

# Experiences of local research assistants in field research

Support for Western scientists in the Kavango East region, Namibia

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## 1. Introduction and historical overview

It is accepted that research assistants play a pivotal role to researchers particularly in translating and transcribing ethnographic material (Caretta/Cheptum 2017). Discussions on the relationships between researchers and assistants point to the collaboration between a researcher and research assistants, not just out of a need for employment but as an opportunity for the assistant to gain knowledge about his or her own community. Seemingly, the central benefit of the research assistant in the field work experiences is not limited or defined in monetary terms but in other contexts, it relates to terms of igniting the love to pursue further tertiary education. Examples from South Africa, a close neighbour to Namibia with similar colonial histories, indicate that Africans have been motivated to become research assistants by financial rewards, by the associated status benefits, developing new skills and knowledge and by a desire, to contribute to a profession that was critical of government and white settler dominance (Bank 2008).

Although research assistants have been central to ethnographic practice, the conventions of academic labour have left their roles understated and obscured (Middleton/Cons 2014). Important discussions surround or focus on the relationship between researchers and assistants, particularly the cross disciplinary and cross-cultural views on the positionality of the researchers and the field assistants (Pasquini/Olaniyan 2004). These important discussions on positionality reveals research assistants' experiences of the feeling of invisibility and exclusion during the fieldwork data collection process. They further reflect researcher's reflexive experiences of fieldwork in contrast to the field assistant's reflexive account. The invisibility and exclusion are true for the research assistants who also take the role of translators or interpreters, local cultural guide and as members of the ethnographic team in conducting interviews (Turner 2010). The invisibility of research assistants has been more pronounced in discussions on the complications of authorship representation that has left a mark in anthropological studies on self-reflexive ethnographies (Gupta 2014). Although research assistants have fundamentally configured the process and results of data collection and the notion of the field itself, their visibilities seemingly disappear in the self-presentation of the authors, who assert their own authority. The roles of assistants, guides, collaborators and friends have also been highlighted in conflict research and have allowed for open and honest discussions on the methodological and ethical challenges of conflict research (Jenkins 2018). Existing historiography points to the centrality of assistants in the ethnographic research process but these valuable contributions or roles have been downplayed by researchers in eventual publications, a situation which is true for Namibia. In Namibia,

many western researchers did not and continue not to understand the language, culture and physical geography of the communities. It is the field assistant who usually opens doors for the western researchers to access information they require. When one traces the history of research assistants to the period of missionaries in the early periods of colonial times in Namibia, it is easy to note that missionaries were amongst the early example of western researchers who were assisted by the local people to collect information regarding local languages and cultures. The local people provided the information or collected the oral data and gave it to the missionaries to write books, articles, journals and to translate the bible, hymns, schoolbooks etc. (Lau 1995). Despite the evidence that Africans played a great role to supporting missionaries to write African histories and culture, they are hardly given due recognition by the missionaries. One such example was a Rhenish missionary Hugo Hahn who was assisted by Uerita Gertse who did not receive due recognition (Lau 1995). Further example includes the publications by Father Josef Gotthard titled *Auf zum Okavango* (Gotthardt 1933). It remains difficult to validate the extent to which recognition was accorded to the local research assistants. Father Josef Wust, who worked at Nyangana and later at Andara mission station and who is said by Fisch to have left behind a lot of materials, that he collected as an ardent historian or person with a huge interest in history, provides no indication to how research assistants were acknowledged (Fisch 2022). An exception is Axel Fleisch and co-editors on the Kavango people publication who published in verbatim the oral sources they collected (Fleisch/Möhlig, 2002). Patricia Hayes published in verbatim Vilho Kaulinge's History of Ovakwanyama of Mandume Ndemufayo and she chose to co-edit the book with her former research assistant Dan Haipinge (Kaulinge 1997). Evidently, in the early years of colonialism, researchers were self-centred as they wrote from their own personal perspectives and glorified their own names and side-lined the African assistants in the process. This practice did not end with early missionaries, early explorers or European travellers but extended to academic western researchers in later years. They continued to write their research without acknowledging the roles and contributions of their field research assistants.

Although research assistants' role and contribution to field research was in the past overlooked, downplayed or not recognised at all, this changed with time. Researchers found ways to reinsert research assistants into ethnography's past and present contexts. Such changes and continuities in the recognition of the roles and contributions in Namibia remain unknown as not many studies have focussed on exploring such roles and contributions. There is now a pressing need to explore the experiences of research assistants in Namibia with visiting Western researchers. I provide discussions surrounding roles and responsibilities of field research assistants, the relation between researchers and assistants beyond the research field work and the future of the collected raw materials for further use by African research assistants and their communities.

This paper is based on the personal experiences of research assistants, which were collected through oral interviews, using a narrative approach, a form of discourse which interrogates language in terms of how and why events are storied rather than only focusing on the content (Riessman/Quinney 2005: 394). The approach helps to examine the position of researcher and research assistant within the research process. I focused the analysis on how meanings are translated from African languages across into English. I further used the self-reflective approach in adding my personal experiences as a