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The "Nets and Anchors" on the Indian Community in Mwanza City (Tanzania): Ethnographic Challenges and Encounters

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ABSTRACT

The use of "nets and anchors" framework requires a researcher to get a broad perspective of life in the case-study area through everyday observations and conversations with its residents before attempting an in-depth perspective of life as it is narrated by the key respondents of community groups. This framework was adopted in a study conducted among the Indians living in Mwanza City, Tanzania during the period of COVID-19 pandemic. This paper discusses the challenges encountered when conducting ethnographic research on the socio-cultural practices of Indians in Mwanza. The paper points out that COVID-19 pandemic among other factors hindered the process of collecting data through participant observation and interviews on the Indian community in Mwanza City.

KEY WORDS: COVID-19, ethnography, interview, Indians, Mwanza, participant observation, research

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Introduction

The mid of August 2021 marked the beginning of the fieldwork for the PhD project proposal titled *An Ethnographic and Historical Study of Indians in Mwanza City*, *Tanzania*. It is the study which sought to establish a monograph of Indians in Mwanza by using a case study. The study is interdisciplinary. It uses both historical and ethnographic methods to explore the Indian community living in Mwanza from the period of African colonization to the recent times. Ethnographic part of the study will be used to show how Ismailis' cultural practices have been influenced by the urban setting of Mwanza and vice versa. Thus, there was a need to conduct ethnographic study with the aim of obtaining ethnographic data along with historical data that will lead to a successful completion of the project at hand. It was from this context that ethnographic data was sought.

Ethnography in general terms refers to both a method of data collection and analysis, and a piece of work resulting from such method. As a research method, it entails a combination of various tools used to investigate "other people's perceptions, opinions, subjective experience and their situational meanings" (Hughes et al. 2008, 352; Allen 2017). There are several such tools or methods as identified by Bradshaw (2017). Among the identified methods, "long term and immersive participant observation" is considered as the most effective method in conducting ethnographic research. The effectiveness of this method lies on its ability to help researchers "witness the values, dynamics, internal relationships, structures, and conflicts as they play out in communities" (Bradshaw 2010, 67).

A researcher must adopt convenient framework for utilizing ethnographic methods effectively. It is important to adopt a framework because a researcher gets a clear structure of collecting significant information in relation to the research topic. As far as ethnographic research is concerned, various frameworks have been invented by ethnographers in different times. It is therefore up on the researcher's decisions to adopt any framework that is relevant to his or her own research. Given the context of Mwanza City where multiplicity of social and economic groups converges, the study adopted a "nets and anchors" approach as a guiding framework for ethnographic fieldwork in Mwanza. This framework was introduced by Nicholas Hopkins and Sohair Mehanna in their famous work on Nubians in the early 1960s. While the framework proved to be useful, some challenges emerged leading to adjustment of research methods and the adopted framework.

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This paper therefore seeks to uncover those challenges encountered during the initial stages of fieldwork which adopted the "nets and anchors" framework and how these challenges were addressed to ensure a successful collection of ethnographic data. The paper does not pretend to establish new principles of ethnographic research. It is rather seeking to make a reflection of the few challenges that are specifically related to the chosen study community and the time when the fieldwork was conducted. The paper proceeds by giving a general background to the "nets and anchors' framework and how it is applied in ethnographic research. It later shows how this framework was applied in Mwanza and discusses the challenges that the researcher encountered in the study community. Lastly it concludes the discussion by giving general observation and recommendation on the pertinent issues related to ethnographic research.

Background to the "Nets and Anchors"

As it has been noted above, the "nets and anchors" framework was first adopted in the works of Hopkins and Mehanna on the Nubian ethnological survey of the 1960s. It has its origin from Robert Fernea as an imaginary proposal that would help the research team conduct an intensive study of their study communities in Nubia (Hopkins, Mehanna 2010, 13). The most recent existing study which adopted this framework was that of Rebecca Bradshaw on the impact of archaeology on local communities in Sudan's Nile Valley. This approach, as it was originally used and later adopted by Bradshaw entails the researcher to have a wide view of the case study area by making a wide range of participant observation from the people in the study area before concentrating on the identified key informants within the study area (Hopkins, Mehanna 2017, 22; Bradshaw 2017, 69). In simpler terms the "nets" refers to the general residents in the study area while the "anchors" refers to the identified key informants in the study community. The nets can also be the totality of surveys conducted in the general field study area with a diverse community within which a studied community is found. The anchors in this context, refer to the intensive community studied in their specific localities.

This framework is useful in ethnographic research seeking to understand how particular groups of people are affected by a particular phenomenon at given space and time. The researcher may be exposed to diversity before considering the ways in which a group under study might assemble with respect to the phenomenon of interest (Bradshaw 2010, 69). It is believed that "each group has its own way of

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responding to a phenomenon and a similar phenomenon may be felt differently among members of different group at a given period and space” (Bradshaw 2010). This is what Bradshaw calls a net approach which uses participant observation to bring about various groups of people from which key respondents may be identified (Bradshaw 2010, 69).

The proponents of this framework vary slightly in applying this framework to their fieldworks. However, they all follow three successive stages in the fieldwork. The first stage involves familiarization with study community. It may be devoted to either participant observation or survey. The choice from these two methods is largely informed by the purpose of the researcher and the extent to which the researcher is familiar with study community. Generally, the difference between participant observation and survey depends on the purpose of research and the amount and type of data these two methods generate (Bajorek 2017). Yet, the intention is mainly to “cast a wide net across the study community” (Bradshaw 2010). Using either of the two methods researchers take time to familiarize with the study communities at this stage. The time spent at this stage is relatively short compared to the next stages. In some studies, it takes only a short period while in others it takes long period up to two months or more. At this stage the researcher may have a research assistant from the study community when doing participant observation: together, they must discuss the research topic; its aim and objectives, its data collection methods, and the fieldwork plan. This applies mostly to the researchers who are “outsiders” (Liamputtong 2010). During this stage the researcher goes around the entire area of the study community: study any person, family, and people, visit homes, and places of work, attend social events and collect preliminary data. It is possible to establish the study community profile and establish census.

The second stage starts immediately after sketching a study community thoroughly in the first stage. It may also take two weeks in a semi structured or unstructured interviews. Specific groups of people are targeted basing on gender, life experience and knowledge possessed regarding the study community. At this stage listening to speeches, public statements, and songs, reading books and magazines, textbooks and poems becomes important. The researcher must attend key social events, observe, and conduct informal discussions and conversations at this stage. By the end of this stage a researcher should have established how different groups are positioned in the study community (Bradshaw 2010, 79).

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The final, third stage comes after participant observation. It starts with encounters with the key respondents after identifying and selecting the study's anchors. The anchors who represent various groups in various interests are given in-depth explanation of what the project is about at this stage. A researcher should get their verbal consent (Bradshaw 2010, 80). This stage involves in-depth interviews and conversation with the key informants. It may be private, one on one, open, and public settings. Note taking and recording, specifying places, time and people is important at this stage (Bradshaw 2010, 80).

Mwanza City and the Indians: The Study Area and Study Community

Mwanza is the second largest city in Tanzania with a population approximately more than one million. The city is located on the shores of Lake Victoria in northern Tanzania. It serves as port and an economic hub of the lake region (UN-Habitat 2018; McGranahan et al. 2020, 4). It is covered by granite rocks and has a gently undulating topography consisting of isolated hills and rock inselbergs. The city's soils are well drained; this is associated with the rock inselbergs, whose height is between 1100 and 1600m (UN-Habitat 2018). The popular name, "Rock City", is derived from these rocks and hills that characterize the city. Since its inception the city has attracted a multiplicity of ethnic and racial groups from different parts of the country and the world at large. Indians make up one of the significant groups in city.

The presence of Indians in the city is historic. They have been living in the city since the colonial period to date. Most of them are permanent residents occupying largely the central part of the town residential areas. They constitute a group of urban minorities in the city holding a significant part of the town's economy. They own wholesale and retail shops, restaurants, and industries (Mutebi 2020). Their social activities are well noticeable in the city. Their mosques and temples are very prominent. They are also noted for their contribution in the development of health and educational sector. This contribution regards particularly to the Hindu and Ismailis who have established medical centres and operate schools in Mwanza. They conduct festivals and social gatherings. A good example was the historic 2015 Unity Games which was held in Mwanza City in April 2015 where Jamat members from all over East Africa joined to participate in four-day Unity Games sports tournaments.

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Situating the Case Study in the "Nets and Anchors" Framework: Challenges and Encounters

As it has been noted above, the fieldwork in Mwanza began in the mid-August 2012. This was after acquiring a research permit from the office of the District Administrative Secretary. Responding to the prescribed stages of the "nets and anchors framework" I started with familiarization with the study community. This was the time to approach the research assistants who are very familiar with the Indian community. These research assistants were to help in the data collection process after a detailed discussion regarding the research projects, its aim, objectives, and data collection mechanisms (Liampttung 2010; Middleton, Cons 2014, 279). However, I had not yet obtained any research assistant. A friend whom I relied on was not living in the city by this time. Thus, I did not have any trusted person who is very familiar with the Indian community in the city. Yet, I grew up and studied in Mwanza and had been a resident for quite a long time. I knew where specifically Indians were found in the city. I relied on this general knowledge as an insider in the city to familiarize with the study community personally. Familiarization took a form of surveys and participant observation. A general survey of the city was conducted in four administrative wards: Pamba, Nyamagana, Mirongo and Igogo. These are the areas with many Indian residential houses and wholesale and retail shops. In these areas I walked around, taking general surroundings and hangout for one week as suggested by Meskell, 2005. By taking this approach, the Indian temples, shops, schools, restaurants, stores, residential houses were identified. I could talk to whoever was interested to talk to me and shared the general information regarding the research in one week time. The main intention was to sketch the general settlements and Indian cultural space in the city and identify respondents. Four schools: a secondary school, a primary school and two nursery schools which are owned by Indians, three temples: Aga Khan Ismaili Jamatkhana, Hindu temple, Shia Ithna-asheri Jamaat, two restaurants and various shops and homes were identified and visited regularly within one week.

At this stage informal conversations were held and noted with the people I met in all the above-mentioned places. The day's experience was noted, and a reflection was done in the evening and helped to establish some fieldnotes. Notes were used to establish general facts regarding the Indian presence, population, and activities in

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the city and the important informants who would assist me to proceed to the next stage of fieldwork. This task was generally successful with some noted challenges.

The greatest challenge encountered in this initial stage was an unpredictable response and sometimes neglect of Indians to talk to me. This was common especially to the Indian shop owners in both wholesale and retail shops I visited. Most of them were not ready to keep on talking to me when they realized I am not a customer as they might have expected. For instance, one old man owning a home medicine shop at Makoroboi, the busiest street in town, welcomed me generously when I visited the shop and bought toothpaste and soaps. When I visited the same place and showed my interest as a researcher, he showed non-cooperation. He just said he was busy and could not help me anything related to my research. In some shops, they only told their African servants to listen to me and did not want to hear anything unrelated to buying their products. I quickly realized that they mistrust Africans. They are always careful thinking that the government send people to spy them and close their shops on tax grounds.

I considered this as a challenge emanating from the researcher as an “outsider” as highlighted by Gelir (Gelir 2021, 227). Yet, I was able to identify respondents from my nets in the first stage. Informal conversations that I held with some Africans and few Indians in the first stage helped to identify an Indian ward councillor in Nyamagana ward who serves as a Deputy Mayor in the city. He has been serving in these positions since 2015. The conversation we had helped to identify key respondents among the Indian community including the Hindu Union Association Chairman, old men, and women in the city. I later conducted official visits in schools. I was able to meet and talk to two Indian teachers in two nursery schools. They became the most significant persons who helped me to meet the Indian community leaders. From one of them I was able to meet the Chairman and Secretary, and an ex-chairman elder of the Ismailis in Mwanza. A meeting with these leaders was held in the second week of my field week at the Ismailis Jamatkhana.

A formal conversation in form of group discussion was held with the chairman, secretary and one member of the council serving as the chairman of communication and development department of the council. I made a formal introduction and shared my research topic in detail. From this meeting I was able to establish a close relationship with the chairman of communication and development department. In accordance with the ethical guidelines of a good research, I shared with him the research objectives, its scope, and the proposed data collection mechanisms. The

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chairman of communication department became my research assistant in the study community henceforth. I was able to decide to focus with the Ismaili community at this stage which I may call the second stage. It was good to proceed in a semi structured approach with observation of the study community in accordance with Bradshaw. The intention was to explore the participant's thoughts and perceptions about the research topic. It certainly helped to reveal the information flow among the Ismailis. I could notice that none of the Ismaili community member was able to share information outside the formal channel. They are only ready to reveal information after the formal consent with the community leadership. They respect their organization and protect their community affairs. Thus, I had to seek consent from the chairman for conducting any interview.

In cooperation with and the help from my research assistant, some adult men and women were identified and visited. Semi structured interviews were held at homes and workplaces in Nyamagana, Pamba, Mirongo, Uhuru and Liberty streets. I was able to collect few old public speeches and statements, and associations records from the informants. The collected information was heard and read. It was possible to find information about migration stories, early families, and group initiatives in the city. During this stage, I had to attend social gatherings of Ismaili Indians. I expected to attend weddings, community festivals and other social gatherings which would take the remaining time with my nets in the town. However, this was not possible due to COVID-19 pandemic which I discuss below.

COVID-19 Challenges

COVID-19, a global pandemic that erupted at the end of 2019 has left the world in a new system of life. Since its eruption in 2019 many people have been affected with many reported deaths all over the world. The spread of the pandemic has prompted nation states, organizations, institutions, and individuals to adopt various control measures to prevent the spread of pandemic. Most of these control measures are very common everywhere. However, the degree of exercising them vary across continents, nations, regions, and localities. In Tanzania, various measures, as recommended by WHO were implemented. However, the government decided not to implement lockdown which sought to control people's movement. Lockdown was considered a threat to citizens as it would take them out of daily working and lack of necessities which are obtained on daily basis (Mfinanga et al. 2021, 1542-1543). Since then, all activities continued to operate daily, public gatherings and related

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gatherings continued from national to local level. This was a general view that I had when reflecting on COVID-19 pandemic in Tanzania and Mwanza.

However, I encountered a different experience with the Indian community in the city. Experience from a semi structured interviews held among the Indian adult men and women indicated that there was no social gathering that was taking place since the outbreak of the pandemic. Community and religious festivals were suspended by the Ismaili Council (Informant 1 2021; Informant 2 2021). Likewise, picnics, weddings, family ceremonies and outings were also cancelled. This applied to both Hindu and Ismailis. Oral testimonies from some community members attested that many people have suffered from this pandemic, some elderly people have died especially in early 2021 (Informant 1 2021; Informant 3 2021; Informant 4 2021). The increasing number of COVID-19 cases and deaths prompted the Indian community to adopt strict measures to control the spread of COVID-19. Consequently, it was not possible to attend, observe and conduct discussion in any Indian community gatherings. These gatherings would be very significant in these early stages of fieldwork. It was from these community gatherings where discussions with Indians from different social groups about their lives, work, family, social relations among many issues relevant to the topic were sought. It would ease active participation and acquisition of similar experience as an insider in the study community (Jaimagal-Jones 2014). This was the time when open statement of the research was to be shared with a wide range of respondents and consequently account for the choice of the key informants who would later become the research “anchors” (Salmon 2004, 3).

However, COVID-19 did not completely restrict the efforts to seek informants and establish a base in the study community. Alternative approach and methods were sought from various research conducted during the pandemic and some established principles on how to conduct ethnographic during COVID-19 pandemic. These gave the insights of how to get in touch with the study community and establish the key respondents. The use of digital ethnography as discussed by Góralska and applied in the work of Arya and Henn has been alternatively used to keep in touch with the respondents. I had to rely on WhatsApp voice and video calls and chats with some respondents. I have been able to obtain various information including old magazines, family photos on various social occasions that had been taking place on the study community.

However, as noted by Góralska, digital ethnography is challenging. It “… usually has blurry boundaries, confusing research strategies that make up the ‘being there’, or a

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handful of novel ethical dilemmas” (Góralska 2020, 48). Generally, this method obscures the mode of participant observation in an ethnographic context (De Seta 2020, 93). Establishing a close relationship with diverse groups in the study area comes before. This relationship makes it easy to collect data (Ardévol, Gómez-Cruz 2013, 10). In quite a similar way I may admit that the use of digital ethnography as applied in the later stage has neither enabled this research to increase the number of informants nor develop a participant observation in its entirety. Yet, more approaches are still sought to be applied to ensure objectives of the study are fully met. As it has been pointed above, this is an interdisciplinary study. It applies both ethnographic and historical methods to achieve its objectives. Archival documents have been sought and utilized to supplement the ethnographic data.

Conclusion

Research methodology is an important part in a successful completion of data collection. Its success in ethnographic fieldwork relies heavily on the choice of convenient framework to simplify data collection methods. An ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Mwanza adopted the “nets and anchors” approach to gather reliable information on the socio-cultural practices of the Indian immigrants in Mwanza City. Various steps of this framework were followed accordingly. In adopting such steps various challenges were encountered. While familiarization with the study community through general survey proved effective in sketching the Indians’ geographical set up, initial participant observation encountered the rigid and less cooperation from the identified informants. Likewise, COVID-19 hindered the use of participant observation on different levels. The Indians adopted measures which restricted physical and social contacts. Such measures made it impossible to access various public places and homes leading to the adoption different alternative techniques other than participant observation.

From the foregoing discussion, this paper establishes that the Indian immigrants’ shared history, their established social structure, and group identity determined the level of successful use of the “nets and anchors” approach in various stage. They restricted the numbers of informants, and sometimes the kind of information to be accessed. They further led to the adoption of different strict COVID-19 measures among the Indians thus hindering access to the Indians’ gatherings as an important component in identifying many “anchors”. The challenges were therefore settled with flexibility through alternative techniques. It is therefore important for ethnographers

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to consider that COVID-19 may have a far-reaching consequence. It has altered the community's ways of life thus calling for ethnographers to seek and find out new fieldwork methods and approaches.

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INFORMANT 4, 09.09.2021, Uhuru Street, Mwanza

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