

SOCIOLOGICAL FIELDWORK FACING TERRORISM HURDLES IN THE SAHEL IN BURKINA FASO

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Abstract: Since 2015, Burkina Faso has been plunged into terrorist violence. This has led to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in the eastern and northern Sahel. Today, this violence by terrorist groups (jihadists, narco-traffickers, major bandits and criminals, etc.) has cost the lives of 1,219 civilians. These deadly conflicts have undermined the ability of various communities to live together, namely the Fulani and the Moosé. Insecurity has reached such a degree that the Sahel region is no longer under the control of the state's monopoly of legitimate violence. Based on a qualitative approach, it appears that researchers interested in the issue of terrorism in the Burkinabe Sahel must adopt a posture that is respectful of research ethics and refrains from indulging in presuppositions to make a sociological analysis. However, to reduce the risks associated with this sensitive or hostile terrain, the sociologist or anthropologist must be familiar with the cultural codes of the communities being studied, or risk being rejected because of the dangerous nature of the subject for both the researcher and respondents.

Keywords: Sensitive field, terrorism, risk, feasibility, Burkina Faso

LE TRAVAIL SOCIOLOGIQUE DE TERRAIN FACE AUX OBSTACLES DU TERRORISME DU SAHEL AU BURKINA FASO

Résumé : Depuis 2015, le Burkina Faso a basculé dans la violence terroriste, toute chose qui a entraîné une crise humanitaire sans précédent dans la région du Sahel, de l'Est et du Nord. Aujourd'hui, cette violence engendrée par des groupes terroristes (djihadistes, narcotrafiquants, les grands bandits, etc.) a coûté la vie à 1219 personnes parmi la population civile. Ces conflits meurtriers ont mis en mal le vivre ensemble entre les différentes communautés ; en l'occurrence les peulhs et les moosé. L'insécurité a atteint un degré tel que la région du Sahel n'est plus sous le contrôle du monopole de la violence légitime de l'État. À partir d'une approche qualitative, il ressort que les chercheurs qui s'intéressent à la problématique du terrorisme dans le Sahel burkinabè doivent adopter une posture qui est respectueuse de l'éthique de la recherche et qui s'interdit de s'abreuer des présupposés pour en faire une analyse sociologique. Toutefois, pour minimiser les risques liés à ce terrain sensible ou hostile, le sociologue ou l'anthropologue se doit de connaître les codes culturels des communautés étudiées au risque de se faire rejeter parce qu'il aborde un sujet sensible et périlleux pour lui et ses enquêtés.

Mots-clés : Terrain sensible, terrorisme, risque, faisabilité, Burkina Faso

Introduction

Once considered a stable country in the sub-region, Burkina Faso soon found itself in the crosshairs of terrorist hydras after the fall of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. This “violence in the name of God” (Conesa, 2005) was initially directed against state institutions (schools) and the defense and security forces. From April 2015 to May 2020, armed terrorist groups carried out more than 580 targeted attacks against defense and security forces, militias cooperating with the state, schools, and town halls. During the same period, civilians suffered more than 359 attacks resulting in the deaths of 1,219 people, including 595 targeted killings and 349 wounded¹. This crisis became entrenched and gradually spread to political, religious, and customary leaders, and herders. This category of people has become undesirable in these areas because they are perceived as an information source for the security forces. The escalation of violence in the eastern and northern Sahel regions is becoming more intertwined and complex with deadly clashes between different communities. In January 2019, following a targeted terrorist attack against the Mossi community in the village of Yirgou, Burkinabè learned with shock on social networks and in the media of the vendetta organized against the Fulani community, perceived to be the hosts of the armed terrorist groups, sometimes the sponsors and executors of these deadly attacks. This violence against the Fulani community began with the assassination of the son and village chief of the Mossi community in the village of Yirgou. This is the most serious inter-community violence ever recorded in Burkina Faso. Figures vary widely depending on sources, which respectively correspond to 49 dead and 210 dead for the State and NGO (210 dead).

This “profiling crime” is inseparable from the image of the Fulani preacher Malam Dicko, who wanted to impose radical Islam in the Soum province through jihad. This makes these geographical areas very sensitive, risky terrains, as no one is safe from this violence perpetrated by non-state actors (Lafaye, 2016). The Sahel region is now considered a war zone and very strongly not recommended (not only for expatriates, but even for Burkinabè) because it is no longer under the legitimate control of the state. Indeed, since the beginning of the crisis, there have been massive displacements of people fleeing reprisals by armed terrorist groups to other parts of the country. The populations fleeing these areas of violence are taking refuge in nearby, relatively stable and secure localities in spontaneous settlements. From the beginning of the crisis to the present day, this violence has generated internally displaced persons, whose number may be estimated at more than one million people (OCHA, 2020). All of this violence “in the name of God” or out of revenge has undermined social cohesion and togetherness. It has increased mistrust between different communities. The legendary hospitality of the communities has quickly deteriorated and given way to suspicion and mistrust. The question is, how do you tame a terrain undermined by violence perpetrated by non-state actors? How do you investigate a community undermined by a deep social divide? In other words, are sociologists or anthropologists sufficiently equipped to invest in war-ridden terrains or prey to terrorist attacks?

From these numerous research questions, the following main hypothesis emerges: The weakening of social ties against the backdrop of terrorism is an obstacle

¹ <https://lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/attaques-djihadistes-au-burkina-1650-civils-et-militaires-tues-en-cinq-ans-20200624>, consulté le 15/05/2021

to the sociologist's immersion in and engagement with the field. Indeed, according to Lafaye (2016):

80% of the work on terrorism is reportedly based solely on second-hand materials (books, journals, press] (Silke, 2007). 65% of articles are only reviews of other publications (Silke, 2007). Only 1% of research is based on interviews and no systematic surveys have been conducted with jihadists.

Silke, 2008; Bonelli (2011, p. 9)

This study aims to guide junior researchers in choosing a realistic and feasible research field or topic, to approach the field of terrorism away from prejudices or dominant discourses, while bearing in mind the challenges related to the use of sociological tools or those borrowed from other disciplines, and finally, based on various field experiences, to proposed research tips and strategies developed by researchers to carry out their investigation in sensitive fields.

1. Methodology

1.1 About the Study Area

Burkina Faso is a Sahelian country located in the heart of West Africa and shares borders with Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Togo, Benin and Ghana. The country is inhabited by about sixty ethnic groups, the majority of which are the Moosé, Fulani and Bobos. The vast majority, 80%, of these ethnic groups are agropastoralists. The country's economy is based primarily on gold and cotton. Politically, the country has experienced many military regimes since its independence on August 3, 1960. In October 2014, the country faced a popular uprising that ended the power of President Blaise Compaoré. Under Blaise Compaoré's regime, Burkina Faso was considered as a stable country. However, this stability was short-lived due to the rapid deterioration of the social climate. The political transition was followed by the first incursions of armed terrorist groups on Burkina Faso territory. The attacks began in 2015 in the Sahel region and are now spreading to the eastern and northern Mouhoun River Loop. The Sahel region is predominantly populated by the Fulani. They are mostly Muslim and traditionally transhumant herders. Their number is estimated to be about 1,200,000 (Sangaré, 2019).

1.2 Data Collection Techniques and Tools

This study involved mainly sociology students in master's and doctoral programs, professional investigators, and researchers interested in studies on terrorism in the Sahel region. The interview guide was developed to capture the motivation, immersion challenges in a sensitive terrain, risk perception of a sensitive terrain, and the different strategies used to investigate such a field. We conducted individual semi-structured interviews. The selection of respondents was made based on purposive sampling. We surveyed eight (8) students enrolled in different classes (masters and thesis) who had defended their master's thesis and one (1) doctoral student. The rest of the sample is made up of researchers and professional investigators who have experience in hostile terrain.

2. Results and Discussions

2.1 Challenging Field and Study Feasibility

The difficulty for beginners in sociology is to formulate their research topic while respecting the criteria of clarity, relevance and feasibility. If they manage to get

past this stage, other challenges must be overcome. However, in this specific case, we will focus on the role of the supervisor in the student's work. The supervisor is certainly not the co-author of the thesis, but given his or her experience, he or she should be able to guide the junior researcher before things get complicated. Many students wish to work on the profile of the various armed groups that crisscross the Sahel region, but they rarely ask themselves questions about their ability to thoroughly master this very delicate and "slippery" terrain (Maurice, 1987). In most cases, the feasibility of the study becomes a nightmare when it is time to do the fieldwork, they realize they might have been overambitious. Indeed, according to a Jula saying, "he who sits knows how to wrestle". Risk perception is a matter of position and posture. This should be a determining factor for fieldwork must guide the advisor in supporting the student in his intellectual endeavor. This is the main concern that guides Professor Felix Compaoré during a thesis defense in sociology on "the socio-anthropological approach of relationships at school against the backdrop of terrorism in the province of Oudalan (Sahel Region, Burkina Faso)" at the University Joseph KI-ZERBO. During discussions with the candidate, he stated: "I would not take the risk of supervising a student on this topic. It is a risk". The risk here refers to the social responsibility of the teacher-advisor for the risks taken by the student in such dangerous terrain, such as the Sahel region, which is prey to recurrent attacks. Who bears the responsibility? Is it the teacher, the student or the institution in case of kidnapping or killing? This risk is even more pronounced for the candidate given that his status as an "elementary school inspector". He represents a school institution that has been disavowed by armed terrorist groups and by some students' parents. The rejection of "western" school in this part of Burkina Faso is no secret. The demands of terrorist groups for a religious education school are echoed in a community that has long turned to Koranic schools. The candidate addresses this risky position as follows:

"I was once going to a village for teachers' evaluation. On the road, I was arrested by the army. When I took off the helmet on my head, one of them said: 'Mr. Chief of the Basic Education District (CCEB), despite the fact that you have been advised against taking this road, you continue to do so. This means that they know me. I left but I had started to be afraid.'" (Interviewee 2, primary school inspector).

Supervising a student researching this conflict area also means asking questions about the feasibility of the study in the light of the risks which may overwhelm the overall research goals. The subject may be relevant but the social space may not be accessible because of the risks of kidnapping, torture or physical execution. Examples are legion across the world. For instance, the conviction of the Franco-Iranian anthropologist Fariba Adelkhah arrested in June 2019 in Iran or the kidnapping of the Spanish researcher Jesus Quintana in Colombia or the high school girls in Nigeria taken hostage by Boko Haram. Investigating certain sensitive areas is synonymous with playing the Russian roulette as pointed out by respondent 8, a sociology student:

It was a short-sighted choice. On the road to Gorgadji, the terrorists took out the passengers from a public transport vehicle and shot the men; only the women were spared. When they caught a tricycle driver, they said they had killed enough today, but they could not let him go scot-free. So, he was stabbed so he would remember their encounter. This means that if you choose to investigate Unidentified Armed Men (UAM), it's like drawing straws because you don't know what group you're dealing with. There are jihadists, drug traffickers, and highway bandits.

Interviewee 8, sociology student)

This unwarranted violence reveals the pathological personality of these radicalized, frustrated or manipulated individuals. These acts reflect an absence of religious ideology or Islamist claims. The targeted executions at the beginning of the crisis were intended to bring to heel all rural people who collaborated with the public administration. This trend of gratuitous violence reveals the criminal nature and accentuates the risk for a student, considered by the Unidentified Armed Men as a product of the “evil institution” embodied by the western school. In such circumstances, the student can easily be mistaken for a spy. For Quivy and Campenhout (2006), one must be realistic in framing research topics. The researcher must answer or have answers to questions about his or her technical skills in taming the terrain and also about his or her economic means. The investigation of spaces referred to as “red zones” or such spaces that are beyond the control of the State is strongly discouraged. Is the sociologist sufficiently equipped to investigate in this kind of context? Can the sociologist begin his or her research in such areas without the approval of the State? Can the sociologist visit households without being introduced by a local, an administrative or customary authority? Answers to these questions are that such opportunities are diminishing in villages, as residents are becoming increasingly suspicious of outsiders. On top of such conditions, political authorities have formally forbidden journalists to travel to conflict zones for reporting purposes. Such a prohibition also implies that other bodies wishing to investigate such forbidden spaces must also adhere strictly to those instructions. Instructions are clear as to how to behave in the field. One must report one’s presence to the police and/or gendarmerie; one must respect the hours of movement in the locality due to curfew restrictions. Most often, one should avoid traveling at dusk; avoid riding scooters or in tricycles; sleep with host families known to the community; avoid schools, hostels, etc., as much as possible; be transported by a member of the community when traveling within villages, preferably with the guardian’s own means of transportation. This avoids drawing attention to the presence of a stranger in the community; gatherings are forbidden; avoid discussing or talking about topics such as terrorists, beer, brothels, etc. For Quivy and Campendhout (2006), researchers run the risk of becoming discouraged once the immersion occurred, or after many unsuccessful attempts to enter and engage the field, they end up being destroyed psychologically. Much of the information needed to analyze the phenomenon under study may become obsolete. Given such objective constraints, researchers must be realistic in their ambitions to deal with a phenomenon or to engage a problematic terrain at the risk of becoming exhausted after years of fruitless attempts. In reality, this desire to engage treacherous fields by the neophyte often reveals a desire to assert their status as a “real sociologist”. The illusion of being a true sociologist leads many junior researchers to a dead end due to overarching ambitions. The search for a scoop or a topical subject may plunge the junior researcher into a spiral of no return and endless anguish.

2.2 The stigma of “Fulani equals terrorist”: the need for an epistemological break

In his book “The Rules of Sociological Method”, Durkheim takes a position on the researcher’s posture towards his object of study. For him, the sociologist must be on his guard, because there are multiple risks of error that he incurs by penetrating the social field. Indeed, “if there is a science of societies, it is to be expected that it does not consist in a simple paraphrase of conventional biases but it rather makes us see things differently than they appear to the vulgar” (Durkheim, 2010, p.67). The author mainly argues that there is a kind of “rupture” or “cut” between scientific knowledge and

“vulgar knowledge” based on a negative, sometimes contemptuous image of ordinary knowledge. This study on terrorism or on the sensitive terrain, emphasizes the strong need for the researcher to get rid of the dominant thought that overwhelms him/her. During interviews with students whose research focused on the sensitive terrain, it clearly emerges some are guided by their passion, while others wanted to protect their communities from being a scapegoat. Indeed, since the outbreak of terrorist attacks in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso, the Fulani community has been the focus of various social groups in the threatened areas, because of their alleged affinity with armed terrorist groups. This asymmetric war makes the Fulani a scapegoat. In this context, how can one be a researcher from within and be able to break away from prejudice? Against this background, respondent 5, a sociology student belonging to the aforementioned ethnic group, states the following:

I am passionate about the subject” “After exchanges with the suspected terrorists in their cells, I was hurting in my heart. I felt compassion for them. If I had the opportunity, I would ask for their release. For me, there are good terrorists; those with whom one can talk and bad terrorists; those with whom it is impossible to talk. It is the latter that must be fought.”

And respondent 7, a sociology student, asserts the following: “In reality, when you do fieldwork, you tend to believe those who point the finger at the Fulani. The majority of them are from this community.” From the analysis, the researcher takes a position and groups these respondents into two categories, i.e., “good and bad terrorists.” He takes sides with the “good terrorists” who have good reasons according to him and the “bad terrorists” who carry out acts that have no moral basis. The labels “good” or “bad” are value judgments. Passion obscures any lucid analysis on what constitutes a terrorist. The risk of making a science of presuppositions is greater, yet the sociologist must critically consider his research object with value-free judgment, step back as he/she grounds his/her analysis in facts. Indeed, for Lafaye (2016, p.8): “The investigator is not always able to control all the information he is given, to control his affective, ethical or political relationship to the object and to maintain an attitude of “distanced engagement”, guaranteeing his critical sense”. Moreover, by maintaining that “one tends to believe” in the words of respondents, the researcher exposes himself, as Durkheim (2010) asserts, to receiving therein a sociological pseudo-science already in use among social actors, but also to preserving therein the thoughts, practices and interests of the social actor that he embodies. So, how can a native of a locality research his/her own people objectively? The researcher exposes himself/herself to several risks, including being rejected by his/her own people, should his/her findings tend towards the general opinion on the matter of the “Fulani equals terrorist”. If he/she manages to successfully engage a highly sensitive terrain, he/she must also face the other members of society, such as accounting for such a success. The fear of being stigmatized after the quest for scientific knowledge hinders the willingness of other students to investigate the phenomenon, so the study of terrorism becomes the terrain of others. However, if the local student researcher decides to carry out research on terrorism, he/she must behave in such a way as not to let emotions overwhelm his/her understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon. Thus. the quest for scientific knowledge is caught between ethnicity and the accusing gaze of the other. There is a palpable tension between the commitment to such a sensitive terrain for the understanding of reality and the distancing required by the scientific posture. Thus, for Lamarche (2015), in this type of sensitive field, the researcher is constantly asked to

clarify his/her position, to specify where his/her sympathies lie with questions that are beyond his research. Romani (2007, p.41) quoted by Lamarche (2015, p.38-39), reports on his Palestinian field that: “The binary search for pro- or anti-labeling is often the first reflex of the great majority of people when faced with an intervention or a speaker on a “sensitive” subject. This is one of the concerns that emerges in substance from the words of respondent 3, a sociology student:

Choosing to research on this topic comes with risks. How will I be perceived? They’ll probably say I’m a member of these groups, that’s why I was able to do this study, or they’ll say I probably know people in this community. The state will hunt me down and some will say that I was able to do this study because they are my brothers.

Respondent 5 added:

“When I was returning from the field, I was pulled out of the vehicle to check my identity because I have the Fulani features. I complained about the “profiling.” Once in the capital, I had insomnia. I was afraid that I would be kidnapped at night. It was a month later that I was able to sleep again. To tell the truth, it was after the field that I understood the risk I had taken.

These various statements highlight the fear of being stigmatized but also the fear of being scapegoated by the State. When one is a Fulani interested in terrorism and terrorists, one feels insecure in the face of the State. Investigating a sensitive and complex subject is not easy for the researcher. He/she must constantly fight against his/her own assumptions and those of others, because in the eyes of the public, the Fulani are terrorists. Yet this community is the first victim of terrorist incursions into their localities. As Pellerin (2019, p.39) notes, the two leading figures in the jihad of the Fulani community rose up against local elites in an effort to establish social justice among the tribes. This rallying was initially for the “cow jihad” before being motivated by revenge, harassment, arrests and targeted executions. Armed groups were able to penetrate and exploit these social cracks and to stir up past and latent conflicts between different communities. The recruitment of junior people from the community was sometimes based on political discourse (social equality, abandonment of the region by political leaders, land grabbing by other communities, poverty, etc.), religious discourse (the influence of Islam) and nostalgia for a proud and warlike Fulani empire. However, there is a quick conflation of the situation by systematically lumping all the Fulani in the same bag and this constitutes a shortcut in analyzing the issue at stake. These armed groups are composed of Fulani, Mossé, Gulmatché, Bobo, etc., as evidenced by the last names of the perpetrators of the attack on the Armed Forces Headquarters on March 2, 2018. The terrorist does not have a fixed identity. Many internet users and sometimes in private discussions, people blame young Fulani for voluntarily joining these armed groups. The silence of the Fulani community is interpreted as an endorsement of or complicity with these armed groups. This led an internet user to raise the following question: “What is the contribution of the Fulani intellectual community in raising awareness among their brothers? Such prejudices persist and reinforce suspicions between these ethnic groups and other communities. Against this background, some people legitimize the old prejudices about the Fulani, according to which they are deceitful, sneaky, and overestimate their intelligence compared to other communities. This perception of the community is translated into the Mooré language as “siidmiougou”; literally translated as “the red malignancy” or deceit. For Sangaré (2019, p.4), they are also blamed for being prone to communitarianism, nepotism and prone to betray.

When the junior researcher relies on these sources of knowledge, he/she consciously or unconsciously internalizes such prejudices as data that he/she could mobilize to conduct the research. To appropriate such preconceived ideas complicates the analysis of the sociologist because rather engaging in an actual sociological analysis, the junior researcher may embrace an ideological analysis which gives him/her the false impression of understanding of the issue at stake. These prejudices are extended to the description of victims by using terms such as people “neutralized” for acts of terrorism. Some respondents thus describe terrorists by resorting to the physical or cultural traits of the Fulani community: “they are light-skinned like the Fulani,” “they spoke in Fulfulde,” “they were turbaned,” and “they ride big Sanily model motorcycles,” “we all know the terrorists’ last names. However, it would be illusory to analyze these expressions without taking account of Malam Dicko, the jihad figurehead in Burkina Faso. In reality, this image of the Fulani terrorist is much more related to the ethnic affiliation of Hamadoune Kouffa (from Mali) and his student Malam Dicko (from Burkina Faso) as the spearheads of the jihad in the Sahel (Pellerin, 2019, p.37; Diallo, 2021). Malam Dicko, a Fulani preacher, wanted to defend Islam and the cause of the Fulani community through radical Islam. However, based on the study by Diallo (2021) on the profiling of people suspected of terrorism, one can only assert that the phenomenon of terrorism is complex and involves several contradictory logics that cannot be summed up in few simplistic and simplified criteria. The Fulani become the scapegoat of a phenomenon that goes beyond them because the objectives and interests of the different groups are sometimes contradictory. Diallo Ali Hamidou distinguishes between jihadists, former highway bandits, drug traffickers, etc.

2.3 Sensitive Field and Confidence Crisis

In conventional warfare, the belligerents are sometimes compelled to observe or respect certain international conventions related to human rights. The sociologist can go and meet the populations on both sides to discuss their perception of the war. However, this asymmetrical war (terrorism) most often rhymes with the violation of international conventions. Violence establishes an omerta because for these armed terrorist groups, it is a war that only concerns the Defense and Security Forces. In this context, to avoid reprisals, silence becomes the golden rule of survival for the various communities. One does not discuss with anyone in society because it has been infiltrated by armed groups. Therefore, the issue is discussed in private, in total privacy, and all outsiders to the community are seen as spies. Respondents reduce any “risks of speaking out” (De Sardan, 2003). Few of these respondents are willing to be investigated by a stranger on the issue of terrorism. For respondent 5, a sociology student: “I found some childhood friends exchanging in front of their yard. When I arrived, I wanted to start a discussion about terrorists. All three of my friends got up and took their motorcycles. And they left”. This attitude of his childhood companions highlights the lack of trust because the issue remains a taboo even among friends. In the collective consciousness, to address the highly sensitive issue of terrorism is either being suicidal or a spy from one of the two opposing camps. As the saying goes, “your neighbor is your first parent”, but since this crisis of confidence, the neighbor appears as a “potential spy” to be feared and distrusted. The movie “The Purge” by the American director James DeMonaco (2013), translates this hypocrisy of living together: one laughs, shares meals, but as soon as there is a legal loophole opportunity to exploit, one discovers the true face of one’s entourage. Indeed, these attacks by armed groups have created mistrust between members of the same family, between neighbors and

between communities. The distancing of social ties, the development of individualism and the weakening of sociability thus characterize relations between neighbors (Merckle; 2004). In the same vein, respondent 5 goes on to say: “Some respondents told me clearly that I was exposing them to certain death. They did not want me to be seen with them. For them, I was protected by the administration and after I leave, who will protect them? These comments underscore the danger that the researcher represents for the respondents. Seeing a community member with a foreigner is subject to reprisals by armed terrorist groups. This also highlights the sense of insecurity and powerlessness that communities feel. As a result, the populations under study can become dangers to the researcher because he or she is perceived as part of their problem, a risk to the community. This insecurity felt by the respondents makes them hostile to the researchers coming to interview them on the subject. It is this risk for the researcher that emerges in substance from the interview with professional investigator 1, a sociologist, in the following terms:

I was kicked out of a village in the Sahel. I was accompanied by a nephew, but the population kept me away. They thought I was probably a spy coming to probe them. They called the counselor who lived outside the locality to see if he had been informed of my arrival. He told the people not to welcome me.

This fear of the population is linked to the loss of confidence in the State’s ability to help and protect them against external aggressors. Indeed, the headquarters of Burkina Faso’s army, which is supposed to coordinate actions on the ground to protect the population, has not escaped the fury of the terrorists. The attack on the army’s operational headquarters is perceived by the rural population as a strong signal of the nuisance capacity of these armed terrorist groups. This attack is highly symbolic of the infiltration and nuisance capacity of these armed groups, which implies that no one is safe or secure. The political capital is not safe and therefore, the risk becomes even greater to venture into areas outside the State’s control and authority. Therefore, addressing the issue of terrorism becomes suicidal. The challenge to the State’s monopoly on legitimate violence in some parts of the country and the occupation of these areas by armed groups contribute to the population’s fear. The police and gendarmerie, which were a beacon of hope, have sometimes been crushed by these armed groups or deserted. Who can we trust in this context? The State or the terrorist?

2.4 Fruitless Individual and Group Interview in a Sensitive Terrain

Given the difficulties in successfully engaging a field infested by terrorist attacks, one is tempted to ask how a sociologist could investigate in a deadly environment? If Covid19 crisis imposes a distance between the researcher and his/her informants and sometimes with the social space of investigation, other strategies were quickly discovered to overcome these difficulties. During this pandemic period, the use of internet tools (google form, Mendel, etc.) in designing questionnaires and interview guides became common. Are these online surveys reproducible in our context? Can these techniques of data collection in the field replace the classical sociological approach to data collection? Of course not, for several reasons. Beyond the corpus, there is the interaction, the empathy of the researcher, the facts and gestures of the respondent during the individual or group interview are essential in understanding and explaining the phenomenon. Observation and empathy participate in the construction of sociological reality. They are part of the sociologist’s corpus of analysis. A remote survey does not allow the sociologist to perceive these micro-data on the

phenomenon. What is the use of a sociological survey if the researcher is not able to question the respondent about some of his or her actions? For Durkheim, (2010, p.67): “If there is a science of societies, it is to be expected that it will not consist in a mere paraphrase of traditional prejudices but will make us see things differently than they appear to the vulgar.” When the respondent looks left and right before speaking, what does this mean for the sociologist? Such micro-data allow us to better understand the respondents’ thought patterns. However, if this compensatory strategy relieves the sociologist in the field of study, in the case of Covid 19 pandemic, it is far from being a fruitful solution in the field of terrorism, because certain behaviors of the respondent may seem meaningless or absurd, but which nevertheless carry a deep meaning for the respondents. According to Bourdieu et al (1968), this is not enough for the sociologist:

“To listen to the research subjects, to faithfully record their words and their reasons, in order to render a reason for their conduct and even for the reasons they propose; in so doing, he/she risks purely and simply substituting his own preconceptions of those he/she is studying, or a falsely scholarly and falsely objective mixture of the spontaneous sociology of the “scholar” and the spontaneous sociology of his object.”

Bourdieu et al (1968: 56-61)

In reality, investigating the Fulani environment requires a sound understanding of the habits and customs of the community. In Diallo’s study (2004, p. 246) titled “A Sustainable Literacy in the Fulani Community,” it clearly appears that in Fulani culture, oral communication is as much a part of language practices as written communication. The Fulani prefer a verbally transmitted order to a written order. The written word appears as a provocation in Fulani culture. This would mean that the Fulani are much more receptive to direct exchange than to being interrogated from afar without knowing the person they are talking to. The individual interview then appears to be the solution to better understand the construction of the respondent’s reality. It is a technique that presupposes a process of building trust. However, in this context, all cats are grey. Who is it? Who sent him/her? Why me? More often than not, the respondents feel that they have done something wrong. In this case, the use of the telephone is not recommended. The hidden identity of the researcher is a barrier and immediately creates suspicion. “Who gave you my number?”, “I don’t know you” or the caller hangs up on you. It is a risk to talk to a stranger on the phone. The telephone appears to be a spying tool. In addition, it should be noted that the use of tools such as Mendel will come up against the reality of illiteracy that plagues the Fulani community. The Sahel region has the lowest schooling rate in Burkina.

In addition, there is a cultural clash between researchers and the Fulani community. It is not uncommon to hear researchers working on various topics in the area complain about the difficulties they have collecting data. Such difficulties are interpreted as a cultural closure or insincerity in the community. Few question their own approach in this environment. It is necessary to master the codes of conduct or to have the knowledge to read this culture in order to be able to overcome any “speech related risks.” On top of these challenges, security instructions question the use of certain social science research techniques. Different interview techniques such as focus group or group interviews and individual interviews are developed based on the research objectives. Can the prohibition on gathering populations in war zones force the researcher to adapt these techniques? Should or can the researcher change the interview technique to comply with security regulations? Of course, the researcher

should not have a rigid posture, but on the contrary, he/she should be flexible. One may go into the field with the view of conducting individual interviews, and yet end up with group interview and vice versa. On the other hand, by refusing to submit to these safety rules, the researcher exposes both himself/herself and the respondents to a deadly situation. This technique is unproductive in this context because the communities are suspicious of each other and this may produce the opposite effect. One should avoid focus group or group interview technique because it is unproductive and reinforces the feeling of insecurity for the respondents, including the researcher. Indeed, these are the risks that are underlined in the following statement by a professional investigator:

During public consultations, few community members agreed to participate in the gathering because it is formally prohibited. Also, there was this fear of being identified to a person from outside the community. Once, I was doing my public consultation and a group of motorcyclists surprised us. They slammed on their brakes and wanted to run away. Those who were participating in the meeting also wanted to flee at the sight of these bikers.

These statements highlight the psychological instability of respondents due to trauma. They panic at the slightest perceived sign of threat. This is partly due to the fact that the modus operandi of the armed terrorist groups in the area consists of moving in large groups on motorcycles. Respondent 3, a sociology student, underscores the risks generated by the presence of the researcher in the field as follows: “What guarantee can you give about your identity? You can’t convince me of anything. Please don’t create trouble for me.”

2.5 The Inside Researcher as a Solution to Sensitive Terrain

The adoption of a hypothetical-deductive and inductive approach requires the researcher to travel to the field to interact directly with the target population. Fieldwork duration depends on field dynamics. The research questions and hypotheses are developed to be confronted with facts. This process implies that the researcher undertakes negotiations for his/her integration and acceptance in the field. In the context where the subject of terrorism remains taboo, it is urgent for the researcher to adopt a scientific posture that is respectful of research ethics. Research ethics refers here to the values that guide human conduct and behavior. It is based on moral principles; that is, the determination of principles that distinguish good from evil, right from wrong, true from false. It also refers to the principles of justice, equity and integrity. Indeed, as in any research, the sensitivity of the issue requires the sociologist to respect research ethics, which consists in preserving as much as possible the identity (initial name and surname, geographical situation, professional situation, ethnicity, religion, etc.) of informants, but also making the research objectives clear to participants. According to Boutin cited by Royer et al (2012):

“The researcher’s primary responsibility is respecting the rights and well-being of individuals, a respect that is broken down into four requirements: safeguarding the rights, interests, and sensitivity of subjects; communicating the objectives of the research and the importance of their collaboration; ensuring confidentiality; and protecting anonymity in order to avoid any exploitation.”

Boutin cited by Royer et al (2012: 26)

Given the magnitude of the barriers to be overcome in order to gain access to the mental universe of respondents, one is tempted to ask whether this does not constitute an obstacle for the sociologist to invest in sensitive terrain. The answer is obviously no. Observation allows us to put forward the hypothesis that belonging to the study environment facilitates access and data collection, but this does not exclude the risk of being taken to task. The analysis of our respondents' profiles shows that they are either residents in the context of their work or native to the locality. For example, as part of his thesis, the immersion in the school institution to understand the relationship between terrorism and schooling in the Sahel was possible for the doctoral student, thanks to his status as an elementary school inspector. Thus, he was able to observe from the inside without sometimes stating his research intentions. Informal interviews were conducted during workshops and meetings with teachers who had been visited by terrorists or who had been traumatized by the school attacks. The researcher is much more involved in a clandestine, concealed approach than in revealing the objectives of discussions. The nature of discussions remains questionable as well as the personality games during exchanges. One may criticize the influence of the inspector's status on the interview, as this constitutes both a barrier and an opportunity. One can legitimately ask how the double break takes place; the distinction between the inspector and the sociologist, valid also between the inspector and the subordinate. Doesn't this sociology of "clandestinity"² lead the researcher to the interpret the actions or behaviors of research subjects in light of his own knowledge? The second example relates to the study on "Violent Extremism in the Burkinabe Sahel: Actors and Engagement Logics" (Diallo, 2021). It appears that his ethnicity, his mastery of Arabic, Fulani, Tamacheq and Songhai contributed greatly to his acceptance and confidence among the target population. Mastery of the language avoids imposing concepts on the respondents that do not reflect their realities about the phenomenon. With regard to terrorism and violent extremism, the concept is translated into Foulani as "bad guys with turbans" or "armed men". Also, being a native of the locality facilitates access to informal discussions that may not be covered during formal interviews. For him, the researcher must demonstrate that he/she is not a stranger to the culture. Also, being from the locality has been a great help in blending in with the community. Success depends on the researcher's ability to master the social codes (show mastery of the culture), otherwise he/she might be rejected. Diallo (2021) believes that:

Our fieldworks in the Sahel were facilitated by the fact that we belonged to the region. Nevertheless, this belonging made the implementation of this study more complex. To this end, knowing the social codes and the language greatly facilitated the fieldwork. We were aware, however, that we had to be careful not to fall into the trap of sentimentality linked to this belonging. The investigator, in search of objectivity, benefits from the advantages of his socio-cultural links (ease of meetings, contacts, favor of the respondents) and political links, and he/she better understands nuances, the said and unsaid, while keeping a distance to avoid being influenced.

Diallo (2021, p.68)

The researcher's dressing style is also an important factor of integration and acceptance, as is the language of the different communities, in order to attend preaching sessions by armed terrorist groups in the villages. Sometimes, this required

² Investigating without making the research objectives clear to participants.

the researcher to disguise himself (wearing a turban, wearing a baggy dress (also known as *boubou*), wearing pants that rise above the ankle, and growing beard) to gain access to the preaching sites of armed terrorist groups. Western clothing is not allowed because you are considered a representative of the state.

Conclusion

For Lafaye (2016, p.10): “The study of radicalizations does not call for “methodological exceptionalism” but produces specific difficulties arising from its designation as being on the margins of legality.” Research on terrorism in the Burkinabe Sahel raises a whole host of questions about feasibility, the epistemological break necessary for its apprehension, and ethical issues. Investigating in sensitive terrain is an ordeal because challenges to conducting the study are multiple and multifaceted. Hostage-taking, kidnappings and assassinations make access to the field uncertain and suicidal for a researcher who gets too close. The feasibility of the study requires an awareness of the objective limits imposed on researchers by this “thorny”, “slippery” and dangerous terrain. This accounts for the low availability of primary data on the phenomenon. However, the researcher who ventures into this dangerous environment must consider his/her investigation impacts on the respondents. Also, a distance with the dominant discourse on the identity of the terrorist is the condition to better look from the inside with initiated eyes and free from biases.

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