

Introduction 2: Co-Researching by African and Japanese: The Way We Started and the Way Forward

Wakana SHIINO

Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

The Academic Relationship between Africans and Japanese

In the 1950s, after World War II had ended but Japan was still rebuilding itself, Japanese fieldworkers began research in Africa. Early pioneers formed an integrative research team representing various disciplines such as primatology, ecological anthropology, agriculture, architecture, and others. After some years, specialized teams were formed according to the specific area of research. Most of these have been founded by the Ministry of Education (since 2001 MEXT/Monbukagakusho: the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) or the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), which is one of affiliated organization to MEXT, supported by Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research up to today.

It is interesting that Japan, located in the Far East and never concerned with colonizing Africa, began producing many graduates in African Studies after the war. As of 2015, there were about 1000 Japanese scholars in the Japan Society for African Studies. Since its construction in 1964 JSPS Nairobi Research Station has been a hub for fieldworkers from various disciplines.

In the twenty-first century, international communication is easy, thanks to mobile phones and ubiquitous Internet, but in 1995, when I visited Kenya for the first time, it was difficult to find a working telephone, even in Nairobi City. Major changes transpired in the decade following, not only in terms of technology but also with respect to African Studies in Japan and Africa. In the generation of my supervisor, Professor Nagashima, Japanese Africanists were still considered pioneers in their field, and they were mostly Japanese social anthropologists who were born in the 1920s-30s. For example, in the field of Socio-Cultural Anthropology, Professor Nagashima developed a Social Anthropology course at Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo in 1972, and in 1975 he formed a research group which focused on Ring Lake Victoria region and published hi-quality ethnographic papers in English [Nagashima ed. 1981]. One can also find numerous unpublished papers from these researchers in the Library

at the University of Nairobi. It is not easy to track academic communication channels between Japanese and Africans because there are not records and publications about it. But it is clear that these research papers represent a significant contribution to African historiography, as many African societies are growing increasingly modern, and there are few records of their fast-vanishing traditional cultures. Papers by these early Japanese researchers were referred to in several international publications. However, the 200-some Japanese anthropologists conducting research in Africa today are largely unknown in the international community. This is due in large part to the difficulty of procuring adequate translations and a general resistance (or mere neglect) to publishing research in other languages.

When a foreigner wants to conduct research in Africa, there are typically procedures for acquiring a permit from the government by asking African institutions to act as local counterparts for the foreign research groups. Unfortunately, many Japanese scholars have not attempted to forge such relationships, to discuss about the research data and share idea for future view etc. We have already had some exciting and productive experiences to know that we have different view of the environment and culture because of our own socio-cultural background when we held symposium in Uganda and Kenya. If we wish to facilitate better international relationships and more efficient research, it is imperative that we adopt a broader and more cooperative stance.

The Form of Ethnography and Relationship with the Research Assistant

The form of Ethnography is an important topic, since 'Writing Culture' Shock in Socio-Cultural Anthropology, even though the academic trend seems to pass this topic in the wave of post-Colonial anthropology. This critical turn in socio-cultural anthropology during the mid-1980s began the famous book *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) in which their critique was mainly on the authority of the author of the ethnography who comes from developed countries or former colonial power in post-Colonial and global societies. This critique developed various form of the ethnography. Some scholars have published work in experimental ethnography, such as Marjorie Shostak, who wrote her *Nisa* in the voice of an African narrator – a !Kung woman by the name of Nisa who resided in the Kalahari Desert. From my area of interest, Kenya–Luo, there is an interesting experimental ethnography called *Siaya*, written by US Anthropologist David William Cohen and Native Historian Atieno Odhiambo and published in 1989. The topic of experimental ethnography should not be a 'trend', because the discussion never reached the 'proper' way to

write ethnography. However, since these sources, there have been no publications in experimental ethnography.

In most fields, it is typical to publish materials under the name or names of the researcher(s) and include the names of research assistants in the acknowledgements. However, since foreign researchers are strangers to the geography and local residents despite having studied them before arrival, their first work is to find a local to assist them with their project – someone who understands the research topic and specific aims of the researcher, and who knows a common language to communicate with the researcher. Ideally, a research assistant should be a teacher of the local language, a guide in the research area, and a commentator on how the research ought to be conducted. The nature of the relationship between researcher and assistant ranges from that of employer and employee to one that resembles a familial relationship. Wherever the researcher goes, whatever the researcher does, we can be sure that the research assistant has a hand in all of it, and is essentially co-researching. We hope to discuss ethnography in greater detail in future volumes, but our first challenge – met in this volume – was to include at least two articles as a form of ‘Letter’ written by research assistants.

Corroborative Research

The relationship between foreign researchers and local assistants and the corroboration between African and Japanese scholars are crucial to the furthering of African studies in Japan and, by extension, the contribution these scholars can make to the preservation of African history.

As a social anthropologist, I recently began collaborating with Associate Professor Mundia, a geographic information systems (GIS) specialist, and Mr. Noguchi, a media artist, on following the change of Nairobi city in 2009. When we visit Kenya, we arrive in the capital city of Nairobi and proceed to our research field in the upcountry. Every time we go, I observe major changes in Nairobi City and I have begun to think we should be recording these changes to compare them with cultural shifts in the more remote area that has been the target of our research thus far. I would also like to experience a greater degree of interaction with average citizens in Kenya, rather than relegating my time exclusively to fellow academicians. Moreover, it seems written history is no longer interesting enough to captivate modern audiences, so I was inspired to work with media artist Mr. Noguchi, who has been developing a kind of archival software using pictures and video. I also got to know Dr. Mundia, when he studied GIS as a Ph.D) student at Tsukuba University. GIS technology and the unique perspective it provides are very useful in tracking geographical changes in Nairobi. One of his works was to estimate how Nairobi slums and population

would develop by using satellite images. Together, the three of us developed an ambition to create a visual history system, and we began work on this project even before receiving any funds.

We soon discovered the merits and difficulties associated with our background and position in Kenya. Acquiring maps and areal photos is not easy for foreigners. Dr. Mundia provided access to maps and old photos and graciously agreed to our requests for interviews and tours of the town. He had the ability to converse with and persuade both conservative and difficult officers.

There were other challenges waiting for us as well. For instance, it is considered a security risk for a foreigner to carry a camera and take pictures in Nairobi. Moreover, our research had not prepared us to find people familiar with the old Nairobi, because most people who lived or worked in the city around 1940s or more early days in those days had already returned to their homeland by the time we began our research. Nairobi is a place for the young, working generation, not for old people. There are only spaces for in the slum for working people who can pay for the rent. There are no spaces for old one to stay. We did encounter some *muzee* ('elders') from Kikuyu who had returned to walk through central Nairobi and reminisce about when they were working in the city. Fortunately, Dr. Ndegwa spoke to them in Gikikuyu and we were able to glean some valuable information and stories about the old city.

We also faced some difficulties with the Kenyan–Asian population. When we were trying to conduct research in the area of Indian merchants, for instance, many were unfriendly toward us and we were not able to ask any questions or learn anything new. They looked at us who are a strange combination of African and Japanese researchers. At the certain shop, there were old African men who may work for long time and seems to know the condition in old Nairobi, but an Indian shopkeeper watch him and he couldn't talk to us anything apart from Indians business. We later learned that this condition persists even up until the present.

The relationship between researcher and assistant, and the cooperation of researchers from different backgrounds and positions, are clearly integral in overcoming some of the difficulties of conducting research in Africa today. Improving corroborative research is likely to prove fruitful for the future of Japanese African studies and the contribution of these studies to the record of African history.

References

- Cohen, D.W. and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo 1989 *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape*. Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya.
- Clifford, James and Marcus, George E. eds. 1986. *Writing Culture : The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. University of California Press.
- Nagashima, Nobuhiro, ed., 1981 *Themes in Socio-cultural Ideas and Behaviour among the Six Ethnic Groups of Kenya: The Visukha, the Iteso, the Gusii, the Kipsigis, the Luo and the Kamba*, Tokyo: Hitotsubashi University.
- Shiino, W. and Mundia, Ndegwa 2011. "How Do We Start a Joint Research? : Its Framework and Methods? Approaches and Methodologies of Field Research in Africa" (International Symposium), <http://aaafrika.aacore.jp/news/2011/07/approaches-and-methodologies-of-field-research-in-africa-international-symposium.html>.
- Shostak, Marjorie 1981 *Nisa, the Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.