

Insider/Outsider Dilemma: Experience-based Reflections on the Study of Manhood Ritual

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Abstract

The notion that someone can get inside another's belief system and speak with integrity about it exists in tension alongside the notion that only those within a tradition can speak for it. This raises the politics of methods, power and membership. These controversies continue, but re-creating the claims and counter-claims provides invaluable insight. This paper highlights the relationship between studying, practising and the complex nature of categorisations. It draws on a field-based experience among members of the Ogo society in Amasiri, Nigeria. The paper argues that the categories of 'insider' and 'outsider' are not clear-cut categories, but rather they involve complex and often shifting positions.

Key words: Insider, Outsider, Ogo society, Initiation and Experience.

Introduction

The 'insider/outsider problem' has been a part of the academic study of religion since the middle of the nineteenth century. The problem largely concerned two apparently conflicting issues: On one hand were those who suggested there was something specific about 'religion' that implied those who did not share a 'religious outlook' could not hope to understand the 'real' nature of religion at all. On the other hand, there were those who argued that researchers who were also members of the religion being studied were so involved in what was happening that they could not possibly hope to understand the religion from an 'objective' position. Even today, the problem of defining complex notions of the terms 'religion', 'being religious', 'objectivity,' and what it means to be an insider or outsider still remains.

Relating to this is the question of what it is that insiders share that outsiders do not. When bystanders observe the same traffic accident, their individual testimonies about what happened and who was at fault may differ. When two friends read the same novel, their respective retellings may emphasise different events and reflect different impressions of the characters. These differences in interpretations appear in qualitative research as well: Two participant-observers might tell different stories of the same culture. What qualitative researchers report from an investigation often reflects what they expect to find, what they look for, and

how they perceive their role. In other words, scholars' perspective on their research shapes their interpretation and therefore what they report as knowledge.

A description of the researcher's field-based experience among members of the indigenous Ogo society in Amasiri, south-eastern Nigeria, highlights the fact that a researcher's notions of self-intersect with those of the people studied in multiple ways. Recently, with the reflexive turn in the social sciences, it is no longer assumed that researchers can remain 'objective'. Most contemporary ethnographers draw attention to the ways in which the researchers themselves affect the production of information. These include an important discussion about how the researcher's status as an insider or an outsider affects data gathering and analysis.

This paper therefore raises a few methodological issues regarding how researchers can best be situated in the empirical world, thus connecting them to specific sites, persons, groups, and institutions. This paper also raises issues about the formulation of knowledge and its interpretation. Furthermore, it illustrates that the constantly shifting, ambiguous boundaries between people becomes an important part of the research process. The following questions relate to the explorations within this paper: Can anyone understand the religious experience of someone else? Or is religion something that must be experienced to be understood? What does it mean to experience and understand religion?

This paper contends that categories of insider or outsider are socially constructed and are therefore constantly in flux. Being an insider or an outsider is not a steady definition of one's role but depends on the particular interactive situation, determined by changing attributes or patterns of action and interests of the actors.

Historical and Socio-Political Background

Amasiri is the traditional name of the autonomous villages groups that include Ezeke, Ndukwe, Ohechara, Poperi and Ihie (Oko 1993:22). The villages of Amasiri are compact but with populations in the thousands. According to the 1991 Nigerian census count, the clan then had a population of 49,000 (Oko 1993: 15). The Intelligence Report of 1932 offers additional insight about the clan:

Like the Afikpo the Amaseris are a strong virile race famed for their wrestling and powers of endurance. They are conservative to a degree and have withstood the advance of civilization despite their proximity to the government station....Although it may be said that civilization has made little impression upon Amaseris [sic]; they cannot be termed a timid or retiring people... (Intelligent Report 1932:7, Obinna 2001:8).

Even though this extract likely represents a colonial perspective, it gives an insight into the Amasiri life, including their fame for wrestling and endurance. These characteristics were especially visible through the activities and initiation rituals of the Ogo society, which tested the strength and endurance of the males.

Amasiri history is largely fragmentary, an accumulation of different groups migrating at various times to settle in the villages (Oko 1993:15). The approximate date of their departure and arrival is estimated to be between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Intelligence Reports 1932:13).

The Amasiri are united by kinship and descent, which is defined by an actual or perceived lineage from a common ancestor. Although the different villages recognise and appropriate their specific ancestors, the clan collectively recognises Ekuma Ubaghala as its ancestor; hence the clan is also called ‘Amasiri Ekuma Ubaghala’. But when Western missionaries first encountered ancestor veneration among the Amasiri, they dismissed it as mere superstition without understanding the complexity of the clan’s cosmologies.

This traditional understanding of Amasiri and its world appears to follow Emile Durkheim’s sociological approach, which assumes primacy of society over the individual (Morrison 2006:153). In his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1961:47), Durkheim defined religion as a social phenomenon – that is, in a way that gives priority to its social rather than its psychological dimensions. Religion, according to Durkheim is “a unified system of beliefs and practices (rites) relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart or forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” According to Durkheim religion serves the interest of social cohesion, and this plays out in the relationship between Amasiri and its ancestors. This symbolic role of religion further seems to agree with the view that religion is indispensable to society, because its inherent moral functions result in social unity (Giddens 1996:114). Among the Amasiri, belief in ancestors acts as a form of social control that also regulates the conduct of individuals. The constant reminder of the good deeds and presence of ancestors act as a spur for good conduct, and the belief that the dead can punish those who violate traditionally sanctioned mores acts as a deterrent.

Belief in ancestors therefore represents a powerful source of moral sanction, because they affirm the values upon which society is based. Ancestors are thus held as models to be copied in an effort to strictly adhere, preserve, and transmit the traditions and norms of the clan. As the benevolent spiritual guardians of their families and villages, ancestors are believed to reincarnate in new-born babies among the clan. Many children are often named after their family or village ancestors who are believed to have been reincarnated. Special attention and favour are often bestowed on such a child as a mark of respect to the ancestor. Among the Amasiri, child-naming is regarded as very important: Names are not supposed to be randomly selected but thoughtfully chosen through divination. It is believed given names are so powerful that the names children bear can influence their life-cycle, integrity and profession. Name provides a person’s identity and a window on one’s culture and oneself. It links individuals and families to their past, to their ancestors, and it forms a part of and an expression of spirituality.

The Ogo Society among the Amasiri

The Ogo society is an institution into which every male is expected to be initiated. The initiation sets the platform for social mobility and incorporation into the adult society. Without it, a traditional Amasiri male is perceived as a social misfit. The Ogo society is believed to be as old as Amasiri clan. An interviewee explains that the Ogo society was brought to Amasiri from its neighbouring clan, Ikwini Ekumubaghala at the present Cross-River state. He observes that although their fathers did not give them details as to why they introduced the Ogo society to Amasiri, it has remained central in the clan's pursuit of unity and maintenance of social order. The interviewee further observes that there were questions young people and even elderly people could not ask, especially with regards to the reasons behind its introduction of the Ogo society, but that they were meant to accept, believe and defend it. According to him, 'that is what our fathers have been doing these past years, and none of us is ready to break what our fathers started, even if we want to, we do not know how, as we were not told'.

The interviewee's comments suggest that the question of how the Ogo society was introduced to Amasiri is not central, but what its initiation does and why the clan believes it does so draws crucial attention. The Ogo society is open to all males, and its initiation is a prerequisite for participation in adult roles. The initiation focuses on the centrality of the society, and the images that are created to encourage participants to experience transcendence. The initiation into the Ogo society defines boundaries between members of the society and outsiders, between different statuses and ideas. Ritual thus can be seen as the presumably immutable substratum of religious behaviour that pertains not only to social stability, but to transition, passage and change.

The Ogo society has initiation processes for both the boys' and adult groups that describe the processes within the boys' adults' groups. Each initiation has symbolic meanings, including death to the world, purification and rebirth. Furthermore, the initiation reinforces the clarity or rigidity of the Amasiri's categories of boys and men, male and female, initiated and uninitiated, while simultaneously moving people from one category to another. The initiation processes into the Ogo society thus reinforce the structure of the clan, because they reformulate social status as well as enhance the sense of community. Thus Ogo society (although with the recognisable fluidity in its processes — creates a significant pattern in indigenous life and perpetuates social institutions.

Theorizing the Insider/Outsider Experience

The insider/outsider problem encompasses whether — or how — a researcher "can study, understand, or explain the beliefs, words or actions of another" (McCutecheon 1999:2). However, the gap between involvement and external observation constitutes a key methodological problem in religious studies. The insider-researcher has, as a member of the 'in-group', access to its past and present histories. She or he is a party to the nuances and idioms within their shared

language, and because of her or his proximity to the internal structure of the group, the hierarchical position of members within the group is clearly defined. Since the insider researcher shares the social world of the research participants there is less likelihood of his experiencing any ‘culture shock or disorientation’ Hockey (1993:119). The expectation is that the context will be understood and appreciated in a way not open to an outsider researcher. Insights and sensitivity to things both said and unsaid and to the culture(s) operating at the time of the research — all these are potentially available to the insider researcher.

Hockey (1993:119) offers a further advantage for insider research, namely that there is the possibility of ‘enhanced rapport’ between respondent and insider researcher. He suggests that respondents are more likely to divulge “intimate details of their lives to someone considered empathetic.” Hockey cautions against insider researchers’ presumptions that their ‘partialness’ of knowledge reflects the full picture of the researched location. ‘Overfamiliarity’ and ‘taken-for-granted assumptions’ are further pitfalls to be avoided. Robson (2002:535) similarly warns the insider researcher against ‘preconceptions about issues and solutions.’ Needless to say there is the parallel problem of the research participants presuming the insider researcher knows more than she or he does and therefore not sharing certain material.

Although insider researchers must be cautious about such assumptions, they do have the benefit of their “knowledge of trustworthy recipes for interpreting the social world” (Schutz, 1976:103), in which they are located as members. Schutz describes these recipes as enabling ‘thinking as usual’, i.e. replacing ‘truth with “truisms” and ‘substituting the self-explanatory for the questionable.’ The attraction of such an approach is understandable for, as Senge comments (1998:61) there is comfort in the application of ‘familiar solutions to problems, sticking to what we know best.’

However the clear danger of this attitude is that the insider researcher will approach situations with assumptions and preconceptions applicable to the home group. Such an approach might not enable the researcher to achieve insights and effect change because ‘thinking as usual’ will only perpetuate the status quo. Senge (1998:61) contends that we need to take a holistic view of the systems in place in our lives and our organizations and to appreciate the interconnectivity of the parts within the whole. This is no easy task if, an insider researcher, is a part of the whole and therefore lack the objectivity and sense of distance necessary to appreciate interrelationships within it.

This issue of objectivity is a challenging one for researchers. Our experiences and the meanings we attribute to them are shaped by our backgrounds, the environment in which we live, the culture (s) in which we function, and the people with whom we interact. Therefore however much one seeks to claim to be non-partisan and objective, preconceptions and stereotypical responses will come into play. Bell (1993) comments that it is an ‘impossible goal’ to seek objectivity but that the researcher must nonetheless strive to attain it.

Hubbard et al. (2001) do not, however, champion this striving for objectivity. They challenge the concept of the researcher as ‘merely an instrument’ and question the belief that the researcher can remain, in Schutz’s words (1976:101), a “disinterested scientific onlooker of the social world.” They are critical of a research culture “that, on the whole, trains researchers to be rational and objective, and ‘extract out’ emotion.” Fontana and Frey (1994:367), on the other hand, appear to hold to the research culture, which reveres objectivity and holds that:

...establishing close rapport may create problems for the research as the researcher may lose his or her distance and objectivity, over-identify with the individual or group under study, and ‘forgo the academic role. (quoted in Hubbard *et al*, 2001: 120)

In contrast, Sherman & Webb (1988) claim that if one is to pursue qualitative research successfully, one needs to appreciate the experiences of the researched as nearly as possible as its participants live it. Nonetheless, caution must be taken to distinguish between information given by ritual specialists and information given by laypersons i.e. between esoteric and exoteric interpretations. A researcher should also be careful to ascertain whether a given explanation is truly representative of either of these categories or whether it is uniquely personal view. Can this be achieved if the researcher:

...intentionally refrains from participating in the network of plans, means and ends relations, motives and chances, hopes and fears, which the actor within the social world uses for interpreting his experiences of it... (Schutz, 1976: 101).

On the other hand would not such a close encounter with the research participants’ experiences as that described by Sherman & Webb (1988) lay the researcher open to the criticism of lacking sufficient distance from the locus of research in order to achieve any real level of objectivity (Fontana & Frey, 1994)?

In their work concerning research interviews, Miller & Glassner (1997:99) reject both the positivist goal of a ‘pure’ interview...providing a ‘mirror reflection’ of the reality that exists in the social world’ and the radical social constructionists’ suggestion that “no knowledge about a reality that is ‘out there’ in the social world can be obtained from the interview” (1997: 100).

Donald Wiebe, like some other scholars, is committed to a pure science of religion. Such scholars minimise the role of insiders, insisting that failure to do so may see theology returning to the academy (1999:7). According to Chitanda (2005:82), this specific reading of insider/outside suggests there are no possibilities of bridging the gap between the two approaches. It is on the basis on this that it has often been argued that there are two mutually exclusive ways to ‘understand’ religion: as an insider who ‘knows’ through his experience of his faith

or as an outsider who knows about a faith by bringing it into hers or his laboratory or hers or his armchair and systematically inspecting it (Dougherty 1981:297).

On the contrary, Schipper 1999:27 observes the complimentary nature of the insider/outsider positions:

Of course, there are experiences that someone from outside does not share with insiders, but this also holds true the other way round. Insiders' and outsiders' views can be both enriching and restricting. Due to a certain detachment, someone who looks in from outside observes things that are not obvious to the insiders, since they are too self-evident, too close to their situation and experience. On the other hand, outsiders lack this intimate knowledge and experience.

It is thus better to consider insiders and outsiders as complementary. The academic study of religion is better served by recognised the relative strengths of each category of researchers.

The Insider Researcher

The researcher was well acquainted with the location of his initial research – Amasiri and its Ogo society - and with its ethos, culture, systems and formal structures. In fact the researcher was a participant within this culture and, as Richardson (1990: 24) comments: “Participation in a culture includes participation in the narratives of that culture, a general understanding of the stock of meanings and their relationships to each other.” This being the case, the researcher was able to short-cut much of the mutual familiarisation phase necessary to seek out common ground and establish a research relationship (Miller & Glassner, 1997). This position is a privileged one and is essential: ‘...in order to make legitimate knowledge claims, researchers should “have lived or experienced their material in some fashion” (quoted in Miller & Glassner, 1997:105)

Notwithstanding, the researcher's ‘partial’ insider awareness of the internal politics of the Amasiri and the Ogo society meant he had to accept that those with the power to implement his recommendations might not be supportive of his research. As quoted in Miller & Glassner, this particular problem can be described as the ‘prophet in own country phenomenon’ and adds that ‘outside advice may be more highly valued’ (1997:105). This latter issue notwithstanding, the researcher entered the research arena believing that he had, through his privileged access to the participants and through their shared experience of past and present histories, the opportunity to explore in depth the dynamic of the Ogo society.

As an insider the researcher presumed that he understood how the system functioned, and assumed that others had encountered similar problems and benefits. What he failed to acknowledge was that his hierarchical role played a major part in how members of the Ogo society interacted with him. It quickly became clear that the researcher needed to be involved with far more than the philosophy behind the

scheme. Not only did he need to reflect upon his partial knowledge (Schutz, 1976) and its impact upon his research, there were also much more fundamental issues of space, time and power to be addressed before the researcher could even begin to consider the focus of this insider research.

A further cautionary note for the 'insider' researcher comes from Hockey (1993:199) and concerns the danger of 'the native going stranger', thereby potentially endangering the benefits of insider status. Even though the researcher's initial stance was that of the insider, as the period of study progressed he became gradually aware of a certain dislocation occurring between his sense of being a participant within the research arena and his acceptance of a non-participant observational stance. This certainly has resonance with Hockey's concept of 'the native going stranger', but contrary to Hockey's warnings, this re-location did not appear to incur any loss of benefits.

In the research among members of the Ogo society in the Amasiri, the researcher saw the change of stance as enhancing my findings because they could not be discounted for being contaminated with personal motivations, because he would no longer be there to benefit from any potential implementation of his recommendations. The researcher also found interviewees became more open as they perceived how his research was serving to distance him from the internal politics of the community. The apparent power of the researcher's hierarchical status was lost, but a greater sense of freedom to explore all avenues was released.

The Outsider Researcher

Schutz (1976:100) describes the term 'stranger' in the context of his ethnographic study to be "an adult individual of our times and civilisation who tries to be permanently accepted or at least tolerated by the group which he approaches." Having initially arrived for the research among the Amasiri, the researcher's concern was to be 'accepted or at least tolerated' so that he could carry out his research. Schutz (110) identifies 'two basic traits' with regard to the stranger's relationship with the in-group, namely 'the stranger's objectivity' and 'his doubtful loyalty.' He suggests that the reason for the stranger's objectivity

...lies in his own bitter experience of the limits of the 'thinking as usual', which has taught him that a man may lose his status, his rules of guidance, and even his history and that the normal way of life is always far less guaranteed than it seems.

Although the researcher recognised some strangeness of now being within Amasiri culture after being away for more than two years, he does not relate to Schutz's description of the stranger's bitter experience. Perhaps this is because it was the researcher's choice to move away from a social world in which he possessed status and a history. Although during the research he was fairly without a formally recognised position within the community hierarchical structure, this lack of 'rules of guidance', was a liberating experience, enabling him to move outside

the ‘thinking as usual’ box and enter the research arena without any sense of strings controlling my investigations or ‘recipes’ which might prescribe my actions (Schutz, 1976:110).

Schutz’s second ‘stranger’ trait of ‘doubtful loyalty’ is not easily brushed aside. Researcher neutrality demands that loyalty is not apportioned within the organisation, where this would affect the status of the researcher as non-partisan and unbiased. However, as a native of Amasiri clan, the integrity of the researcher embodied obligations towards the clan, which include the concept of loyalty but should exclude ‘blind loyalty’. Those participating in the research also place ethical and other obligations upon a researcher in relation to their contributions to the research process.

The role of the researcher – the relationship between “us” and “them” and between the researcher and the “researched community” – has increasingly been deconstructed and problematized in recent years. This has led to an increased awareness of the need for critical and reflexive thought regarding the implications of any researcher’s positionality and situatedness. Turner (1985:205) observes that to understand others and grasp their sociocultural environment one ought to make oneself “vulnerable to the total impact not just of the other culture but of the intricate human existence of others.” Nonetheless, the researcher is cautioned against “going native” in the process. “Going native” encapsulates the development of a sense of “overrapport” between the researcher and those “under study,” to the extent that the researcher essentially “becomes” one of those under study (Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Liao, 2004:434). Alder and Alder (1987:8) write of “going native” as a problem rather than a desirable option.

In view of this, the researcher among the Ogo society was conscious of personal reflections about the potential ‘shoot the messenger’ reaction on the part of any community to unexpected and possibly unpalatable findings that might be deemed to be disloyal to the clan. These reflections are all the more heightened by Schutz’s words:

Therefore, the stranger discerns, frequently with a grievous clear-sightedness, the rising of a crisis which may menace the whole foundation of the ‘relatively natural conception of the world’, while all those symptoms pass unnoticed by the members of the in-group, who rely on the continuance of their customary way of life (Schutz, 1976:110).

It is at this point that the anticipated benefits of an outsider researcher, namely non-partisanship and objectivity are vital to any message being accepted. If there is any hint of a researcher’s findings being biased towards one side of the evidence then the research loses its impact. Outsider researchers must protect this impartiality of approach if their ‘clear-sightedness’ is to be responded to. How then does this marry up with the need for empathy with the participants in order to facilitate disclosure of

often quite sensitive information? How does one deal with issues of confidentiality, which - if honoured - blunt the clarity of a researcher's insights?

The latter issue of confidentiality is, of course, one that confronts both insider and outsider researchers. Confidentiality derives from a relationship when an individual gives private information to another on the condition or understanding that the other will not disclose it, or will disclose it, to the extent that the individual allows. Baez (2002: 35-36) expresses grave concerns about the impact of confidentiality agreements upon the potential effectiveness of research: "...in order for qualitative research to be transformative the convention of confidentiality must be questioned...at every research opportunity confidentiality should be theorised for what it permits and forecloses." His main concern about the researcher omitting or altering data to protect sources is that this: '... [undermines] critical agency because it can accomplish the same thing as confidentiality: keeping oppressive power arrangements hidden' (Baez, 2002:41).

The outsider-researcher, who has worked to build a trusting relationship with the respondents, is unlikely to jeopardise this relationship through publishing without the consent of the research participants. Thus it is all too easy to see how Baez's fears might be realised. It should be mentioned that the insider and outsider position is far more complicated and fluid than can be imagined and that such complication bear directly on issues of credible data and knowledge production. One such complications involved the researcher becoming a kind of 'suspicious insider,' especially when he discussed issues that were considered culturally and politically sensitive.

The issue of a researcher's character and personality plays an equally vital role to that of outsider impartiality versus insider knowledge (Hubbard *et al*, 2001; Laslett, 1990; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Gaining the trust of members of the Ogo society as an outsider researcher proved most difficult. A few of the interviewees were apprehensive as they perceived the researcher as a 'Whiteman's spy' whose purpose it was to gather information and sale to the West. Furthermore, some interviewees needed to be clarified on the researcher's status before they could grant interviews, in terms of whether or not he is an initiated male into the Ogo society. However, the researcher's insider experience was also helpful and affected relationships with many members of the Ogo society: It was fairly easy to establish contacts and relationships with interviewees.

The researcher realised that until he could convince them of his integrity and trustworthiness, there was no way he was going to acquire research data. This apparent distrust on the part of the interviewees could have impacted upon the reliability of the data, had not the participants been reassured concerning their privacy and rights. Contrary to Miller and Glassner's (1997:104) findings that respondents were more concerned with the end purpose of the research rather than issues of confidentiality, he observed that, while the use that would be made of the data was of interest to the participants, confidentiality was uppermost in their minds. This was due to the culture in which they functioned (Le Gallais, 2001),

where they hoped that the promised anonymity of response would afford them a degree of protection.

Conclusion

The researcher's field-based experiences as described in this paper not only reinforce the implications of being an insider/outsider, it also highlights the incomplete and unstable nature of an insider/outsider. It also raises questions on the formulation of knowledge and its interpretation. Furthermore, it illustrates that the constantly shifting, ambiguous boundaries between people become an important part of the research process. It would be extremely naïve to ignore insider/outsider dynamics of research relationships, neither is it sufficient to treat bias, social identities, and insider/outsider status as self-evident or fixed. In contrast, categories of insider and outsider are socially constructed and are therefore constantly in change. However, all identities are ambiguous and permeable, and some are much more permeable than others. The argument is not that 'insider' and 'outsider' are meaningless terms: Social boundaries cannot be dispelled into a haze of post-modern relativism. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to question when and how existing and imagined boundaries might be subjective, ambiguous and transformable.

Differences of ethnicity, age, and class between the researcher, who is considered an outsider/insider, and the members of the group being studied, pose special problems. Thus 'getting in', or the process of gaining, building, and maintaining trust with the group under study, is difficult for any researcher, but should be constantly negotiated. However, social research is often influenced by the researcher's personal characteristics: age, gender, linguistic ability and other qualities influence the researcher's ability to form relationships and gather information. The researcher's personal interests motivate her or him and help give the researcher's contributions distinctive merits. The objectivity that can be attained in the social sciences does not stem from any attempt to distance the researcher from his or her subject matter, but from interactions between researchers.

Research is both a product and a process: Researchers are embedded within field experiences in such a way that all their interactions involve choices, and thus, there is a moral dimension – made explicit or not – in all anthropological writing. In essence, what the researcher sees or fails to see, reporting a particular misunderstanding or embarrassment, or ignoring it, all involve choices. Researchers also make choices when they edit their final ethnographic product. Researchers need to do more by declaring their biases. This means that scholars need to account not just for what they produce, but for *how* they produce knowledge and the ideological, socio-political, epistemological, and methodological context within which it is produced.

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