

BEING A RESEARCHER IN HIS OWN COUNTRY, PRACTICAL EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELDWORK

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INTRODUCTION

I am a student in Master of social sciences in the EHESSE Marseille. Since 2003 I have been working as a researcher assistant at LASDEL in the capital of Niger Niamey (Laboratory of studies and researches in social dynamics and local development).

The research assistant participates in the preparation of questions, data collection in the fieldwork, with others researchers or alone. During the few years that I had stayed at LASDEL I participated in numerous researches concerning a political anthropology (decentralization, local authorities, public administrations, etc.) and anthropology of development (health, HIV / AIDS, child malnutrition, the food crisis in 2005, managing community, etc.)

My statement is thus intended to give you some examples of my experience in the fieldwork. These examples can be used to demonstrate the value of two methodological tools: “triangulation” and “reflectivity” deal with the risks of “encliquage”. The definitions that will be given to those two tools are Jean Pierre OLIVIER DE SARDAN’s ones[1].

THE TRIANGULATION

Triangulation is to cross points of views. It is distinct from an ethnographic approach which gives a preference to an indication given by one informant which privileges indication given by one informant who knows all things (“privileged informant”).

Triangulation proposes to analyse the diversity of social actors. This methodological tool is necessary in African context, because there are different points of view. For example, when the researcher is interested in the history of the settlement of a village, in the traditional authorities, a consensus is just apparent. You can’t be sure that a single informant is not lying in order to protect or promote his or her family. Hence, working on the story imports a

question of contemporary situation, with reflexivity. We will see, with examples that will be described below, that triangulation and reflexivity are useful tools in the fieldwork.

I was involved in a program of research, focused on the decentralization process (socio-political context before, during and after the municipal elections, etc.). Municipalities were settled two years ago. I worked in a rural district in the western part of the country, called "D" in the case that will be described below. We were trying to understand how the political power was negotiated at the local level with a new authority. Which social changes were happening? We encountered some methodological problems. Here I want to propose some explanation of them and a description of our choices in the fieldwork.

In 2004, the process of decentralization became effective as the municipal councils were setting up. Before this period, the country was divided into departments, departments into districts, districts into townships and townships into several villages. With the decentralization's advent, the departments became regions, districts became departments, townships became rural municipalities. However, traditional authorities were maintained and were coexisting with the municipal represents.

The first problem, I want to describe here, takes place in the cooperative of rice growing in a village of "D". Two farmers were evicted from the association and their fields were confiscated by the general assembly of the cooperative. Both were taxed with widespread political ideas within the cooperative, which was forbidden by law. Specifically, they would have approached some delegates of the assembly to suggest that a farmer who is living out of "D" can't become member of the cooperative's office. The cooperative of rice represent an important financial issue in the context of the decentralization. More than 20% of the cooperative's revenue has to be paid to the town hall. The office's members come from different rural communes. The members who are come from "D", like the two farmers evicted, refused that "outsiders" administer the cooperative. They talked about this point to the treasurer of the cooperative who is also their cousin. This one informed the president of the cooperative about this discussion because he is potentially affected by the case. The President comes from another rural commune and might be dismissed. Finally, the assembly was convened and the two farmers were evicted.

To grasp the problem, we decided to meet the three officers of the cooperative (president, treasurer, general secretary). The fieldwork guided us to another actors : state worker who is in charge to control the rice-growing and to advise the cooperative's office, two evicted farmers, the deputy mayor of "D" and some represents of villagers and the

regional represent of rice-growing, the members of an association which promotes human rights. We learned from our interviews that, it was the deputy mayor (a son of a wealthy merchant) who expressed an idea diffused by the two farmers evicted. But as he was too powerful, people could not accuse him as they did in the case of the two farmers. They were in the same political party. They have talked to the treasurer of the cooperative, who came from village “D” and who is also their cousin. But they did not have a confidence in him, because was a political challenger. The treasure found an opportunity to take revenge on the two farmers, because during the last elections of village’s chief, the two cousins had supported the elected chief against him. They had also wanted to prevent his re-election to the post of treasurer. The treasurer informed the president, of his cousins’ hopes. The President convened a general assembly who decided an expulsion of the two farmers and an their rice paddies expropriation.

The governor of department and the regional official of rice-growing moved to the event in order to reach a conciliation because the problem began to disturb the cooperative’s operations. Finally they came to agreement. However, soon after the governor and two farmers rejected the agreement and decided to bring the case to trial. In fact, the governor of the region was in the same political party as two farmers so he assured them of his support. With this support, they asked for legal advices to the association which promotes human rights. It helped them to constitute the file. A first judges decision gave reason to the two evicted farmers. He ordered to the cooperative’s office to refund the rice fields and to pay compensation. The office appealed the decision because the judge acquitted farmers without hearing their evidence. During a new trial, the office won. The evicted farmers appealed. The case has been not closed yet when we left the fieldwork.

The question was how could we reconstruct the sequences of events by taking into account only the views of officers and the two evicted farmers? How could we understand the transposition of village’s problems concerning a cooperative’s management without using the concept of triangulation?

However, it was not within our power to meet all concerned actors from several reasons. The first actor was the judge who, after making decision in the cooperative office favour, has been reassigned to another department. We could not meet the governor of the department because he was transferred. Finally, we could neither have a meeting with a policeman who led investigation because he was a part of military corps. We were not allowed to hold an interview without authorization of the Minister of National Defence. The

legal process was ongoing. The political actors were required to remain silent. This constraint is common in the fieldwork, especially in the research concerned with contemporary events. This controversial situation obstruct us to data access. We realised hat it is necessary to be aware of these constraints that determine our data, and therefore our understanding of social reality.

We have encountered those limits when we were working on a case study of another conflict between two rural communes "D" and "A" concerning a location of a market place. The commune "D" decided to establish a market on a land located on the border with the commune "A". This place was situated on the banks of the river. To avoid the risk of flooding, the municipality "D" has spilled over fields located in the municipality "A". The owners of the fields have protested and have vowed to prevent the inauguration of the new market, by all means.

To understand the problem, we met two chiefs of township and two mayors. We went on the marketplace with the chief of township who was a responsible of the town "D". But, we missed the version of the field owners, the prefecture, because the situation became dramatic. We were obliged to leave the field. We didn't want to be either witnesses or victims of the tragedy. The observation became impossible. The situation was so tense that using a pen or a sheet of paper seemed to be dangerous.

These two examples demonstrate the importance of triangulation while elucidating some constraints which depend on the circumstances. These constraints are inseparable from the fieldwork.

ENCLIQUAGE

Anthropological research requires a long stay in the fieldwork. During this stay, there is a major risk threatens the research which is called "encliquage". This concept was defined by Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, a French anthropologist. A researcher during his fieldwork tend to be integrated only by the networks of individual groups. He can be considered to be involved in a local "clique" (restricted social reality) unwittingly or sometimes with his complicity. Reflexivity permits to understand a status given to the researcher.

The LASDEL has conducted a program about "Women and local governments in the context of the decentralization." The program was interested in the actions of a development project, expected to promote the advancement of women in six rural districts. We were

greeted by the local responsible of the project when we went to the fieldwork for the first time. He prepared our room where we lived during our stay. We did not have the opportunity to choose another place. When we ate with him, each evening, he was trying to know whom we met, but he was asking the question differently, he said, “How was your day?” “Did you make some interviews?” He also proposed us to see people, “good informants” he said. And he dismissed others. The next year, when we returned in the fieldwork, the local responsible had changed his attitude; a certain climate of distrust had started to rise. If we had listen to him, we could certainly missed useful information to understand the context. He gave us good indications to combine his points of view with others.

On the other hand, villagers thought that we were working on the project, because we were living where the project took place. Hence, it was really important to clarify our position - who are we - and to be sure that our informants understood. There was no need to maintain a situation of ambiguity.

CONCLUSION

As I have said the constraints are inherent to the fieldwork and this can not be avoid. We have to be aware of the risks of “encliquage” and we have to use “triangulation” and “reflexivity”. There are other risks like ideological populism or culturalism that a researcher has to be aware.

Workshops, conventions, like this forum, are welcomed because Workshops, conventions, like this forum, are welcomed because we can learn more than what we have in the books, by the experience and the expertise of each other.

[1] OLIVIER DE SARDAN J.P., 1995, *La politique de terrain, sur la production des données en Anthropologie*, in *Revue Enquête*, numéro 1, PP 71-109