Young urban refugees in Kampala, Uganda: some thoughts on the ethics and fieldwork issues of representation
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YOUNG, URBAN REFUGEES IN KAMPALA, UGANDA:
SOME THOUGHTS ON THE ETHICS OF FIELDWORK AND ISSUES OF
REPRESENTATION

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Introduction

Last week Thursday I attended an evening seminar about African philosophy. The main guest was Paulin Hountondji, scholar and philosopher from Benin, and his discussion partner was a Dutch philosopher and medical doctor by the name of Bert Keizer. The latter gave the opening statement. He shared with us, the audience, some of his reflections on working as a doctor in Kenya, reading passages from the book he published about that experience. His message was unambiguous: I do not understand the Africans. Drawing on the event of how a child with hydrocephalus was treated by his Kenyan colleagues at the hospital, he concluded: there is no common ground between me and the Africans to discuss concepts like compassion, motherhood, suffering, illness, … let alone, he said, more complicated concepts like democracy. But mostly, he repeated, he had not seen evidence of compassion in Africa, at least not anything vaguely connected to how he himself lived that human quality. This doctor had worked in Kenya for five months.

Paulin Hountondji responded in a dignified and almost casual way to the doctor’s exposé – by simply offering that he must have been very unlucky to land in a place where nurses did not show any compassion – but the tone had been set for an emotionally charged evening. I myself was shocked by the authoritative voice with which this Dutch medical doctor related his truths about the African continent. And shocked mostly because of the setting: this was a supposedly academic seminar about African philosophy.

In this paper I will say a few words on the issue of representation. What are the images we academics choose to create, what message do we want to get across to our readers, how do we do this, and especially: what are the dilemmas and pitfalls we are bound to encounter along the way? To me the issue of representation is a vital one to discuss when speaking about the ethics of research among refugees.

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1 This paper was first presented at the workshop ‘Research on Refugees in Urban Settings: Methods and Ethics’, American University Cairo, 11-13 April 2003.
Before starting our research projects we write research proposals in which we usually include a section on methodology and sometimes a few words on ethics as well. I must admit I cannot remember mentioning the word ethics in my PhD proposal, nor did my proposal have to pass an Ethical Commission of some sort. Soon enough though, once I got to Uganda to carry out my research among young, urban refugees in Kampala, did I find myself confronted with methodological and ethical issues of all sorts. I differed in opinion with my supervisor about whether or not to give material and/or financial assistance to the people in my research. I was busy trying to avoid at all cost replicating the damaging experience of the police or military interviews that people had gone through. I was told the survey I wanted to undertake would compromise the security of the urban refugees whose lives I wanted to study. These are but a few of the many important issues that illustrate the complications of refugee research.

However, I believe that these issues are preceded by a more fundamental one: why do we do our research? What is the knowledge we want to gain? For what purpose, for what audience? These are questions that should be addressed before starting *any* kind of research. They become especially pertinent for a researcher who chooses to engage him/herself with the politically involved field of refugee studies. Knowledge is never sought or used just for the sake of it. It is always linked to more or less explicit political goals. Needless to say this has been true very much for the history of cultural anthropology\(^2\). Therefore, it is crucial to realise from the outset that particularly in a field like refugee studies neutral research is no option, nor would it be desirable. Refugee situations do not happen out of nowhere. Intricate and often long historical processes are at the heart of nearly all refugee situations\(^3\), while at the same time they are used in present-day national and global power politics. Because of the politics that are inherently involved in refugee research, it is imperative to always reflect on the kind of knowledge we believe to be collecting. And on what we are collecting it for.

There are many questions and dilemmas that arise from such a statement. I will touch upon a few, having organised them under three headings, of which the first two deal mainly with collecting data/knowledge, and the third with presenting it:

a. Epistemological considerations
b. Positioning of the researcher vis-à-vis the research subjects
c. Representation: how and what do we write?

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\(^3\) Historical processes of inclusion and exclusion that link power politics, individual greed, IMF policies, ethnic strife, European asylum legislation, etcetera.
A. Epistemological issues

Epistemology is concerned with questions like: what is knowledge, how do we gain and produce knowledge, and what can we know? When doing research in a refugee setting these questions take on particular relevance. As said, knowledge is always connected to power, and every refugee situation itself is needless to say politically charged. All the people I met in the course of my research – refugees, government officials, humanitarian workers, fellow researchers – as well as myself position themselves and each other accordingly. In such an environment the researcher must be aware of the underlying motivations that people have to tell or not to tell you something. Narratives are political. For the refugees: narratives are what people need to survive. A good story to protect them from nosy neighbours or the piercing questions in a police interview. If we are not aware of the political positions and biases involved, we might think we are simply observing ‘facts’. Although as anthropologists we are often still made to believe that ‘participant observation’ is a relatively straightforward research method, in reality observation is never a simple, self-evident process.4

What I found in Kampala was a climate of suspicion, fear and gossip. Few people volunteered information about themselves. Most would always be extremely evasive about what they were doing or where they were headed. This attitude was infectious: I soon caught myself answering in terms of ‘oh, I’m just going down the road’. So-called friends would share very little information about themselves. It often struck me how little people who lived together in one house or room knew of each other. I remember talking to a group of young Congolese girls who were all living together in one house on the outskirts of town and discovering that they did not know who among them still had parents alive in Congo and who didn’t. If those are the conditions under which research is being carried out, this undoubtedly has consequences for the information you are collecting. I hasten to add that the climate of suspicion and gossip was not limited to the refugees but also seemed to pervade the various humanitarian offices and moreover characterised the relationship between refugees and agency staff.

In another article I wrote: “How can I even think that I’m looking for truth in a field so charged by politics, by people’s immediate interests and fights for physical and emotional survival? Where ‘lying’ is one of the most efficient survival strategies? Where truth has so many faces, depending on whom you talk to, and even, at what hour of the day? I feel uneasy because I can’t get a grip on the reality I’m studying. I’m constantly being confronted with its disparities and controversies, its splinters and silences, the hidden tales. Moreover, I often have the sensation that it is impossible to truly understand

4 Let alone ethical considerations, what about the practicalities of participant observation in this particular setting. Is it possible to truly participate in the city? With those sleeping on the streets? With people who have come to the city to hide from security agents?
what is going on without being part and parcel of the situation myself. That the combination of my inquisitiveness, empathy and imagination has not been enough to unravel the threads, to bring to light ‘what it is all about’. ” (Lammers 2002).

Following from the above, a question can be posed: what are the consequences of this for the idea that science should and can be neutral, value-free and objective? I have come to doubt these central tenets of western science as a result of my research in Kampala. And related to that the question: what are the consequences for the idea that science is about ‘rational analysis’?

Research among refugees often means research with people who are traumatised. The question must be posed: can we really understand what they are saying when they talk about grief, loss, pain, and fear? Pain is a very personal experience and one that is often difficult to communicate. Research in medical anthropology has shown that patients who suffer from chronic pain greatly suffer from not being able to communicate what they feel and (therefore) often not being taken seriously. I’m convinced that this holds true for many refugees. We must not forget that what we cannot see may still be there. This refers to issues of cross-cultural interpretation as well as inter-personal understanding. And ultimately to the question: what can we know?

In academia we are taught to limit ourselves to rational analysis of the spoken or written word. What about information that is non-verbal? What about information that cannot so easily be subjected to rational, scientific analysis? I know that a lot of the knowledge I gained during my three years in Kampala was not through my rational and analytic capacities. In my research I am trying to learn about the ways in which young people who have lived through violence make sense of their world, about how they reflect on their memories, and from what perspectives they look at their future. It would be completely besides the point to try and interpret only rationally their processes of ‘making meaning’, which so obviously involve reflection on an emotional, sensational and spiritual level on top of careful thinking. In other words, I cannot reduce to rationality that what is lived in so many different ways; or rather, I cannot see how that could lead to meaningful analysis.

Moreover, our knowledge of social and psychological processes is directly related to our personal experiences, which are both cognitive and emotional. For example, if we would not know fear, would we be able to learn about or understand it? Also, I learned most about the fear and hopelessness of some of the young men in my study, not so much through their telling me how and why and when they are scared, but by looking into their eyes, by physically feeling something of the strong emotions they carried when sitting next to them or shaking hands.

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5 See for example: Greenhalgh 2001; Good et al. 1994.
The above are just a few thoughts on issues of neutrality, objectivity and rationality that follow from the question of ‘what can we know’. Even though a more elaborate discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, these are issues, I believe, that researchers in refugee situations will almost undoubtedly encounter at some point or another.

The question ‘what can we know’ may have to be preceded by yet another one: are we allowed to just go out there to satisfy our ‘wanting to know’? Is a refugee situation a “data site” where you can harvest your data at will? Can we ask people to speak about violence if we don’t also offer counselling? ‘Speaking out’ can be a healing (or empowering) experience, but I suppose it depends a lot on the qualities of the listener. This brings us to the relationship between the researcher and the research subjects.

B. The positioning of the researcher vis-à-vis the research subjects

The (dynamic) relationship between the researcher and the research subjects for a large part determines the knowledge one will gain. The researcher is no neutral observer but someone who brings his/her own biases into the field. The research subjects are also no neutral or passive informers.

The relationship between researcher and research subjects can or must be defined as a power relationship. Much can be – and has been – said about this relationship. Some scholars have argued in favour of a so-called dialogical approach to research involving the research subjects in all phases of the research project in order to minimise the power differences and make it a joint project. Others have pointed out that the idea of egalitarian relationships in research is an illusion, and the postcolonial critique has referred to it as the arrogance of white scholars supposedly ‘giving a voice’ to ‘Third World’ citizens while in fact appropriating people’s voices for their own purposes. They emphasise that we cannot see ourselves as ‘innocent’ individuals but that we are part of larger histories. In my case would be pointed, among other things, at the power differences between a young, white, female, middle-class researcher doing research among young, black, male, mostly poor refugees.

Sometimes admonitions about how researchers should be careful not to violate the dignity of research subjects slightly irritate me: as if people are passive victims who have themselves being played around with. As if ‘we’ have all negotiation power on our side. This is certainly not the case. Ultimately,

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6 See for example Schrijvers 1995.
8 See for example: Spivak 1988; Trinh Min-ha 1989.
people decide what to tell, how to tell it and what to hide or be quiet about. In the words of Lorraine Nencel: “A good anthropologist always tries to protect the group participating in her project. […] However, because the research group is envisioned as vulnerable, it is often assumed they find it difficult to protect themselves, overlooking the fact that most vulnerable people are continuously protecting themselves and usually more experienced in this area than the anthropologist” (1997: 112). And she concludes: “Why does the projection of power relations in the field reflect a nearly binary opposition between the powerful and the powerless instead of as in other areas departing from a notion of difference and the multipositioned subject?”

I agree with Nencel’s statement while at the same time I acknowledge the potentially harmful effects of the relationship between researcher and researched in the field. For one, people who have fled their homes are often in a desperate position and possibly willing to volunteer a great deal of information about themselves (or others) with the hope of getting something out of it. More about the possibly harmful effects of research after the fieldwork period will be said in the following section. For now I will conclude by saying that the fact that this relationship is complicated and its dilemmas probably irresolvable does not mean we should not pay it attention. I believe that a lot can be gained by being aware of the processes involved and retaining a critical stance towards yourself and your research. Unfortunately I have come across very few authors who explicitly write about the relationship between knowledge, politics and power during the process of doing fieldwork.

Lastly and very briefly: a few concrete examples of what I believe should be expected of the researcher in this situation:

a) How not to do it: What I learned as being very crucial in people's experiences in Kampala is the fact that they never get information about how, where and when, let alone why, something will happen: when is their next appointment, will they be seen by a legal officer today, when will the results from the interview be out, do they have the right to appeal, who is responsible for what, etc. This is a very mean way of keeping power on one’s side. The researcher must do his/her utmost to avoid replicating this example often set by UNHCR and many NGO’s.

b) In the process of doing research most researchers, like humanitarian staff, will develop defence mechanisms against all the painful and harrowing accounts of injustice and human suffering they hear on a daily basis. It is important to be self-aware about these processes, for your own good and that of the research subjects. The challenge is to the researcher to listen to and judge each account as a new one and one in its own right, despite similarities between them.
c) Where and when possible researchers must not shy away from being a broker between UNHCR, government, NGO’s and the refugees. With this we are not only ‘helping’ refugees; it is also very helpful for the researcher: I learned a lot about what humiliation means and where frustration comes from.

d) But ethics is also: not to overestimate what you yourself can do to alleviate other people’s suffering. Not to give false hope.

C. Representation

After completing the fieldwork we come back home and start the writing-up. We must realise that, with our writing, we are in the business of creating images, and mostly images of others. I believe we have to take responsibility and question – and where needed contradict – the images of refugees that are poured out on us by the media and which are generally extremely superficial and full of false stereotypes. People are not challenged to think and reflect on their assumptions. No writing is neutral. I like a quote from Carolyn Nordstrom who writes about war and violence in Mozambique. She says: [Violence is] “a topic so politically loaded and emotionally charged that opinions often speak more to how people want to see the world than how it really is” (1997: 118). No writing is neutral, so nor is ours. This should not make us feel uncomfortable, instead we should capitalise on it. Our research and science should be inspired by a critical analysis and contemplation of the world we live in. Maybe to go against the reductionist images of refugees created all around us our task (or political statement) as scholars is to show that life is not self-evident, that reality is complicated and made up of many partial and often conflicting truths (or ‘situated knowledge’ in Donna Haraway’s words).

Thus, one thing we can do is to make a point of ‘diversity’. Not only an awareness of diversity within the group of urban refugees in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, educational, rural or urban background, but also an awareness that people have and speak from different identities. That a refugee may at the same time be a mother, student, soldier, lover… This may be the only or most effective way of going against images of Self versus Other, which are so often implicated when people speak about refugees. It is not easy to achieve this in our writing, but let us try. It requires that we make conscious choices about how we portray the people in our research. Because, how do we portray the people we meet, individuals who have been forced to leave behind all that was dear to them, who are frustrated, angry and hurt, but also looking towards the future? One very simple question: as victims or as survivors, or probably both? Another question: as people whose lives are in transition or stagnant?

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9 Feminist scholars were among the first to dare question the strict division of science and politics. See for example: Harding 1986; Grant 1993; Schrijvers 1995.
10 Is my aim to write in such a way that every suggestion of ‘the Other’ – with capital O - disappears, and that we are all ‘others’ - and ‘selves’ - to each other, in all possible different constellations?
‘Transition’ is an interesting angle from which to approach the lives of the young people in exile that I meet in Kampala. They are young people who, because of their age, find themselves faced with decisions and challenges that characterise the lives of young people everywhere. They fantasise about marriage; they worry about finding a job; they long for knowledge and education; and they want to be independent and able to cater for their own needs. But at the same time their hearts ache for parents dead or left behind, they fear nepotism on the job market, they deeply worry about their inability to feed or clothe a future wife and children if their situation does not change. Their questions – so common to all inquisitive young people – about where they are in life and why, about where they want to be and what the world is trying to show them, are tainted by their vivid memories of war and violence, loss and separation. I noticed that ‘transition’ is one of the principle ways in which the young refugees I spoke to relate to the world surrounding them. It is as if there are constantly making mental notes on what is the same and what is different between ‘home and here’, and between ‘here and elsewhere’. People in general respond to change - are surprised by it, amazed or petrified, challenged or excited. Transition helps us to think about who we are and what we want, as the changes we are confronted with force us to evaluate, to decide on what we value positively and what negatively, on what we wish to strive for and what leaves us indifferent. Refugees, in contrast to their common representation as passive victims, are constantly faced with choices to make – the first one being the choice to leave (often a last conscious choice after having tried a long list of alternatives). I do not want to imply that this sets refugees apart from other people, as indeed most people’s lives are full of decision-making. However, I do believe that people who come from a situation of war and move into exile are faced with choices and changes that surpass those of ‘ordinary’ people in terms of intensity and the impact of their consequences.

However, thinking of the young people in Kampala in terms of lives in transition, I feel I also need to bring in its antonym, i.e. concepts like stability, permanence or stagnation. Is it a matter of what glasses we put on whether we see change or stagnation? We can think of the world at the beginning of this 21st century as a world in transition, but at the same time it is not very hard to picture it as all but changing, to picture its history as repeating itself, with the powerful and the powerless in frozen positions vis-à-vis each other. Similarly I can turn around the image of the young refugees’ lives as changing, and picture them living in a standstill situation of misery without an end in sight. It is depressing to look at the world in these terms, but it is part of reality. And I am quite sure the young people in Kampala find themselves oscillating between these two opposite ways of looking at their own lives.

By persistently asking questions and wanting to make sense, and especially by writing down (life)stories, we tend to create a dimension of permanence about other people’s lives. This may be
highly at odds with the way people experience their lives, or even: people may need to see their position in life as temporary in order to be able to cope\textsuperscript{11}.

Conflicting stories, interpretations and views are at the heart of all accounts of war and flight. For us researchers born and bred in the tradition of western science that is often difficult to deal with; equivocality makes us feel nervous, we live with the philosophical legacy of non-contradiction, which is reflected in our concept of truth. For many of us, even in this ‘post-modern world’, it is still difficult to discard the concept of truth with a capital T. Interestingly, in African philosophy, truth is by definition multidimensional and ever-changing. Does research into forced migration and violence maybe challenge us to rethink certain long-treasured tenets of western science?

I wish to end with a few words from Paulin Hountondji, the philosopher from Benin. He said during that evening last week: human responsibility is not only about responsibility in action, but also about taking responsibility for what you believe in, for the things you assert\textsuperscript{12}. I cannot agree more, as it is true that, at least partly, the world of words creates the world of things…

\textsuperscript{11} See Nencel (2001) for a discussion of this problem in her research with women who prostitute, and for her critical and original evaluation of other feminist epistemological principles.

\textsuperscript{12} Compare Donna Haraway: “… an argument for situated and embodied knowledges and against various forms of unlocatable, and thus irresponsible, knowledge claims. Irresponsible means unable to call into account” (1991:191).
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