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**A Field Full of Researchers.
Fieldwork as a Collective Experience**

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This paper is dedicated to the “Kano Mafia”, to our landlord Alhaji Aminu Sharif Bappa, his wife Hajiya Yelwa, and to all our neighbors at Sabuwar K’ofa.
Allah ya saka da alheri.

A Field Full of Researchers. Fieldwork as a Collective Experience¹

Katja Werthmann²

“No anthropologist has ever uttered, at the start of his career, ‘fieldwork be dashed, to the library I belong’”³.

The myth of the lone fieldworker

The idea – or myth – of fieldwork as a rite of passage is probably more pronounced in anthropology than in any other discipline⁴. The fieldworker leaves his or her familiar environment and undergoes a transformation by accumulating specific knowledge, thus eventually achieving higher status. In spite of a growing number of confessional accounts about the actual importance of relationships with assistants and key informants⁵, fieldwork appears as a solitary endeavor. According to several volumes about fieldwork that have appeared since the “Writing Culture” debate⁶, fieldwork is still represented as a one-person project, designed to meet Malinowski’s classical demand of immersion in the world of the studied group⁷. The conceptualization of fieldwork as “self-sacrifice”⁸ or “art”⁹, or the term “epiphany”¹⁰ for moments of sudden insight in a field situation add to the mystification of the work of anthropologists. This paper points out that fieldwork may actually be a much more collective experience.

The Hausa areas in West Africa have long been the focus of numerous research projects. Consequently, I half expected to meet some other researchers when I came to the city of Kano in northern Nigeria to conduct fieldwork about Hausa-speaking Muslim women in 1992. However, I was not prepared to find myself in the company of no less than twenty researchers and students from three continents and several disciplines (including history, linguistics, anthropology, and psychology) whose fieldwork periods between 1992 and 1994 overlapped with my own¹¹ and who were

¹ A version of this paper was originally written for a plenary session about “The Futures of Ethnography” at the 1998 EASA conference in Frankfurt/Main. In the preparation of the paper, I sent out some questions to my former fellow researchers by e-mail. I thank Douglas Anthony, Jan-Patrick Heiß, Alaine Hutson, Matthias Krings, and Brian Larkin for their answers.

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³ Wengle 1988: 6.

⁴ Cf. Fischer 2002, Kohl 1986, Lindner 1984, Stagl 1981, 2002, Wengle 1988, Gupta/Ferguson 1997.

⁵ Casagrande 1960, Cesara 1982, Kulick/Willson 1995; see also Gupta/Ferguson 1997, 23.

⁶ For instance see Agar 1996, Devereux/Hoddinott 1992, Jackson 1987, Jackson/Ives 1996, Kulick/Willson 1995, Okely/Callaway 1992, Smith/Kornblum 1996, Wolcott 1995.

⁷ As James Clifford pointed out: “The licensing function of having done ‘real’ fieldwork – intensive and displaced from university – remains strong” (Clifford 1997: 210). See also Stagl 2002.

⁸ Wengle 1988: 169.

⁹ Wolcott 1995.

¹⁰ Jackson/Ives 1995: xi .

¹¹ I stayed in Kano for sixteen months in 1992 and 1993, and again one month in 1994. Before that, I had attended a Hausa language course of two months at Bayero University Kano in 1990, and spent one month in

staying in the same neighborhood in the Old City. Even if there were some months when only one of us was there, often there would be at least two or three researchers around, plus relatives and friends who came to visit, or researchers who worked in other northern Nigerian locations and were passing through¹². Moreover, some senior colleagues as well as local academics visited us and inquired about our work. The notion of fieldwork as a solitary endeavor with which I came to Kano became absurd in such a setting.

Looking back on this experience, I will try to highlight some issues that affected most of us, and probably many other researchers: the difficulty of finding a research topic in an already thoroughly studied area, the relationships with local research partners, the encounters with senior colleagues and local academics, and the advantages and disadvantages of the co-presence of other fieldworkers who pursued different, but sometimes related research topics.

The field: Kano city

For centuries, Kano has been an important centre for trade and Islamic education and has thus always attracted foreigners. Today, Kano is the largest city of northern Nigeria with about two million inhabitants. The wall surrounding the Old City, although today only existing in fragments, still presents not only a physical but also a cultural barrier between the predominantly Muslim quarters and the more recently built parts of the city. Many inhabitants of the Old City never venture into areas where non-Muslims and non-Nigerians settle, and many Kano citizens such as southern Nigerians, Europeans, Indians or Lebanese have never set foot into the Old City.

The quarter where we stayed is located inside the Old City, close to the city wall and right next to one of the gates, Sabuwar K'ofa. Although located inside the city wall, the area had not been settled until the 1940s and 1950s. Nowadays, the neighborhood is conveniently located along the road that connects the city centre with the university, and along the road to the centre of the Old City, the Emir's palace and institutions like the Gidan Makama Museum and the British Council.

Today, there are three houses in the neighborhood that for a long time have been used to accommodate students and researchers from North America and Canada, Great Britain, Germany, and other countries. They come to stay from anything between two weeks and several years. Once someone asked why all these people were coming to Kano and not to some other Nigerian city. This was mainly due to the fact that several researchers had been to Kano before as participants of Hausa language courses and had then established contacts and chosen a research topic. Certainly, Kano had also been

Kano in 1991 in order to renew contacts and apply for a research permit. I thank Constanze Schmaling for letting me stay in "her" house.

¹² Among others members of the Special Research Project "West African Savannah" at the University of Frankfurt/Main who were based in Maiduguri, including my husband Holger Kirscht.

chosen because it is the largest urban centre in northern Nigeria, offering the whole range of infrastructure like airport, telephones, hospitals, the university and other research institutions, bookshops and so forth. Of course, research in other urban centers or in rural areas of northern Nigeria had been carried out before by colleagues, and some of the Kano researchers frequently traveled to northern Nigerian cities such as Kaduna to work in the National Archives and the Arewa House, or to the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria.

Relationships with neighbors were mostly cordial. Since there was already a tradition of accommodating foreign researchers in the neighborhood, our presence did not evoke serious irritations: “It was nice to know there was a safe place to live where people would not be totally disturbed and unfamiliar and hostile to Americans and Europeans” (Alaine Hutson). However, our apparent material wealth did cause some envy, and minor cases of attempted or completed theft occurred. Some of our neighbors became friends and visited us or – in the case of secluded women – were visited by us. Children frequently sneaked into our courtyards, and some boys were earning a little money by running errands for us. There was a group of young unmarried men who used to hang around in front of one of the houses. Some of them became assistants or friends of individual researchers. Many neighbors probably appreciated the presence of foreign researchers because it provided access to knowledge about the wider world as well as good entertainment. In any case, both foreigners and local inhabitants did learn a lot about each other.

Although our neighbors were tolerant about having foreign researchers around, they were not so indulgent concerning some of our research subjects. When one researcher who worked about the *bori* spirit possession cult wanted to organize a dance session in our neighborhood as part of his farewell celebration, some neighbors intervened, and eventually our landlord asked him to find another location for the event outside the neighborhood. The *bori* cult and its adepts are often associated with socially marginalized groups and “un-Islamic” behavior, and the presence of cult mediums in our neighborhood caused discomfort among some local people (as well as among some researchers).

In Hausa society, the religiously defined segregation of the sexes is very pronounced. Most people did not really understand how male and female researchers could share houses without being married or related to one another. Although we were not judged by the same standards as Kano inhabitants, our neighbors remained curious or even distrustful about our social and sexual relationships. The tensions that arose from our presence became especially evident in the case of one young man who suffered from a nervous breakdown after having physically attacked a German woman. Although he later explained that he had been furious because he was refused marriage to a Hausa girl just before this incident, it was clear that his relationships with foreign women had been ambiguous for years.

A home away from home

According to a common warning concerning fieldwork in small communities, the researcher may not be able to maintain the kind of privacy he or she is used to. Finding oneself in a situation where privacy is not curtailed by the members of the studied group but by colleagues with whom one happens to share a house came as a mild irritation. The presence of so many foreigners in the same neighborhood and sharing houses with people one had not known before was both a chance and a challenge. Having people from a similar cultural background around provided opportunities to help and being helped, to gossip about mutual acquaintances, to talk about the absurdities of Nigerian bureaucracy, or to simply take a break and go to a restaurant or a club. In addition, “the constant coming and going of other foreigners who were attracted to our enclave because we were so many helped in communicating with those at home, advisors as well as friends and family. It also better ensured that important and/or sensitive material could be sent home” (Alaine Hutson).

In fact, one of the main obstacles to doing serious research and learning Hausa was the inclination to “skip” fieldwork and instead socialize with fellow researchers. On the other hand, seeing the progress of other people’s work could spur on one’s own efforts. In any case, this community of foreign researchers provided a sense of “home away from home”.

Some of us got along very well and formed lasting friendships. I became especially close with the historian Alaine Hutson who also worked about women. We frequently compared and discussed our findings as well as our encounters with northern Nigerian elite women. Often it was only during such conversations that we found out who was actually related to whom, or who was active not only in one, but also in another domain that either Alaine or me – or some other researcher – had explored. We also discussed with male researchers whose work bordered on gender issues, but who did not have access to many realms of female life in Kano due to gender segregation.

Research topics, assistants, and institutions

The research topics of my fellow fieldworkers were as diverse as, for instance, traditional iron smelting, post-colonial politics, cultural concepts of mental health, female members of Sufi orders, and Hausa novels and video films. Since we were all affiliated to the Bayero University Kano (BUK) and/or the Kano State History and Culture Bureau, some amount of cross-cutting did nevertheless occur. Some of us were advised by or worked with the same university members, research assistants, or informants. Being in the company of so many other researchers could diminish the sense of adventure, but also reduce frustration: “When things were going slowly, it was nice to know it happened to others” (Alaine Hutson).

My original research proposal shared the fate of many anticipated anthropological

projects: it did not work out. I had planned to conduct research about Muslim Hausa women and Western education, a topic that had been studied before in Kano by the American political scientist Barbara Callaway¹³. For several reasons this project failed, one reason being the closure of schools and universities due to political disturbances. Another reason was the more or less openly articulated distrust towards me and my project. Those women academics who knew about or had read Callaway's book felt that she had not understood and consequently misrepresented the significance of Islamic religious belief for northern Nigerian women. After some months, it was clear that I had to find another topic, and so I turned to explore the lives of women in our neighborhood in the Old City of Kano, some of whom I had already come to know through greetings and visits.

The fieldwork followed an "urban village" approach in the sense of studying a socially and spatially delimited locality within a wider urban context. Rejecting the concept of "Hausa" as an ethnic category, some researchers before me had introduced the term "Kano women", referring to the location rather than to the ethnic or linguistic background of their research subjects.

In an edited volume that had appeared shortly before I started my research, the editors asserted that "... female solidarity and a common class identification have not emerged among most Hausa women."¹⁴ During my research I found that a common "class" identification had in fact developed among the women in the police barracks (*bariki*) in our neighborhood. *Bariki* is an ambivalent term, indicating modernity and "Westernization" in a derogatory sense. Although *matan bariki* – "the women of the barracks" – is synonymous with "prostitutes" for many Hausa speakers, the secluded wives of policemen living in this housing estate used it as a self-designation. For them it signified membership of a modern, well-to-do urban middle-class, thus playing down the actual impoverishment and bad reputation of their neighborhood. However, this concept of identity and status was as fragile as the social relationships in the lives of these women. My book¹⁵ describes the everyday world and the social relationships of these women and analyzes the significance of the ideology of wife seclusion and the construction of a distinct collective identity by appropriating the designation *matan bariki*.

Choosing a topic was difficult to begin with. As in many other thoroughly researched areas in Africa, it seemed everything had already been observed, described, and re-studied in northern Nigeria. All our projects referred to previous studies by Nigerian or foreign researchers. The latter had established a tradition of foreigners residing in the Old City of Kano and had thus contributed to our being accepted more easily. "People had a better idea of what it was we did and how to help, and that helping us was not participating in something sinister" (Alaine Hutson). During our stay in Kano, several established colleagues and "forerunners" in our respective fields turned up. Apart from

¹³ Callaway 1987, see also Werthmann 2000.

¹⁴ Coles/Mack 1991: 15.

¹⁵ Werthmann 1997, see also Werthmann 2002.

two historians who had been living Kano for more than twenty years, there were others who came for follow-up studies or for regular visits. Meeting prominent scholars whom one had only known through their writings before caused excitement as well as anxiety. Being asked about the outline and the progress of one's research while undergoing a phase of acute frustration and insecurity could be rather awkward. However, any comment on our work was welcome because it helped to clarify questions, to structure thoughts or to defend a particular approach.

One important aspect of fieldwork was the sometimes painful discrepancy between our own career options and those of our research partners. Some of my colleagues collaborated with interpreters or assistants who were often crucial for gaining access to particular groups or persons¹⁶, such as a young man from our neighborhood who was a law student. "This is where the lone field worker myth really ends because people are often dependent on research assistants for a variety of reasons" (Brian Larkin). His comprehension of different research projects and his capacity for not only linguistic but also cultural translation made him an invaluable research partner. However, the profits he gained from these fieldwork enterprises were not equivalent to ours: "Our material lives have changed here mostly for the better, his has gotten worse. He earned his first degree as we were earning our third, but he did not reap any rewards for it. And with our absence his material life eroded without a research assistance's wages coming in and the benefit of sharing at times in our lifestyle" (Alaine Hutson). Moreover, his privileged access to the foreigners aroused his friends' envy, and exaggerated details about what he had been given by the foreigners circulated (e.g. a car, which he had actually bought from one of the researchers).

The relationships with Nigerian university members often required diplomatic skills. To be sure, there were university members as well as members of the Kano State History and Culture Bureau who went out of their way in order to support our projects. But given the discrepancy between the financial situation of Nigerian universities due to the declining economy and the resources we had at our disposal – which often were imagined much larger than they actually were – it was probably not surprising that some people tried to secure a share of these funds against official regulations. Several foreign researchers also experienced being lectured or reprimanded by local academics because they had allegedly not read the relevant literature, not written an adequate proposal, or not talked to the right people. In retrospect it is difficult to assess whether this was due to different notions of research due to different national academic "traditions"¹⁷, or because some university members felt disturbed or threatened by our presence and reacted with unfair criticism.

Sharing the field with so many others did not mean, of course, that we did not struggle individually with the usual difficulties inherent to fieldwork: adapting to the climate

¹⁶ I did not work with assistants during most of my stay, but in the beginning Mariam Mansur Yola at Bayero University Kano helped me to improve my Hausa. She also introduced me to some institutions and persons. So did Zainab Gwadabe from the Kano State History and Culture Bureau, who in addition helped me with the transcription of interviews with female students. I am grateful to both of them for their support.

¹⁷ Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 27.

and food habits, getting to know people and places, learning the language and appropriate behavior, conducting interviews, digging into archives, suffering from malaria and homesickness, keeping up with writing field notes etc. – and being frustrated by perceived failures in doing all these things.

Within our group (or the “Kano Mafia”, as we called ourselves), we rarely systematically compared our projects, but we constantly exchanged bits and pieces of information. This created a shared “sediment of common knowledge” (Matthias Krings) about northern Nigeria in general and about Kano in particular that would not have been as comprehensive had we been there individually. I can only speak for myself, but the company of so many other researchers greatly expanded my horizon and my interpretation of things I learned about Kano. Otherwise I would have known much less about, say, interethnic relations, or women in Sufi orders, or Hausa novel writers’ associations, or about gender issues in realms to which I personally had no access, such as the *bori* cult or the world of men who act and speak like women (*yan daudu*) etc. Even if this kind of information was not always directly relevant for my particular sub-field, it certainly helped to put my own findings in a broader perspective and to check misconceptions.

Fieldwork: collective approaches

What I have outlined so far pertains to a number of issues that have to be tackled by anthropologists at the beginning of the 21st century, among others:

- Selecting a research topic in already thoroughly studied areas
- Evaluating and acknowledging the crucial role of assistants and key persons
- Responding to local academics who might question the relevance of our projects or our capacity to gain insight

Although the co-presence of so many researchers in one particular field was unexpected for most of us, it is – I think – by now a rather common phenomenon.¹⁸ Fieldworkers today rarely study whole societies (or “cultures”) any more. They are much more likely to select a specific topic or a region in a wider area of interest that has already been explored by local or foreign predecessors. This is especially evident with regard to urban studies, but even in some remote rural areas it becomes less and less likely to be the first stranger who has come to study a local community, or to remain the only one.

Nevertheless, the image of the lone fieldworker was reproduced in the written accounts of our fieldwork. Although I did not have access to all dissertations that were produced by our cohort, I assume that the same holds true for most of them: our peculiar research situation is not mentioned. The co-presence of other researchers is relegated to the acknowledgements and to footnotes containing “personal communications”.

¹⁸ Cf. Glazier 1993: 47.

This is mainly due to two reasons: first, although we stayed in the same neighborhood and shared some information as well as teachers, informants and other resources, we all conducted our individual projects that were only partially overlapping. Second, given the standards of dissertation writing, it did not appear wise to mention the co-presence of so many other researchers. It seems we all felt the need to emphasize the originality of our fieldwork, which, of course, is fully justified by the resulting theses and publications¹⁹.

The collective experience of doing fieldwork in Kano was incidental – and very stimulating. After I had finished my doctoral dissertation, I was again in a field situation where I was not a lone fieldworker, this time due to a different setup. From 1997 to 2002 I was involved in a multidisciplinary research program at the university of Frankfurt/Main as part of a team that studied the settlement history, land rights, and interethnic relations in South-western Burkina Faso. Several colonial officers, missionaries, and researchers from different disciplines had already conducted fieldwork there since the beginning of the 20th century. Moreover, the region is characterized by decades of intervention by international development organizations. In addition, several anthropologists, historians and linguists who originated from this area have written voluminous theses about it. Being in competition among themselves, they were not entirely pleased about the arrival of a group of foreign researchers who descended on “their” field. It is especially in settings like these where one can expect to work with professional informants, interpreters and “gate keepers”²⁰ who might actively control access to – or exclusion from – sources of information, depending on the perceived interests, status, or economic resources of the fieldworker.

In contrast with fieldwork in Kano, the Frankfurt project was an organized team research. Of course, team research is not a recent invention. In West Africa, the most famous examples are the research “missions” directed by Marcel Griaule between the 1930s and 1950s. Perhaps less well known in the Anglophone and Francophone world are the expeditions to various African countries led by Leo Frobenius between 1904 and 1933²¹. These expeditions, however, were rather hierarchically organized and more or less determined by the colonial situation. Thus, they were different from present-day projects that are conditioned on cooperation with African partners and subject to regulations by African academic institutions. In the case of the multidisciplinary project about the West African Savannah at the university of Frankfurt/Main that lasted from 1988 and 2002, partnerships with universities in Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Benin were institutionalized, and research teams included both African and German researchers, as well as doctoral candidates and students. Although some difficulties and misunderstandings between Africans and Germans in the course of this project were unavoidable, it proved to be a success both in terms of multidisciplinary cooperation and output²².

¹⁹ For some of the results, see the list of dissertations at the end of the paper.

²⁰ Lindner 1984: 69, n. 40.

²¹ <http://www.frobenius-institut.de/>

²² See Albert, Löhr and Neumann 2003.

Team research is now being used both as a distinct methodological approach and for the supervised training of students. One specific approach that has been applied by African-European teams of researchers and students in Africa is ECRIS (*Enquête collective rapide d'identification des conflits et des groupes stratégiques*), a “collective method of data collection for the rapid identification of social groups and strategic groups”, developed by Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1998). Team-oriented approaches such as these structure an initial phase of exploration during which themes for subsequent individual research are specified. At the same time, they provide a framework for comparison and theorizing.

Team research may have some distinct advantages vis-à-vis individual fieldwork, among others:

- The reduction of culture shock and other irritations
- The consideration of aspects that could not be pursued or even perceived by an individual researcher
- Effective research in spite of time constraints
- The opportunity to discuss central aspects of one's work at an early stage etc.

However, team research cannot replace individual fieldwork. Individual research in face-to-face situations remains one of the crucial features of anthropological fieldwork. Depending on the topic or the study area, team research may even be inappropriate or impossible. Nevertheless, every individual research project is part of a wider framework of people, institutions, theories, methods and topics, and we still have to go a long way to improve communication, exchange, and training, both within our respective academic communities as with our partners in African institutions and in the field.

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