, CSe, NBo, LBK, GBS, EWS, SNM who have contributed as RAs during the data collection and transcription. For privacy reasons, names are shortened.
- The author acknowledges Peter de Valk's contribution that helped to improve the article's discussion.
- Within the explanatory sequential design model, triangulation is conceptualized as the process of connecting quantitative findings to qualitative results in a sense of reintegrating insights from both methods (see details in Creswell & Creswell, (2018, p. 222) and Fetters and Molina-Azorin (2017, p. 7).
- Throughout the discussion in this article, insider or native concepts will be interchangeably used.
- The commonly used saying in Lingala, one of the Congolese national languages mostly used by the security services means that "something little dear" or "even cheaper water."
- Walikale: Interview with an Ex-combatant Jeannot (nickname) on 28th February 2019.
- Discussion with UEPNDDR coordinator, January 17, 2019, Goma.
- Discussion and email exchange with UEPNDDR Statistician, February 3, 2019, Goma.
- Bweramana is westward of Goma City and at the border of North-Kivu and South-Kivu Provinces. The visit took place on 3rd December 2018.
- Informal discussion with close relatives in Goma, 21st February 2019.
- Discussion with a military senior within the national army, May 5, 2019, Mwenga.
- A village chief, Kawaza Nyakwana was killed on 4th May 2019 in Fizi territory, precisely in Mikalati by Gumino's commander. Whilst the victim belongs to Banyindu, dominating the region I was visiting, Gumino is an armed group affiliated to my ethnic community. On 4th May afternoon, I traveled to visit a region having similar socio-cultural setting as the region where Kawaza was killed. Hence, I could have been caught in; so long as reprisals do not take personal responsibility.
- Interview with, May 5, 2019, Mwenga/South Kivu.
- Our discussion with Emma was in Kiswahili. Here is my interpretation in English.
- Rutshuru Centre and Kiwanja are closer agglomerations of the Rutshuru territory at around 70 kms from Goma, the North-Kivu capital city.
- Informal discussion with a motorcyclist, February 11, 2019, Kiwanja-Nyamilima/North Kivu.
- It happened around 5 PM on 6th April 2019 and recalled a horrific incident that took place in same locality.
- Though yet discriminated against, Banyamulenge military officers are deployed across DRC. The localities cited are among those visited during the field research.
- Afande* means military commander in Tanzanian Swahili that has been exported in Congo during the last decades of insurgencies supported by Rwanda and Uganda.
- The visit took place on 11 April 2019. It is worth noting that 120 Kms from Uvira to Misisi, there are at least 20 checkpoints. At each checkpoint, passengers must pay at least a half dollar (1000 FC: Congolese currency).
- Informal discussion with Captain Amuli, April 12, 2019, Lulimba/South Kivu.
- Informal discussion with Walikale Territorial Administrator, February 27, 2019, Walikale/North-Kivu.
- See details of the Kasika's massacre in Stearns (2011), and Ntanyoma (2014). While the massacre was committed by a rebel group, Banyamulenge and Tutsi are locally considered as the killers.
- Interview with Ilde, Kasika 5th May 2020.
- Discussion and report of Fizi territory from RAs, CRM & JNg, April 20, 2019, Bukavu.
- Informal discussion within a public transport toward Mwenga/South Kivu, April 4, 2019.
- Interview with BMu, November 23, 2018, Bukavu/South Kivu.

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