Research Brokers We Use and Abuse while Researching Civil Wars and Their Aftermaths – Methodological Concerns

Mats Utas

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Research Brokers We Use and Abuse while Researching Civil Wars and Their Aftermaths – Methodological Concerns

Mats Utas

Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT

In this practitioners note I want, with a number of cases from my own fieldworks, highlight problems and possibilities of collecting first hand material about conflict with a specific focus on research brokers.

When Anthony looks at the moon he can suddenly see a man sitting next to a house. The man is Jesus. The man leaves the moon and descends to earth joined by soldiers dressed all in white. As it happens, Jesus has chosen war-ravaged Monrovia as his destination. He lands in the Waterside market area. The entire market is there to welcome him. Jesus walks from Waterside via UN Drive, past Happy Homes (a furniture store at the time struggling to make do), climbing the hill up to the US Embassy on Mamba Point. He enters the embassy compound and sits down with the US Ambassador. The crowd is watching as the Ambassador all of a sudden stands up and calls Anthony to come and join them. Jesus, the American Ambassador and Anthony sit down and Jesus tells them in heart-to-heart conversation that when the time is ripe he himself will come and rescue everyone.

It is early 1998, just after the end of the first part of the Liberian civil war. Anthony is one of several dozen people who have informally assisted me, and thus pretty much co-researched the social landscapes of war and postwar in Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Somalia (a country I have in fact never visited) over the past 22 years. Without people like Anthony I would never have accomplished what I have. Yet still, I am ashamed to say, I have with a few exceptions given them very little credit.

Anthony narrated his dream to me in 1998, soon after the erstwhile rebel leader Charles Taylor was elected president of Liberia. The dream is spatially organized in a profoundly hierarchical way. When Jesus descends to the world he enters a market area of Monrovia, crowded with ordinary Liberians,
at sea level. But Jesus does not stop there. Instead, he ascends uphill to a higher ground, a location associated in the minds of Anthony and those like him with dignity and status, the US Embassy – symbolically constructed on one of the highest points in Monrovia. Jesus sits down and speaks on equal terms with the US ambassador.

In his dream, Anthony thus places the Americans on an equal level with Jesus on top of the hill and the ordinary Liberians way down the slope in the messy market of Waterside. Anthony is invited to the table as a messenger, a go-between, and is thus included in the important conversation. This is ‘merely’ a dream, but it highlights Anthony’s take on cultural hierarchies and his own potential role within them. In this practitioner’s note I want to draw on a number of cases from my own fieldwork to highlight problems and possibilities of collecting first-hand material about conflict, with a specific focus on people like Anthony getting by in the rather unbounded and diverse sector of ‘research brokers’ (defined in our introduction as ‘a key agent being in-between the researcher and the researched who regulate access and flows of knowledge between them’ p. ?? – and check final wording in intro).

**Among the Heroes of Conflict Research**

Anthony was only one of a number of people who made my work in 1997 and 98, in the direct aftermath of the first part of the Liberian civil war, not just possible but enjoyable. The ex-combatant Olu adopted me and enabled me to have access to places and ideas that I would never have entered without him. The street child Ansu (who is today a schoolteacher) helped me understand the challenges for youngsters of life on the streets, and without Paul I would not have learnt how ex-combatants navigated rural Liberia. Earlier, in 1996, Oliver was my guide to understanding refugee life in Danane, Côte d’Ivoire, and since then there have been a more than a handful of significant research others that I have to thank for both helping me with research and making my everyday life eventful, interesting and relatively safe. I am quite certain that I have been able to contribute positively to their lives, but my presence in their lives has in no way been as important as their presence in mine, on both private and scholarly levels.

On the pages that follow, I give examples of research brokering that I have experienced and highlight implications that may be especially relevant in conflict research. I want to point out two issues that make relationships of trust extra pertinent in conflict zones, including an even heavier reliance on brokers:

1. First, there is a tendency – pronounced, but neglected by many researchers – for interlocutors to downplay their own agency and present themselves, rather, as victims of circumstance. In my work with child and youth-soldiers in Liberia and Sierra Leone, this has
been a constant problem. It is hardly surprising. We should all ask ourselves why anybody would admit to a relative stranger and a potential turncoat that they have killed, maimed, raped, looted or burned down property. Why would a non-combatant talk about ties with a warlord? Why would a politician (or a local NGO boss for that matter) agree that they informally support or sponsor a brutal rebel group? Elsewhere, I have defined the agency of presenting oneself as a victim as victimcy, and argued that it is a rather obvious position to take in relation to researchers, humanitarian workers and journalists, but also to kin and home communities (Utas 2005a, 2005b, 2011). By contrast, I have also encountered many people who, rather than down-playing personal agency, have for one reason or another fabricated stories with themselves as perpetrators. Just as there are reasons to maintain one’s innocence, there are equally reasons to play up agency. In conflict research, we need to be particularly sensitive to how our interlocutors present themselves or the groups they belong to.

Importantly, we ought to evaluate research brokers’ positions along similar lines, as they tend to face the very same political difficulties in life and work. At the very least, we must show awareness of these methodological facets as we write about conflict zones. In every text we ought to present the research broker who helped us, describing their particular psycho-social circumstances and socio-political positions. Yet still, as we point out in the introduction to this special issue, this is only done in a handful of cases and then most often in articles concerning research methodologies.

(2) The second issue is directly related to the political position of the research broker in a particular society. In my own research over the years, I have observed how densely networked are the political and economically realities in much of West Africa This is a point which has been made by political scientists in particular and in the literature on patron/client relations in much of Africa, but also on other continents. I have considerable issues with this literature, as I have discussed elsewhere (Utas 2012), but to avoid a long detour here we need only to think about what patron and client ties mean for the position of a research broker. Research brokers are found in a variety of dependency positions that inevitably effect research findings and place both researcher and research assistants at risk or in relative safety in ways that are often invisible to a visiting researcher from the global north.

Our position as researcher hinges on the social positions of research brokers in patron/client relations or in Big Man networks. Research brokers are dependent on Big Men in society, are themselves Big Men to others and
relate to the researcher as a Big Man as well. In such a system it becomes very important to locate and understand the power positions of the broker in relation to other players in the local sociopolitical landscape. It is equally important to highlight the Big Man relationship between the researcher and the research broker.

In the examples below I will relate issues of victimcy and Big Men systems to cases I have encountered myself in a variety ways during field research in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Kenya and Dubai in the period 1996–2019. Although I will mainly focus on what these relations mean for our research results, I will also at times look at ethics, risks, power differences and constructions of friendship. If the introduction of this special issue is devoted to taking stock of what others have written and what methodological lacunas exist, this essay is a similar stock-taking process, but from a distinctly personal vantage point. As I have in no way systematically researched these issues I present this as a think piece to provoke readers to explore further and to take methodological issues more seriously.

**Held Hostage by the White Cars**

I first arrived in Monrovia, Liberia, in 1997. (I had been there once before, during the 6 April 1996 fighting but in the rage of war you cannot carry out proper research.) An easy entry point to study ex-combatant lives and livelihoods was the International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) leading programmes to reintegrate former rebel soldiers (part of the humanitarian regime of DDR – Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration). They were almost without exception headed by white expatriates, but manned by local staff. They predominantly catered to ex-combatants through reintegration programs where participants would enter their premises in order to participate in a vocational training project for a fairly limited time. From afar, such an organization appears to be a perfect broker institution, the bridge between a global Northern ‘humanitarian’ we and a situationally informed them. However, my research experience revealed that, in order to get enrolled into these programs, ex-combatants had to conform not just to humanitarian stereotypes of an ex rebel-soldier, but also to our ideas of the childsoldier-cum-victim. Thus, stories told by this crowd were corrupted by humanitarian principles and remolded into narrative frameworks that suited a global northern us. The global North NGO regime formed a unity, an overarching collective Big Man, or global patron, who demanded a narrative conformity which often corresponded poorly with local versions of the same.

In order to push beyond this methodological lacuna, I turned instead to the few local social workers of the INGOs who did outreach work. Although these brokers created slightly more interesting connections with ex-combatants, the
colour of my skin still brought about certain expectations: I was white and thus by appearance part of the global Northern humanitarian regime. The answers I received remained fixed and complied with preconceived ideas that people like me had perpetually acted out on Africa for centuries. At this point I also started to run into a category of street children who told tragic yet embellished stories of their active participation in the civil war. In due course, I found out that many of them had not fought at all. Their street lives were equally rough and rife with personal tragedies and by telling ‘childsoldier stories’ they hoped to track down a wealthy sponsor-cum-Big Man. Their motivation to get close to me was a means to access resources in a poverty stricken post-war reality. Was this deceitful behaviour? No. I was an outsider whose motives they had no reason to trust. I had the resources which ultimately made them accept my presence.

Repeatedly getting stuck in pseudo-stories I gave up after about a month. I ‘went rogue’ and instead of using the INGOs as brokers I found my own brokers on the streets. I tried many without success, but eventually found my footing. Over the subsequent 20 years I have carried out occasional consultancies for INGOs and UN agencies and, although I have worked with many talented research brokers, my experience still confirms that once you are associated with an INGO you are more or less predestined to get data which conforms to the dominant ideas of the humanitarian regime. Although there are exceptions to any rule, the white cars take our research hostage.

This is a rather obvious conclusion, and yet too many conflict researchers remain in this bubble, keep using INGO staff as brokers and may even rely on interviewing expatriate staff working and living in the bubble. In the dream narrated above, Anthony symbolically highlighted the spatial power differences that ordinary Liberians so painfully observe between their world and ours. Researchers from the global North generally have a clear theoretic understanding of power differences, be it postcolonial or some other framework, but for some reason they fail to take it into account from a methodological point of view in their own research. Remaining within the premises of the INGO regime implies staying on top of the US embassy hill and failing to understand properly why the people at the Waterside market say what they say and do what they do. It is like being a newcomer repeatedly and never understanding that you have paid at least double, maybe five times as much as the regular market-goer does.

The Ex-combatant and the University Student

Sisqo\(^2\) was a positive force on a street corner in downtown Freetown, Sierra Leone. It was 2004, the year after the end of the Sierra Leone civil war. He was that instantly friendly type who did whatever he could to make me feel welcome among the group of street dwellers I was to study. Most were former combatants and struggled to survive through day labor, small-scale
and often illegal business or petty theft. Drugs were rife on the corner and violence frequent. It was not an environment where an outsider was immediately welcome and some in the area waited many months before they started to accept me. I remained on the corner for two years checking in and hanging out on an almost daily basis. Sisqo’s arduous work and commitment were crucial for my growing sense-making. Sisqo had his ways of earning money and I did not want to interfere too much with that. I did not put him on a formal payroll. Thus he was not a research assistant in the formal sense (i.e. on the official pay role – cf. the introduction of this volume). However Sisqo was my key research broker and he (as well as many others on the streetcorner) received fringe benefits such as a meal and a drink now and then, or monetary assistance to go to the doctor or buy medicines. As one of Sisqo’s Big Men I am, up until today, in a debt relationship of delayed reciprocity. Once in a while, I am socially obliged to send him money or help him broker access to other Big Men. Sisqo, I would argue, is a rather typical key research broker in ethnographic fieldwork.

Student X, by contrast, came from a comparatively well-to-do family. I supervised his MA at a local university. He was bright, well-read, trained in sociology, a great prose writer and admired by many – including me. I don’t need to go into further detail as I believe most readers can imagine the type, if not from among research assistants you have employed, then from among your students.

An international research group commissioned me to carry out a study in the interior of Sierra Leone. The focus was small-scale diamond mining, and socio-economic patterns among diggers. A high percentage were ex-combatants. To aid me, I could hire two assistants. As both Sisqo and student X originated from the region where the study was to take place, my choice of the two was clear: one was street, the other elite. In order to be fair, I made their reimbursements equal. This sum translated to a substantial amount for Sisqo but a fairly meagre one for student X – who mainly did it for the experience. Student X had the advantage of being of the same ethnicity as the majority of the diggers and also most of the political establishment in the region. Sisqo was from a minority group that many held some prejudice against, but he had the obvious advantage of being an ex-combatant.

The fieldtrip turned out to be instructive. In many ways, they made a great team, with a solid amount of local knowledge and expertise. Sisqo could use his ex-combatant background to broker access to diggers in the pits. Sisqo also located a former commander of his who controlled a working team and who in turn became a sub-broker. Student X could relate to his vast academic knowledge of the sub-region. One thing that was striking, however, was that despite his sociological training he had a hard time blending in. The diggers reacted against him. They placed him in the group of urban elites whom they blamed for the country’s poor state. In fact, many of the former combatants maintained a ‘revolutionary’ discourse,
stating that they had taken up arms to fight a corrupt state and its political elite. In their eyes Student X was typical of the urban elite with whom they had nothing in common. By and large, they refrained from sharing insights with him. Student X immediately sensed this. It may have been due insecurity, but he subsequently began to tell the diggers off about how they were doing things and how, by direct contrast, things should be done properly. This certainly did not work out well for the project.

Before I continue, I would like to dwell on this type of methodological hiccup. In my experience, a great many INGO workers and journalists, but also researchers, from the global North in action in the field have severe problems with positioning themselves socially. A common way to resolve this issue is by taking the position of the ever-knowledgeable expert who will tell the ‘local’, ‘uneducated’ other how to do things correctly. As in the case of Student X above, I am sure that it is most often a reaction stemming from insecurity, but the outcome is mimicking the colonialist and thus backward, damaging and rather shameful.

Returning to the case: I had two research assistants who were both well-positioned in the local realm, yet their access to data for the project differed profoundly. A qualified guess is that many researchers would have preferred the academically schooled Student X. He was in many ways a stellar choice. He understood local politics and he knew how to write scholarly notes. In the work of categorising and analysing data his background turned out to be a great asset. Yet our task would not have worked very well without the streetwise Sisqo. I am not suggesting that one assistant worked better than the other. Rather, I want to highlight the importance of an understanding of research brokers’ different positionalities in local power structures. Furthermore, in our research publications we ought to present these social positions to enable the reader to evaluate our research findings. On this front I believe most of us have room for improvement.

A final note relates to the Big Man networks and how to navigate them. Sisqo used his junior position in the Big Man structure to locate a more powerful broker and then subsequently used his equal social position with the diggers to gain access to the interlocutors we wanted to approach. Student X however ignored the knowledge of his social position. He maintained, or even played up, an eliteness in relation to the diggers. This may have been out of social awkwardness. However, he could potentially have used his ethnic background and relative elite status to access elders of the community who in their turn could have solicited access to the diggers. Here I must however admit my own ignorance. It is possible that, even leveraging his language and ethnic commonalities would not have bridged the urban/rural social divide that characterises the socio-economic reality of Sierra Leone.
Gender and a Broker I Loved – Using Intimacies?

She became my girlfriend during fieldwork in Liberia – later we got married and today we have two children together. Before meeting me, she had a serious relationship with a high ranking officer in a former junta in neighboring Sierra Leone. Armed with vast experience of military life, she offered unique insights into the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia. She regularly helped me understand what was not just unclear to me, but almost impossible to get my head around. Where other people stopped short, because of sensitivities or embarrassment, she filled in the gaps. She was socially at ease whether at elite or street level. She attended INGO gatherings, blended with the political elite with dignity and yet also hung out successfully with rebel soldiers in urban ghettos or in remote rural villages.

The first time she assisted me directly was on a consultancy I carried out in a refugee camp close to the Sierra Leone border. As I had previously resided in a refugee area in Côte d’Ivoire, I was surprised to find so many young men in the camp we visited. When I raised the issue, it did not take her long to identify a huge number of former soldiers who had escaped Sierra Leone as the military junta they supported had been forced to flee both the capital and the country. It was not the same junta as she had previously been associated with, but she soon found acquaintances of hers among their numbers. We conducted some unique interviews with them. This encounter not only altered the research findings of our consultancy, but also enabled us, before we left, to initiate a dialogue between the former junta guys and the expatriate UN staff who headed the camp. The latter had up to this point been oblivious to the presence of juntas in the camp. This is a good example of how action-oriented research often generates practical outcomes.

At times, my girlfriend would hang out with me and the ex-combatant crowd I worked with. She rarely assisted me with my research, but her presence in these locations did grant me novel forms of access. Through her, I became a relatable social being – not a weird stranger with potential ties to international peacekeepers or to a legal system they all feared could punish then for their criminal conducts during the war. In many ways, they came to bond with me through her. It built trust. It somehow bridged what might otherwise have remained a cultural chasm. Especially in the rural city of Ganta we became known as something of a team. How the researcher chooses to live and organize her/his everyday life has a significant effect that should not be underestimated when carrying out this kind of research. Swanky hotels and lavish lifestyles will affect research data. When we arrived in Ganta we moved into a room in an ordinary house, sublet by a Sierra Leonean refugee family. It was acknowledged by most that although not an ordinary couple, we lived an ordinary life far different from what was expected of an average expatriate. Our more ‘local’
lifestyle combined with me having a local partner, turned into a great asset in this part of my fieldwork.

After close to a year of discussion about my research goals, she was helping me conduct some intimate interviews by the end of the field period. Due to her gender and junta background she could easily talk to former female combatants and girlfriends of rebel soldiers. In one case, she interviewed a Liberian woman she had known previously in Sierra Leone. This story became the backbone of a close rereading of women in war. Yet at the time I never considered making her co-author. She certainly did not write the text with me. However, the unique material was due to her efforts, rather than mine. This case is instructive as it raises several questions about gender positionalities, but also opens up more intricate questions about power sites beyond the field. And these questions concern not only power in the sites where we write and publish, but in this case also within the private sphere.

Firstly, as a white man, from the global North, I do not have the same understanding of the field as a West African woman born and raised. Her gender combined with social background positioned her as a perfect researcher. Her participation in my project created methodologically fertile ground, enabling findings far beyond the average expectations of any researcher, man or woman, from the global North. Her social position was perfect for recording the stories of women associated with the fighting forces (or WAFF) as she had herself been a WAFF in many ways. She was not an outsider to whom WAFFs were socially and politically obliged to present victim-leaning stories. This opened up new research perspectives. Secondly, this story pinpoints problems of the more intimate, yet still socio-political, intersection at which my wife and I existed. Did I exploit our emergent relationship? Did I exploit love? Today, we are no longer a couple and due to circumstances and different positionalities we may have different readings of the work we jointly carried out back then. Yet, if the article was to be written today, informed by current scholarly discussions, I would clearly have included her as co-author.

Professional Brokers – Pitfalls

The small Liberian city Ganta was the venue of the episode narrated above. We lived there for a good part of 1998. At that time, ethnographic research in war/post-war zones was relatively rare. In Ganta, I was the only academic researcher, a rare figure who stood out from the crowd. Globally, researchers began investigating war and postwar zones in large numbers during the early 2000s. When I did fieldwork in Sierra Leone between 2004 and 2006, I was only one in a deluge of researchers. We were so many that Sierra Leonean scholars had grown weary writing invitation letters for us. Sierra Leonean university professors often expressed frustration over international scholars/students whom they officially hosted but who did not even pay
them a visit upon arrival. On street corners of the city, most ex-combatants had at some point chatted with at least one if not more researchers from the global North. We became an obvious post-war reference point. And ex-combatants kept good track of us. If one enquired about a particular researcher, ex-combatants often, and instantly, categorised us on a scale from good to bad even if they had in fact never laid their eyes on the person in question. We had thus become an intimate part of the post-war economy.

Meanwhile in Liberia, Ganta had grown into the second largest city of the country and at the war’s end in 2003 it turned into something like a research hub. Ganta was as remote as one could get from Monrovia without leaving the tarred road. It was an easily accessible and attractive spot for INGOs and researchers alike. Amidst a humanitarian gold rush, with the INGO economy the lifeblood of the country, some ex-combatants found themselves repeatedly approached by international conflict scholars and students. While ordinary citizens might secure an income in the post-war INGO industry, work was more scarce for ex-combatants, and many only scraped by. However some industrious ex-combatants created something of a research hub with the flourishing business of brokering access to ex-combatants not just across the city, but all of Nimba County. This was so successful that for a time most, if not all, researchers, journalists and INGO consultants researching ex-combatants, passed through this ‘brokerage’, whether they were aware of it or not. Similar outfits existed in other parts of the country as well. This often meant that a select few gained a virtual monopoly over history in a particular area. While one cannot talk of a singular ‘true story’ of war events, it is rather startling to think about the politically skewed versions of war events that such outfits had the potential to produce and how ready many researchers have been to transmit these stories to the wider world.

Some researchers stay for an extended time in an area and learn how to navigate networks of brokers and how to triangulate stories. However many researchers do short-term fieldwork and end up only spending a couple of weeks or a month in a location and then writing entire books based on their findings. The case described above highlights several uncertainties and pitfalls for this latter group, pitfalls which, I argue, only time and a profound contextual understanding can correct. It is common in the post-war context for ex-combatant brokers to maintain and exploit the Big Man positions of their previous war networks (Themnér and Utas 2016), which means that they are free to dictate what answers people below them will give to researchers. Furthermore, they in turn may receive enticements from the Big Men above them to exaggerate or downplay central issues. Certainly this is not always the case, but a proper contextual understanding of the social and political positions is pivotal – recall the situation with Sisqo and Student X – for good-enough research.
Some would suggest that large quantitative data sets are the way around this, but I would argue, to the contrary, that when carrying out such studies the researcher has even less control over the research assistants working on the project. They are often many more in number, and who they are, how they relate to Big Men and how they relate to the interviewees is even less understood. In many cases, lead researchers may not visit the areas or even countries where they carry out research. Control may be zero and disastrous errors can certainly be found within big samples due to an inadequate understanding of the research assistants and brokers involved.

**The Researcher as Broker**

I used his award winning book in teaching – and I profoundly enjoyed it. When he emailed me saying he planned a visit Freetown it was obvious that I would help him finding his footing amongst ex-combatants in Freetown. He was on a short-term visit to a, for him, new field and he needed a quick way in. Thus I became his research broker. It was far from the first time I functioned as a broker for international researchers. However, this time it was a senior scholar. Against my better judgement, I brokered access to the very guys with whom I was doing fieldwork. Although I wouldn’t have done it that way myself, I didn’t mind when he offered one of them money to broker a series of meetings with a group of people. I doubted the success of the arrangement but at the same time I didn’t want to hinder the possibility of rather substantial income for the broker. After all, he like most of the others was extremely strapped for cash.

The meetings went well, according to reports that I got. A few days later, the visiting researcher virtually set up shop on the street-corner offering ex-combatants and other passersby a small sum of money to talk to him. I had previously introduced him to the ex-combatants in the area as someone they could trust. They duly accepted his presence. But people became upset as he began to commercialise information to this extent. What did he think he was doing? One of my closest interlocutors approached me one afternoon, extremely agitated. What was the researcher really up to? Where was the respect? Was this just a commercial activity to him? The interlocutor made this comparison:

“Mats, join me down at the riverside. I will pull down my pants and I will shit in front of you. Take a picture of me. This is exactly what this man is doing to us.”

By stating this, the interlocutor suggested that he felt exploited. Meanwhile I had also become increasingly troubled by the behaviour of the researcher. I had a moral responsibility for the people I worked with and so I felt the need to deal with this emergency. I was in a rush and in hindsight I can see that I was slightly upset too. Instead of talking to the researcher directly I simply informed the interlocutor that just because I had recommended them to talk to this man it was in no way compulsory. I might have sounded just a tad irritated. I then headed home for dinner.
From then on, things escalated rapidly. The researcher was summoned to the ex-combatant who had previously brokered for him. There he and his crew confiscated his field notebook and demanded ransom. To get out of this threatening situation, the researcher handed over 250 USD and was released. But he was in shock. The very same evening we tried to locate the ex-combatant to repay the money, but although we found him in the end, the effort was fruitless. The money was already long gone, distributed amongst his crew. This disturbing story highlights several instructive points. One concerns my position as a broker: I brokered access to potentially sensitive data for a person totally unknown to the ex-combatants. They trusted me to such a degree that they acceded without hesitation. Certainly, money mattered as well. Yet it takes a good portion of trust and shows how crucial the role of the broker may be. The other side of the coin is the potentially dangerous power a broker has over his/her researcher. Once I removed my protective hand, the researcher ended up in a security limbo. I had singlehandedly granted him access and by uttering a word or two I not only ended his access, but I placed him at impending risk.

This incident shows the power of a broker. If had happened during the civil war itself, a breach in protection like this could have meant the death of a researcher. But, equally, if in a warzone a local research broker took on a client with limited social skills or cultural understanding, it could have endangered the researcher’s life. It may also have placed interlocutors under extreme duress. From an ethical perspective, researchers have the responsibility to act extremely carefully in conflict areas. As noted in the introduction, accounts from conflict zones are surprisingly hackneyed when it comes to security issues as we tend chiefly to focus on ourselves. Although I do refer to a self-experienced case in this section, it still highlights the potential problems, if not dangers, that a research broker may face. The risk for me was mainly loss of access to the field, but for a local broker, in a direct conflict situation, the outcome could indeed be fatal.

The Best Research Broker?

Above, I have referred to rather long-term studies in the field. In the most extreme case, my fieldwork took two years. Most academic disciplines do not allow such long periods of fieldwork. For an anthropologist with children of school age, more than a month may not be feasible. Thus quick and dirty work is a reality for most. Awes was a former student of mine. He had studied in Sweden, but had kept close ties to his birth country Somalia. He often travelled to both Nairobi and Dubai where he kept up relations with both the youth and the elite of Somali exile society. He was a smooth broker, mastering the local terrain, and had a profound understanding of what good ethnographic data consisted of. In Sweden, prior to the
fieldwork, we jointly designed a project about wealthy Somali traders who played a part in the country’s civil war. They led highly nomadic lives as they flew between their posh houses in the cities of Nairobi, Dubai and Mogadishu. Focus was on their overlooked roles when it came to peace efforts – by contrast with the more conventional focus on their culpability in the war. With Awes, I gained swift access to the homes of former ministers and embassy workers in Nairobi and Dubai, but he also opened the door to people within the business class who generally kept low profile in relation to the international community. Many of them had made their money during the war or even, it may be suggested, as a result of the war. At the same time it was clear that, despite any income they may have gained from the war, they all had in common the desire for the war to end.

Awes was the perfect culturally informed, socially sassy and well-connected broker. In Sweden, he always felt slightly awkward (if not misplaced) – something he carried with a great sense of humor – but in Nairobi and Dubai he was in total control. He entered meetings with full confidence and could relate to people through a diverse set of family and clan ties, but also through friendship networks he had acquired by growing up and studying in two Somali-dense Nordic countries. Navigating the predominantly Somali neighborhood of Eastleigh in Nairobi with him was a dream. The only time I observed him being slightly insecure was when we knocked on the hotel door of an infamous Somali warlord. His discomfort, and my own, ensured that the visit was not particularly successful.

Awes had his own brokers. Part of our success was due to Awes’s friends and acquaintances who assisted us. Doing fieldwork in two mega-cities, it took more than a few telephone calls, although at times it felt like it, to locate the right people. In Nairobi, Awes engaged a friend who became the fixer-with-the-car who could take us anywhere at any hour. The other broker that Awes engaged was an ambitious politician/businessman/NGO Somali who knew the right people.

Awes was successful because he was a socially savvy person who understood the research conventions of the researcher and who could navigate local social landscapes where we did research. A key reason for his success was that he maintained an active role in the social networks of the Somali diaspora. He was also a Big Man who despite his young age had achieved a social, if not economical standing, by living and studying in the global North. The combination of Big Man access, youthfulness and pre-understanding of my research discipline was perfect. Unfortunately at the time I had too many other projects on the go, and we never had the possibility to carry out more substantive fieldwork in the area. Awes enrolled as a PhD candidate at a UK university, but he tragically passed away after a protracted illness a few years after this.

Awes, may your soul rest in perfect peace my friend.
‘Open Road’

In Sierra Leone, people often ask if you can to help brokering access to a new job, a particular school for their kids, a piece of land or good hospital care. Sierra Leoneans are keen to point out that man live by man and the brokering access to somebody is often called open road. Relations and relationship-building are central in a network-based society like Sierra Leone.

With a few episodes from my own past research, I have tried in this short article to highlight the central aspect of open road, or brokering access, for researchers doing fieldwork in conflict and near conflict settings. I have tried to show how brokering access is not a one-way street, nor a road without obstacles. Political and economic stakes are often high in conflict and post-conflict settings and agendas are often far from clear. When engaging with a research broker, the researchers thus needs to understand what road he/she opens and the motives for doing so. We need to understand the broker’s position in the game of power, but more than that, we also need to understand the roles and positions given to us. If we fail to do so, we are bound to end up with bad data. We may end up with knowledge that actually hinders us from understanding why wars unfold the way they do and why postwar societies develop the way they do. But even more is at stake, including the danger and ethical dilemmas that I have highlighted. In the literature we reviewed for the introduction to this special issue, we found a good number of references to the risks we run when we conduct research in zones of conflict or near conflicts, but there was little discussion of the risks to which we expose research brokers and interlocutors. There is a tendency in the literature to talk about ethical problems of research brokers demanding money or producing politically skewed data, but there is not much about the ethical problems we as researchers stir up in local arenas.

Jesus and US Ambassadors have well-known lives, livelihoods and agendas. Anthony and those like him have not. Despite their importance for our research we write very little about them. This piece is one more methodological analysis from our ‘Northern’ perspective and starting with a ‘me’, but I do believe it has taken a rather different path and I hope that it has provided new insights and new perspectives on important questions that many of us either battle or consciously ignore – because they are hard.

Notes

1. Big Men may be Big Women as well. The term (emically used in for instance West Africa) is socially gender neutral despite its linguistic gender particularity.
2. Sisqo is his postwar street nom de plume.
3. For a better understanding of extended debt relations in Sierra Leone see Utas and Maya (2016).
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Notes on contributor

Mats Utas is professor in Cultural Anthropology at Uppsala University. His research and scholarship have mainly focused on conflict and post conflict situations with a particular focus on West Africa. Utas is the editor of African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and networks (Zed Books, 2012) and co-editor (with Paul Higate) of Private Security in Africa: From the Global Assemblage to the Everyday (Zed Books 2017). In addition to these Utas has published articles and chapters in leading journals and edited book volumes. His aim with this article is to share personal experiences. By referring to his own previous publications he intend to further contextualise these findings. In the introduction to this special issue he, together with Maria Eriksson Baaz, take a broader approach and refer to other research equally relevant for this text.

ORCID

Mats Utas http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2022-6985

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