Encounters in and Beyond the Field: Reflections from Malawi

Katherine Shen
PhD Candidate, School of Geography and Sustainable Development, University of St Andrews, United Kingdom
ds356@st-andrews.ac.uk | shendihang2023@163.com
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/katherine-shen-2513ab288

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My research examines how environmental education is understood and practised in secondary schools in climate-vulnerable areas. I chose Malawi because it is severely affected by extreme weather (Warnatzsch & Reay, 2019; The World Bank, 2023; USAID, 2023), while possessing rich and useful Indigenous ecological knowledge often marginalised in mainstream environmental education discourses (Phiri, 2008; Kayira, 2015; Tikly, 2019). Little did I know, it would guide me to reconstruct my understanding of the world and rediscover myself. Those days in Malawi - the cross-cultural encounters and precious accidental moments - didn't merely enrich my research data but also etched an indelible mark on me. For me, it was a journey of cognitive reconstruction, emotional turmoil, and quiet rebirth.

This reflective piece unfolds in four sections: first, the cross-cultural encounters that triggered my deep reflections on this land, especially on the role of education and research; second, the ethical tensions of being both an ally and outsider; third, how the native worldview uMunthu reshaped my understanding of research as connection; and finally, the cognitive shift the fieldwork provoked. All of this has led to a re-understanding of my research, the world I inhabit, and perhaps most unexpectedly, myself.

Moving towards Truth in the Field

With a reminder to cast aside all preconceptions and a postcolonial lens to frame my gaze, I set off for Malawi, one of the poorest nations on Earth. Its economy relies heavily on subsistence agriculture, and its people face recurrent cycles of droughts, floods, and food insecurity that have intensified with climate change. Statistics say little about the texture of life here. Therefore, I went to encounter the people where they lived and to engage with them deeply as a participant. From my perspective, instead of arriving as an expert with

solutions, I am a learner with questions, and it was the community that decided whether I was worth their time.

In one local secondary school, I met a woman who prepared meals for the students. I recorded her process of making nsima, a traditional staple food, under the shade of a tree. She stirred the cornmeal skilfully and hummed a lullaby in the local Chichewa language. Her words were brimming with love for life, and the soft and repetitive melody carried reassurance, as if she were singing to the maize, the fire, and the children who would soon eat. At that moment, I realised that what literature called a harmonious bond between humans and nature has long been woven into the fabric of her daily existence. I had come with frameworks about Indigenous ecological knowledge, but she may not need my frameworks to know what she already knew. This was my first lesson in humility.

During an all-night bus ride from the Malawi-Zambia border, I was impressed by the overloaded carriage crammed with people struggling for a living. Beside them were piles of goods bought with most of their might, bearing hopes for improving their lives. No one complained of exhaustion. Instead, they chatted and laughed warmly, with tenacity in their eyes. In that instant, “livelihood” ceased to be a cold research keyword but something real and heavy. It became tangible and embodied. And I began to question: how had my training taught me to speak of “vulnerability” and “resilience” as abstract categories, when here they were simply ways of being alive?

On another long-distance bus trip, a middle school student with short jet-black hair and bright eyes left an even deeper impression. Unprompted, he brought up “dependency syndrome” - a topic that I had never touched upon for ethical considerations. In Malawi, this phrase commonly critiques the nation’s heavy reliance on foreign aid, which many argue has led to a cycle of dependency that undermines local initiative and self-reliance (Dambula, 2020). When asked for his opinion, he spoke resolutely that Malawians need to break free from dependence, build lives with their own hands, and change their fate through education. His gaze was steady, and his clarity startling. I had thought I was protecting him by avoiding sensitive topics, but he had no such protection in his daily life, nor did he want it. Going beyond my ethical concerns, he needed someone to listen to his analysis and take it seriously.

A group of children lived near to where I stayed. They dressed simply, ate plainly, and yet their eagerness for knowledge was palpable. They would bring their textbooks, gather around me, and read aloud, their voices bright. I taught them bits of Chinese and English, and they taught me Chichewa. The most touching moment came when we sang our national anthems. When they sang theirs for me, they stood straight and solemnly, as if singing for their very identity. When I sang mine, even though they didn’t understand a word,

they listened in silence, their eyes full of respect. Poverty, I realised then, had never touched their dignity. As I left, I gave them food and a note, on which I copied Mandela's words: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." This was out of my hope that food would alleviate their temporary scarcity, and education would plant hope for the future in their hearts. But as I wrote it, I felt the weight of my unexamined assumptions. Was I offering hope, or was I exporting a fantasy I had never had to test against hunger, displacement, or the daily grind of survival?

These encounters were more than ethnographic data. Generally, they dismantled the knowledge and assumptions I had brought into the field. I had arrived with a vocabulary of vulnerability, resilience, development, and so on, which felt precise in my reading but crude in the face of lived complexity. The truth I encountered took the form of reminders, repeated and insistent, that the people I had come to study may not need me to give them voice. They already had voices. My work, if it was to mean anything, would have to start from their fullness.

Being Torn Apart as the "Other"

In the field, I had always reminded myself to treat the local people as equal partners in our collaborative exploration, not merely subjects of my research. However, "othering" still worked both ways. On the surface, I was visibly foreign, being the "other" in the field. Deep down, I felt myself becoming the "other" whenever I opened my notebook and reduced their vivid lives to data. Thus, as our connections deepened, I couldn't escape being torn apart when those who treated me as one of their own looked at me with such hopeful eyes, and when their expectations collided with my own powerlessness.

Participants didn't see me as neutral. They saw someone with access to resources who could transform their situation. Managing those expectations without promising too much or dismissing their hopes became a struggle. A question from an elder lingers still. During a conversation about the floods wrought by climate change, he leaned in and asked, "Can your research help us restore our land?" I was lost for words. Looking at the murky, swollen river nearby, at the children wandering along its banks, I had no answer.

I understand my research may offer theoretical insights or policy references, but it cannot change their present suffering immediately. While explaining the limitations of my research, I questioned myself: Am I here to "do research" or to "solve problems"? I interacted sincerely with them, collecting their perceptions and expectations, yet still couldn't break free from the constraints of the academic system. I was both a fellow traveller longing to change the status quo and a climber within the system. But it is precisely this searing reflection that has enabled me to understand "environmental justice". It is not an empty slogan, but about

the right to survive and build a better life for ordinary people. Academic research, I realised, is no spectator's game. It is a practice grounded in equality that directs me to face moral dilemmas, sit with discomfort, and keep questioning myself.

The Connection Beyond Academia: From uMunthu to the Soul of the Research

In my academic training, I have been drawn to the deep and meaningful connections that participatory methods make possible. I believed then, and even more now, that true understanding grows from closeness, from presence, from seeing and being seen. In Malawi, the connections I forged beyond the boundaries of academia not only fulfilled that longing for understanding but also became the very soul of my research.

Kamala is the owner of the lodge where I stayed then. At first, we were just host and guest. But as the days passed, we became close, our conversations unfolding slowly over cups of tea, with the hum of the TV in the background on rainy days when few guests came. She told me her story: her husband had died early, leaving her to raise their children and care for her elderly parents alone. Life was hard, but she faced it with optimism and kindness that radiated from her. She talked about uMunthu, Malawi's philosophy of "I am because we are". It was a simple phrase, but it held a world of meaning - people are inherently interdependent, bound to one another, and to the land that sustains them. To Kamala, uMunthu meant collective survival, mutual support, and a deep reverence for nature, seen as a sacred space where the spirits of ancestors' dwell.

I saw her distribute the food she had to neighbours' children, help the elderly fetch water, and tend to their fields. When I fell ill with a fever, she sat beside me and spoke to me in her not-so-fluent English, her presence a quiet comfort. In that moment, I felt it - the power of connection. Then, I was no longer a researcher conducting "objective" observation. I was just a person, cared for by another, bound by our shared understanding.

Through Kamala, I truly stepped into the lives of Malawians and understood their values, beliefs, and resilience. That gave me a new determination and confidence in my research, which has never been about "objective" observation, but rather close and honest connections. Academic rigour, for me, is not about keeping detached, but about understanding through connection and reflecting through understanding; sometimes even real connection would shatter the researcher's existing conceptions and values.

The Strangeness of Returning Home: Seeing the Familiar with Fresh Eyes

After finishing my fieldwork, I returned to my university in the UK, and later to my home country. What I found was unsettling. I could no longer look at this familiar world through the same eyes as before. But I soon realised, this "strangeness of returning home"

was the gift of perspective from my time in Malawi - a critical lens that I could never unsee. This is when re-understanding took shape. More than unlearning stereotypes, it is a deeper cognitive shift through which once familiar concepts acquired new weight, grounded in lived experience.

Walking through markets, seeing shelves overflowing with goods, watching food discarded carelessly, I felt a twinge of discomfort. In Malawi, I had witnessed people struggling for a grain of food, children emaciated from hunger, and every bit of food cherished. That contrast drove me to re-examine the world around me.

I began to feel the weight of my Malawi experiences in familiar spaces. The Western centrism woven into the textbooks, the way news outlets ignored environmental policies in developing countries, and the lack of voices from Global South researchers in the academic system, all became glaringly obvious. This sense of “can’t go back” was not confusion but a critical consciousness, the recognition that reflection is not confined to the field but woven into the ordinary moments of daily life, waiting to be noticed.

Today, I continue to walk the academic path. My time in Malawi - the cognitive reconstruction, emotional turmoil, and the strangeness of returning home has become my precious treasure. I now believe that academic research is a critical practice concerning myself, others, and the world we share, with the significance lying in approaching it with sincerity, remaining reflexive, and promoting even the slightest change. That elder’s question about land restoration still has no answer. But perhaps this is why re-understanding matters, as this process teaches me to hold questions with no easy resolution and let them shape the questions I ask next and the actions I take.

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