'When you leave, they will kill me.'
Navigating politics in and of the field in northern Mozambique

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Abstract – **This paper explores the paradoxes of carrying out research into rural development, drawing on experiences of doing ethnography in Mozambique to highlight how the research process can both recreate, and hence provide valuable insights into, the unevenness of development for vulnerable communities.**

Odeta was sick again. She had an ache that had started in her neck and moved through her shoulders, temples and now her back. My first thought was that it was likely malaria, but when my research assistant Tifa heard Odeta recount the symptoms, especially the fact that the pain had migrated – she knew at once that it was a 'traditional' illness, caused by witchcraft. Someone wished Odeta harm.

By now, I had been living with Odeta and her children for over ten months. On my first arrival in this rural neighbourhood in northern Mozambique a year before, I asked the farmers' association of which she was a member if I could stay and conduct research with them. I explained my plan to stay in a local household in order to experience the everyday life of smallholder farmers and their day to day food security challenges, and they nominated Odeta to be my host. At the time, the president of the association explained that they had chosen Odeta because she was a poor widow, someone who would benefit from my financial contributions to rent and food. Desperate to justify my white privileged presence in the community, I leapt at this apparent chance to help someone. Later, Odeta's sister-in-law Aurélia told me that she thought that the association had chosen Odeta because they were wary of me. She was vulnerable, had no family in the area, had no choice but to accept. As months passed and people realised that I was in the community *por bem*, for good, Aurélia told me, people changed their tune. They saw the benefits – to me modest, to Odeta significant – which my presence and rent money had brought to Odeta and her family: black plastic sheeting to waterproof our roof, for example. Some of the worst gossip about Odeta, which closely preceded this most recent illness, revolved around an evening when neighbours said that they had seen Odeta eating imported frozen mackerel, which she had refused to share with them.

Local people called this kind of response *ciume*, the Portuguese word for jealousy. Financial success or good fortune, such as making a large profit from the sale of cash crops, or even participating in a development project training day and being given a per diem, could provoke *ciume*. This was especially the case where people were seen not to be adequately sharing their wealth, or seen to *gingar* (in Portuguese, literally to wiggle one's bottom), to show off their wealth by boasting or wearing new clothes. Odeta went to great lengths to avoid this perception, either sharing something with all her neighbours, or trying to keep it secret. *Ciume*, for some, was grounds for malicious gossip at best, at worst for procuring a *feitiço* against the person of whom you were envious. 'When you leave, they will kill me,' Odeta told me one evening. I was horrified. I had few illusions about the benefits of my research for local people, but I had little idea that I could cause so much harm. Trying to act according to my own ethical principles, I recognised too late that these ethics belonged to a different moral ontology and more individualistic notions of fairness and generosity than those of my hosts. My ideas about how I could help the community did not align with those of community members. In exchanges like this I always offered to leave or to intervene. Odeta always refused, saying, 'It's not you, it's them. If it hadn't been you, it would have been something else.' When I left the village, so did she, moving to the nearby town.

Gossip and envy have been documented in societies around the world and can be understood as a means of negotiating the uneven impacts of development (Besnier, 2009). However, this case brings home the intensely political nature and ambivalent implications of fieldwork itself, raising pertinent questions about how and why academics do research in economically marginal rural settings, and who does that research. Misalignments of ethical codes and power relations can occur in any research context, as the act of research disrupts, intensifies or challenges existing community dynamics, but this is exacerbated by the intersection of different identities and axes of inequality (Sultana, 2007). A Mozambican researcher would have had a very different research experience but, depending on class and gender might still have encountered similar problems. This raises immediate questions: about the unpredictability and unruliness of how research participants view you, the researcher, and your behaviour; how these link to, reinforce and subvert colonial and other power asymmetries and structures; and, given these dynamics and their dynamism, how to navigate consent and ethics throughout the research process.

These questions draw us into more fundamental questions, beyond the methodology and processes of research, to the politics of ontology and epistemology, and the politics of our research institutions, and hence

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to the need to actively dismantle these power structures and decolonise research. I find alienating the way in which positionality is frequently reduced to a matter of data quality (do people trust you enough to answer interview questions fully?) rather than ethics (do you have a right to their trust?). Ethics become an issue to navigate in research praxis, without necessarily paying attention to the wider politics of the entire research project (Sultana, 2007). This perspective can also ignore the agency of participants in shaping the research project, the way positionality changes over time, and the meaning of consent within shifting and unequal power relations (Vermeylen and Clark, 2016).

It's not a new idea to point out the long and challenging history both of ethnography and 'overseas fieldwork' as tools of colonial knowledge production, but they continue to be a mainstay of qualitative social research (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). In part this has been facilitated by their incorporation of participatory methods and feminist and postcolonial critique (Simpson, 2011). In the case of ethnography, this has entailed moving away from the classic colonial model towards more diverse, though not unproblematic, models. Methods like ethnography, which pay attention to intra-community politics and the everyday and encourage longer-term researcher engagement with a particular place or community, continue to be valuable, especially in the context of very time-limited development research.

So the old model is still going strong. It was possible, in fact normal, for a reputable British university in 2014 to hire me, a white, wealthy postgraduate student who spoke no Portuguese and had never been to Mozambique, to study the impacts of a controversial development project, ProSAVANA, on smallholders. This is enabled by the continued, often unchecked whiteness of the academy (Faria and Mollett, 2012), and, within northern academic institutions, a colonial sense of entitlement to travel and do research anywhere in the world. It is also encouraged, paradoxically, by the social sciences' ongoing interest in studying marginalised peoples (cf. George, 1974). Long-term overseas fieldwork is by its nature restricted to privileged researcher with access to the financial resources, visas, physical and mental health, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation to do so safely. Ethnographic research can be made more participatory, but the kinds of projects and data ethnography produces may be low priority for rural communities. In-situ ethnographic research like mine also raises ethical issues which lie outside the formal research methods covered by institutional protocols and critical literature on reflexivity.

As Odeta told me of her fears for her life, it seemed that all my ethical fears about ethnographic fieldwork overseas had been realised. Despite my sincere wish to 'do no harm', to be kind and inclusive, and include 'local voices' in debates about ProSAVANA, I was causing problems for the people who had helped me most. Paradoxically, however, this process, and my culpable positionality within it, gave me a powerful lens through which to understand *ciume* and how interactions between development projects and local communities play out. Some of the most revealing insights into perceptions of rural change, and responses to the unevenness of development, came from observing the negative impacts my own presence and uneven generosity had on my hosts; the mismatch between my intentions, capabilities and impacts; the way my actions were perceived; and the similarities these social dynamics bore to those stemming from the inevitable inclusions and exclusions of development projects.

There is a wealth of literature we can draw on to minimise the negative impacts of research, particularly on making the *whole* research process more reflexive and participatory and achieving more egalitarian collaborations with local research institutions. I find helpful Coddington's (2017: 318) idea of 'proceeding' with research as 'not just […] doing research and glossing over the uncomfortable decisions made along the way but conducting research by dwelling in those methodologically complex places, as well as the difficult practical considerations […] that also shape decisions.' Auto-ethnography can play a crucial role here, enabling researchers to take the same critical examination of the dialectic between structural power inequalities and individual experiences that forms the basis of our analytical work, and apply it to the actual process of research.

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Kraków, July 24–27, 2017

"Uneven processes of rural change"

The XXVII European Society for Rural Sociology Congress

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