

FIELD WORK REPORT

Ethnographic research after violent conflicts: personal reflections on dilemmas and challenges

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ABSTRACT

Conducting ethnographic research after violent conflict poses a number of challenges. Even though it is essential for understanding processes of social change from 'war' to 'peace' it interferes with the lives of people who have been affected and who are trying to cope with its aftermath. Researchers therefore need to consider what questions they pose, how they approach war-torn communities, how they themselves deal with the painful information they receive and, most importantly, who benefits from their work: they or the people who have lived through the horror? Through drawing on extensive fieldwork in Rwanda this essay highlights some of the dilemmas and challenges, though without providing answers. Given the subject matter, these can only come from researchers themselves.

Introduction

It is not easy to conduct research on the consequences of violent conflicts.² While this thought has been with me for some time, it was only recently that I decided to put my views on paper, triggered by the following. Because of its focus on discourses on memory and commemorations, my work on post-genocide Rwanda had led me to looking for some technical details about genocide memorials. On the Internet, I searched for the word ‘Murambi’ and when a site with pictures appeared I was, once more, speechless. The monument of Murambi sits on a hill at the edge of the provincial city Gikongoro and is surrounded by lush, green fields. Before 1994, the long white buildings housed a technical school where teenagers received vocational training. Today, Murambi is one of many monuments that serve as reminders of the 1994 genocide. About 40,000 Tutsis had taken shelter in the buildings which were surrounded by government troops. On the 21st of April, the army called the genocide militias which first shelled the buildings with grenades and then hacked the people inside to death with their machetes. 25,000 people died in four days; they were thrown into a mass grave. Later, the survivors dug out 800 of the corpses, mummified them with limestone and placed them in the buildings of the technical school for display. Many were women and children, as one can see by the jewellery around their necks or the scraps of hair sticking to their shrunken bodies. It reeks of death.

I will never forget my first visit to Murambi. My companion, the local representative of a survivor organisation, had excused himself with the words that there are a few things survivors still find difficult – seeing corpses, for instance. And there I stood, alone with 800 bodies, and a feeling of loneliness came over me. Why, I wondered, do I do this to myself?

² This essay draws on ten months ethnographic fieldwork in Rwanda in 2003-2004 and, to a lesser extent, one year in Uganda in 2000.

Telling a different kind of story

The answer is both simple and complicated. The simple version is that one cannot write about violence and its effects without giving serious thought to its consequences. In order to understand processes of social change, one must know the local situation, as far as this is possible for an outsider.³ As already argued by Carolyn Nordstrom, there is always a different war story that cannot be experienced and analysed from desks and universities far-away.⁴ Of course, this does not mean engaging in war tourism or voyeurism, but visiting the places of violence with much tact and openness and to speak to all parties concerned, whether victims, perpetrators or bystanders – even if these categories cannot always be easily defined. Only if one at least partially exposes oneself to painful and sometimes confusing feelings, can one begin to understand a fraction of what local people have gone through and what consequences this might have for the future of their country. This is not a gesture of personal sacrifice or a form of masochism, but it constitutes the basis of a strong research project which can lead to relevant insights. In my case, intensive field research has shown that the gap between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda is much deeper than is commonly believed. After only twelve years –and given the enormity of the violence – this may not be surprising. However, my argument stands in contrast to the claims of the Rwandan government, according to whose official rhetoric the reconciliation process is far advanced, as well as to the assessments of a large number

³ The objective of my research project is to analyse various peacebuilding and transitional justice mechanisms used by the government of Rwanda, non-governmental organisations and the international community. The research has been funded by the Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung (DSF) and some of its findings have already been published. See for instance: Susanne Buckley-Zistel, 'Living in the Shadows [of Genocide]', *Index on Censorship* 34, no. 2 (2005); Susanne Buckley-Zistel, "'The Truth Heals'? - Gacaca Jurisdiction and the Consolidation of Peace in Rwanda', *Die Friedens Werte* 80, no. 1-2 (2005); Susanne Buckley-Zistel, 'Dividing and Uniting. The Use of Citizenship Discourses in Conflict and Reconciliation in Rwanda', *Global Society* 20, no. 1 (2006); Susanne Buckley-Zistel, 'Remembering to Forget. Chosen Amnesia as a Strategy for Local Coexistence in Post-Genocide Rwanda', *Africa* 76, no. 2 (2006).

⁴ Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1997); Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C.G.M. Robben, 'Anthropology and Ethnography of Violence and Sociopolitical Conflict', in *Fieldwork Under Fire. Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, ed. Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C.G.M. Robben (Berkley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1995).

of international donors, which accept these claims uncritically.

While all of this may seem complicated, it is only the easy answer. It becomes more difficult when looking at further aspects of fieldwork after mass violence. In the hope that they are of benefit for future fieldworkers, the following paragraphs will outline some of the dilemmas and challenges.

Interviewing affected people

How to engage with people who have lost everything and experienced the unimaginable? In Rwanda, the question poses itself not only in regard to the Tutsi survivors but also to many Hutus who have lost home and family due to war, revenge or flight. I spoke to a man who had walked back on foot for four years from his refugee camp in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with shoes made from banana leaves. He had already lost his wife when fleeing Rwanda in 1994, and none of his six children survived the long march. As a researcher, one sits in the modest house of the informant thinking about words of consolation, but each comment can sound only trivial. In these situations, I had the good fortune to be accompanied by an extremely perceptive Rwandan research assistant, who always found a word of comfort. This is, however, quite an exception and so the question poses itself whether we as researchers have the right to poke around in the lives of people who are slowly coming to terms with their horrendous fate.

This question did indeed occupy me for a long time and developed into the threshold for conducting interviews in rural areas. Since these were an important part of my work, and are generally much more important than the knocking on doors of politicians, NGO workers and expatriates in the capital, I finally had to face the challenge. To my surprise, it turned out to be easier than feared. Thanks to my extremely competent driver and translator I soon drove and climbed over the stick and

stones of the Rwandan hills. Fieldwork in remote areas of Africa means walking on narrow paths from homestead to homestead and knocking on non-existent doors. Contrary to my concerns, my interview partners were much more open and frank in telling their stories and, indeed, some were happy to be finally asked about their opinion. After a several-hour long discussion, a group of survivors thanked me for the opportunity to be able to talk about their past and its repercussions on the present. Shortly before the tenth anniversary, they explained, the emotions in their community were very high, yet no one dared to address the topic. The discussions in the light of my research had allowed them to debate tricky subjects among themselves in a way which would not have been possible otherwise.

However, this positive feedback was not the rule. Survivors in particular, frequently reported about their daily sorrow and future fears with tear-repressed voices. These reports were not limited to my working day; in Rwanda, there is no closing time. Every time I mentioned the reason of my stay in the country, stories about the genocide and its consequences were shared with me. After a long, difficult day full of interviews, this often bordered the unbearable. And yet, what is a bit of fieldwork blues compared to what people have experienced in Rwanda? Invariably, a feeling of guilt creeps in here, since we researchers always have a return ticket in our bag and can leave if it becomes too much for us. For Rwandans, there is no escape. This leads to the dilemma as to what kind of questions researchers should ask in the first place. When conducting ethnographic research after violent conflicts, it is definitely inappropriate to work with prefabricated interview questionnaires since some questions can lead the conversation to an absolute standstill. It is more important to wait for the right atmosphere during the interview while keeping the reason for the visit in mind. As Liisa Malkki has remarked in her seminal study on Burundian Hutu refugees in Tanzania, it is sometimes more powerful to focus on what cannot be asked than on what can be asked.⁵ The unspoken often weighs heavier than

⁵ Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile. Violence, Memory and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

the spoken. For us researchers, this poses the challenge of turning silence into concrete accounts and arguments.

Ethical engagement

This leads to a further point, which is of tremendous importance for fieldwork after extreme violence: in what relation does the benefit of a case study stand to the potential damage it can cause in a delicate situation? During my stay in Rwanda, I met an ethnology student, who – just like I had originally planned – lived in a small community to conduct Participatory Action Research on reconciliation processes. After a few months, she came to the conclusion that her presence had destroyed more potential conciliation than the results of her research can ever merit. People in her surroundings quickly came under the suspicion of being subversive and were observed by the police. Moreover, other community members became jealous of their contacts with a white woman – in Africa often a promise of affluence – and conspired against them. This example shows that our research does not operate in a vacuum but in a highly sensitive environment and that we are responsible for not further damaging the fragile conditions.

This responsibility blends quickly and inevitably with a feeling of the guilt. Regardless of whether our fieldwork is funded or not, economically we are far better off than most people in developing countries. Does this affluence gap mean that we should pay our informants? Since our interviews keep the rural population from farming their land, some form of financial compensation would be justifiable. After all, we ourselves are being rewarded for our research, be it in monetary terms or through publications. I, personally, have decided against paying for information, except occasional small presents. On the one hand, there is a danger of establishing a ‘research industry’ and turning people’s past after violent conflicts into a lucrative business. On the other hand, I hope that my research on Rwanda leads to changes and an improvement of peoples lives so that they do eventually gain something in return.

The above aspects lead inescapably to questions about the personal motivation behind a research project: do we only conduct our investigations because the topic is currently popular, we can put out some publications and thus advance our academic career? Have we succumbed to a case study promiscuity, in which countries and people can easily be exchanged? How far does our commitment and interest in a country go after we have extracted our information? In short: who benefits from our work, we or the people affected?

Dealing with emotions

Murambi was not the only monument where I worked, nor was this my last visit. I lost count of the body parts I have seen in Rwanda. But, nevertheless, Murambi symbolises all the difficult encounters I was confronted with during my ten month stay in Rwanda. Fieldwork after extreme violence is not only academically but also personally challenging. How one handles the experience during and after the trip is a question of character. The institutional framework, in which one conducts the research, can be of tremendous importance here. Institutional support is essential and discussions with colleagues surely helpful for processing the experience. However, these contacts are often rare.

The objective of this essay is to encourage future researchers to critically reflect upon the dilemmas and challenges of ethnographic field research after violence and to carefully consider their impact on the people and conflicts affected. Even though it is essential for the analysis of social change after a violent conflict it is not everybody's strength and not always to the benefit of the country concerned. In essence, researchers need to carefully consider what questions they pose, how they approach war-torn communities, how they themselves deal with the painful information they receive and, most importantly, who benefits from their work: they or the people who have lived through the horror?

Given the subject matter, each of us has to find our own way. As for myself, what remains after my departure from Rwanda, as triggered off by the sight of the corpses of Murambi, is a feeling of pain and sorrow. Maybe it is the wish that such horrors never happen again which makes this kind of ethnographic fieldwork after violent conflict more urgent for me.

LITERATURE

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