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Methodological issues arising from surveys in Bwa villages in Mali

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Introduction

Carrying out a survey in a foreign country is a continual challenge to the methodological "best practice" current in the researcher's home country. Whether the methods used are quantitative or qualitative, various issues arise for the project leader. The key one is the leader's legitimacy and membership of a research network run by local scientists. Similarly, the methodology must be closely examined to enable the research team to adapt to the context in which the data will be collected.

After briefly presenting the institutional context for the research that has been conducting for some fifteen years in seven Bwa villages in Mali (Hertrich 1996), I highlight the various stages necessary in contacting people, and describe the questions arising during the training of interviewers and interpreters when INED's Survey Department was involved in organising the data collection held from January to April 2004 (Quaglia 2004). The restitution of results to the survey respondents is also examined, with a description of the options chosen by the survey organisers.

The research project, begun some fifteen years ago, is intended to monitor demographic change and identify the first signs of fertility transition in remote rural communities in Mali. The observation system was set up in 1987-89 and is updated roughly every five years (1994/95 and 1999/2000). The Survey Department has been involved since the start of the most recent update. Two main surveys have been carried out: an exhaustive "renewed survey" of seven villages (3,600 people in 1999) and a "biographical survey" concentrating on two villages (1,500 people in 1999).

Institutional relations

These institutional relations have various purposes. One, as part of the partnership that has developed over the last fifteen years, is to meet the researchers and senior staff of the institutions interested in research on the Bwa people, and to inform them of the progress of the research and the renewal of the surveys. Another purpose is to ask about current or planned Malian research in demography; and finally to obtain the necessary permits to hold the survey.

In 2004, some of these institutional contacts were also intended to help prepare for a collective work to be edited by Véronique Hertrich and Seydou Keïta (CNRST¹), and followed on from the demography meeting held in Mali in January 2003, "Population questions in Mali: from international stakes to local perspectives" (Hertrich 2003).

My encounters with national and local scholarly, political, religious and NGO authorities helped me better understand the issues raised by this research and how the updated knowledge of the Bwa population fitted into the Malian authorities' national development plans.

Survey organisation

Surveys require various types of data, and biographical details are recorded with respect to census data, family trees, and dating calendars. The continual comparison of these various types of data restricts the possibility of dividing tasks and having the survey carried out by a team of local investigators only.

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The research leader did the initial survey personally and was then assisted by doctoral students working on the survey with interpreters. Marie Lesclingand, who took part in the 1999-2000 survey was in 2004, piloting the project with Veronique Hertrich. For the 2004 data collection round, it was decided to add three women students beginning a DEA advanced diploma – two from France and one from Mali – whose recruitment was finalised at the start of the mission.

Recruiting census agents/interpreters

French is Mali's official language, and some villagers have a partial understanding of Bambara, the language traditionally used throughout Mali; however, most only speak Bomu. So interpreters are essential for collecting the data.

The choice made has always been to recruit interpreters from villages close to the study area, both to ensure that they speak the local dialect properly and in order to adapt to living conditions in the villages. However, the "supply" is small: the educational level of the people who live in the villages surveyed is very low. Few have attended school and those who have usually leave the villages to live in town.

One interpreter living in a village near those surveyed has worked with the research leader since 1989. The others were found, as for earlier surveys, by using the network of relations that has gradually been formed (parish, local radio, pharmacist, etc.).

Informing the community before repeating the survey, and staying in the two villages of the biographical survey

The villagers are informed of the new survey before the team arrives. In November 2003, Véronique Hertrich held a meeting in each village to submit the proposal for a new survey to the villagers' approval. Subsequently a letter was sent to each village to confirm the new survey round and an official statement was broadcast over the local radio (Radio Parana). Finally, the interpreter with long survey experience went round the villages to confirm the dates when we would be arriving.

The research leaders consider it essential for the proper conduct of the survey for the team to stay in the villages during the data collection round, both for practical reasons and to ensure the legitimacy of the survey and that it is understood and accepted by the villagers. Not only does the presence of the research team in the village ease relations between villagers and team members, it enables the "newcomers" to learn, from the relations they form with the villagers they live with, the customs, codes and rules that regulate the daily lives of their temporary hosts.

Meeting the village chief and making arrangements

Field work begins with a new meeting in each village. The first task is to pay our respects to the village chief, ask about events (harvests, deaths, etc.) that have occurred since our last visit, inform him of the new data collection round, how long it will last and how it will be conducted, receive confirmation that he agrees to us doing the survey and moving into the village, and set a time for the meeting with the whole village. This is also when the practical details of our visit are arranged: allocation of a hut, appointment of a cook, etc.

Meeting the village

As with the meeting with the chief, this contact with the village families is an opportunity to recapitulate the various stages to follow. It is an occasion when those who wish may publicly ask questions and receive answers. It is also a chance to ensure that all the villagers agree to the survey being held.

Data collection, repeat survey and biographical survey

1. Repeat survey

The repeat survey to update the data obtained from previous surveys in the light of current data comprises a number of linked stages essential to the survey.

Census

The local census is designed to be completed with a minimum of paperwork in an exercise book. It consists of recording every person who slept in a particular village hut the night before. The information entered in the census book is: the hut number (allocated as we visit them), the person's first name, family name (*diamou*), marriage status, and the name of their head of economic household (*zuso*).

The census work was given to the interpreters, accompanied (to ensure no detail was omitted) by a villager (one for each team) appointed by the village as a guide. Among the Bwa, the residential unit (used as the census collection unit) does not correspond to the economic household (or farm). Generally, the members of a single farm live in various homes throughout the village. A single home may also house individuals belonging to different households (for example, young men who sleep in the same place but work and share meals with their parents). These households (*zu*) correspond to the units used for analysis. The name of the head of household is recorded in order to reconstitute households from the data collected from residential units.

Although all the interpreters come from Bwa villages and this household structure is a reality they are familiar with, during the interpreter/census agent training stress was laid on the notion of the head of household (the person you farm or eat with), central to the proper conduct of the census, and the further information to be recorded for visitors and people absent for less than three months.

Field note: the first census

We began the census with the village chief. The first problem was that he told us about the people who had slept in the three dwellings in the courtyard. Check. We visited each dwelling. In fact it was a single building with three doors, one of which was hard to see from the courtyard. Opposite was another building. This was the kitchen; I wondered what to do about the kitchens, how to be sure that all the dwellings had been recorded if we did not put a mark on each building. There was also the problem of derelict houses that were no longer inhabited and those whose residents were away travelling, or working, or gone for good. Later I would realise. Véronique confirmed that there was always someone from the village with the team. That way we are sure not to miss anyone.

I thought back to censuses in France. When the residents of a dwelling cannot be contacted, the census agents are required to ask their neighbours for information about them. Do these neighbours all know these people well enough to be able to say how long they are gone for? What type of information do we actually collect?

Other questions were asked by the interpreters. They seemed to find it hard not to record migrants, since these return to the village. This is a regular migration, from November to June, when they come back to farm the millet. I explained to them yet again that a census consists of recording all the people present on a given day in a given place, and that if it were a national census, the migrants would be recorded in the place they were living on that day.

For the zuso, I made sure several times that they had properly recorded the person they farm with or eat with. This zuso business (checking if the person named farms alone or with others) was not always clear even to me. But it did seem clear to the census agents, who all come from Boo country.

I was asked what to do about a lodging set aside for visitors. I confirmed that if it was empty the night before we arrived, it was not to be recorded.

After checking with Véronique, it turns out that the information about visitors, and absentees (less than three months) could have been fuller. The names were recorded but not always where they had gone to or come from, and the reasons for their departure or arrival.

A few clues. If a man has two wives, they live in separate houses, the children do not always live with their parents, there may be a house where a number of young people live who are from different families, not everyone living in the same house always has the same zuso. Check if that person farms alone or with others, and in the latter case, find out who the head of the zu is.

Comparing the data

The 2004 census data were then copied onto family sheets containing the data from the previous censuses. The final stage of the repeat survey was to compare the data with the families. This was done within the working group that included the men of the lineage. The details were recorded by the survey leaders, accompanied by an interpreter.

Field note: multiple first names

My work comparing current census data with preceding censuses in the village of Sirao taught me the importance of this stage for validating the data collected. For example, the same person may be declared, according to the informant, by a first name different from that recorded in the previous census. One man did not recognise his son in the list of people who had slept in his house the night before the census. The first name the boy was declared under was not known to his father. The same person may even have three first names: one from tradition (given at birth), a Christian name (for those who follow that faith), and another. All the first names are not always known by everyone or even by the person themselves. Data comparison is an opportunity to check with the various informants that it is indeed the same person

2. Biographical survey

The biographical survey was done by the three students recruited in Paris and Bamako, each accompanied by an interpreter. The teams spent a week being trained in interviewing techniques. They learnt how to ask people for the information in the various sections of the questionnaire; how to obtain basic demographic data, marital history recording all unions and marriage processes, birth history and pregnancies (whether or not resulting in a birth), migration history of people who had migrated at least once for at least three months, and religious history.

During the previous updates, the interviews were carried out by the survey designers or students who had already used the survey data. A novel feature of this 2004 data collection round was the recruitment of students who had not worked with the biographical survey before, or not long enough to have internalised, or at least discovered, if not understood, the rules, codes and concepts implied in the various sections. Furthermore, since the team was larger, more interpreters had to be used. The interviewers were given a document presenting the survey objectives and framework with appendices such as a description of the various questionnaire sections, the type of information required, the various formulations for collecting the information, the administrative papers to request when the person was unsure or did not know the answer, local references, material to align dates of events such as each village's historical and lineage calendars, and some basic words of Bomu.

The three weeks I spent in the villages gave me time to observe the succession of stages for each survey. For the repeat survey, for example, I attended the census agent/interpreter training course, took part in the census, copied out the data, and watched a data comparison in a small village. For the biographical survey, I took part in the training course for the students who were to do the interviewing and for the interpreters, the key intermediaries between respondents and interviewers.

Training in administering the questionnaire: "When two people meet, two worlds, objectivised, face each other" (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

The words and sentences used in a conversation, whether natural or arranged, as for a survey, use a social construction of the object they refer to and consequently a concept originating in a specific cultural and social context. Since language is a set of codes, it is not sufficient that the codes should be common to the sender and receiver, "the code must associate with each message to be communicated at least one sign (simple or complex) and with each signal at most one meaning" (Origgi and Sperber 2005). If this idea is commonplace for any research in the social sciences, its accuracy is all the most striking when the research is being done in a foreign country, and therefore a sociocultural, economic and political context, different from that in which the research was designed.

O The questionnaire as seen by the interviewers

Apart from the time taken to adapt to the various filters, usual with all surveys, and although the interviewers were able to consult the documents and began to work on the concepts in the questionnaire as soon as they arrived in the village, one of the main difficulties that arose for the students in the practice interviews was to adapt to formulating questions and to the concepts contained in the questions and answers, unusual for the French interviewers and also for the Malian one, since they were adapted to the Boo tradition.

Furthermore, since most of the villagers are illiterate, a list of items cannot be presented to the respondents. The interviewers have to learn the various questionnaire sections and their order, adapted to the answers given, and also the various types of solution to propose.

Take, for example, the traditional marriage process, which comprises the following stages:

- Decision to marry
 - O Agreement of the bride's family
 - Mediator
 - O Initiative
 - O Agreement of the person concerned
 - (non individual initiative)
 - (individual initiative and kidnapping)
 - O Agreement between partners
- · Services or other gifts
 - O Fields
 - O Grain
 - O Chap (Millet beer)
 - Money
- · Recipients of services
- Services after marriage
- Deposition
 - O Location
 - O Period
- Duration of process

As for all questionnaires, but more especially in this context, there is a formulation for each topic, each question, that must be scrupulously followed by the interviewer to avoid the risk, as we shall see, of not being understood by the respondent.

For the first question concerning the decision to marry, for example, to ask "Did anyone go and ask the bride's family (your family) if they agreed to this marriage? Were they asked before the kidnapping or not until afterwards?", talking of requests for agreement and kidnapping as natural occurrences, implies that the interviewers have accepted the Bwa marriage process as a norm. In other words, their own conception of marriage (in their own country, region or social background, namely the choice of two people who meet and decide to marry even before talking to their families about it) does not influence their questioning. Although these processes are nowadays sometimes simplified, it is important that the interviewers know of all the elements they comprise and that no stage is omitted in the questions asked of the villagers. For example, the name (diamou) of the person sent to ask for agreement is not sufficient; their status must also be recorded (sowinima, griot, blacksmith, friend of member of the man's lineage).

Also for marriage, custom requires that the bride who has been kidnapped should be sequestered (for a varying length of time) in a village other than her own with a person chosen by the future groom. The question is "Who was the bride (were you) sequestered with?"

The answer, from the respondent's point of view, may well be "A female friend of my mother's". From both the respondent and the interpreter's point of view, the word "mother" may mean the biological mother or the sister of the respondent's mother (just as "father" also means the brother of the biological father). If the interviewer asks no further questions, the answer recorded will be "a friend of my mother's", understood to be "my biological mother's". A further question is therefore necessary to discover the actual relationship of this "mother" to the respondent, for research purposes. With respect to family ties, to be sure of the actual relationship involved when a respondent speaks of her "brother", the following question must be "Same father, same mother?" Consequently the respondent's answer must never be taken at face value, but thought must be given to what that answer implies or may be recorded with the words used in the researchers' environment, here in France or in some Western country.

With birth history, the introductory sentence, "I would like you to tell me about all the children you have borne, even the spoilt pregnancies and the children who died without a name", implies that the interviewers have accepted all the notions associated with the expression "spoilt pregnancy", namely miscarriages, stillbirths and even children who die shortly after birth, and the various possibilities to be presented to enable the respondent to distinguish miscarriages (or abortions), "the child was not yet properly formed", from stillbirths, "the child was formed", and live births, "the child cried out at birth". The interviewer must therefore not only learn and understand the questionnaire and its various filters and instructions, but also concepts and turns of phrase that are not familiar to her.

Another difficulty encountered by the interviewers, particularly but not only the French students, arises from the fact that many words currently used in France to denote a concept have a different meaning in Mali, and more specifically among the Bwa. For example, a "breakdown" (of marriage) is called a "spoilt marriage". Although the expressions are close, the use of the term "breakdown" makes no sense to the interpreters, nor therefore to the respondent. A few situations that arose during the practice exercises may illustrate this point. When the questionnaire on birth history is administered, what is perceived by the interviewer as the "second pregnancy" must be called the "following pregnancy"; or, concerning school enrolment: "she was at school" becomes "she went to school". In the religious history, "have you changed religion?" must become "did you go to see the [Catholics, Protestants, etc.]?" or "Did you leave the [Catholics, Protestants, etc.] to follow tradition, to go to the [Catholics, Protestants, etc.]?". And in migration history, "How long did you stay in Bamako?" is changed to "How long did you last in Bamako?"

Living in the villages and attending practice sessions helps the interviewers to become familiar with these new ways of talking about familiar concepts, this new way of using a language they thought they spoke fluently (which for the French interviewers is their native language). As we have seen, the practice exercises also showed that it was important not to neglect this aspect of the interviewers' work.

O The questionnaire as seen by the interpreters

The task of administering the questionnaire, following the right filters and instructions, belongs to the interviewer. The interpreter's work is to convey to the two speakers the words and therefore the concepts attached to them. As we have already seen, although the people recruited had already personally experienced the passage from one language to another, since they all came from Bwa villages and had been taught in French at school, they were not as such professional interpreters and were often unfamiliar with concepts from the researcher's culture (except the interpreter who worked with the previous surveys). Much of the interpreter training was therefore devoted to raising their awareness of this specific position of the interpreter in the interview.

The skills required for the interviews are those of consecutive interpreting. Apart from repeating in another language the words and concepts contained in the speech to be translated, one of the prime requirements for this work, as for that of interviewer, is to see oneself and act as a "neutral" intermediary between two individuals talking. Since the formulation of the question or answer is crucial for the rest of the interview, the restatement of the remarks must be as faithful as possible, and not contain any personal interpretation. The task is not to make an interpretation to oneself and then give a brief summary but to restate as accurately as possible the remarks of the two speakers. However, it is necessary to add to this a major feature of interpreting as a profession, which is to inform the speakers of any cultural elements that may help them understand the answer to a question. These requirements both to "forget oneself" and to be a cultural informant, well known to professional interpreters and survey agents from their own experience, were preconditions for any training in the work the interpreters would have to do.

Being the interpreter for a survey requires of the people recruited, therefore, in addition to a knowledge of the two languages being used in the interview, that they work at various levels:

- understand the purpose of the survey and what follows from it: from the point of view of
 the interpreters, all from neighbouring villages and considering the marriage process as
 the norm, marriage, say, must be understood as not always involving such a complex
 process; there may be different forms of behaviour, some variations from the norm, etc.
- internalise the notions contained in questions originating in a cultural model they are now discovering, namely in this case the French model: "mother" almost always means biological mother;
- be aware of the various procedures and techniques used in survey interviews.

Various groups were formed during the training. A large number of practice interviews, with interpreters taking turns as respondents, not only trained people in administering the questionnaire but also enabled each side to understand their function on the interviewer/interpreter team. By sharing among interpreters the formulations proposed by each, and criticising various interpretations (under the leadership of the one interpreter who had worked on the previous surveys), they eventually reached agreement on a common formulation for the questions asked in the different sections of the questionnaire.

The following examples taken from the training sessions are to some extent arguments for recognising the degree of training required for an intercultural survey, whether the interpreters are professional or otherwise.

Still on the topic of marriage, one question was asked during a practice followed by a sharing of the various formulations proposed by the interpreters. The question was "I would like to know how the engagement was decided?" and it emerged that the idea of engagement is linked to action by elders, and the term engagement is not used when the young people decide. The answer might well be "There was no engagement" although there was one, decided by the young people. The term "commitment" was preferred, because this referred to a stage in the process rather than a religious or civil ceremony, and could cover both.

Similarly, the difference between duration and period was not clear to everyone. A question which might appear sufficiently explicit, such as "How long did you last in Bamako?" might, depending on the interpreter, be answered "For the wet season" or "Three weeks". Depending on the formulation used, a period corresponds to part of the year, while duration is a length of time. If the question about duration is not properly explained during training it may become a question about a period and the answer will have to be followed by another question about the time spent.

This last example illustrates the amount of work required of the interpreters, who when asking a question become interviewers, and the type of error that may arise if the essential period of practice and training in administering the questionnaire, with systematic verification of the terms used in translation, is not planned to take place before the field survey.

The section on divorce consisted of reading a number of statements to which the respondent had to reply how far the statement did or did not correspond to the reason the spouses divorced. A threepoint scale of responses was given: the reason counted a lot, a little or not at all in the decision to divorce. In "standard" surveys this type of question is known as not always easy for respondents to understand and is focused on during interviewer training. Some interpreters, not understanding the way in which people were being asked to respond, turned the statement into a condition. "There were problems between the man's family and the woman's family" became "If there were problems between the man's family and the woman's family" and the respondent did not know how to answer. Similarly a formulation of the type "There were problems between the man's family and the woman's family" became, if the interpreter had not been trained to know why the impersonal form was used, "There were problems between your family and your husband's family". Or the statement "The woman thought the man did not look after the children properly" became "You did not look after your children properly", to which the respondent replied "Yes, I did look after my children", and the interviewer would then repeat, "Did this reason count a little, a lot or not at all?" and neither the respondent nor the interpreter understood the point of the repetition. A long time was spent on this section of the questionnaire to stop this type of situation recurring.

The experience of the interpreter who had already worked on these surveys was invaluable during this part of the training. Many of the questions raised were familiar to him because they had been pointed out during his previous work with the research team. Unfortunately, this sort of experience is not always available when a survey is being set up. A particularly productive feature of the days spent on training was the pooling of the various interpreters' translations and examination by the whole team of the various options available and of the position of interpreter and interviewer.

Results restitution, team integration in villages, and the consequences for interaction between researchers and villagers.

Although restitution following surveys of the general population is usually decided by the researchers or their institutions, the issue is much more complicated for surveys of particular communities. This is often with categories that are not recorded or not represented in surveys of the general population. It may be illegal practices (drug addiction, undocumented immigration) or mobility (the homeless) that make is impossible to produce personal records, and restitution often involves sending the results to

the institutions concerned by that category or publication in the media. Even when this type of dissemination exists, the publication of scientific data always raises the problem of understanding by the non-specialist public. The time needed to produce easily readable reports is seldom planned for in research projects, and the researchers have often moved on to other work even before the analyses are completed.

Since the late 1980s, when the Bwa village surveys began, each villager has received after the survey a copy of their own biography, and a patrilineal family tree has been given to the representative of the lineage. Although the recipients are illiterate, these papers have been preciously kept safe among the various official documents that are evidence of each person's life. In a sense, these papers were the equivalent of the scientific publications sent out in France and many other countries to survey respondents. Many people keep these documents, four-page papers, in a corner of their bookcases or in a file, as evidence of their participation in an officially sanctioned survey.

Aware of the limitations of this type of restitution to an illiterate audience, the research leaders set up an innovative method using an audiovisual presentation in the local language. This was projected on a large screen in each village in January 2003. Finally, the villagers were given the chance of having sketches filmed, on condition that these were invented, rehearsed and acted by themselves on topics related to those in the survey. When each village or hamlet had rehearsed at least one, they were all filmed and shown to the villagers in January 2004.

This stay gave me the opportunity to share experience with the inhabitants of the village where we were staying and other villages where the repeat survey was being carried out. I was greatly struck by people's reactions. Both the image they had of other surveys they had taken part in and their unawareness of the researchers' objectives. The questions they asked were familiar to me because they were similar to those raised by respondents to "standard" surveys. The impression they have of being "objects" rather than agents maintained a degree of vagueness about the objectives of these surveys and their usefulness for the people surveyed. Although oral tradition had kept up a collective memory for centuries, this new form of restitution seems to have opened up for the villagers another vision of their individual and collective histories, integrating them in a wider process of change in Malian society. My institutional contacts, as mentioned above, enabled me to see how this survey fitted into a general development process advanced by the Malian authorities. The subsidies given to regions to build schools and health centres, for campaigns on contraception, AIDS prevention, information on the use of tax revenues, are all opportunities for the national and local authorities to raise individual citizens' awareness of belonging to a wider project aiming at improving the living conditions of people in the countries of the South. The feeling of taking part in raising the understanding of individual and collective processes, and consequently of belonging to this development project, seemed to me to be shared by the people I spoke to and was clearly expressed in some of the sketches the villagers produced.

Conclusion

Surveying communities in cultures other than that of the survey designers is a topic now discussed in most workshops and seminars devoted to survey methodology. Many research bodies, whether their surveys are national or international, consider this to be a central issue. Historically, anthropologists were the first to stress the importance of field work and to question the place of the researcher in their relations with the society being studied (Malinowski 1922, Leiris 1981). This question, crucial to the understanding of the society studied, is now taken into account by all the human and social sciences. Because this research, both qualitative and quantitative, re-examines professional practises and develops new skills, it sets an example for so-called "classical" field work. Through the ethical and methodological choices that are made, through the questions that these choices raise, this research touches, as we have seen, the heart of these issues.

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