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School in Rural Mozambique as a Field for Ethnographic Research

Abstracts

EN

The modern rural school in Mozambique, introduced by Portuguese colonialism, faces challenges in delivering quality education – quality according to international standards – and at the same time, it must be in permanent dialogue with its rural context in order to serve the needs of its people. One of the ways to produce scientific evidence about educational practices in these rural schools is to use the ethnographic approach. However, in a study of schools in rural Mozambique, the ethnographic approach faced specific challenges concerning a) the identification of the target population and the sample, b) the non-transparencies of the role of the researcher, c) the objectives of the research process and d) the research process itself. The article describes these challenges and reflects upon their influence on research results and possibilities.

DE

Die moderne Schule auf dem Land in Mosambik, die durch den portugiesischen Kolonialismus eingeführt wurde, steht vor der Herausforderung, qualitativ hochwertige Bildung zu vermitteln – Qualität nach internationalen Standards – und muss gleichzeitig in ständigem Dialog mit ihrem ländlichen Umfeld stehen, um den Bedürfnissen der Bevölkerung gerecht zu werden. Eine der Möglichkeiten, wissenschaftliche Erkenntnisse über die Bildungspraktiken in diesen ländlichen Schulen zu gewinnen, ist der ethnografische Ansatz. Bei einer Studie über Schulen im ländlichen Mosambik stand der ethnografische Ansatz jedoch vor besonderen Herausforderungen in Bezug auf: a) die Identifizierung der Adressat:innen und der Stichprobe, b) die Intransparenz der Rolle des Forschers, c) die Ziele des Forschungsprozesses und d) den Forschungsprozess selbst. Der Artikel beschreibt diese Herausforderungen und reflektiert über ihren Einfluss auf die Forschungsergebnisse und -möglichkeiten.

PT

A escola moderna no meio rural moçambicano, introduzida pelo colonialismo português, enfrenta desafios para oferecer uma educação de qualidade – qualidade de acordo com os padrões internacionais – e, ao mesmo tempo, deve estar em diálogo permanente com o seu contexto rural, a fim de servir as necessidades da sua população. Uma das formas de produzir evidência científica sobre as práticas educativas nestas escolas rurais é utilizar a abordagem etnográfica. No entanto, num estudo sobre escolas em zonas rurais de Moçambique, a abordagem etnográfica enfrentou desafios específicos relacionados com a) a identificação da população-alvo e da amostra, b) a não transparência do papel do investigador, c) os objectivos do processo de investigação e d) o próprio processo de investigação. O artigo descreve estes desafios e reflete sobre a sua influência nos resultados e possibilidades da investigação.

JA

モザンビークの農村地帯には、ポルトガルの植民地支配によって学校が導入されたが、質の高い教育をおこなうにあたって現在も困難を抱えている。ここでいう質とは、国際標準として要求されるものである。同時に、人びとのニーズに応えるべく、農村地帯の文脈ではたえざる意見交換が必要になっている。これら農村地帯の学校での教育実践について学術的知見を得る方法の一つとして、エスノグラフィのアプローチがある。しかし、モザンビークの農村地帯の学校調査では、4つの点に課題が生じた；a) 研究対象となるグループとサンプルの特定；b) 研究者の役割の不透明性；c) 研究プロセスの対象；d) 研究プロセスそのもの。本稿では、これらの課題を叙述し、研究の成果に対する影響と可能性について省察する。

1 Introduction

Relating to the post-colonial situation of education in Mozambique – e.g., the persistence of a centralised education system in a structurally heterogeneous region (see part 2), the study I refer to (Mulhanga 1998) was aimed to understand the relationship between the school and the rural community. This, in turn, required knowledge of socio-cultural aspects of the community and schooling practices, utilising an ethnographic approach as one of the methodological resources. The problems and challenges I faced during this study, which was conducted as my doctoral thesis, will serve as a basis for discussing general challenges of ongoing relevance that can be faced in implementing

the ethnographic method, in the search for descriptions to understand the sociocultural realities of lesser-known social groups.

The study, following the methodological approach of ethnography, was carried out in a primary school in a rural area of Mozambique, in Messano, Province Gaza. Its main objective was to examine the standing of the school in particular rural areas, and in doing so, taking into consideration the influence of the colonisation by Portugal on one of the fundamental institutions of modern societies. This rural area of Mozambique is considered to be an area where the traditions of pre-colonial times have been upheld and continue to influence the customs, practices, meanings and social and economic structures.

Due to the paucity of studies concerning these socio-cultural aspects and their relation to education in rural Mozambique, it was necessary to investigate the aforementioned aspects in this rural area and the meanings which people living there attribute to their own life. The method most suited to gathering this specific data is the ethnographic approach, the expectation being that by way of the results gained by ethnographic research on culture and social practices, it would then be possible to examine if and how traditional cultural and social practices are reflected in modern rural schools. More specifically, the study aimed to determine how the traditions of understanding and managing life in the rural context of the school were valued in school culture and practices. In turn, this knowledge would make it possible to question the relevance of the centralised curriculum (issued by the Ministry of Education) and school culture for cultural and social practices of the communities in the respective rural areas.

Hence, the ethnographic approach has become an essential tool in the process of producing the knowledge necessary for the 'dialogue' between the school and its rural context. Furthermore, it provides the crucial aspect of analysing and evaluating the information gleaned from this dialogue. Despite its key role in research on the school and rural area, the application of the ethnographic method presented some challenges that may have, in one way or another, influenced the results of the study conducted. It is these challenges that I intend to broach and reflect upon in this article, as they generated the interest to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of this approach in the specific conditions of those school contexts, especially so when one must also take into account the crucial realm of 'unseen', 'unheard' and 'unspoken' (for example in the sense of supernatural/metaphysical knowledge/wisdom) knowledge production particular to rural areas in Mozambique. These may be unfamiliar to researchers, thus leading to the probability that this knowledge will remain unaccounted for and the chance to assess the value and impact of this knowledge on contextualisation would be forfeited: Is the ethnographic method viable for producing relevant information about the rural school of

Mozambique? What obstacles does a researcher encounter in the field of study?

Due to the way the ethnographic approach is methodologically constructed, it foresees and relies upon contextualisation. Hence, the rural school is the centre of focus, and therefore, some information about the history and development of the school system in Mozambique and the cultural heterogeneity of the rural areas, must be given (part 2). In this part, some of the key findings of the study of school in rural Mozambique will also be highlighted. This is followed by a presentation of what the participants experienced during the research process and the particular challenges in using the ethnographic method in this context (part 3).

The conclusion shall point out the possibilities and the challenges arising when Western research and knowledge practices encounter communities with very different (re)search and knowledge practices and discuss what we can learn from that for the ethnographic approach.

2 Background: School in rural Mozambique

It is common, especially in rural Mozambique, that parents and guardians motivate and urge their children to enter and attend school by employing expressions such as: "You have to go to school to be a doctor and have work...", "You have to go to school to be someone...", "If you don't go to school, you will carry bags...". Other frequently used phrases are: "If you don't go to school, you'll be like us, your parents, and you'll live off the hoe...".

Without these and other expressions being generalisable, they reveal an idea of successful school attendance that simultaneously presents itself as a criticism, by the parents themselves, of the conditions and the context in which they live. These expressions also show that those who use them, in this case the parents, feel that they do not possess the knowledge that is required to live in the world that the school prepares pupils for. The types of motivation described above, not referring to the culture and context of their children's lives, make it difficult to understand whether the desire to see the school contribute to the reading, writing and quantification, meaning, re-signification and interpretation of the world of rural life in which they are living, exists in the parents' perspective.

The category of motivational expressions described above does not leave space for the culture and context of their children's lives in rural areas. It is exactly this unaccounted aspect that, in turn, makes it difficult to understand whether the parents' desire for their children to attend school also signifies that they would encourage and accept a situation whereby their children would foster an opposing understanding and attach a deviating significance

and value to life in the rural environment from that of their parents. Moreover, the question arises as to whether parents take the aforesaid perspective and the ensuing impact and far-reaching consequences this would impose on their and their children's lives into consideration, when urging their children to attend school.

A relevant observation in relation to these types of expressions is the fact that parents understand the school as an institution where their children can obtain a recognised qualification, but that this qualification is one for a world they do not know because they do not live in it: the modern world. This lack of knowledge considerably limits the scope and content of informed discourse between parents and children and the support parents can offer their children in relation to their children's studies and in relation to the modern world.

But why does the modern school in rural areas present these characteristics and difficulties in relation to its context? In order to clarify this, it is important to take into account the historical background of schooling in Mozambique and to mention some characteristics of rural areas in Mozambique.

Several sources on the history of schooling in Mozambique indicate that the introduction and establishment of schools was linked its colonisation (Mazula 1995; Mondlane 1990). According to these sources, the school, as an effective institution of colonisation, actively sought to promote the policy of assimilation. Indigenous Mozambicans who, among other things, were able to speak the Portuguese language, who ceased to practice local customs and traditions, had a job, etc., were considered as being assimilated. Thus, the Portuguese language was introduced as a teaching language, and curriculums were developed based on the Portuguese colonial reality. At certain stages of the implementation of colonial schooling, the above-mentioned sources underline the importance of the role and impact of the Catholic Church, especially in schooling in rural areas of Mozambique. It is also pointed out that, except for some isolated cases of missionaries such as the anthropologist Henri Junod¹, Portuguese colonialism did not promote studies of the identity, culture and social practices of Mozambicans, thus making it difficult for colonial schooling to integrate relevant knowledge about Mozambicans and their culture. Such knowledge, in turn, is of course fundamental for rural schools in order to recognise and value their context

Mozambique's independence in 1975 brought with it the aim of reform, and former disciplines and contents of the colonial curriculum have been replaced by curriculums more linked to the Mozambican reality. Notwithstanding these profound changes, the school education system had failed to eliminate one of

1 Around 1913, Henri Alexander Junod wrote the work entitled, *Uses and Customs of the Bantu*, more specifically of the Tsongas living in southern Mozambique.

the main causes which disconnected the school from its socio-cultural context: the sustained use of Portuguese, a non-native language, as the only language of schooling in a system of curriculum education and centralised management. The first significant signs of a response to these issues appeared in with the introduction of the new Basic Education curriculum in 2004, containing two fundamental innovations: bilingual teaching and the local curriculum. The introduction of bilingual teaching demonstrates the importance of the fundamental role of the first language(s) and how crucial the mother tongue(s) is/are for the teaching and learning process, which was recognised and accordingly acted upon. This change also demonstrated the recognition of the fundamental place of the meanings of themselves and of the world developed by children before they entered school. With the introduction of the adapted curriculum, the managers of the National Education System recognised not only the importance, but above all the need, for the culture and social practices of the students' life contexts to be part of the school's curriculum content.

Regarding rural areas in Mozambique, it may be questioned why they earn special consideration in debates concerning the relationship between schooling and society. This can be explained by the fact that the difficulties of integrating the school in some contexts of Mozambican society lie not only in the colonial history of its establishment but also in the fact that the country is characterised by a large diversity in the population. This diversity, in turn, is characterised by the existence of ethnically diverse populations living within the same geographical context. The country has a vast linguistic diversity, and also comprises of areas at different stages of social and economic development and different forms of knowledge production and knowledge management. These differences are, in turn, reflected in the cognitive and emotional structures of its inhabitants. The German political scientist Nohlen (1992) refers to a type of society, like the Mozambican one, as "structurally heterogeneous" because it has different structures of economic and social organisation. While in certain areas, for example, the centrality of the family is still the most important institution for regulating coexistence and meeting the needs of its members, in cities and towns, the institutions of modernity (e.g., formal jurisdiction, bureaucratic and work relations) are playing an increasingly important role in the management of society.

From the historical perspective on the development of societies (e.g., Tenbruck 1989), Mozambique can be regarded as a country, that finds itself in different forms of societal and social organisation at the same time.

In rural areas of Mozambique, where Bantu languages are predominantly spoken rather than the official language, Portuguese, there is a predominance of knowledge production that is not based on scientific research (see 3.2).

There are regions where populations alternate between their main areas of residence and those of agricultural production throughout the year.

It should be noted that, despite the heterogeneous structure of Mozambican society, the National Education System in the country is centralised², thus hindering regional and local adaptations. This centrality, together with other factors linked to its history, means that schooling is facing crises related to the quality of the education offered, especially regarding the value attached to school and schooling above all in the rural context. In this regard, several studies focused on this post-colonial schooling, with some researchers discussing its quality from the perspective of its functions (Castiano 1997). Other researchers aimed to understand the anthropology and ideology inherent to the genesis of post-colonial schools (Mazula 1995), while others, such as Palme (1992), focused their research on the meaning given to the Mozambican school by the community and schools informants.

The study, whose methodological challenges are the object of reflection, was carried out in the southern part of Mozambique between 1995 and 1998. Through ethnographic research, we sought to understand the relationship of the modern school of colonial origin with the culture of its context. More specifically, the study sought to identify whether or not the contents and educational objectives of the school were in relation to the cultural traditions and educational objectives of the rural context of the school. There were two main research questions: a) whether school prepares children to gain life skills, especially for life in their rural environment; b) whether the rural school contributed to the development of a stable personality for the children.

Among the results achieved, it is important to highlight two of them, namely:

- i) There was a notable absence of the sociocultural traditions of the rural context in the contents, practices and school life, especially with the exclusion of the children's mother tongue as the language of teaching and communication in the school context, a fact that did not contribute to the development of life skills in children for their main life context.
- ii) It was noted that, with the exclusion of culture, and with it the roots gained in their first socialisation, the school negatively interfered in the process of personality development of children (Mulhanga 1998: 174-177).

2 It is based on a model of educational management, in which decision-making power is concentrated in a single central authority, the central government. Thus, schools are run uniformly, following the same policies and guidelines set by the central government.

3 Ethnographic method possibilities and limits in rural areas

Particularly in the light of the significance that ethnographic research assumes, it is important to describe the challenges of the application of the ethnographic method that may have influenced the results of the study conducted. It is these challenges that I intend to broach and reflect upon in this part. More specifically, the challenges faced are the non-transparencies of the role of the researcher and the objectives of the research process (3.1), the identification of the target population and the sample (3.2) and the preparation and implementation of the data collection processes (3.3).

3.1 The role of the researcher and the objectives of the research process

A first aspect that emerged in the research process in the rural context of the school was related to the non-transparency of the function of the researcher and his objectives in that rural context.

The concept of non-transparency of the researcher's role was used by Lang-Wojtasik (2002) to discuss the limits of ethnographic research in contexts where informants lack an idea of *researchers'* roles and the objectives they intend to achieve with their work. In addressing this concept, Lang-Wojtasik not only wanted to draw attention to the dangers of the universalisation of Western-inspired research methods, but also to show the importance of a permanent reflection and re-evaluation of the dynamics between the researcher, the method and the context in conducting research, especially of ethnographic character. According to Lang-Wojtasik (2002), the lack or false understanding of the role of the researcher is problematic, since it can lead to the community developing unrealistic expectations of the researcher and the objectives of the research, which, in turn, can make the development of productive interactions difficult, which, in Stigel's words, are necessary for the establishment of relations of reciprocity that are indispensable for "the metabolism, the unknown cultural community" (Stigel in Thomas 2019: 60).

The concept of non-transparency in relation to the role of the researcher and his objectives, presented by Lang-Wojtasik, describes the experience of research in the Mozambican rural school precisely and raises some questions that may be important for ethnographic research, such as whether the lack of meaning in the local language for the concept of researcher could mean that there is a lack of or no understanding of this concept in the community, of how knowledge is produced and managed in these contexts. Finally, the question arises as to if and to what extent non-transparency affects research.

a) The non-transparency

Starting with the last question, which is related to non-transparency and its consequences, it should be noted that the difficulty to understand what a researcher is and what his function and objectives are, was apparent when the research commenced and continued throughout the study. The following field note of a public meeting where the researcher was presented to the community, demonstrates some of the effects of non-transparency:

At a public meeting, the researcher was presented to the community. The village leader informed those present that the community had received someone who was coming to carry out a job to become a doctor. He added that the doctor would then help them treat diseases. After the researcher quickly informed the village leader that he was in fact preparing to write a book, the leader then related to the villagers that the researcher intended through his work to become a doctor of books. Some participants in the meeting then commented that the researcher could then help their children with matters relating to school³ (it could be because the word books prompted a connection with the school).

Furthermore, it emerged that among some villagers who had already been observing the researcher interviewing villagers and recording the data, the idea had formed that the researcher was, in fact, a spy, and this supposition had circulated in the community. Therefore, it is clear that, should the supposition be considered as being valid, the researcher would be regarded as a threat and consequently, this would innately limit the willingness of villagers to provide the researcher with information.

Unexpectedly, during the course of the research, some members of the community contacted the researcher about a list into which, according to the information circulating, the researcher entered the names of children who would later study in Germany, requesting the researcher to add the names of their children to the list.

Regarding the community's expectations of the researcher's role and objectives, it seems, that in the absence of the concept of researcher and his research activity, community members observed what the researcher was doing in his field work, and from this they drew their conclusions: In their eyes he either became a spy or was capable of helping in the treatment of diseases, or providing support for children attending school in the role of a philanthropist. From these categorisations or attributions, the community developed its expectations of the researcher, whether it was to have diseases treated by him, to enable their children to study in Europe or to avoid being spied on.

3 With the comments of community members, it seemed that the community was trying to pursue the practical purpose of the researcher's work for their lives and less an understanding of the importance of the knowledge he would produce.

This brief extract from an analysis of the ethnographic research experience in the rural context of Mozambique showed ambivalence, uncertainty and misunderstanding about the role and objectives of the researcher, which infer that the research process was threatened by the difference in concepts, and that this difference generated different expectations and objectives between the researcher and community members. Moreover, the presence of the researcher in the community raised expectations that were impossible for the researcher to meet. On the latter aspect, when the presence of the researcher contributes to the emergence of unrealistic expectations for the resolution of existing problems in the communities, the previously cited publication by Lang-Wojtasik (2002: 137) deems this as an ethical issue in ethnographic research, as expectations and needs are evoked that cannot be satisfied by the researcher.

b) Conceptualisation of 'research' in the field: authorities and procedures of knowledge production

The second question that the experience of this study has forced me to ask is whether the lack of meaning of the concept of a researcher in the local language could point to the non-existence or unfamiliarity of this activity in the community. Or, if a meaning of the concept of research exists, how is it characterised, and what is the term and meaning attributed by the community to the activity? This question seems important to me because the search for cultural meanings in a given context is undoubtedly an encounter with the system of production and management of these meanings. It seems equally important to me because each ethnographer is a representative of a concrete system of production of cultural meanings

In the Changane language, which was spoken in the area where the study was carried out, there are concepts corresponding to the word '*search*', namely *kulava*, which also means to search, or *kulandzelela*, which means *to walk behind*. However, there is no evidence of the existence of the concept of '*researcher*', in the sense of someone who is exclusively or partially dedicated to the search, processing, supply and management of information and knowledge, just as there is no evidence of the existence of a professional role, exercised by researchers, as is practiced in Western societies⁴. So how are cultural meanings generated, how are clarifications attained, how are answers concerning the various existential challenges found? Reviewing the approach of this rural community to existential problems, such as sickness, death and misfortune, a social group has been identified that itself actively searches for

4 This is not in contradiction with the fact that in reality, communities have systems of knowledge produced and managed by them, for example through elders. The statement is valid only when it is a question of identifying a specific social role regarding research.

meanings and explanations, comprising of traditional doctors (also known as healers or shaman (Mueller 1997)), who, in the local language, are called *tinhang*, and, of course, the community members who turn to the healers in their own search to understand and come to terms with difficulties they encounter. In fact, when traditional doctors are presented with life problems, such as death, illness, naming new-borns, lack of rain, infertility, etc., by members of their communities, they seek an explanation through two procedures: *Kufemba* and *Kulhalhuva*. In the search for explanations through *Kufemba*, the *Nyanga* – the traditional physician possessed by a spirit – goes into a state of trance in which the causes and the effects are revealed, and accordingly, the *Nyanga* gives a prognosis of the future and advice on the remedial measures to be taken. *Kulhalhuva*, a procedure of searching for explanations, occurs with the use of *Tinhlolo* (artefacts such as bones, shells, wood, skin, etc.) to map out reality. Here, the *Nyanga* uses both *Tinhlolo* and revelations from a spirit without going into a trance. The spirit, in this case, helps the *Nyanga* to ‘see’, i.e., to decipher the meanings that the *Tinhlolos* show.

These search procedures for explanations and solutions differ from those of scientific research in several crucial aspects (method, purpose, data processing). However, the causes that lead to the need for research – the search for explanations and solutions to existential problems affecting human beings – are similar. Moreover, the motivation – to discover the origin of problems and find solutions – is a common factor. This assertion holds despite the fact that academic scientific research differs from the search proceedings of societies in rural communities in Mozambique because scientific research aims to discover and establish sustainable, long term, and not primarily immediate solutions.

Regarding the design and implementation of ethnographic research in contexts similar to this one, it should be noted that, in addition to the non-transparency of the function and objectives of the researcher, there was no correspondence between the local system of knowledge production and the Western scientific traditions. The experience in this research on rural areas may have given clues that describing the meanings, rules, norms of a concrete social world in order to create an insight into local knowledge and practices, which, as we have seen, is the task of ethnography, may require that the ethnographer also identifies the system of the production of knowledge in the social context of the research. In general, this is a complex system, which, besides the knowledge it produces, also contains subsystems, such as legitimations, beliefs and interpretations of this same knowledge.

3.2 Identification of target population and sample (informants) in rural areas

If ethnographic studies aim to determine and describe the meanings, rules, and norms of a concrete social world in order to create an encyclopaedia of local knowledge (Thomas 2019), immediately, the question arises who the holders of the relevant information about this social world are. The answer to this question is not generalisable for all social contexts. In this case, for example, it was shown that the social actors and contributors in the production and legitimisation of meanings involved not only living human beings but also included knowledge bequeathed from the spirits of ancestors (Mulhanga 1998). Ancestral spirits are consulted, and there are spaces and symbols dedicated to them in houses and courtyards, as it is believed that the spirits have, among others, the ability to explain the causes of various phenomena such as illness, death, and learning difficulties. At the same time, there are vital events concerning their happiness or suffering, which the living view as a manifestation of the will of the spirits of their ancestors. It is also believed that spirits possess the ability to be born again. Communication with the ancestors is, in turn, made by people gifted and trained especially for this purpose, called *tinhangas*, in whose bodies the spirits of the ancestors can manifest themselves. It is in the state of trance that meanings are attributed and explanations about phenomena of nature and society are given. In this way, a special challenge is posed to the identification of sources of information and to the establishment of interactions and "reciprocal relationships" (Stagel in Thomas 2019: 11), which are indispensable for the success of the ethnographer's work. The following field note shows how knowledge is produced, shared, and accepted in this region, which is different to standardised Western scientific procedures:

At a public meeting held in the community during the research period, which was attended by about 100 people, a community member was accused of being a wizard and the community decided to expel him from the community. His residence was to be burned within one week. The citizen accepted and agreed to leave the village. The public accusation was that the accused was linked to the appearance of misfortunes such as illness and death, a bad harvest and a divorce case in that community. For the acts of witchcraft, it was said at that meeting that the accused used an animal kept in his home (nwamulambu), which he fed on human blood (Mulhanga 1998).

In relation to this event, it should be noted that the relevance and credibility of the information for the community, which led to the expulsion of the said member, was apparent throughout the prosecution, trial, conviction and accordingly from the acceptance of the sentence by the accused.

In searches for the sources of the information that served as a basis for the conviction and expulsion of the community member, it was possible to ascertain that the information had been brought to the village authorities by several families as a denunciation. The latter, in the search for explanations for the problems they were facing, together with the healers, were informed that the cause of these problems was linked to the spell of the community member now expelled. As sources of information, the healer contacted said that the spirit he possessed would go into a trance to help discover the wizard, what they were doing, who they were attacking and how they were acting. The same healer also related that, from the moment he entered a state of trance until he regained his consciousness, he was disconnected from everything that happened to him and around him. According to him, he only came to know what he had discovered in trance by the explanation of his assistants at the end of his state of trance.

Thus, it is clear that during the study, difficulties were to be encountered in identifying the sample and in the process of searching for information and experiences when this search necessarily involved contacting healers, sorcerers, and ancestral spirits.

These difficulties elicited another great challenge, that of understanding (comprehension), taking into account that understanding results from interpretation, which, in turn, is made on the basis of internalised individual and collective knowledge, beliefs and experiences. Thus, the informants wondered about the reasons for certain questions of the researcher, and the researcher did not understand or did not frame certain answers of the informants, their stories and narratives. As an example of these difficulties, during the research in question, I noticed the following: When carrying out the interviews, I took notes in a notebook and also recorded the interviewees' statements. In the transcription process, I discovered that there were certain contents missing in my written interview notes, i.e., I did not recall what I had heard; that is, those contents were deliberately ignored, but they were in the transcriptions of the recorded interviews. The missing statements indicated, for example, that a crocodile went to the village to look for a person and keep him in the water for a long period of time and then return him to the community. This piece of information did not have access to my consciousness; that is, the verbal codes, the characteristics of the voice and the corresponding body language were not interpreted. Hence, they were not even perceived as being 'incomprehensible' at the very least.

3.3 Preparation and implementation of data collection processes

Other aspects worthy of emphasis in this reflection concerned the challenges faced in identifying informants and establishing them accordingly as well as the course of data collection processes, as the following field notes illustrate:

Case 1: In this case, an interview was negotiated and scheduled with a divorced woman who had had an experience relevant to the research in question. The interview was carried out in her parents' family home where she lived. As the day and time arrived, instead of meeting the daughter alone as agreed, father and daughter presented themselves together for the interview, transforming the interview from an individual to a group format. Neither the woman nor the father explained the reason for his presence at the interview. After the greetings, the father said that the interview could commence. During the interview, the father answered all the questions asked although they were addressed to his daughter ⁵ (Field notes 1996).

Case 2: In the second case (and on two further occasions), while individual interview sessions were taking place, a group of people gathered and participated in the interview, answering questions for the respondents or simply confirming the interviewees' answers without having been invited or having requested permission to partake in the interview (Field notes 1996).

Although these two cases are isolated and, therefore, not to generalise, they give rise to some questions regarding the preparation and conduct of data collection processes. The first question is: Which factors cause informants in the community to deviate from their agreement with the researcher? The second question is how knowledge and experience within the community are validated.

The first question arises as a consequence of two cases in which people from the community who were not selected as informants participated in an interview between identified informants and the researcher without being asked to, and provided information in place of the actual respondent. This question is relevant because the participation of the father of the informant (case 1) and uninvited participants who took part in the interviews (case 2) seems contrary to the premises of scientific research. The premises are (1) the autonomy of an informant over the age of 18 to decide how, where and when to provide information and (2) that each person's life experience is unique, therefore to be relayed only by themselves. These premises guide the preparation of the data collection sessions after the identification of the informants. The premise of uniqueness originates in the concept of individualism prevalent in Western philosophy, which leads the ethnographer to believe in a certain uniqueness

5 In this example, the informant and the interviewer did not insist on the original agreement of an interview with the young woman.

of the information that each individual possesses. At the same time, applying ethnography as the systematic study of special cultures and exploration of cultural phenomena from a subjective point of view, the researcher negotiates with the informants and briefs them on the purposes of the research, guaranteeing secrecy, agreeing on how, when and where the collection of information will be done. The negotiation with the selected informants was carried out directly with subjects over the age of 18 and with the parents or guardians of minors.

Despite this protocol, case 1 shows that the agreement with the informant was neither adhered to by the respondent and her father nor was this divergence challenged by the researcher. At the same time, the father's behaviour can be understood as having fully assumed his daughter's acquiescence. The actions of the respondent's father may be understood as possibly being due to the father being the head (patriarch) of the household and thus assuming full responsibility for his daughter. Hence, his daughter would not be permitted to agree or to give an interview or provide information in a session. Furthermore, this may be a gender related issue whereby the father regarded it as inappropriate for his daughter to negotiate or take part in a session without her father being present. Moreover, the father may have deemed it improper for his daughter to be left alone or directly communicate respectively with an unknown male interviewer, either because his daughter was still living in his home or because she, despite being of age, was not allowed to make independent decisions regarding the communication of information to a stranger. It seems clear that after the identification of informants, regardless of their age, depending on their position in the social structure, negotiations on the conditions of the interviews may nonetheless have to be made with the parents or the family. This, in turn, shows that in certain forms of social organisation, uniqueness and autonomy are not taken into account, hence, hierarchical relationships prevail throughout people's lives.

Therefore, in contexts similar to this one, prior knowledge of the relations between the individual and the collective is necessary for the ethnographer.

The second question related to the two cases concerns how individual knowledge and experiences within the community are validated: In fact, it is the question of what enables a father to feel legitimately authorised to answer for his daughter despite her being of full age. In other words, what leads a community member to believe that their knowledge and experiences are more relevant than the knowledge and experience of others. In the Western tradition, valid knowledge is legitimated by argument and considered more unchallengeable if the arguments are based on scientific methods and findings.

This hypothesis can be supported by Fauser's thesis (1991: 108, 111), with reference to Luhmann's theory of knowledge, when he differentiates between two ways of legitimating the validity of knowledge. One perspective concerns the validity to be found in things themselves and from there, the knowledge is legitimated by the argumentation of its producer or holder. The other considers validation as being done by persons, i.e., knowledge is valid when a person who is considered to be legitimised states it as such. This second perspective of legitimisation is relational, as valid knowledge presupposes the existence of two people relating to that knowledge. At the same time, this perspective presumes hierarchical relations; that is, power relations, because there are people whose opinion is more valid and unquestionable in relation to others. In this strategy of attention on relationships, it can be seen that in the community in question, not only are people guided by hierarchical relationships, but their experiences and knowledge are also in a hierarchical relationship; that is, their validity is proportional to the person's place in the social hierarchy.

Fauser's (1991) argument on the role of relations seems coherent if we take into account that interference, whether in case 1 or case 2, has transformed individual interviews into group interviews, since it is in groups, in collectives, that the value of hierarchical relations (fundamental to the legitimisation of knowledge) is at its highest.

Finally, it should be noted that in this type of legitimisation in the community in question, it is almost impossible to separate knowledge from its legitimate holder in social contexts where knowledge does not exist in the written but only in the oral form. This is why legitimised people always speak, because they are the best placed in hierarchies based on age, sex, gender, power, etc. In this specific research context, where valid knowledge is subordinated to the legitimate person, where people are willing to cede their personal narratives to those considered legitimate, the challenge for the ethnographer, in his search for relevant experience, is necessarily bound to what and whose experience is accepted. Thus, perspectives of different persons in the field might not be accessible to the ethnographer and stay hidden, however, this phenomenon can provide valuable insights into the structures of the social field in which schooling is embedded.

4 Concluding remarks

At the heart of this reflection was the intention of revealing the difficulties that may arise when Western knowledge, methods and research practices are confronted with communities with different knowledge and research practices. The experiences gained in ethnographic research carried out in a rural community in Mozambique served as the basis for this reflection.

This brings us back to the main question of reflection: Can rural schools in Mozambique be a field of ethnographic research or not?

In the dimension of communication between the researcher and the community, the discussion showed that misunderstandings arise when the concepts used by the researcher do not have equivalents or have other meanings in the research community. These are misunderstandings that, as in this case, can lead to expectations or behaviours that counter the research objectives.

One of the most profound findings of the reflection is the existence of the community's own ways to produce, validate, legitimise and communicate knowledge. These are forms (or systems) that represent a challenge to be taken into account in the design of the ethnographic research strategy (in defining objectives, choosing informants, deciding on research instruments, processing data, etc.).

In this system, for example, it was not possible to identify/describe the method used by the healer in trance state to produce knowledge. Knowing that in the Western tradition of research, the method has a huge centrality in the production and validation of knowledge, the ethnographer will face challenges to integrate these forms of knowledge (production) and to communicate them in his/her own scientific community.

This experience, despite being unique, indicates the pertinence of an increased reflective attitude in ethnographic research in communities with sociocultural realities different from those of the West. However, this experience also shows that this approach enables researchers to gain knowledge relevant to the context.

Concerning the findings on how knowledge is produced and legitimised: What significance do they have in the school context? The importance lies in the fact that when children enter school, leaving their social context, they bring with them knowledge and an understanding of forms of its production and legitimisation, with all the consequences that this same knowledge has for the belief system, feelings and behaviours that influence their lives. Furthermore, understanding the form of production and legitimisation of knowledge in tradition and its difference to modern knowledge, can, on the one hand, help to understand why it is difficult to integrate one system into the other and on the other hand, this understanding can facilitate the exploration of possibilities for connections and dialogues between them, which is the biggest challenge of the modern school in the traditional rural context.

For rural areas in Mozambique, a school whose content and forms of knowledge are based on a construction that is articulated within, and integrates, the culture, would be emancipatory and would allow to appropriate the acquired knowledge into the context of their specific existence, thus coming closer to the demands of the process of individualisation, in which the school can no

longer be merely an imposed mediator of the dominant culture but a critical-innovative and democratic agent in favour of individuals and society. Thus, ethnographic research in rural areas opened up possibilities to discuss forms of dialogue between the modern school and its rural context, for example, instead of searching for what is best between the rural tradition of production and science, seeking the knowledge that works to improve people's lives and the reason it works. This search would turn the school in a rural context into a research institution.

Finally, through the experiences gained in the field research process, the ethnographic approach proved to be a field of encounter between the cultures of the researcher and the informant, whose possibility of effective communication requires the recognition of the other, the expansion of the ways of interpreting the other, in permanent curiosity towards what is different. This is the permanent challenge between the teacher, the modern school curriculum and the student and the sociocultural context of the rural school.

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