



# The Ambivalent Insider/ Outsider Status of Academic 'Homecomers': Observations on Identity and Field Research in the Nigerian Delta

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## Abstract

This research note draws attention to the play of a researcher's identity during a summer's worth of research conducted in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Focus is particularly directed at the position of 'academic homecomers', and the various ways in which different forms of their identity and 'insiderness' can structure research.

## Keywords

homecomers, insider/outsider, political ethnography, qualitative research

The Nigerian soldier's machine gun was aimed at my head as he interrogated us about the travels of our small group. I informed him a professor from the Niger Delta University had sent us to the Agge community for a visit. That was not a lie, but it was also not entirely true, and the specifics would not hold up under intensified scrutiny. The soldier was unimpressed, and steadied his weapon. At least three other soldiers maintained combat positions. It could be all over in a few seconds. I recalled the question asked by the daughter of Agge's paramount chief, an undergraduate university student who accompanied us to her community: 'Does a PhD have to be so hard?' I smiled nervously at the thought, which turned out to be a profound mistake. My smile enraged the soldier who believed he was being mocked.

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That I have been able to write this research note is evidence that this encounter did not end in tragedy. However, as I detail below, our salvation arrived in an unexpected form and spoke to broader issues pertaining to the play of multiple forms of identity in field research.

This research note considers a summer's worth of research conducted in 2009 in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Returning to my native Nigeria after nearly four years of academic sojourn in Canada, I found myself caught in the peripatetic liminality of being unsure of how to position myself – and the implications of how I was being positioned by others. I use my experiences to explicate some of the pragmatic issues that can arise in conducting what has been referred to as 'political ethnography' (see Howell, 1990; Schwedler, 2006). Beyond established sociological readers, I believe that this account will be particularly appealing to a growing subset of scholars who I call 'academic homecomers'. These are individuals who left home to pursue graduate education in the West, with an eye to returning to their country of origin to conduct research or start an academic career.

It is timely to contemplate such academic subject positions as there is now a steady stream of international students eager to secure both the training and cultural capital that can come with graduate education in the global North. Many universities eagerly admit such students because they add to the intellectual incandescence of the university, and also represent a lucrative revenue stream. The upshot is that international students now comprise a significant proportion of graduate school enrolments. In Canada, for example, in 2004/05 almost one quarter of all doctoral graduates were foreign or visa students (Statistics Canada, 2008).

In what follows I first provide a brief overview of the Niger Delta, emphasizing both its political economy and cultural diversity. I then turn to the main focus of the discussion which is on how I was positioned and how this served to shape my research experience and the types of data that I could collect.

This research note is a collaborative exercise, written jointly by a senior PhD student (Oriola) and his supervisor (Haggerty). Both individuals played assorted roles in the story we detail below. However, as it is Oriola's experiences that best connect the narrative, we use the first person throughout to refer to him.

## **The Niger Delta**

Nigeria is a study in complexity. It contains at least 252 identifiable ethnic groups speaking over 400 languages (Mensah, 2005: 73). Many religions are practised here, including Christianity, Islam and an abundance of African Traditional Religions, further heightening the remarkable diversity. The Niger Delta region exemplifies this diversity. Geographically, the Delta is suffused with waterways, and comprises 12 per cent of Nigeria's land mass. The Delta region covers 112,110 km<sup>2</sup>, making it slightly larger than both Britain and the state of Nevada. Here, 31 million people reside, divided into roughly 40 ethnic groups living in 13,329 settlements and speaking over 250 languages and dialects (Watts, 2008).

A chequered history has brought inexperienced military officers to power, meaning that the country's current ostensible 'democratic' regime leaves much to be desired.

Joseph (1987) describes the *modus operandi* of the Nigerian state as entailing a form of 'prebendal politics'. Here, the state is the 'main reservoir of financial resources' and a central role is played by strong but often corrupt patronage networks. In Nigeria, kinship can be the difference between success and failure in a myriad of ventures, including academic research.

Nigeria, as it is currently constituted, would not exist without crude oil from the Delta, which accounts for about 96 per cent of all foreign earnings and 85 per cent of state revenues (Oyefusi, 2008; Watts, 2008). In a country that makes at least US\$1.5 billion every week from crude oil sales (Watts, 2008), the Delta region remains one of the poorest and most marginalized in Nigeria's political structure (Oyefusi, 2008). The Delta has recently attracted worldwide attention because of the recurrent kidnapping of foreign oil workers, vandalism of oil pipelines and offshore and onshore rigs.

My research focus was on these kidnappings, and specifically sought to understand such activities as residing at the contested intersection of criminal expropriation and legitimate political protest. To do so, I travelled to Nigeria and spent time with and interviewed members of various groups in the Niger Delta, including community members, political activists, and members of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the group allegedly spearheading the kidnappings.

## Identity in Process

Beyond my scholarly ambitions, this trip was also a homecoming. Born and raised in Nigeria's Abeokuta Ogun state (South West), I had not been back for almost four years. I am a member of the Yoruba ethnic group, one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria (the others are Hausa-Fulani and Igbo). As it would turn out, several aspects of my biography and ethnicity proved to be consequential to my subsequent PhD research, including securing ethics clearance, research access and occasionally my personal welfare.

From the outset, I had been cautioned that it might be difficult to obtain ethics approval for my project. I found it interesting to wait for a Canadian committee to pass judgment on the risks I was apt to experience in my home country, something that was compounded by my knowledge that the ethics board was comprised of individuals who had never visited Nigeria and who could not distinguish a Hausa-Fulani from an Igbo.

As it turned out, it was my own national identity which proved to be a decisive factor in my negotiations with the research ethics committee. To ease their various anxieties, I repeatedly stressed my cultural belonging, pointing out that as a native Nigerian I am intimately familiar with local habits, routines and risks, and that such knowledge would go a long way to ensure my safety and that of my participants. And while I was certain that my Nigerian background would (and often did) serve me well, the field research also demonstrated the difficulties of such straightforward appeals to fellowship in a country like Nigeria which contains so many diverse cultural, linguistic and religious groups, making it difficult for anyone to unambiguously 'belong'.

## Familial Connections and ‘Prebendalism’

Returning to Nigeria immediately reminded me of the complexities of identity. Here, being ‘Nigerian’ can be significant, but it provides little discriminatory power. Instead, one must negotiate myriad identity markers pertaining to language, religion and kinship, all of which often speak to one’s class position. Such networks repeatedly positioned me during my fieldwork. That is not to say that I was necessarily pleased or comfortable with this situation, but I had little or no control over the fact that I, and everyone else, is identified by, and related to, in light of, such markers (Jenkins, 2000). Sometimes I worked this to my advantage, while other times it foreclosed opportunities.

A positive example pertained to the fact that one of my family members holds a pivotal position on the editorial board of a major daily newspaper. He therefore helped me collect otherwise difficult to obtain newspaper data on the conflicts in the Delta. Such personal contacts were also instrumental in securing help from my gatekeeper, who I will refer to as the pseudonymous ‘Mr Tamunosaki’. Mr Tamunosaki was a senior politician who had served in various capacities in the Niger Delta. He was kind and extremely generous with his time. He also provided me with accommodation, meals, a vehicle, and a chauffeur, all at no cost.

Perhaps most instrumental to furthering my research was the fact that his business card travelled quickly within the bureaucracy. He introduced me to vital contacts and helped to secure access to other institutions. Because of his connections I met the police commissioner within 30 minutes of arriving at Bayelsa state police headquarters – no mean achievement. The police also provided me with official data about arrests in the Delta only three days after I requested this information. Simply being able to obtain those data was unexpected, and the speed with which they materialized was unprecedented. This undoubtedly would not have happened without Mr Tamunosaki’s influence.

Such generosity was particularly noteworthy given that my initial connection with Mr Tamunosaki was extremely tangential. Essentially, I knew him only because he had met my cousin on an airplane and started up a conversation that mentioned my research. The degree of assistance that he provided on the basis of such a tenuous relationship further reinforces the centrality of extended ‘familial’ connections in Nigeria’s political and social structure. Indeed, at one point while we were negotiating the delicate act of securing research access to the military, my cousin introduced me to a Nigerian general, who in turn arranged a meeting with another senior general, who now introduced me as *his* (the general’s) ‘cousin’. I was able to parlay these connections into what would have otherwise been unobtainable interviews with a representative of the JTF – the Nigerian military unit responsible for dealing with the insurgency in the Niger Delta.

## Ethnic Belonging and Difference

Beyond extended family connections, I was also positioned by the related dynamics of ethnicity and language. Identifying as ‘Nigerian’ was not always sufficient to secure the trust and cooperation of my informants. Instead, I had to situate myself in the economy of subnational and ethnic sentiments.

One memorable moment when my being Nigerian was beneficial came when I was securing research access to the military. An officer at army headquarters assured me that:

There are things you will see that you cannot write about. The Niger Delta crisis is still on-going. There is very little we can tell you at the moment, just like the US will not tell you everything going on in Afghanistan.

He made it explicit that he believed that as a Nigerian citizen he trusted that I would not report on things that would jeopardize Nigeria's national interests. The surprising upshot was that I did not have to sign any confidentiality agreements or have my work officially vetted, as it was believed that I could be trusted simply by virtue of being Nigerian. Leaving aside the question of whether or not such trust was well placed, and the fact that his evaluation was undoubtedly informed by a more complicated weighing of assorted attributes of my identity, such trust undeniably would not have been extended to a foreigner.

Typically, a series of more nuanced subnational ethnic and linguistic distinctions were at play. Particularly important was my Yoruba ethnic background, which took on heightened significance as both a mark of belonging and sign of distrust (Gill, 2004). For instance, when my gatekeeper, Mr Tamunosaki, introduced me to friends or contacts he typically said: 'Meet my friend, Mr Oriola, a PhD student from Canada. A Yoruba man.' In doing so, he sought to draw on the stereotype of Yorubas as being disproportionately well educated and enlightened.

At another point I was at a police station to collect official police data where I met a senior police officer, whose name also identified him as Yoruba. As the Nigerian police establishment is not known for its efficacy, he ordered his staff to ensure there was no delay, a demonstration that was certainly informed by our inferred cultural solidarity. When I asked to interview militants being held in custody, he replied in the Yoruba language – to ensure that the handful of non-Yoruba people around would not understand – 'As *my own*, I wouldn't allow you to interview militants even if I had them in custody. It is too dangerous' (emphasis added). To this officer, I was no mere researcher or citizen; I was 'his own' and as such needed to be protected from the dangerous militants who were unlike *us*.

In sharp contrast, when I travelled into the Niger Delta, being Yoruba meant that locals often perceived me as an oppressor. As the Yoruba are one of Nigeria's three dominant ethnic groups, Delta residents saw me as personally implicated in the expropriation of local oil. At one point, a research participant vented his frustrations against those stealing their jobs by vehemently announcing: 'Shell is dominated by Hausas; Chevron is for the Yoruba people.' Here he was referring to the difficulty people from minority ethnic groups have getting hired by oil corporations operating in their communities. Well aware of my ethnic identity he wanted to remind me that 'my people' were responsible for the problems 'his people' faced. Naively, I had hoped to stand outside of those histories and politics.

While the above examples were relatively benign, the incident which I recount in the opening of this note was more fraught, and one where ethnic identity played a vital role in both my safety and that of my research participants. Travelling by speedboat, a key

informant and I approached a JTF checkpoint mounted on a houseboat. We raised our hands in ritual submission, as not doing so could result in summary execution. I was extremely cognizant of the case two years previously of the clergyman who militants had released from capture. A group of young men travelled up the waterways to retrieve him and went wild with jubilation as they were reunited. The JTF, on patrol nearby, heard the celebration. Thinking the men were militants, the soldiers machine-gunned their boat, killing everyone.

It was almost 6 p.m. as we approached the checkpoint, and no one was allowed to travel to or from Agge after that time. We were accompanied by my key informant, and we all belonged to the demographic the JTF was particularly concerned about. We also had no women with us, which was problematic given that the presence of female companions could lessen official suspicions, as many militant groups do not admit women to their ranks unless the militants were 'off duty'. To compound matters, my laptop case, a clear object of suspicion, was the sole bag on board.

The soldier surmised I was leading this delegation. His initial stoicism gave way to impatience, his voice gradually rising as he asked more questions. As the encounter reached its climax his eyes fell on my laptop case, and he became extremely agitated. He shouted: 'Are you Nigerian?' Surprised at the question I also sensed an opening. He asked my name, which revealed my ethnic identity. As if by magic, my answer softened his posture. He smiled heartily, said 'O dabo' (goodbye in Yoruba), and a potentially lethal encounter evaporated into a small gesture of communal recognition. By simply being able to respond in the same language we were free to go. I pondered what might have happened if I were an Ijaw person like my companions.

Being a member or insider of a group being studied is often a key aspect of research access, and in Nigeria its importance cannot be over-emphasized (Labaree, 2002). In embarking on the fieldwork I was well aware of the struggles of the Delta people. Therefore, while not expecting to be treated as an insider qua insider, since I was not a Niger Deltan, I thought that as a fellow Nigerian I would at a minimum be perceived as an insider-outsider. Little did I envisage that I would be a stranger. I was taken aback by the fact that a key informant even described me as 'oyibo', which literally means 'white person', something that is demonstrably not the case, but in the context implied a meddling foreigner.

Through a process that further accentuated my outsider status, I also had to go through a process of cultural education, learning many customs specific to the Delta region, such as not crossing my legs when speaking with elders – something that implied an air of superiority. More interestingly, I also learned to ignore or overlook overt demonstrations of patriarchy, such as the practice of women arriving first for focus group discussions but sitting at the back of the hall and waiting for the men, who invariably arrived late and took the front seats.

My relations to such cultural traditions had implications for how I was perceived, which, in turn, shaped my project. At one point after a full day's research, my informant told me he would like to provide me with 'Bayelsa allowance'. This is a form of hospitality sex, where a male guest is offered a female companion with whom he may have sex throughout his visit. This was no small gesture, but a significant demonstration of my unconditional acceptance. Taken aback, I told him as diplomatically as possible that

this was not necessary. Afterwards, the sense that I missed out on a higher level of rapport with my informant because of this refusal was palpable. He was stung by my demurral and became more aloof. By rejecting the offer I seemed to have put myself on a moral pedestal that affected our rapport and, by extension, the quality of the information that he provided me, in ways I could never fully estimate (see generally, Edgerton, 1965). Moreover, I suspect that my 'Nigerianess' also influenced his reaction, as it is unlikely that he would have been so offended if a Westerner or non-Nigerian had declined his offer.

A few days after the incident this new trajectory in our relationship was apparent when my informant – enraged about a recent encounter where he and I had effectively been robbed by the Nigerian police – declared that militancy would never end in the Niger Delta and that he would have shot the officers if he had a gun. He continued his tirade, complaining that I looked 'foreign' and did not speak like a Nigerian, punctuating his grievances by declaring 'Two or three years ago, we would have kidnapped *you*.' Perhaps he had said that on the spur of the moment and did not mean it, but my rejecting his offer kept coming to mind.

Researchers, like everyone else, are 'multiple insiders and outsider' (Deutsch, 1981: 174). Such distinctions are fluid, and open to negotiation and occasional challenge (Labaree, 2002: 101). While I resented being perceived as an 'Other' by my own people, to my chagrin I also realized that I was no longer fully *Nigerian* in the same way that the Agge people were. My time away had apparently made me less warm and somewhat aloof in my interpersonal relations. Rather than being regarded as yet another citizen, I was often treated as a stranger needing protection and guidance, something that was both appreciated and unsettling.

Ambiguities about my belonging were also highlighted by a series of moments where I chose to misrepresent my identity in assorted ways, something that also played a tangible role in the development of my research. Prior to commencing the fieldwork, Nigerian colleagues were adamant that I should not inform anyone that I was not based in Nigeria because doing so would increase my appeal to kidnappers, given that 'foreigners' have a higher ransom value. This introduced a complicated dynamic of deception and revelation, as I regularly told people that I was a PhD student at the Niger Delta University – a strategy that might not be available to other researchers for reasons of language and phenotype – but I also occasionally revealed my real affiliation to key gatekeepers, and asked them not to disclose my secret.

A different dynamic of altered self-presentation occasionally occurred when I was in more informal contact with members of my key gatekeeper's extended network. At a social gathering, for instance, I recall a state legislator's wife complaining that she had given birth to her last baby in England, by her reckoning a poor alternative to Canada. She asked if I could formally invite her family to Canada. To have said 'no' would have meant letting everyone down and acknowledging that I had no such powers, perhaps embarrassing my gatekeeper for having invited such an inconsequential person to this gathering. Although I was an international student, I agreed to send an invitation letter to the Canadian Deputy High Commission in Lagos demonstrating that I would like to invite them to Canada. This was just one of the many subtle manipulations of the question of 'who are you', that played a role in the development of my research.

## Concluding Observations

Many scholars educated in the global North will face distinctive challenges and opportunities as they return home to conduct research or to take up academic positions. Being able to invoke one's nationality can provide a form of pragmatic utility in such situations, but such appeals to 'belonging' can also be a form of institutional fiction, with the lived reality of how one is positioned being inherently fluid, negotiated and sometimes contested. Moreover, as Schutz long ago noted about homecomers, 'it is inevitably the case that; ... the home to which he returns is by no means the home he left or the home which he recalled and longed for during his absence ... the homecomer is not the same man who left' [sic throughout] (Schutz, 1945: 375). One cannot step twice into the same stream, and Western-trained researchers returning to developing countries may find themselves cultural aliens even in societies they presume to know too well.

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