

The making of the fieldwork-er: debating agency in elites research.

Mattia Fumanti (University of Manchester)

Based on the outcome of 20 months fieldwork on the process of elite formation and the making of public space in a northern Namibian town, this paper explores the challenges of doing research among elites. Elites, whether political, economic, administrative, religious or traditional, occupy a prominent position within a community, which sets them apart from the rest of the population. While elite status inevitably brings to its members prestige, recognition and privileges, at the same time it often attracts criticism and suspicion of the elites' *modus operandi*. For these reasons the elites tend to keep an aura of secrecy around their activities, thus limiting access to their social milieu by outsiders. Beyond secrecy, in Africa, where the relationship between the elites and their subalterns is often socially and culturally regulated through age practices, generational difference can become a considerable hindrance for a young researcher. Taking inspiration from the work of feminist anthropologists, I reflect on my own experience to highlight the problematic role of the researcher's agency in the context of elite studies. Much as in the case of gender, I argue that age and generation regulates and determines the access of fieldworkers to their chosen field sites. As a consequence, fieldworkers doing research among elites have to constantly negotiate and adjust their position in the field. I aim to stress that while on many occasions these negotiations respond to the fieldworker's conscious intended strategies, in other circumstances there is little room for individual choices, let alone conscious and planned manoeuvring.

An introduction to Rundu elites

The definition of what constitutes the elite is always a highly problematic one for social scientists. Pareto (1981) and Mosca (1972) define them as the chosen ones, Putnam (1976) as the most powerful in public decision making and Marxist scholars of the Gramscian tradition tend to present elites as the bourgeois capitalist class who own the means of production and control the bureaucratic apparatus.

Of course, as various anthropologists have pointed out, the identification of the elite should be contextual. Chris Shore and Stephen Nugent (2002) in their recently edited volume *Elite Cultures* define the elites as those who collectively occupy the most influential positions or roles in the governing institutions of the community, the leaders, rulers and decision makers. Similarly Marcus defines the elites as, 'Those with political power and who control the distribution of resources in their locales' (Marcus 1998).

All these definitions are valid in their own terms but for the purpose of this paper I will leave the definition of elites widely open and adopt a broader approach. I want to go beyond that body of elite studies which concerns itself purely with the ways in which a group or groups of individuals emerge, whether through publicly recognized merit, inheritance, or even force, into a position of prominence within a community (Mosca 1972, Putnam 1976, Scott 1990, Wright Mills 1956). Here my aim is to open

the analysis of elites in the direction of subjectivity and foreground what I call, after Pareto's usage, the 'subjective dimension' of the elites—that is the values, ideals and expectations which constitute them (Pareto 1901, 1981).

What existing definitions of and theoretical approaches to elites tend to miss is the highly heterogeneous nature of the elites themselves. It is this characteristic of the elites which I aim to capture here. The elites with whom I worked in Rundu, a middle-range town in northern Namibia, were composed of traditional, administrative, educational, political and religious elites. They emerged during the seventies, and consolidated their role after the Namibian independence in 1990.¹ Thus, the various categories of elitism are not mutually exclusive and often the position of members of the Rundu elite overlap and interlock in various ways (see Dahl 1961).

My evidence shows that this black power elite,² emerged in Rundu through two different career channels. These career choices related to few opportunities left for the black population by the apartheid regime. The first career channel, and the most successful one, was through employment in education. In most cases the contemporary leaders started their careers in the education sector. They were at some point in their lives teachers, then vice-principals and principals in the schools of the region. The second, less successful channel, was through employment in the public sector as civil servants within what was then known as the Kavango administration (see Totemeyer 1978 for a comparative study of Owamboland). However, these two channels were not mutually exclusive and the elites showed a reasonable degree of occupational mobility rather than being fixed in one channel. After independence they were appointed to senior posts in the local administration by virtue of their knowledge, education, involvement in the liberation struggle and political affiliation to the SWAPO party.³

Education in Namibia, like in many other postcolonial African countries, has always had a very strong emotional connotation because of its enormous potential for emancipation, liberation and social mobility. It is around educational achievements that the elite's values and public recognition are constituted in post-apartheid Rundu. Formed in the experience, first of schooling during apartheid and then in the trauma of the liberation struggle, the elites' personal views on education are deeply imbued with the values of professionalism, achievement and civic virtues, and the post-independence rhetoric of hard work and sacrifice. These elites represent the *intelligentsia* of Rundu and as part of their official duties they are actively involved in the public life of the town, occupying many positions in local associations and NGOs,

¹Rundu is an important administrative center and the capital of the Kavango region of Namibia. The town, having experienced an exponential growth in population, has faced massive changes over the last two decades. According to statistics, the population increased from 12,307 in 1981 to 20,980 in 1991, and reached 43,789 in 1999 (see Urban Dynamics Africa).

²I use this term in opposition to the resurgent white settler elite who, often in opposition to this black power elite, are composed of Afrikaans and Portuguese speaking people. This white elite has been resurging over the last few years dominating Rundu's formal economic sector. Elsewhere (Fumanti 2003) I discuss their problematic position; my discussion in this paper is limited to the Rundu black elite.

³SWAPO is the acronym of South West Africa People's Organization, the Namibian ruling party which led the liberation struggle against apartheid.

contributing substantially to the process of nation-building and to the making of the public sphere at the local level of this post-apartheid town.

The problem of the fieldworker's agency

In a place like Rundu, where people put great emphasis on 'civility' and 'respect' in public (two concepts constructed around notions of seniority), I found it hard as a young researcher to approach members of these elites, to the extent that my own agency was often put into question. I use the term agency here in its relational and intersubjective sense (see Durham 1995 and Nyamnjoh 2002). I want to propose an approach which, by emphasizing intersubjectivity, brings to the fore the process of individual negotiation which takes place in daily social encounters in the field. I emphasize that the agency of individuals in the field is mutually and dialectically constituted through a continuous dialogue. Writing about the day-to-day requests that pervade social encounters in Botswana, Deborah Durham makes it clear that agency is constituted and reconstituted through these interactions: 'Individuals exist in Botswana, but they do not pre-exist social intercourse: they must be created, or create themselves repeatedly and repetitively' (1995: 116). And again: 'It follows, then, that people are not construed as independent, self-determining actors of full agentive powers prior to any interchange, but that their definition as such must be forged, and perpetually reforged, in each social encounter' (1995: 118). In doing research among an heterogeneous elite, observing and participating in many social, political and cultural events, I had to constantly renegotiate my own agency in accordance with the position, age and gender of the interlocutor, and adjust to the context of the event itself whether it be more formal, political rallies, town council, NGO and church meetings, or more informal meetings in bars and other public places.

The question of agency has been debated to a great length by feminist anthropologists who discussed the problem of female researcher agency and subjectivity (see Golde 1986 and Strathern 1981). I take their observations as an inspiration for my own discussion of agency. Of course, as a young man myself, doing research among mostly male elites facilitated my research. But it is the discussion of the problematics of agency which is central to my analysis.

Fieldwork in Rundu

When I arrived in Rundu in early January 2000, after a month of archival research in Windhoek, I found the site of my fieldwork to be in an undeclared state of emergency. Namibian National Defence Force soldiers and members of the Special Field Force, the presidential guard, were patrolling the streets. In fact, at the beginning of December 1999, the Angolan army, using Namibian territory as a springboard, launched an offensive against the UNITA⁴ rebel movement in Cuando Cubango, the southernmost Angolan region, bordering Kavango. They captured Calai, a small town across the river from Rundu. For months, the Kavango region became unsafe, as UNITA troops launched cross-border operations, attacking villages, stealing property,

⁴UNITA is the acronym for the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, the rebel movement led by Jonas Savimbi, which after the Angolan Independence in 1975 waged a 30-year war against the Angolan government.

killing and abducting civilians. As a consequence of this renewal of hostilities, a considerable number of Angolan refugees fled across the border into Namibia and settled in temporary shelters throughout the region.

Planning to do research among the Rundu elites, I was aware of the problems of accessibility and secrecy my research posed (see Becker and Meyers 1975, Dexter 1970, Marshall 1984, Ouroussof 2002). I had a contact person prior to my fieldwork, Miss C., a female member of the Rundu elite, whom I met at the University of Manchester during 1999, where she was pursuing her Masters degree in adult literacy. My hope was that Miss C. would be an invaluable gatekeeper and source of help for my research, and so she was at the beginning. Enthusiastic about my research project, she introduced me to eminent members of the Rundu elite, helping me to establish my first local contacts and to make myself known in town. Yet, from the start, I had the feeling that despite her introduction, there was a general sense of mistrust among senior members of the local elite, especially among the SWAPO ruling elite. As the political situation became more and more tense, the elite grew more and more suspicious of my intentions. Increasingly I found doors closed, even the ones that had previously been open. What certainly did not help was the fact that all the expatriate volunteers of VSO, Peace Corps USA and other foreign organizations were withdrawn from the region because of the security situation. As they were pulled out, I appeared in town, raising further suspicion as to my identity and motives.⁵

Nevertheless, to blame the difficulty in accessing the town elite exclusively upon the contingent political situation would be misleading. Worse still, it would distract attention from the need for a serious reflexive account of the complexities of conducting research among elites. There were, of course, other problems too. I have already mentioned the secrecy that often surrounds elites and usually hampers the researcher's efforts. The elites, as the most prominent members within a community, easily become the targets of gossip and the objects of various accusations. For this reason, as I experienced myself, elites try to keep an aura of inaccessibility and secrecy around themselves. Also it is often this very aura that elites exploit to keep their powerful position. As an elite informant said:

'You see as a leader, I feel as though I am living in a house made of glass. There is light inside the house and outside it is dark. I cannot see the people outside, but they can see me. So it is very difficult. People always watch you. They want to see what you do'.

Besides secrecy and the unstable situation in the region, I want to draw attention to my own youth as another element which played a significant part in my research. Because the Rundu elite consisted of junior elders, individuals in their late 40s and early 50s who were not used to younger people taking up their time, I had certain difficulties entering into casual conversations, and could only do so with a few of them.

As my original research project was aimed at focusing on the founding of the SWAPO elite, I found it extremely difficult from the very beginning to establish an

⁵ After a few months I found that there was a curious rumour among the Rundu elites that I was a former South African officer who had been in the area during the war and was now working as a journalist for the BBC World Service.

equal and informal relationship with the majority of the senior elite, let alone be granted formal interviews. Although, with time, the senior elite became more acquainted with my ubiquitous presence in Rundu as ‘our student who likes to be everywhere’, I was often treated in a paternalistic tone as nothing more than a ‘kid’. It is only by maintaining my behaviour within the frame of a respectful junior throughout my fieldwork that I managed in the end to be accepted by the senior elite. As a member of the senior elite put it when bidding me farewell ‘We have really appreciated your stay here, you are a well behaved and respectful person’.

The idea of ‘hanging around’ with the senior elite in a casual, friendly manner, as I’d hoped to do, proved to be a difficult, if not impossible, task. As a consequence, I had to change my fieldwork practice from time to time to negotiate my way around this obstacle.

A few days into my fieldwork, at a bar in Rundu, I got to know a group of young men. They were smartly dressed, and spent most of the evening drinking and talking in a convivial mood. They were constantly cracking jokes, and I liked their irony and sense of humour. I felt that they liked me, too. I started ‘hanging around’ with them and was drawn into their group of youth elite friends. Heirs, in certain cases, to local dynasties whose influence stretches from pre-colonial to postcolonial times, this youth elite of civil servants is more and more disenchanted about the directions taken by nation-building. The expectations raised by independence are still high, but the accomplishments are seen by the youth elite to fall short of the objectives. In their moral reasoning, they see themselves as possessing the right skills and qualities, moral and professional, to contribute to the Namibian post-independence society. Yet they feel blocked in their careers and excluded from the public sphere by the SWAPO ruling party elite. In opposition to the SWAPO ruling elite’s post-independence rhetoric of sacrifice and hard work, they propose a moral discourse on the delivery of governance and the public good, addressing what constitutes capable leadership and moral behaviour in the public sphere.

While following my thesis proposal’s original plan of research with the senior elite, I tried to focus for several months on both elite generations, but the more I was drawn into the youth elite, the less I won access to the senior elite. Nevertheless, this proved to be positive on balance, in that being associated with this upwardly mobile youth elite made me a party to the intergenerational dialogue between the seniors and the juniors, being a close member of the latter. I had the chance to see this dialogue unfold, while I moved between the casual moments I spent with the youth and the more serious ones staged with and by their seniors. While the closer and casual relationship with the youth elite provided access to a backstage, the more formal relationship with the seniors gave me a chance to observe certain onstage or front stage dynamics.

My personal relationship with the youth elite grew stronger with time, especially after my decision to stay in the field despite the fact that the town came under a rocket attack in March 2000. As our shared confidence and mutual trust grew stronger, I became involved in the activities of the Shinyewile club, a club formed by the youth elite in July 2000. At the first general meeting of the club, I was offered the post of secretary and found myself uncertain as to whether to accept it or not. Although the post did not make provision for any remittance, I asked myself to what extent I could associate with the members of the youth elite, and what would be the consequences for my fieldwork. I thought that a greater involvement with them might compromise

my objectivity, and probably end any future hope of access to the senior elite. However, as the relationship with the senior elite proved to be awkward and highly problematic, I decided things could hardly get worse in that regard. Intuitively I felt that there was more to learn from my peers and I accepted the post in the hope that it would give me more insights into the making of Rundu's public space. Assisting my friends with the club activities suddenly gave me access to an important source of information on Rundu's associational life. During the preparation for the several public events, which the club organized during my second period of fieldwork, I was able to observe the ways in which Rundu associational life works. Moving around town, following the youth elite, I observed individuals negotiating their paths in the public sphere by drawing on their personal networks. These observations also gave me clues about who creates the public sphere in Rundu.

Because the making of the public sphere was one of my key interests, I went to as many public and official occasions as possible. To the youth elite, I looked rather odd, for I did not miss a single SWAPO rally party or President's speech, attending all his visits to Rundu: 'Why are you always going there, man? The old man always says the same things', is how they would dismiss his speeches. Nevertheless, my dutifulness allowed me to earn a bit more trust from the ruling elite, by showing that I was, if not a supporter, at least someone with a dedicated interest in SWAPO politics. During my fieldwork, I also faithfully attended the weekly hearings at the Rundu magistrate court, the monthly meetings of Rundu town council, the traditional court hearings presided over by *Foromani* (headman) Kambundu in the town district of Safari, workshops, funerals, weddings and, for a limited period of time, church meetings. On every occasion, I tried to engage in conversations with as many people as possible and, for this reason, I kept up a constant routine, moving around town to visit friends and acquaintances in different places. Rundu was a bigger town than I had expected, and I decided to limit my daily tour of courtesy calls to the youth elite's offices, the Rundu regional office of education and the Rundu open market.⁶ During my fieldwork, I came to know the Reverend John Sindano⁷ of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCIN) in Rundu well, and I spent many hours in amiable conversation in his parish office. I joined two football teams and spent many hours training and talking with my team-mates. We also traveled around the country to attend sport events and play football tournaments. In addition, I came to know some members of the Portuguese and Afrikaner Rundu elites and befriended a young Portuguese businessman with whom I could talk freely without having to put up with listening to the usual racist jokes and remarks. This gave me a further insight into the white business community because I came to know the views of some of his friends and fellow businessmen.

Mobility in and outside town plays a very important part in conducting fieldwork among elites; because elites are geographically highly mobile and take part in official meetings or workshops around the country, I traveled widely. Further, in a town like

⁶Rundu is an important administrative centre and I realized during my fieldwork how the local civil servants, both juniors and seniors, pay visits to various offices throughout the day. The term 'courtesy call' is widely used in these local offices to describe such practices, and here I retain its original meaning.

⁷In March 2004, Reverend Sindano was nominated Bishop of ELCIN (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia) and moved to Oniipa.

Rundu where the rural hinterland is just a few kilometers away, individuals move constantly between the town and its peri-urban villages. This is especially true for the elites whose role of prominence within their matrilineages, *ekoro* in *Ru-Kwangali*⁸ require them to attend to family matters in the villages and various rural areas. For this reason, I tried to follow them as much as possible as they moved about. I went on trips with the youth elite to their villages several times and, on one occasion, I took part in a five day trip to Swakopmund, an important coastal resort. Yet moving among all these spaces I often felt entangled in a tourbillon of relationships in which I had to constantly renegotiate my own agency and sense of identity.

Conclusion

In the certainty of thesis proposals or pre-fieldwork grant applications, anthropologists tend to draw up beautifully crafted methodology sections, knowing that most likely they will have to be changed, and some objectives abandoned. And yet the language used still tends to emphasize the anthropologist's own agency over the fieldwork. In stressing how 'we are going to do fieldwork', we tend to assert our authority over the site and its people. Reading over my first year pre-fieldwork research proposal I found this quote in which I advocated for the following method:

'Writing on interviews among bureaucrats, Becker and Mayers (1975) argue that the success of this kind of research can be reached through two different techniques. The first calls for a necessary level of spontaneity and personal rapport. At one extreme called bravado, the fieldworker opens his way via an assertive technique, the purpose of which is to break the distance between the researcher and the subject of study. At another extreme the fieldworker uses another approach, called empathy'.

Reading this, I found myself wondering: if I had given the two fingers to one of the elites who kept me waiting for hours on end outside their offices, inviting me to come again accompanied with the usual 'please', would I have completed my research?

If anthropologists have had to rethink the authority of their voices in writing ethnographies (see Clifford and Marcus 1986), they still need to reconsider their agency in fieldwork. By this, I do not mean to object simply to the writing of the research proposal and call for a more *laissez-faire* attitude in planning field research; nor do I refuse to acknowledge the strategies that we, as anthropologists, put into action to carry out our fieldwork. Also I do not want to reinstate the essentialized image of fieldwork as the rite of passage par excellence as in Seligman's credo: 'what the blood of the martyrs is to the Roman Catholic Church fieldwork is to anthropology' (Seligman cited in Stocking 1992: 30). Instead I want to argue that, paradoxically, it is often the fieldwork itself that makes us, leaving little room for our individual choices, let alone our conscious, intended strategy. During my stay in Rundu, I often had the feeling that it was the fieldwork that was making itself and me, drawing me into certain situations to which I constantly had to adjust. As for my own experience, as much as it was the making of fieldwork, it turned out also to be the making of the fieldworker.

⁸ *Ru-Kwangali* is one of the five indigenous dialects of Kavango and the most widely spoken in the area.

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About the author

Dr Mattia Fumanti is a Temporary Lecturer in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. He completed his PhD in 2003 also in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester, with a thesis entitled *Youth, elites and distinction in a Northern Namibian Town*. Dr Fumanti's regional specialization is Southern Africa. His topical interests include elites, politics, youth, masculinities, moralities, urban anthropology and postcolonialism.