

GEOGRAPHY UNDERCOVER*

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In 1854 the geographer and scholar Captain Sir Richard F. Burton, disguised as an Arab merchant and using a superlative knowledge of the Muslim faith and local languages, became the first European to enter and leave the Muslim citadel and Somali capital of Harar (Harer, now in Ethiopia) without being executed in the bargain. In the mid–nineteenth century the resources and geography of East Africa, particularly the “Somali Country,” were unknown yet of great interest to Europe. Despite the inherent benefits of information on this area, the British government would not afford Burton any special protection (Figure 1). At great personal risk, Burton nonetheless ventured forth “determined to make geography and commerce of the Somali country his principle objectives” (Burton 1987, xv–xxiii; emphasis added). Although he was not the first person to collect geographical information while “undercover,” with these words about the Somali Expedition he clearly identified undercover research as a methodology of field geography.

“Undercover geography” is a field methodology wherein researchers do not reveal their true research purpose to local residents or others whom they may be studying. Furthermore, depending on conditions, they may hide or disguise their true identity, nationality, affiliation, or even the fact that they are in any way conducting research. Researchers may even assume a role contrary to who they really are by identifying themselves as a member of a different social, cultural, political, or racial group, often adopting the native tongue, which allows them to move surreptitiously through their area of study. In this essay we discuss undercover geography as a field methodology and offer a variety of examples of where and how it has been used.

UNDERCOVER GEOGRAPHY AS A FIELD TECHNIQUE

Even the concept of undercover geography disturbs many academics, conjuring visions of spying, espionage, being a government agent—James Bond, Geographer—or appearing to be less than a proper academic. Even worse, it smacks of Indiana Jones and chasing pell-mell after “adventures” in the field. Yet there are times when having adventures, going undercover, and appearing other than oneself become necessary and useful tools for academic research, and these methods deserve consideration.

Although academics may turn a jaundiced eye toward these field techniques, they are not to be dismissed out of hand as inappropriate, and certainly not as unnecessary. A great deal of the world is less than enamored with the role of aca-

* We dedicate this essay to the late Professor Bernard Q. Nietschmann—undercover geographer, mentor, and friend. *Yawoo*, Señor Barney.

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