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BE PREPARED (TO GO OFF SCRIPT)

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▸ FIELDWORK LOCATIONS: ZAMBIA, MALAWI

I arrived in Lusaka, Zambia, in June of 1993. It was my first time in Africa, and I wanted to hit the ground running. I had just six months in the field, and I wanted to make the most of my time. I had a clear, well-developed research topic and a notebook full of questions I was eager to spring upon people as soon as I got off the plane. Yet I recall those first days as being immensely frustrating. Nobody I spoke with had the slightest interest in answering my questions. I wanted to investigate how Zambia's recent transition to democracy had affected the character of interethnic relations in the country. But all that anyone wanted to talk about was the historic referendum that had just taken place in neighboring Malawi, a country about which I knew little. As I learned, Malawi had long been one of the most closed and repressive countries in Africa. So when the country's long-time dictator, Kamuzu Banda, allowed a referendum on the continuation of one-party rule—and lost—it was natural that people in Lusaka wanted to talk about it. In hindsight, I can see that this obsession with Malawian affairs made complete sense, but at the time it was exasperating.

However, what began as a source of annoyance quickly became an opportunity. Having followed a mentor's advice to seek out journalists, I befriended a British/Australian couple who were working as stringers for the BBC and the Associated Press. Both were deeply involved with the Lusaka-based Malawian opposition—one of them had stage-managed the

triumphant return to Malawi of exiled opposition leader Chikufwa Chihana a few months earlier. They invited me to sit in on strategy sessions on the porch of their bungalow in Lusaka with dissidents, several of whom would go on to be ministers in the new Malawian government and leaders in parliament. Thanks to these connections, a few weeks later I found myself in a motorcade with Chihana and his entourage barnstorming villages in rural Malawi to rally support for the opposition. The experience was totally exhilarating, and it taught me a huge amount about campaigning, local politics, and political change. It also provided an introduction to the role of ethnicity in Malawian politics, which would later provide a useful counterpoint to the way ethnicity manifested itself in politics across the border in Zambia (and the germ of an idea for a paper built around a comparison of ethnic politics in the two settings).

Once the excitement of the Malawian referendum had died down in Zambia, I finally did get to ask the questions I had been planning about the impact of democratic politics on cross-group interactions. I interviewed politicians, activists, journalists, academics, and people on the street, and there was near unanimity among them that ethnic politics had intensified since the return of multiparty elections. But the examples people gave to substantiate their views perplexed me. Several of the people I interviewed pointed to the fact that Bembas had been appointed to all of the key positions in the cabinet. But others pointed to the control of the highest political positions by a different group, Luapulans. Still others identified Lundas or Chishingas as the ones occupying the most important posts. What in the world was going on?

I came to realize that people in Zambia viewed the country's ethnic politics through different lenses. Although everyone was keeping score of which groups were being favored, the scorekeeping was done with reference to different ethnic categories. Some who looked at the country's politics saw it through the lens of (what Zambians referred to as) "tribe." Others saw the country's politics through the lens of language group memberships. The upshot was that Zambians could look at the same set of cabinet members, judges, diplomatic appointees, senior civil servants, and other key officeholders and make different—although equally accurate and correct—claims about which group was receiving preferential treatment. To complicate things further, some language communities spanned multiple provinces, which meant that distinctions were sometimes made

between members of the same language group who happened to trace their roots to different provinces, and some of the labels (for example, "Bemba") were applied to both tribes and broader linguistic groups. Even when people used the same labels, they sometimes had in mind different groups of beneficiaries.

The more I came to understand the complexity and multidimensionality of ethnic categories in Zambia, the more I began to wonder whether I was asking the wrong question. I had chosen Zambia as a field research site because its ethnic diversity and recent transition to competitive multiparty politics made it an ideal place to study how democratization affected intergroup relations. But it began to dawn on me that the more interesting question was why, when Zambians reflected on the role ethnicity was playing in the country's new multiparty era, they saw the country's ethnic landscape and performed their mental accounting of which groups were favored and disfavored in such different ways. Before tackling the question I thought I had come to Zambia to try to answer, I began to wonder whether I needed first to understand the conditions under which people viewed the country as divided among seventy-odd tribes, four to five language groups, or a still different number of provinces or regions. Before studying whether conflict across group lines had intensified, I needed to understand why conflict was perceived to be taking place along one line of social cleavage instead of another.

Looking back, I am grateful that I had the flexibility to change course and pursue this new research question. The dissertation and book I ultimately wrote were much more theoretically interesting because I allowed myself the opportunity to shift gears and adjust to a new set of stimuli. My engagement with Zambia had been limited to secondary sources, and my sense of what was critical to investigate was based on theoretical accounts of African politics that had been written and inspired by events many years earlier. The question I had thought important from afar was less compelling once I hit the ground and began talking to people, observing what was happening, and reflecting on the events of the day.

My experience taught me some additional lessons. Many students arrive in graduate school knowing exactly what they want to study. Sometimes they know not just the question they want to answer but the part of the world in which they want to work and the specific research design they want to implement. This is generally a bad idea.[1] From my first experience

with fieldwork in Zambia, I learned that going into the field wedded to a particular question is generally a bad idea too. Fieldwork is not just about testing a set of hypotheses developed in advance; it is also about identifying which hypotheses are most worth testing.

The lesson is not, of course, that one should do purely inductive research or that it's OK to go to the field without having read everything that has been written about one's case or having reflected on candidate research topics and hypotheses that might be worth testing. Nor is it that one should not bother to write a prospectus or draft survey questions or experimental protocols in advance. It is simply that one should be *flexible* in order to maximize the chance that the time and energy one devotes to data collection is applied to the most important questions. My experience taught me that those questions may not become apparent until one has spent time marinating—"soaking and poking," as Richard Fenno advocated—in the environment one is studying.

The importance of flexibility is also illustrated by my experiences in Malawi. Had I been too committed to my main research topic, and not been willing to take advantage of the serendipitous timing of my arrival in Lusaka and the connections I happened to make with people in the Malawian opposition, I would have missed out on an enormously important source of insight into how politics operates on the ground and an extremely useful exposure to the contrast between how ethnic politics worked in Zambia and Malawi.

Back in the day, when students of developing countries usually had just one opportunity to do their fieldwork—often through a Fulbright or other year-long fellowship—taking this lesson to heart was harder to do. Flexibility of the sort I am advocating is challenging when one has just one shot to collect the data and wrap up the fieldwork. But graduate students today often have the opportunity to undertake multiple trips to the field. My experience suggests the critical importance of consciously structuring at least the first of those trips to maximize opportunities for identifying new questions. These questions may be more interesting and relevant to the issues of the moment than the ones that seemed compelling from a distance. Such flexibility can put researchers in a position to take the fullest possible advantage of serendipitous opportunities that may arise. One should go into the field prepared, but one should also be prepared to go off script.

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PUBLICATIONS TO WHICH THIS FIELDWORK CONTRIBUTED:

- Posner, Daniel N. "The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas Are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi," *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (2004): 529–45.
- ——. *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

NOTE

1. Even worse is when students arrive knowing—or thinking they know—what the *answer* is, viewing their graduate education as an opportunity to acquire the skills to "prove" their position in a more academically acceptable way.