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Oporto! Oporto! Reflections on the motorcycle as methodological tool, and on having lunch with “the men”

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This piece uses two vignettes from fieldwork in northern Sierra Leone. The first explains what happens when I, a white person (*oportó*), turns up in a village on a motorcycle instead of the 4 × 4 in which most other white people arrive. The second explores my discomfort with being invited to eat lunch with “the men” while the women who cooked the food waited until the men have eaten. The piece engages with how the view I have of myself and the view others have of me produces expectations tied up with a complex web of power relations colored by race and gender.



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I. The methodological value of arriving via motorcycle

The motorcycle (*ocada*) is the preferred means of travel in Sierra Leone. It is highly suitable for poor roads, and a ride on one can be hired for a relatively low price. All manner of things can be transported along with you, and when the rainy season starts, it is infinitely more practical to be on an *ocada* than in a car. It was for pragmatic reasons that I rented an *ocada* for my research assistant to drive during a month of research with isolated, rural communities in Port Loko District, Sierra Leone.

When I made this decision, I did so without giving any thought to the methodological value of such a mode of transport, but it became clear almost as soon as I sat on the back of the bike for the first time. As we passed through communities, children could be heard yelling, “Oporto! Oporto!” – more a greeting than anything else. The true value of my mode of transport was the distinction it made between me and NGO/UN workers who customarily arrived in white 4 × 4s. Turning up on the same mode of transport frequently used to travel to markets, or to health centers, or to visit relatives made me more relatable to the communities I visited. I was surely the butt of several jokes because of my insistence on wearing a helmet, but my arrival into communities was followed by a relaxed and friendly welcome. People frequently responded to my questions and requests by providing potentially sensitive and very personal information.

II. My discomfort with eating lunch with “the men”

For several days, I tagged along with a national NGO. They were visiting the district to engage in community sensitization on the government’s new land policy. In part, they sought to explain the policy’s provisions for women’s right to own land jointly with their husbands. In and of itself, this led to some interesting conversations, but in one community it was what happened immediately after the meeting that made me uncomfortable: lunch. As guests, the NGO representatives and I were invited to eat first, along with the men from the community. Since the group from the NGO was made up of men, this meant that I was the only woman eating. The women, both those who had been at the meeting and those who cooked the food, stood across the road washing dishes while we ate. I knew that in some communities in northern Sierra Leone, men and children eat first, and women eat when they’ve finished. I also knew that guests would be invited to eat first along with the men. This knowledge hadn’t prepared me for how I felt to be the only woman eating, directly after hearing the women in the community express their happiness at the new land policy’s statement on women’s land rights. Despite my pressing discomfort, I knew that waiting to eat with the women would be insulting. I sat with the men and ate with my head down.

In both of these vignettes, my perceptions of myself are tied up in complex relations of race and gender, as well as in the perceptions others have of me. Arriving on a bike was atypical for an *oportor*, and particularly for a white *woman*. The perceptions people had of me were surely shaped in part by my manner of arrival. Clearly, I was still a white woman, and a stranger, but I was *not* in a white 4 × 4 like so many other *oportors* – so in that sense, I was somehow different. This mode of transport became important for how I saw myself as well. I really wanted people to feel at ease when they saw me arrive in their community. The *ocada* somehow made me feel at ease with myself, perhaps because of how I perceived people’s reactions to

seeing me on it. This ease I felt with myself surely helped me transmit that feeling of ease to the communities.

The feeling of ease on the ocada stands in stark contrast to my feeling of unease during lunch. It was not so much that I felt uneasy with the local practice of serving food, but more that I felt personally uncomfortable – I perceived (either rightly or wrongly) that it was my *whiteness* that gave me enough status to eat with the men. While I would have loved to see the women sitting down to eat with us, what I wanted most in that moment was to be treated like the other women. While the perception of me was that I was first and foremost *white* or a “stranger,” my perception of myself was rooted in feelings of solidarity with the women washing dishes. From the moment I was invited to start eating, I grappled with my feminist consciousness and how to react. Thinking about it now still makes me uncomfortable, though I’m sure that I could not have done anything differently. For me, doing feminist fieldwork brings me in contact with and, at times, in conflict with my sense of self and my perceptions of how others perceive me.

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Notes on contributor

Caitlin Ryan is an Assistant Professor in International Security at the University of Groningen. She researches gender and security, and specifically how insecurities are produced, experienced and resisted. Her book *Bodies, Power and Resistance in the Middle East* (2015) was published by Routledge.