

# Negotiating Consent in African Studies: A Case for Customized Consent

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## Abstract

Informed consent has been increasingly equated with standardized models and legal jargon. At Scandinavian universities, researchers are expected to adhere to European standardized models and institutional forms, necessitating documentable (preferably signed) consent from research participants. As Africanist researchers, we observe a growing dissonance between institutional expectations and fieldwork ethics and moralities. The field of African Studies has been pivotal in revealing how knowledge practices that are ostensibly universal are, in fact, products of deep-seated inequalities in higher education and knowledge production, perpetuating Western ideals of ethics. This introduction advocates for “customized consent” and introduces three concepts – consent contexts, consent interests, and consent mediators – to address and positively transform informed consent procedures and expectations.

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## 1 Introduction

Social scientists at Scandinavian universities are increasingly being held accountable by university employers and funding agencies for managing their data ‘ethically’. This often refers to standardized and institutionally regulated best practices.<sup>1</sup> One pillar of concern is how to ensure ‘informed consent’, which in broad terms could be defined as the processes leading to a shared agreement between the researcher and the interlocutor(s) regarding participation in the research. Practices of ‘informed consent’ are more and more framed in relation to standardized models and legal jargon. Universities in Scandinavia are increasingly relying on European standardized models and institutional forms, which require that we obtain documentable (and preferably signed) consent from our research participants. In our experience this development has led to a growing dissonance between institutional expectations and fieldwork ethics and moralities (Castañeda 2006; MacClancy & Fuentes 2013; Maeckelbergh 2021).

There are multiple explanations for this tendency. In Denmark, research ethics, transparency, and data management have become increasingly hot topics following the introduction of GDPR regulations, a ‘contractual turn’ (see Section 2 below) in Danish and other universities, together with an increased political focus from the Danish authorities on data management. Accordingly, ideals of materially documentable ‘consent’ have been written into university value statements (Københavns Universitet 2024).

There is also increased political focus on the topic, and both management and front-line staff mention inclusion and transparency as crucial components of research-related work. While this is sensible, our experience is that these ‘tools’ have had unforeseen consequences when introduced outside the halls of our European universities. Scholars working in

diverse African settings have noted how standardized consent procedures may be met with impatience and are perceived as unnecessary bureaucratization, which for some has traumatic connotations (see for example Salaam and Brown 2013; Wasunna et al. 2014; Larsen and Rasmussen this issue) and obfuscates the realities and desires of the African side(s) of Africanist research (Abebe et al. 2021).

Furthermore, a signed consent form tells us nothing about the power and negotiations that connect the research participants, the researcher, and the university and place them within global negotiations of authority, power relations, and knowledge production. This is well exemplified throughout this special issue, where we see how consent is far from being a one-off process, but is rather a process that depends on ongoing negotiations and a deep understanding of both implicit and explicit cultural processes and social positionings. As scholars such as Mkhize (2006), Nsamenang (2007), Ramose (2007), Gaie (2023), and Onuhua (2007) have already noted, issues of confidentiality, justice, ethics, and respect are manifested differently in many African cultures than, for example, in Scandinavian cultures. This is further complicated when institutional norms from the North clash with both existing and non-existing bureaucratic measures for the conduct of research in the country where the research is conducted. Such dissonances can lead researchers to ethical and moral dilemmas, and maybe even to the transgression of boundaries of various sorts.

From this starting point, we wish to engage more empirically with the question of institutional consent requirements and the meeting between consent ideals based on European standards and fieldwork encounters taking place across the African continent. We therefore invited papers to engage with the following research questions: *What are the ethical implications of standardizing and bureaucratizing ‘consent’? How does a standardization of fieldwork ethics interact with fieldwork*

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Code of Conduct for Responsible Research, Copenhagen University, May 2023.

*moralties? And who is to define what determines legitimate informed consent in Africanist research?*

With this special issue we take a critical look at consent ideals and forms of consent at a time when a 'flexible' Scandinavian interpretation of fieldwork ethics and research consent is eroding. We wish to initiate a debate amongst Africanist scholars on how we ensure informed and ethically obtained consent, and how we relate and respond to conflicting expectations from entities such as universities, states (at home and abroad), host institutions, partner organizations and, most importantly, research participants. It has been noted that institutional norms and requirements concerning consent often miss the target and fail to recognize the interrelational dimensions of consenting to research participation (Balkin et al. 2023; Jeko et al. 2012; Salaam and Brown 2013; Wasunna et al. 2014).

When conflicting expectations present themselves in a research encounter, they also present the researcher with a range of dilemmas, which must be weighed against each other. We find it important to address these issues for two reasons: first, to honestly reflect the reality of conducting contemporary Nordic-funded qualitative research on the African continent; and second, to initiate a broader conversation about what constitutes consent in African studies. It is essential to ensure that the measures that we take to safeguard the integrity of our research work as intended, especially given that institutional requirements on ethics are often formulated outside the continent.

### **Structure of the Introduction**

This introductory article starts by considering consent debates at Danish universities as a case within which to unpack the local and global trajectories that led to the move for 'contractualizing' consent within qualitative research. We understand from colleagues at other Scandinavian universities that debates on informed consent, data management, and

whether they should be centralized, are not unique to Denmark (see also Enebakk et al. 2016; Simonsen and Fürst 2024; Fugelsnes 2020). This also explains our choice of venue for this discussion. It is our hope that this can contribute to a debate on how we preserve those traits that make Nordic-based African studies unique, while ensuring both ethical and also morally sound research practices.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, we argue that the longstanding debates about power, knowledge production, and agency at the core of African studies allow us to better appreciate how standardized forms of consent obfuscate further the muddy experiences of negotiating ethics in the field. While these observations do not solely stem from African studies, African studies' epistemological outlook and critical methodologies come from the acknowledgement that (academic) knowledge is a product of power dynamics, which historically have been tied to epistemological networks that have favoured western ethnocentrism and perceptions of 'Africa' (as a homogeneous mass) in its imagined *otherness*<sup>3</sup> to the rest of the world (see, e.g., Larsen and Jensen 2020). These acknowledgements are increasingly brought up to pose critical questions about 'universal' research practices. Accordingly, we consider this an excellent starting point to unpack who benefits from consent and consenting.

The final part of our introduction presents the six contributions to our special issue. These articles, in conversation with the larger literature on power, knowledge production, and agency within African studies, invite us to implement what can be termed *customized consent* practices. That is, consent practices

<sup>2</sup> An extensive discussion of the distinctions and boundaries between 'ethics' and 'morals' goes beyond the scope of this introduction. However, we define ethics as those generalized principles of 'good conduct' a member of a social formation (in this case Africanist social scientists) is expected to follow. Moral, on the other hand, can be broadly defined as an individual's distinction between 'right' and 'wrong'.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Mudimbe (1988).

tailored to the research situation, rather than being defined on the basis of standardized principles governed by entities distant from the fieldwork encounter. We believe these insights are applicable well beyond Africanist research based in Denmark and Scandinavia, despite this being the research context which called for their articulation. It is also crucial to emphasize that not all contributors are affiliated with Scandinavian research institutions. This introduction is thus meant to showcase what brought about the imperative behind the special issue, rather than portraying the institutional challenges experienced by all its contributors. To make these debates applicable for future researchers, we have developed a set of concepts intended to guide the customization of consent guidelines, namely: *consent contexts*, *consent interests*, and *consent mediators*. We hope these concepts foster a productive, honest, critical, and open-minded approach to consent in the future, which acknowledges the relational nature of qualitative research in Africa and beyond.

## 2 The ‘Contractual Turn’ of consenting to Danish research

The turn towards more institutionalized notions of research ethics is a radical and new development that has crept up on the Danish research community. Denmark is famous for having a high level of interpersonal and institutional trust compared to many other places.<sup>4</sup> In the literature on trust this is often referred to as ‘social trust’ (Dinesen and Sønderskov 2024). This has prompted scholars to refer to social trust as “Denmark’s invisible commodity”<sup>5</sup> (Svendsen 2012).

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps also easier to understand a previous more flexible Danish consent model, based on the implicit trust in the researcher’s wish and ability to act within ethical boundaries without legalistic paraphernalia. Unlike universities in, for example, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the United States (see Pels et al. 2018, 392; Maeckelbergh 2021; Sleeboom-Faulkner 2018; Lederman 2018; Albris 2019), Danish MA students, PhD students, and research staff were not subjected to the same levels of ‘ethical reviews’ or ‘audit culture’ (Strathern 2000) before conducting fieldwork. Although Danish researchers are of course also subject to general *ethical guidelines* where the ideal of ‘voluntary and informed consent’ has been central since the Nuremberg code of 1967, such guidelines seem to have been interpreted differently in Denmark historically.

Our experience, as researchers who have moved across and collaborated with networks of colleagues at several Danish universities, is that research ethics and the issue of consent are locally rooted in the research department, apart from in areas such as medical research, where research ethics committees play a greater role (Hartlev 2019). This means that data management infrastructures are set up, but in practice, when it comes to the issue of consent – and ethical practices more generally – the practical responsibility has typically been locally anchored at department level (Thestrup et al. 2017), if not with the individual researcher. This, however, is changing, as we see the question of consent is increasingly becoming a question of standardized and legal permission at the university level. This tendency became increasingly visible in 2018 following the introduction of GDPR law. As universities consider ‘informed consent’ in terms of legal qualities as ‘grounds for processing personal data’ (Maeckelbergh 2021), the question of ‘consent’ is increasingly made equivalent to a standardized, physical, and written form, presented in highly technical, bureaucratic,

<sup>4</sup>The high level of social trust is not unique to Denmark but is characteristic of Scandinavia. For a literature review on ‘social trust’ in the Nordic countries, see, for example, Andreasson (2017).

<sup>5</sup>This is our translation of the original Danish formulation: “Danmarks usynlige råstof”.

and legal language. This situation is frustrating to many researchers who, according to a study from 2019, only feel partially equipped to handle the requirements that come with GDPR and fear that it may interfere with their research (DigHumLab 2019). The introduction of these new processes and instruments of data management bear witness to a shift in fieldwork ethics and institutional expectations at Danish universities. Intimate discussions on how to relate to the research field, and the people inhabiting it, are increasingly replaced with bureaucratic forms, audits, and ethical assessments based on clear-cut legal divisions regarding what constitutes ethical research practices.

While the turn towards institutionalized and *standardized* ethics may have intensified following the introduction of the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in May 2018, the current disruption of what constitutes ethically sound research is the result of several much longer transformations at Danish universities and beyond. For a deeper analysis of these transformations, we refer the reader to Jensen's final and concluding article of this issue. In the following, we briefly highlight some relevant interconnected developments necessary to understand these movements.

On a national level, several currents have shaped the new developments in Danish data management practices. For example, the Danish authorities have had a strong focus on maintaining 'trust' in public data processing (Digitaliseringsstyrelsen 2024). Similarly, for more than ten years EU bodies had been pushing for a centralization of data regulation (Hartlev 2019). At the same time, the research funding landscape has changed at universities, with more and more funding coming from international entities. As a result, universities need to be more competitive, especially on an international level. This development raises questions concerning both collaboration (and thus data sharing), but also under what circumstances universities are expected to

comply with international rules on ethics and data management.

Danish internationalization strategies take shape within a broader epistemic consensus advocating for knowledge production with a 'global' perspective and based on open access principles. The more research is validated with an increasingly global perspective, the more debates and understandings about data ownership and data property regimes sprout. Danish universities act according to frameworks set by the authorities, which focus on openness and accessibility in the form of access to Danish publications and those which have Danish public support. The vision is for research results to be open for use and regulated by existing institutions (see, for example, KU's own definition of research ethics, including data management (Københavns Universitet 2022)). This can be explained as Ostrom's (1990) common property regime approach, with its underlying perception that knowledge sharing should bring researchers, the knowledge community, and other actors closer together and contribute to creating solutions for challenges. It is also within these broader global moves towards more open and transparent research practices that informed consent has become a hot topic of debate – particularly in light of how quickly research (and its consequences) travelled the world with the dawn of modern information technology. It is our experience that these developments also brought along more legalistic and standardized models of 'informed consent', which now play a prominent role in contemporary university and funding guidelines.

The above trends occur simultaneously with (and probably because of) social and political debates on postmodernism, cultural sensitivity, and even so-called 'Africa strategies', which have increased steadily in all their varieties at western universities since the 1960s. Scholarly debates on cultural diversity in global research ethics and 'decolonial' research practices are no longer happening only at the

margins. These critical perspectives have challenged scholars to reflect upon power and cultural hegemony in knowledge production and ethics, rejecting colonial and neoliberal histories in favour of intercultural dialogue (see, e.g., Adichie 2009; Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; Wainaina 2006). While these perspectives are not new, Iyioke et al. (2024) point out that these debates have gained popular traction, and both their foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences urge us to place research ethics, as currently construed, under scrutiny. While Danish universities might not have specific 'Africa strategies' to manage collaborations for research partnerships, as, for example, UK universities have (see Gebremariam 2024 for a discussion of UK universities' 'Africa strategies'), we have observed a rising urgency and critique (particularly from students) concerning the ethical backdrop of contemporary research and the educational system which it gives shape to. This includes both a desire to exclude certain texts from the curricula, but also to include more global (and in the case of African studies, African) literature, theory, methods, and perspectives. In a policy context this societal shift has, most recently, been manifested in the new Danish Africa strategy, which talks about equal partnerships (despite not defining the measure of the said 'equality') (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark 2024). Likewise, the DANIDA Fellowship Center Grant (the largest research grant in Denmark focusing on international development) has also placed an increased focus on 'equitable partnerships' and research ethics, including informed consent practices (Danida Fellowship Centre 2024). This should of course all be understood in a context where African universities, authorities, and local populations are placing new demands on research collaborations and especially on being heard, recognized, and respected. Such requirements may take many different forms, ranging from requiring explicit and formal collaborations with local universities and researchers to

different types of financial regulations, such as joint research activities, conferences and the like being administered by the partner in Africa, but financed by the partner in the Global North.

Given the crossroads that Danish universities and researchers are currently at, between following the consent trend of other universities across Europe, and developing a unique Nordic model for ethical research, we find it pertinent to start a discussion on how to ensure 'consent' that includes and respects Africa-based perspectives and at the same time to challenge the current imbalance often experienced in North-South research relations and partnerships.

### 3 What can African studies teach Scandinavian researchers about 'consent'? A selective review

Many disciplines have engaged with the problems of informed consent forms and practices.<sup>6</sup> That said, we find that African studies invite a unique perspective on the broader debate about informed consent and its relationship with the negotiation of authority, relations, and knowledge within the global knowledge economy. At the core of African studies' epistemology are questions of "how and by whom knowledge about Africa and Africans on the continent and in relation to the world are produced, validated, circulated, published, debated, and what implications this has" (Hammar 2021, 18). These questions involve the acknowledgment of deep histories of unequal power relations within higher education and knowledge production and how this continues to privilege western ideals of ethics to this day.

The discipline of African studies has been instrumental in challenging research ethics by asking critical questions on topics

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Caplan (2003); Fluehr-Lobban (1994); Pels et al. (2018); Kongsholm (2017); Huber and Imeri (2021); Herzfeld (2023); Murillo (2018); Butz (2008).

such as representation and positionality (see, for example, Mama 2007; Pottier et al. 2011; Mayanja 2021; Afolayan et al. 2021; Larsen and Jensen 2020), the underlying dynamics of research partnerships (see, for example, Robinson 1997; Wandji et al. 2022; Adriansen et al. 2015; Walsh et al. 2018, and knowledge production and its validation (see, for example, Zeleza 1997; Hountondji 2009). At the heart of these engagements is a critical perspective on the wider knowledge production economy. With this, African studies as a discipline has been instrumental in unpacking how several knowledge practices, which may be presented as universally given, are in fact products of deep histories of inequalities within higher education and knowledge production and how this continues to privilege western ideals of ethics to this day.

Recent discussions on ethics have also included questions about what data is, who owns it, how it should be protected, and the role of informed consent in this process (see, for example, Mawere and van Stam 2019). Others have highlighted the complexity of informed consent in relation to issues of phone surveys and the vulnerability of in-country research staff (Kuhnt and Kaplan 2022), the normalization of receiving ethical approval from institutions outside the African continent (Griese 2022), and the downsides of open access publication (Cheeseman and Hassan 2022). These issues are further complicated by the interplay between politics and academia in research partnerships (Pritchard 2018; Thomson 2013), the discrepancy between local traditions and regulatory 'informed consent' requirements (Appiah 2021), the application of ethics based in western sociocultural traditions in a non-western context (Jeko et al. 2012), and the balancing of emotional effects with ethical considerations (Ansoms et al. 2021). Other researchers also direct our attention to the complex exercise of navigating and balancing between 'protecting' informants and their data without taking away their agency (Segalo and

Molobela 2019), as well as to the dilemmas that may arise if interlocutors expect inducement (Salaam and Brown 2013).

In addressing the above challenges, Visagie et al. (2019) have discussed the possibilities for an 'Afro-communitarian' approach to informed consent (Visagie et al. 2019). Others have unpacked the emergence of an 'African bioethics' and whether it can move past the ethical imperialism and neocolonialism of earlier bioethics approaches (Fayemi and Macaulay-Adeyelu 2016; Bamford 2018; Barugahare 2018). We find that these debates within African studies invite a critical reading and reconceptualization of current consent practices (and broader research ethics) (see, for example, Iyioke et al. 2024 or Abdul-Gafar this issue).

This special issue starts from these insightful contributions but recognizes that there is still a lack of published empirical data on the direct experiences of researchers trying to ensure informed consent in the field. There can be several reasons for this. As already mentioned, failure to live up to the ideals of ethics and consent are grounds for exclusion from the larger academic community. We have also found that it can be difficult to talk about, as many emotions are involved when showing what really happens as we collect our data and later digest it. Considering this, we have been interested in inviting empirical research that investigated exactly these very personal experiences in an honest, reflexive, but also sensitive manner. All contributions resulted from an open call for papers, during which we received numerous manuscripts. We picked the ones that seemed to showcase exactly the complexities and the tensions between universal ethics and cultural particularities which researchers are expected to seamlessly navigate – often with little to no prior preparation. During the creation of this special issue, we also hosted an informal online seminar, where our contributors had a chance to familiarize themselves with each other while giving and

receiving constructive feedback on their ideas early in the process. The sensitivity of these topics became evident when one author chose to withdraw from the special issue, fearing that his research, conducted years ago, might now be considered 'unethical', with the potential ramifications of such a perception. We are grateful for this author's early contributions to our debates and for the authors who have remained and shared their experiences.

#### 4 'Customized consent': An empirically aligned approach

Recognizing that consent is a product of processual, political, and relational negotiation, we wish to move the question of obtaining consent from a question of 'done' or 'not done' to a continuous process happening at different times in the research process and involving different actors who are all navigating and trying to make sense of the research relationship. To operationalize a critical Africanist perspective on 'consent' we propose a move towards what we term 'customized consent' – that is, consent procedures that are adapted to the specific – and often diverse – contexts we as Africanists explore in our research. For the final part of this introduction we introduce three concepts, namely *consent contexts*, *consent interests*, and *consent mediators*. These describe the interaction between the spaces, people, and goals between which we mediate, and aim to ethically and morally align our research with the individual and collective values it touches upon. In reality, these concepts overlap, yet we find that a distinction is helpful for analysis, comparison, and hopefully future debates. We expect these three concepts to help researchers operationalize consent procedures in ways that align with the realities in the field, in contrast to the standardized models that are increasingly taking hold. Likewise, while changing bureaucratic and institutional expectations may take time, meaning that we as researchers may have to accept standardized

approaches to informed consent for the time being, we still urge researchers to think of these reflection points and to supplement their mandatory ethical procedures with close and intimate negotiations together with interlocutors in the field and colleagues at home. Each article of this special issue presents its own case(s) and accordingly its own reflections and conclusions as to how we can address the issue of informed consent in African studies. The concepts below are all derived from our reading of these articles and are thus best read in conjunction with the specific case studies that led to their formulation.

#### *Consent Contexts*

Rather than seeing informed consent as a procedure based on a universal global ideal of research ethics, we start from the acknowledgment that research ethics is a process always involving more than one consent *context*. In using the term 'consent context' we wish to highlight that consent, and what needs to be done for it to be achieved, is not framed by the researcher-self, but happens at the intersection between various people, spaces, moralities, and societal ethics. On the one hand, the researcher navigates university requirements and their own position within the epistemic apparatus. On the other hand, the researcher interacts with the research field and its power dynamics. In this way the researcher brings different spaces, people, and moralities into conversation with one another.

Some parts of these contexts may be informed by 'formal' requirements such as legal and administrative expectations, both at universities and in the context of the research. This could, for example, be institutional requirements for research permissions and clearances. In such cases we may experience conflicting expectations and rules governing (Nordic) universities and the countries hosting our research, just as other collaborating or participating entities, such as NGOs or research funders, have rules, guidelines, and codes of

conduct that may clash with those of our home institutions. To exemplify such complexities, countries like Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda have long and stringent processes concerning research permissions for foreign researchers, whereas countries like Namibia, Djibouti, and Somaliland (albeit not officially recognized as a country) do not have official clearance procedures for social scientists. Likewise, African countries such as Uganda and Tanzania have, over recent years, intensified regulations and political control over the practices of researchers operating within them, through, for example, extensive and lengthy research evaluation processes and increased prices for obtaining research permits.

On top of this are ideals of social norms and etiquette, which may be less formalized, but not less important to the research and its ethical implications. Research, researchers, and interlocutors are all integrally located and anchored in social relations and settings with vernacular ideals about what makes up 'good' practices. Researchers such as Appaih (2021) have discussed how collective and spiritual ideals play an equally central role, in relation to bioethics, to juridical agreements and codes of conduct. Others, like Iyioke et al. (2024), prompt us to also integrate African philosophical and indigenous knowledge systems into our ethical procedures to appreciate how individuals in communalist settings are anchored within the family, village and clan.

To ensure informed consent in a way that stays true to the ethical objective of the exercise, it is crucial to acknowledge how notions and understandings of consent are situated within socio-cultural, economic, and moral contexts. These shape how our interlocutors wish to consent (or not) to their participation in our research, and to the subsequent outputs of this research. Simultaneously, we as Africanist researchers navigate highly diverse and dynamic contexts ranging from university lecture halls to informal settlements and deep-forest indigenous communities. The

relationship between different consent contexts may become even more muddy when researchers 'partner', to varying degrees, with private companies, NGOs, state institutions, and so forth, who may also make demands on the research and consent processes.

To accommodate this, we recommend that researchers should map research contexts for the ethical and moral conditions governing each space the researcher navigates. The choice of how to operationalize 'consent' in each specific context and how this corresponds with the expectations of the project's interlocutors must then be reflected upon in the research design, and preferably also in the research output. With this comes the acknowledgement that negotiating consent is a social practice, which depends on a negotiation between the various interests vested in the research project. Ethical approval can thus not be seen as a one-off exercise and should ideally not only be governed by institutional bureaucracy.

### ***Consent Interests***

As illuminated by multiple articles in this special issue, the process of achieving informed consent is complicated and often involves various interests extending far beyond those of immediate concern to both researcher and interlocutors. In the examples provided by Larsen and Rasmussen (this issue), we see how, for example, institutional expectations, prompted by funding agencies and universities, clashed with the sensitive political realities of the interlocutors in these two research contexts, whereas in the case of Paulsen (this issue), it was the interests of a local NGO that at first seemed to open up possibilities for research access, but that ended up shifting her entire research topic and scope due to internal misunderstandings between the researcher and her host organization.

These examples show how achieving informed consent, and ethical research conduct more broadly, goes well beyond ticking bureaucratic boxes. They also show how such

purported ethical tools at times become the very source of ethical (self-)questioning. It is thus necessary to acknowledge what interests, within a specific situation and context, are at play and inform the research landscape, which in turn must shape the consent procedures used by the researcher. Lastly, these contributions also reveal a well-known, but at times hidden, power dynamic of the consent processes. At the surface, consent seems to be a process between researcher and interlocutor, but below the surface it is shaped by multiple institutions with various interests in the research. Likewise, as some of our contributors reveal, interlocutors may also have preconceptions of the said institutions and their interests. These parameters ought to be considered and continuously evaluated throughout the research process to align consent practices with the realities of the field. The fact that consent occurs in the field between multiple interests also implies that tensions between these interests may occur. This can also happen within smaller units, as individuals within groups may have different interests vested in participating in the research and in how the research relationship may be shaped. This leads us to our next and final concept, where we present our suggestion as to how we as Africanists can best mobilize our roles as mediators between the interests of our interlocutors, institutions, and of course ourselves.

### **Consent Mediators**

Navne and Segal (2018) introduce the concept of 'ethnographic diplomats' to describe the dynamic role of ethnographic researchers. This concept highlights the constant movement and ethical considerations inherent in ethnography, drawing attention to the players, power dynamics, and agendas that researchers must navigate to avoid causing harm or offence. The reference to diplomacy underscores the fact that every anthropological project involves stakes that extend beyond the specific time and space of fieldwork. Ethnographers must

strive to move through various relationships and moral frameworks without causing harm, often acting as translators between them.

Navne and Segal (2018) emphasize that both knowledge and ethics are always situated and positioned, and never neutral. Thus, it is the ethnographer's task to manage and balance their ethical sense through principles of openness, dialogue, and negotiation. Ethnographers navigate complex moral landscapes, where conflicts may arise. Ethnographic diplomacy, therefore, involves intentional, practical, methodical, and applied efforts – not only in reflecting on ethical choices in writing but also in learning to manage them during fieldwork.

We find that the contributions in this special issue highlight the significant work, thought, and occasional self-doubt involved in navigating and translating between fieldwork sites and shifting moralities to ensure 'consent'. Building on Navne and Segal's (2018) concept, we wish to emphasize that researchers also mediate 'consent' across different epistemic and moral communities and ideals. In doing so, they and their consent forms accommodate, challenge, and *transform* more or less established consent practices.

Just as Hull (2012) notes that documents are not merely carriers of 'ideas' or 'content' but are productive of the relationships they mediate, so are consent forms not only enmeshed in, but co-productive of, the relationships they form during research. On the one hand, as researchers connect academia with other lived worlds, they are informed by different and co-existing – sometimes competing, other times collaborating – claims on what is 'ethical' and on 'proper' ways of establishing and maintaining social relationships. Together these defines the boundaries between researchers, interlocutors, and the epistemic communities that make up academia. Researchers (and their paraphernalia) connect and intermingle universities, field sites, and the people inhabiting them – i.e., people and spaces that would not necessarily have been in contact otherwise. We

become nodes between them. Thus, when we bring along bureaucratically governed practices from our home institutions to the field, we also inform how research (and the implications of participating in it) is imagined and perceived – be it positively or negatively. As researchers navigate and mediate consent, they also authorize certain ‘ethical’ ideals and governing agencies related to their academic work (see also Larsen and Rasmussen, this issue). In this way researchers and their documents become *consent mediators* and are part of (re) producing, albeit on varying terms, consent ideals and power dynamics within and beyond the field. This sometimes includes reproducing and thus legitimizing research practices that the researchers are otherwise critical of. That researchers also have agency in the issue of consent and consent forms is often overlooked in the debate. Recognizing our role as consent mediators and how our practices help shape what consent is and how it should be obtained shows that there are more possibilities and responsibilities to our research than simply ‘navigating’ and following institutional rules. This also emphasizes why it is so important that we as Africanists critically consider how we can best mobilize our roles as mediators between the interests of our interlocutors, our institutions, and, of course, ourselves.

## 5 Moving towards an empirically aligned consent practice

With these concepts in mind, one is left with the question of how to operationalize, and finally achieve, informed consent, in ways that consider the people we work with and their broader socio-cultural environment before funders and institutions. While providing a final, conclusive, and single-sided answer to this question would go against the primary premise of this introduction, all articles in this special issue provide insights that can help us as we prepare, revise, and align our consent

procedures in accordance with the reality of our field sites.

The first three articles primarily deal with clashes emerging because of conflicting consent interests. These were often primed by the different cultural values governing each consent context the researchers had to navigate. In the first article, Larsen and Rasmussen reflect on each of their experiences of introducing an informed consent form, based on standardized institutional guidelines, in their respective field sites in Namibia and Djibouti. They analyse the immediate backlashes caused by these forms, which in both cases (in different ways) provoked experiences of individual and collective cultural transgressions strengthened by the historical trauma of colonial deception and exploitation. This is followed by Paulsen’s experiences of first being encouraged, by a host organization, to undertake fieldwork amongst vulnerable youths in Cape Town, followed by the organization’s withdrawal of consent, despite her interlocutors’ explicit interest in participation. She reflects on the vulnerabilities of young researchers as they negotiate their way into sensitive research fields, and questions who has the right to consent (and to what) in sensitive research contexts – the individual or organizations representing them? Similarly, Tornius’ ethnographic work with diplomats from the African Union draws our attention to how consent processes are shaped by, and play on, the researchers’ personal and conflicting social positions and vulnerabilities, including ethnicity, race, gender, and class, as she describes the dilemmas she experienced as a young female white European researcher conducting ethnographic fieldwork on the political realities of African diplomats.

The two articles that follow reflect on how consent is to be mediated by researchers in ways that sensitively cater for the cultural particularities of a given field encounter, and more specifically how we as Africanist researchers resolve tensions between the clashing ideals of individualism and collectivism as they unfold

in the process of obtaining informed consent. First, Ansoms and Cituli present a selection of case studies from their research with indigenous communities in the DRC, and their process of aligning the expectations of their home institution with the traditional customs of their interlocutors. Second, Abdul-Gafar presents a practically applicable consent tool, which he terms ‘circular consent’, intended to prime the consent process towards a principle of circular reciprocity, whereby researcher and interlocutors exchange views, hesitations, ideas, and concerns ongoingly, throughout the research process.

Lastly, Jensen concludes this special issue with a historical analysis of the evolution of informed consent processes at Danish institutions of higher education, based on his more than 30 years of experience working in Nordic-based African studies. As opposed to the remaining articles of the issue, this contribution does not focus primarily on the interactions between researchers and interlocutors, but moves the analytical gaze towards those cultural and, maybe more importantly, political dynamics which have shaped past, present, and future informed consent practices and expectations in Danish-based African studies.

Changing bureaucratic frameworks can be a long and strenuous process, and even more so if our desire is to modify guidelines beyond our research institutions, as is the case with the problems related to the GDPR regulation’s direct impact on research, as exemplified in some of the articles of this special issue. Thus, there is a need to operate on both

an immediate and long-term basis when it comes to addressing, and eventually positively modifying, informed consent procedures and expectations. On the immediate side, we as researchers must find ways to pragmatically mediate all the consent interests we represent in the field – and maybe more importantly, to voice when these interests clash to such a degree that they hinder, rather than promote, ethically and morally sound research. Amplifying our direct experiences is the first tool needed to showcase how standardized consent norms in practice seem to protect universities and research funders more than the people participating in our research. This brings along the longer-term and indeed more political process that we ought to engage with if we want to change the course of the emerging standardized consent regime. As researchers we must be brave enough to engage with the broader regulatory bodies that govern our professional practice and show the (hopefully) unintended negative consequences brought about by informed consent regulations that are not aligned with the in-situ realities and socio-cultural particularities of the places where we do our research.

All contributors to this special issue took a brave and commendable step in writing these honest and highly reflexive contributions. Our hope is that these acts of courage, by honestly exposing research vulnerabilities, will enable a dialogue aimed towards aligning research ethics more with human morals, decency, and the realities of the people we work with.

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