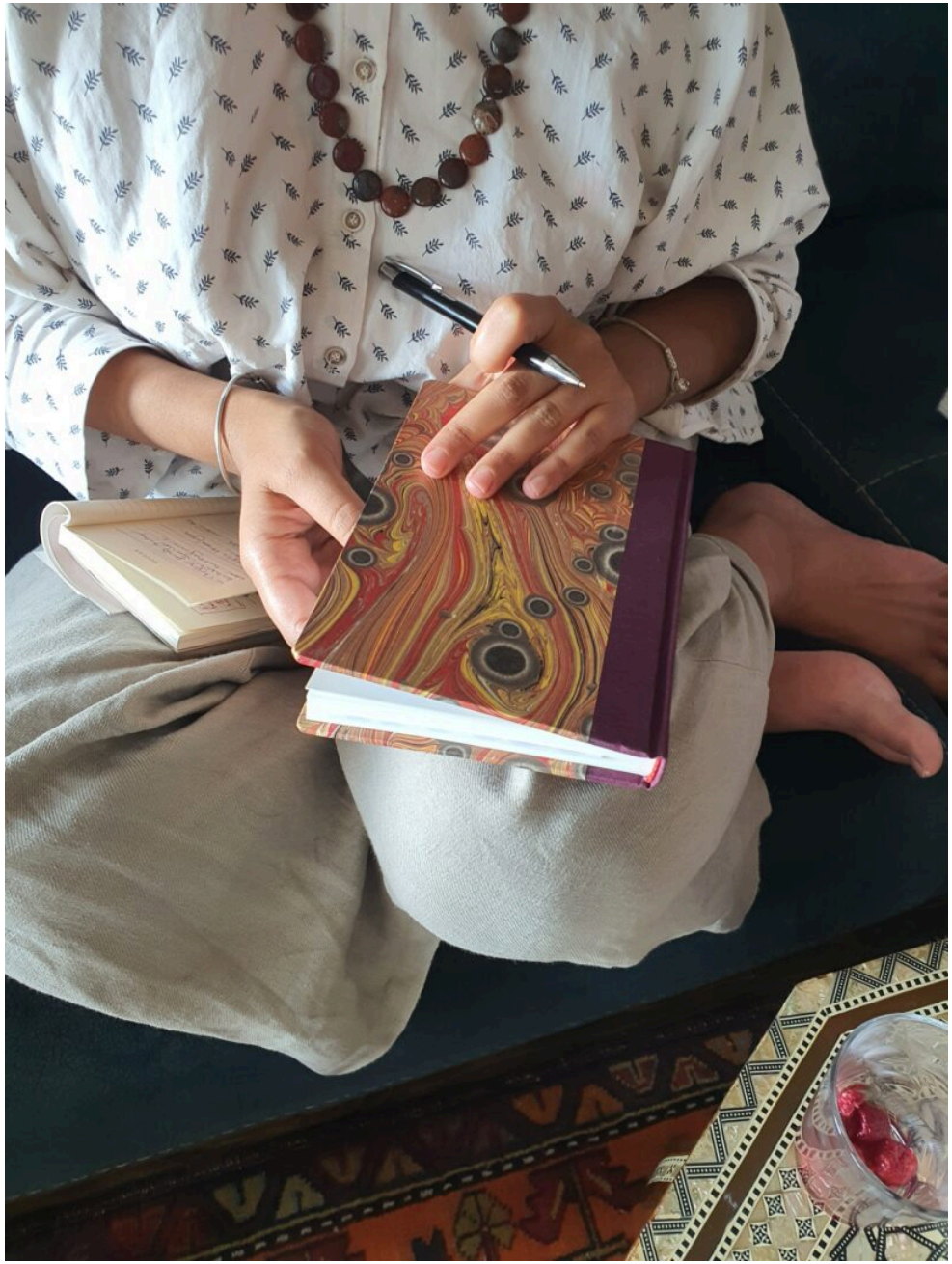
Fieldwork in the Global South | Threads

INTRODUCTION: CONDUCTING ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

November, 2024 / By Fatemeh Sadeghi and Sertaç Sehlikoglu



Conducting field research in the Global South comes with its own challenges in various stages: pre-field, during fieldwork, and post-fieldwork. This thread contributes to the existing and somewhat frayed topic from the perspective of native scholars; simply put, those whose expertise aligns with the geography they grew up in. Instead of repeating the old and deeply Eurocentric insider/outsider dichotomy, we bring in the unique strengths and challenges such positionality entails in methodology: intimacy, care, complex relations with local politics, and vis-a-vis

institutional bureaucracies including the academy itself, university as an establishment, diverse funding bodies, and ethics review boards. The combination of nativeness and the Global South (in our cases Pakistan, Palestine, Iran, and Turkey) creates unique dynamics for ethnographic fieldwork and, in our view, necessitates a separate conversation.

> *“all kinds of obligatory, reciprocal, and asymmetrical relations that ethnographic fieldwork involves are now embroiled in our own vulnerabilities as female researchers from a particular background in those contexts.”*

The complexity arising from this discussion is partly embedded in anthropology's approach to ethnographic fieldwork. Fieldwork as a practice and ethnography have been questioned, studied, and analysed (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). The field's transformative power operates differently on us, too. Further, all kinds of obligatory, reciprocal, and asymmetrical relations that ethnographic fieldwork involves are now embroiled in our own vulnerabilities as female researchers from a particular background in those contexts. The power dynamics embedded in ethnographic field research have so far been evaluated in terms of emotionality (Davies & Spencer, 2010), positionality (Abu-Lughod, 2008; Anderson, 2021; Behar & Gordon, 1995; Clifford, 1990; Clifford & Marcus, 2023; James et al., 1997; Reyes, 2020), and its remnants (Chung, 2009; Davies & Spencer, 2010; Faubion & Marcus, 2009). Yet we hope to be part of a newer set of conversations on nativeness, including its limits, as they emerge during encounters in the field.

A common theme of the contributions in this thread centres around relations between researcher, interlocutors, and the field. As Savannah Shange notes, “fieldwork is never completely out of sight of another set of fields—cotton, cane, tobacco, rice” (Jobson, 2019, p. 261). From this perspective, locals might be seen as informants whose “raw materials” – their “data” – need to be excavated, refined, transmitted, translated, and corrected by the researcher to become legible and useful. This is a type of power relation in which the researcher is seen as more knowledgeable and qualified than the informant in understanding and giving meaning to their experiences. Criticizing this approach, the contributors to the thread highlight various aspects of engaging in fieldwork from ethical, structural and moral perspectives and how intimacy (Aydin, in this thread), commitment, and integrity are to be approached. They explore the institutional limits vis-à-vis the unique positionality of the researcher, the researcher's nativeness, and the particular demands of research practice in the Global South. Although it may appear harmless, the field is often associated with traumas and incidents such as displacement, imprisonment, mental illnesses, and sometimes death of the native researchers who, by doing their work in those contexts, are exposed to threats.

In the Global South, fieldwork is marked by colonial legacies as processes reaching into the present. Indeed, colonial encounters are not moments in history. They are ongoing processes and the region, including its political and social realities, is still affected by these encounters. This has complex consequences for the nativeness of Western-educate researchers (Qato, in this thread), funded and employed by Western institutions. It influences their rapport with research participants and connection to the field. Differences between researchers and their interlocutors challenge rapport and engagement in fieldwork more generally (Low and Merry 2010). However, local perspectives on native scholars living and working abroad prompt another set of challenges altogether (Kalia, in this issue).

> *“Our proximity, intellectual care, and own politics are urging us to engage reflexively in conversations and in writing.”*

As the thread demonstrates, the field is not only a site of research but also a site of self-reflection. The researcher does not only have to navigate the field but also grapples with questions such as: Why do we live in the West? Were we refugees ourselves? Do our accents give us away? Are we allowed to have opinions on local politics? What does it mean to distance oneself, and how is that linked to ethical research? How should we bridge the gap between academic work and the real world? What are the consequences of the fact that we develop our analyses only after we complete our fieldwork, that our opinions and interpretations are likely to become more settled only months later?

The positions that some of us hold as (public) intellectuals and researchers complicate existing concerns about engagement (Sadeghi, in this issue). Our ability to speak and write more freely than our interlocutors can easily “distance a friend rather than constitute a form of knowledge” (Moskowitz 2015). This is not because we conceal our political opinions or values from our interlocutors. It is because of the power and authority embedded not only in day-to-day life but also in writing as an inherently political practice.

Political engagement is a double-edged sword. It is linked to moral obligations of the researcher. Yet it comes with severe consequences. Our proximity, intellectual care, and own politics are urging us to engage reflexively in conversations and in writing. This means remaining intelligible to our interlocutors, not only in local languages, such as Persian, Turkish, Urdu and Arabic, but also by finding and using the correct genre and idiom. This is an ongoing process for all of us which is partly connected to the dilemmas of engaged anthropology more generally, as observed by Low and Merry (2010). It is also a dynamic and multifaceted process through which we have to go through with every shift in the political landscape (and considering the political vulnerability of the Global South, those shifts occur most frequently). Finally, we carry various responsibilities to the field, our interlocutors and ourselves. In this regard, the obligations imposed on us by academic institutions (Sehlikoglu, in this thread) often expose and highlight our own vulnerabilities.

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Photo credit: A woman holding a notebook (Photo by Sehlikoglu).

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Abstract: This article introduces the collection of pieces that examine the unique challenges and complexities faced by native scholars conducting fieldwork in the Global South. It specifically focuses on research and researchers from Pakistan, Palestine, Iran, and Turkey. Moving beyond the conventions of insider/outsider dualities, it explores how researchers navigate intimacy, care, local politics, and institutional bureaucracies while conducting research in their home regions. The authors highlight how nativeness combines with Global South contexts to create distinct research dynamics, particularly for scholars educated and employed by Western institutions. The introduction addresses several key themes: the transformation of researcher-field relationships, ethical considerations in politically sensitive contexts, language and translation challenges, and the ongoing impact of colonial legacies. It particularly emphasizes how native researchers must balance their academic obligations with local political sensitivities, personal safety concerns, and moral responsibilities to their communities. It explains how authors argue that these experiences necessitate

new frameworks for understanding fieldwork methodology, particularly regarding how native researchers navigate their multiple positionalities and responsibilities while maintaining research integrity and personal safety in volatile political contexts.

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Dr. Sertaç Sehlikoglu is an Associate Professor at the University College London's Institute for Global Prosperity. Sehlikoglu's work often focuses on intangible aspects of human subjectivity that enable humans to change and transform social life. She has published ethnography-based research on intangible aspects, such as intimacy, desire, agency, and political imaginaries and conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Turkey, Lebanon, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. She co-edited several special issues on themes related to intimacy, sexuality, Islam, and critique, in journals, including the Cambridge Journal of Anthropology (2015), the Journal of Middle East Women's Studies (2016), Society for Cultural Anthropology (2014), Contemporary Islam (2024), and History and Anthropology (forthcoming), and International Journal of Heritage Studies (forthcoming); and a volume titled The Everyday Makings of Heteronormativity: Cross-Cultural Explorations of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality (Lexington, 2020). Sehlikoglu is also the editor of the Journal of Middle East Women's Studies' Reviews Section and the Associate Editor of Contemporary Islam.

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