A Day of Fieldwork in Rwanda

Marc Sommers

The following description of one day of fieldwork in Rwanda took place while I was carrying out research on the situation of youth there. The work was funded by the World Bank (under the supervision of Maria Correia and Pia Peeters). Under their leadership, the research focused on how Rwandan youth became adults, and how gender roles, and masculinity in particular, impacted youth trajectories.[1]

A central component of site selection was to compare rural youth residing in remote areas to those living much closer to towns or cities. This selection was based, in part, on the hypothesis that rural youth in remote areas would be less mobile than those in places that were more accessible to urban areas. This did not turn out to be the case: youth in remote areas proved just as eager to migrate to towns, cities and large agricultural farms as their rural brethren living near main roads and urban areas.

The day of fieldwork recorded here took place in a remote corner of rural Rwanda. I had decided to take notes on an entire fieldwork day the night before. I then drafted a complete initial draft while awaiting a connecting flight in Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi, Kenya, on my way home from Rwanda. The fieldwork day was in November 2006; the day in Nairobi's airport was in early December. All of the names and locations have been altered.

My research team and I are staying in a guesthouse in a small town beside a rocky mountain road. It's part of a vocational training center. All are welcoming, but I somehow make the man in charge of our visit nervous. One night, when I went up to our house in the dark to do some work before dinner, he became worried. "How could you let him go alone?" he asked my colleagues. He never really talked to me beyond greetings, but for some reason, he thinks I'm unhappy. I'm not, and I smile and shake his hand whenever we meet. But his worries never end, and it amuses my colleagues. He also mistakenly once called mosquitoes "moustache" in Kinyarwanda during a talk with one of my colleagues, so he has gained a nickname. He is Moustache.

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I am working with a wonderful trio. Alexi is about 10 years older than me but very spry. He has lived a remarkable life: born in Rwanda, he spent decades as a refugee before joining the Rwandan Patriotic Front and returning to his homeland during the civil war and genocide in the early and mid-1990s. He has verve and energy, is funny, opinionated and wise, and we debate just about everything often.

There is also Mathias, who grew up in Congo as a Rwandan refugee and returned to his homeland, which he had never seen before, some time in the mid-1990s. He has worked as a research assistant many times before, and it shows. His sensitivity and awareness of people in difficult situations was telling as soon as I first interviewed him. Mathias is tall but unassuming, and his ability to engage with everyone, from kids to elders, is exceptional.

Finally, there is Eugide. He's never left Rwanda. He is funny and bright and always looks alert. He is the sort of guy that my teenaged son would love. He is quirky, too, and adept at interviewing others. He is also detail-oriented, which is an asset in fieldwork. Alexi, Mathias and Eugide are talented researchers, and all are great company, too.

I start the day just after six with a bottle of water and the team's field notebooks. I sit outside our guest house on the verandah, reviewing my colleagues' field notebooks while listening to the dawn cacophony of birds. I can't see much: we are in the mountains in the rainy season, and a cloud has settled around us.

After greeting my groggy team, I take a cold shower and shave in a mirror on the back of a green comb; maybe two inches wide. After dressing, I walk down the hill towards breakfast.

I attract attention on the way. As a white foreigner, a mzungu, in places where whites rarely visit, getting stared at seems to come with the territory. I'm used to it now, but sometimes, it's wearing.[2]

This morning, a woman energetically asks me to see her house. She's speaking in Kinyarwanda, and doesn't know Kiswahili, so I don't understand much. But I know what she wants: support. She shows me her house: a cement floor with a mat, a blanket, a cooking pot, a plastic basin, some clothes rumpled in the corner, pages from some catalogue showing white women in blouses, and a newspaper article about President Kagame, glued to the cement walls about five feet high.

The house looks spare and squalid, but in her immediate environs, she's relatively well off – it's a cement house with a metal roof. That's practically middle-class. I don't know her situation, of course. She seems to be desperate for some money. I want to give her some, but if I do, the word may go out and I might be trailed by others afterwards. So I make the first of a dozen hard, moral decisions of the day, and smile and shake her hand and try to gently leave. It isn't easy and she isn't happy. With an awkward smile and shrug I go to breakfast.

There is a training of some sort taking place at the vocational school, and there are lots of Rwandan participants milling about outside the dining room. They wait for me to enter first, every darn morning (it's embarrassing, but there's nothing to be done), and then they file in. Soon, the room fills with the smell of body odor. It's strong, and every time it happens it reminds me of how different my world is from here.

Bernadette is our, well, waitress, I suppose. She is young and cute and shy, and forever watchful of me. There's bread, milk, tea and coffee, and she brings everyone

on our team omelets. It's cold outside and the coffee tastes great. The team is full of banter. Then we head for the field.

Two days ago, while entering this part of Rwanda (it has some of the highest mountains in the region), I recalled something I'd read about David Livingstone, who had ended his life wandering about in Central Africa. In a book I'd read long ago, he was described as someone who always wanted to see what was on the other side of the next hill.

I thought of that depiction of him as we bumped our way into this area. The vistas are breathtaking: mountains stretching perhaps 6,000 feet or higher, steep valleys with a winding, light brown river carrying Rwandan topsoil below, drifting clouds across the tops of mountains, occasionally revealing a volcano in the distance. As it's the rainy season, the hills are deep green and laced with deep brown paths winding up and down the hills. The hills themselves are distinctly Central African: a sculpted patchwork of farm plot rectangles, containing banana trees, cassava, beans, and sweet potatoes. Shreds of forest are interspersed between the patches. The landscape is entirely pedestrian to my Rwandan colleagues but uncommonly beautiful to me. I remember a UNESCO colleague telling me, during my first visit to Rwanda, just after the 1994 genocide, that the countryside looked like it was part of a fairy tale, with everything in place except castles or mansions on the tops of the hills. He was trying to make sense of the beauty, but also of the awful emptiness of the country during that thoroughly haunted time.

The road is before us, and it's predatory. Just below a tiny town we find clay soup, which we successfully slide through this morning. There's a rutted area next, and villagers wait alongside, hoping, just perhaps, that we'll get stuck (so they can get paid to help push us out). Then there are a series of log bridges over rushing waters. Most are in pretty good shape, but one is getting worse by the day, particularly since our worn, 4-wheel drive Toyota diesel Land Cruiser is daily passing over it. One morning we grab some large stones and fill some gaps between the logs. We get across fine, but we cross carefully. I wonder, to myself, how many more days we'll be able to safely cross this bridge.

Getting out of the car to move rocks or help direct Alexi, who's driving our car, I attract crowds and ongoing remarks. Evidently whites aren't often seen in these parts. The road closes off during both rainy seasons, which means that the area is cut off half of the year. Kids gather and want to shake my hand. Older people gawk and test my Kinyarwanda. Sometimes I take pictures, which amuses most, particularly the kids. They are dressed in trousers, t-shirts and skirts that are dirty, and torn. They are barefoot. As with kids elsewhere in the developing world, they also can act with the poise and grace of tiny adults.

Finally, we hit our destination. Eugide goes down his path for the day, and Alexi drives Mathias and I further up the road. One research method we're using is to go down the same path every day for several days, so people become accustomed to seeing us in their area. This hopefully allows people to relax and open up over time. It seems to be working, as some of the people we interview relate that the talk of their community in recent evenings is the visits of the researchers.

It's Mathias's turn to accompany me. He'll translate for me today. He rotates with Alexi and Eugide. We get out of the car. I put a bag of peanuts and a packet

of cookies into my bag with my pens, notebooks, maps, and camera stuff, grab my umbrella and a water bottle, and head off with Mathias down the hill. It rained the night before, so it's slippery. This is our third day here, on the same path, and the sight of our return is news. Rwandans can report news to neighbors by yelling across valleys and down hills. There's no way we can surprise anyone: here we come. Calls announcing our arrival can be heard on the hillside. Our path is steep. The views of the valley and mountains are beautiful.

We meet a young blind man along the path. We greet and pass him, and then I change my mind – the team has interviewed few handicapped youth, so this is an opportunity. We return to ask if we can interview him. He's surprised, and he accepts. He's waiting to attend a Pentecostal church meeting. He walked for several hours to get to this place for the meeting. It begins to rain. We are welcomed by an onlooking couple into their unfinished house. They are poor, and the roof is made of banana leaves, which provides precious little protection from the elements overhead. The couple joins the interview. Perhaps ten kids look on.

The rain increases, and I invite one boy to hold my umbrella while I ask questions and take notes. Mathias opens his umbrella, too. Lines of water are pouring down from above. "This is how we live," the wife says. I acknowledge it, but there's not a lot else to say.

The interview lasts something like two hours. We finish, we're all a bit weary, and Mathias and I go outside, thank everyone for their time, and head further down the hill. We run across Anatole. He had joined Alexi and I the day before, insisting on carrying my bag and water bottle. He's wearing a huge smile, thoroughly elated to see us, and we're soon joined by Domascene, his friend. Domascene had also joined us on the previous day. Every time I mention Anatole's name, he shouts, "Hello!" with delight. He is fascinated by the interviews, and was a terrific interview himself the day before. Being our escorts seems to have made these two youth men temporary celebrities in their neighborhood. I ask if that's true, and they nod and grin.

We go to the local community leader's house, Dieudonne. He's 30, married with two young children. He's also a former soldier. He is, in addition, very much in love. In his sitting room, which we enter, he has painted in blue, two overlapping hearts, over which he's written "love" in English. There are Kinyarwanda phrases on the wall, too. When his wife enters, I say, "Your husband really loves you." She giggles, and answers, "Badly!"

A crowd of neighbors gather. Dieudonne's wife brings out a mat and other women join her on it. There are people in the sitting room, and others peering in from outside. Kids sidle up near me and stare. So much is fascinating: the hair on my arms, my rushed scribbling of notes, my clothes and boots.

We start the interview, and Dieudonne turns out to be a very quiet man. This allows others to join in with their own comments. I break out the cookies and pass them around (I bring the food to be a kind of lunch, knowing that I'll get maybe two cookies and a handful of peanuts for the day). The cookies often help break down any discomfort people may feel. Most have never been interviewed before, and many youth relate that no one beyond their friends has ever asked them about their views before the interviews by our team. They usually have much to say. The interview in Dieudonne's house is long and lively. I take photos of Dieudonne and

his wife in front of Dieudonne's mural and then show him the digital photo. They're delighted. Dieudonne says "It's a miracle" to have me in his house. He explains that no other white person has ever visited him, and it is, in local culture, an honor. Other houses that we've visited in previous days have inspired similar statements.

Leaving the compound requires an escort. The act of escorting a person from one's home is captured in a verb in Kiswahili (kusindikiza) and in Kinyarwanda. Perhaps twenty people walk us to the main path. Dieudonne's wife gives me three eggs from their hen, each carefully wrapped in the pages of someone's school exercise book. The farewells are heartfelt.

Mathias, Anatole, Domascene and I start climbing the steep hill. As we do, Anatole points to a ramshackle house that we pass. It's the house of a single woman who is expecting her third child. I ask Mathias to return to ask her for an interview tomorrow, as her story is the sort that we want to include in our research. He does, and later reports that some of the questions turned out to be painful for her to answer. In such cases, none of us probe.

We pass a small house that, earlier in the day, we had promised to visit. We want to include the views of adults concerning the lives of youth in our research, and there seem to be a number of older men and women there that day. We immediately find out why: they're brewing banana beer in the small sitting room. Drinking hasn't begun yet, so our visit sets up a short and theatrical interview, with men and women, and, as always, kids, crowded around us. Mathias and I sit on a bench, while everyone else stands except for the young woman straining the fermented banana beer across from us. The vat looks like a small dugout canoe. The smell is pungent.

There are too many people to have a lengthy interview. We also have to meet Alexi and the car way, way up the hill soon. So I cut the interview short. The crowd follows us outside, and there, next to a cow in their small pen, is the grandmother.

Like many elder women, she has short, close-cropped hair. She wears a worn dress and wants to talk to me. "It's too late for me," she says, "But please help these youth." She gently strokes the shoulder of one of her grandsons standing next to her. "They need so much help," she says. Tears begin to brim and then fall from her eyes, and she repeats the word "nuko" several times. It means "that's the way it is." It's an extremely moving moment (and not what takes place most days in the field), and she puts her arms out towards me. We embrace, and then she hugs Mathias. The kids gather round, and they all want to shake my hand. I explain that the research is intended to provide support to youth in Rwanda, adding that I cannot say whether the assistance will reach the youth in her family. But, Mathias and I state, we hope so. She nods, and again, an awkward moment surfaces. Finally, with an escort to the main path and more farewells, we leave.

Up the path, there's a gathering of toddlers. I think they may be seeing a white person for the first time, as they shriek in terror at the sight of me. Not for the first time has this happened to me. There's nothing to do except trudge onwards. No one among us can console them, including Mathias. Anatole and Domascene think it's hilarious.

I'd promised Anatole that I'd photograph his house the day before. So we have to stop, quickly, at his house. His friends and siblings, whom we interviewed the day before, are all there, and they're happy to see me again. The handshakes are

vigorous and the smiles are huge. Anatole's house is tiny, but cool: he has a kind of bunk bed, with a mosquito net, a radio, and a speaker that is directed into a hanging gourd. I guess he likes the echoing sound it gives. He can't help smiling with delight in the photos, and I take pictures and show them to him. He seems overjoyed. Everyone wants to see the photos. It's like a party, but we have to leave. So, again, after many, many more handshakes and another escort, we're off up the hill.

The climb is arduous, and I forget about the stunning mountain views. People call out to us from their fields. Anatole and Domascene respond, enjoying their celebrity.

Finally reaching the road, I gulp some water and take photos of our young chums, Anatole and Domascene. Alexi had instructed us to pay them exactly what they get for a day of digging on plots for others: 200 francs (something like 35 cents). I sneak the money to Mathias because there's a crowd of kids around us. It's hard to do, and fortunately Alexi arrives. After handshakes with the young duo, we leave and smile and wave back at them.

Alexi and Mathias and I head towards our guest house. It's 5 pm. We rock and bolt over the pocked road, and pick up Eugide on the way. What a long day. We get over the bridge, the road ruts and the sliding clay, and finally, after an hour and a half, we reach the village where we're staying.

It's dark – pitch black – except for tiny oil lamps made of Blue Band margarine cans (from Kenya) in the shops. We're all tired. The days are too long here, but it takes so darn long to get to the field.

We stop at a tiny bar to get a beer for our dinner. A teenager named Samuel gives us a hand. I join Eugide (I have the flashlight) in his search for cigarettes, which are not easy to find. Finally he locates a few, in a shop run by a middle-aged woman with a room for drinking banana beer in the back. Several men warmly welcome us to join them. We politely decline.

Dinner, tonight, is not in the dining hall. It's in someone's house on the compound. We sit in chairs in the sitting room, with posters of Jesus and Farrah Fawcett on one wall. A young woman is setting the table, and a young man is helping her cook in the back. We're all hungry, and the food smells great. Eugide starts telling stories, and they're hilarious. We are jovial and drinking Mutsig beer.

Dinner arrives, and it's terrific: vegetable soup, french fries, rice, roast meat, greens, beans, and gravy, each in its own covered pot. It's a feast, and we all dig in. Lots of laughter, too.

But God, what a long day. Sated but weary, we bounce back to our guest house in our mud-soaked car to get ready for bed. The banter descends, we light our candles, and head to our rooms to wash up and sleep.

Endnotes

1 The working title for Marc Sommers' book arising from this research is Manhood, Money and Food: Youth in Rwanda.

2 Mzungu refers to a guest or a stranger in the Swahili language (and in Kinyarwanda). It is also used to refer to white people.