FIELD ENVY: OR,
THE PERILS AND PLEASURES OF DOING FIELDWORK

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Fieldwork is generally not regarded as an emblematic practice of scholars of religion (or more specifically historians of religion as the authors generally refer to themselves here). Nor does it have the "deep metaphysical significance" attributed to it by anthropologists, in that careers are built on it (Lewis 1986: 1). It is, rather, written texts that have assumed this fetishistic quality in the history of religions. But here we have a group of (predominantly young and recently initiated) historians of religion, and one seasoned anthropologist, reflecting on what British anthropologist, I. M. Lewis and others have termed their "shamanistic voyages" into "alien" territories, and the academic and personal repercussions thereof. Rather than commenting on them individually, I intend to distill some of the salient ideas, and address both the explicit and implicit questions they raise about fieldwork.

Many of the scholars assembled here were driven to their respective "fields"—whether India, Russia, Nigeria, or Honduras—in the search for life beyond texts. Some found it in abundance, others found that life without looking for it, one left that life, after having briefly experienced its implications and complications, and returned to the less compromising life of a textual scholar. Nearly all the authors address the "uncomfortable ambiguities" (Marcus 1998: 20), and messiness of lived experience and quotidian practice. For several this complexity served as much-needed demystification or clarification of unanswered questions. For others it added new dimensions to their investigations—prompting them to activate their senses and bodily memories, or consider new sources. No-one seemed to leave with their categories intact, notably over the insider-outsider dichotomy. This is exemplified by the presence (here and more generally) of that new caste of researcher, the indigenous or native anthropologist—in this case of the diasporic variety, who humbles the rest of us whenever we might speak of identity crises in the field.

It is surely a given, that upon reading accounts of other's fieldwork, a fellow fieldworker's historical memory is automatically acti-
vated. Some catharsis of my own was long overdue. This type of forum was not available to me in Britain in the late 1970s when I returned from my first stint of fieldwork on indigenous religious movements in Nigeria.\footnote{In fact, I had earlier done fieldwork for my undergraduate thesis without knowing it. As part of my year abroad in Grenoble, France from the University of Leeds in 1971-72, I somehow ended up in the office of a French church historian at the University of Grenoble. He persuaded me to conduct research on France's first ecumenical church, saying that it was a sensitive issue better studied by an outsider! In return for my going into the fray, he offered to train me in the use of statistics, interviews, etc. Before long, the idea of being a political pawn left me and I began to enjoy sitting in people's kitchens talking with them about the church and how ecumenical it really was. I appreciated even more the sumptuous and heady feasts with Catholic priests from a neighboring church discussing my research. I will not broach here the potential of in vino veritas (on whose part?) as a fieldwork tool. I never did have the wherewithal to go back and find out what the avuncular French academic did with “my” “data.”} I had by then sat confusedly in the University of Ibadan library for many months wondering why I did not have crisp answers concerning my theory and research methodology as some of my American counterparts there in the social sciences appeared to have. My history of religions training seemed irrelevant as I struggled to comprehend the ritual practices of a religious group that seemed to fit in none of my categorical baggage. No-one back at base in London had told me a single thing about fieldwork maneuvers.\footnote{To be strictly honest, Professor Geoffrey Parrinder had handed me a copy of his \textit{Religion in an African City}—a survey of the religious landscape of that teeming Nigerian metropolis, Ibadan, since that was where I was heading in 1975 from the University of London for postgraduate research. He added, though, that it probably would not be much use since he had had a team of researchers and money, whereas I was going to be operating on an unfunded, individual basis.} I started casting longing and treacherous glances at the anthropology shelves.

Perhaps such serious misgivings have not assailed the authors here, operating as they do in a more multi- and inter-disciplinary age. But some are still led to reflect upon the fieldwork experience intrinsically, while others seek to explore more extrinsically its theoretical currency. The ethical dimension of field-based research, notably in non-Western cultures, receives sensitive consideration, not least because it is tied to methodological issues. Some of the authors speak of the transgressive nature of fieldwork—being drawn into ways of participating in the community under study that were not in the “rule book”, whether religiously, politically, financially, or sexually. Like