

Introduction 1: Researchers in 21st Century Africa

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Today, globalization and urbanization have become powerful forces for social change worldwide. These changes, which have greatly altered the social fabric of most societies in a most fundamental way, have become increasingly noticeable to researchers and ordinary people in developing nations, and therefore have attracted the attention of scholars, researchers, policymakers, development planners and perceptive observers, both local and international.

Since the beginning of this millennium, much research effort has revolved around trying to understand and explain the impact of globalization on resources in rural and urban environments and the role of good governance on sustainable natural resource management and development. This has been particularly the case in East Africa, where the effects of globalization and rapid urbanization are not yet clear. However, it is very difficult to capture the actual impact of these radical changes in one research project using a single method because of the social, religious, cultural, economic, political and environmental diversity in the region. Thus, collaborative interdisciplinary research represents an opportunity for Japanese/ foreign scholars in social anthropology and African areas studies to work with their counterparts in East Africa.

Given the complexities brought about by globalization, urbanization and post-modernism, the debate surrounding the merits and weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative research is not surprising. The reality is that researchers may encounter numerous advantages and disadvantages if they choose to undertake qualitative or quantitative research. Combinations of these advantages and disadvantages tend to be unique in time and space, even though some common patterns and themes occur. The question is then how we manage subjectivity in collaborative research work between foreign (outsider) and local (insider) researchers. The final outcome of collaborative research may be influenced in subtle ways by the worldviews of the foreign partner, over whom local researchers have little control.

However, even in cases where local researchers have opportunities to influence the final outcome, subjectivity may not be guaranteed. Relationships between the researcher and the researched are complex and always shifting in

different settings, so an insider may as well be an outsider depending on where s/ he is. Even in a single locale, a person may have many strands of identification. Narayan (1993) suggested a focus on the quality of relations with the people we study rather than fixed distinctions between insiders and outsiders. It is therefore important for researchers to write open, reflective accounts of what really transpires during fieldwork; how it was done and the position/ role of the researcher in the field, as well as their subjective motivation, (pre)conceptions, feelings and experiences (Shore, 1999). Reflexivity is therefore an important part of qualitative research and a theme in this book.

The prime objective of the book is to provide new researchers in African area studies with a quick and simple introduction to East Africa in terms of the collaborative research between Japanese and African scholars. It is also useful for more experienced practitioners who want to broaden their knowledge on African area studies, both from a conceptual and applied perspective. The book is designed to complement other readings that offer in-depth discussions of research focusing on African local assets, city environments and governance. The main strength of the book lies in the fact that all contributors to this volume have incorporated direct native voices where possible and have done their best to interpret local perspectives that reflect reality according to the lived experiences of the researched people. We are convinced that this book will serve its interested parties as a useful compendium to advance the frontiers of social research. This book fills the gap in the literature and knowledge and should find a ready market in the academy as it addresses the rising need to engage scholars in multiple epistemologies and underscores the need for researcher reflexivity.

References

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