Fieldwork through the Zoomiverse

Sensing Uganda in a Time of Immobility

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ABSTRACT: We have been conducting collaborative ethnographic research together for over 20 years. Over the past 12 months, this collaboration has included face-to-face encounters, both in Kampala, Uganda, and in Perth, Australia. However, since the advent of COVID-19-related 'lockdowns' in our respective countries, our engagements have been conducted exclusively over online platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook and – increasingly – Zoom. In this article, we reflect upon our shared experience of conducting ethnography through this platform as a tool for understanding the effects of the pandemic in Uganda. We argue that, despite all kinds of material constraints (at both ends), Zoom has much to offer the ethnographer particularly because it can generate an intimate understanding of experience and time. However, against this advantage, some aspects of social life remain beyond the range of its channels, for which an assemblage of additional methods are required. We finish by reflecting upon what these methods have contributed to our long-term study of emergent cultures of mobility in Uganda – a study which is now being conducted in an ostensible context of immobility.

KEYWORDS: anthropology of roads, COVID-19, cultures of mobility, ethnographic intimacy, Uganda, virtual methods, Zoom

We have been conducting collaborative ethnographic research together – most of it focussed upon Atukunda's natal village of Bugamba, in rural south-western Uganda – for over 20 years. A majority of this collaboration has taken place during Vokes' many fieldwork visits to Uganda and, to a lesser extent, through Atukunda's research trips to Vokes' home universities in (variously) the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia. However, over time, the research engagement has also become progressively more mediated, initially through letters, then via phone calls and e-mails, and later through ever more diverse social media platforms. Indeed, for the past several years now, we have communicated on a near daily basis over some combination of Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp. Yet it was not until the advent of the COVID-19-related 'lockdowns' in our respective countries, from late-March 2020, that we had ever communicated via a video-calling platform such as Zoom.¹

In late February 2020, towards the end of Vokes' most recent period of fieldwork in Uganda, we sat down for dinner in Kampala in order to review and plan our ongoing projects – and much of this discussion was taken up with our ongoing study of Uganda's new road-building programme. Following the Government of Uganda's adoption in the late 1990s of an ambitious new national development agenda – one that aims to achieve structural transformation so that the country may reach middle-income status² – in 2008, a new National Roads Authority (UNRA) was set up to overhaul the country's entire highway network. In the years since, and aided by enormous volumes of new development finance, the UNRA has overseen a vast road-building programme across the country's main trunk routes and rural roads network (Vokes 2016). This has included the building of the new Chinese-funded Entebbe–Kampala Expressway, which at a cost of US\$476 million for its 51.5 km

length, is officially the most expensive road in the world, calculated on a per-kilometre basis (The East African 2016). Begun in 2015, the purpose of our own project has been to develop an ethnography both of the road-building programme and of its broader social effects with the aim of understanding what kinds of new movements (both of people and of things) the programme has enabled and constrained, and how these have altered both relations with the state and 'cultures of mobility' across Uganda (Vokes 2019). However, within just a few weeks of that meeting, after Vokes had returned to Australia, it had become obvious that that next period's fieldwork would have to be postponed, and that any further research on roads, the state, and mobilities in Uganda would, for the foreseeable future, have to be carried out using predominantly online methods.

This is by no means the first time that our collaborative research in Uganda has been disrupted by a disaster, nor is it the first time that we have been forced to make greater use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) for research as a result (Vokes 2018). Vokes had been able to remain in the field throughout Uganda's Ebola outbreak of 2000. However, planned fieldwork in Bugamba in 2003 had to be postponed for several months following a landslide in the area, which left five hundred people homeless, and washed away the main road (see All Africa 2003). A subsequent collaborative project was suspended during a later Ebola outbreak (in 2007–2008), whilst another was delayed for more than a year by New Zealand's Christchurch earthquakes of 2010–2011 (where Vokes was based). Furthermore, beyond such major events, our collaboration has been over the years frequently disrupted by all kinds of more personal, familial constraints, such as those associated with parenting duties, and with the death of loved ones. And over the years, all of these things have also acted as catalysts for our greater use of online methods.

Reflecting these experiences, by the time of the COVID-19 lockdown in Uganda we had become adept at responding to such contingencies and at rapidly redesigning our research around novel online methods. Moreover, as of late March, the situation in Uganda was lending greater urgency to our project on roads given that, following the country's lockdown, it had become quickly apparent that the most pressing issues of health and well-being all stemmed from questions relating to the movement of – or the restraints upon the movement of – certain people and things, including 'essential' workers, suspected COVID-19-positive individuals, HIV-positive per-

sons, blood samples, medicines, motorised transport of all kinds, and especially *food*. So too, it was clear that although Uganda's lockdown was obviously having *some sort* of profound effects upon state–citizen relations, and upon cultures of mobility, further research was required to understand the precise nature of these and to gauge how socially significant they might eventually prove to be. So from the last week of March onwards, we began contacting our extensive networks of respondents and collaborators across Uganda—although with a focus upon people in Bugamba and Kampala—to invite them to participate in our research on the lockdown in general and on their experiences of road use and altered mobilities in particular. With those who agreed to take part, we initially experimented with a range of techniques for engaging these people in the research, before settling upon a method that involved an assemblage of different media. In this way, each respondent was invited to keep a regular 'field diary' of their experiences during the lockdown, focussing upon a varying set of themes and issues, and to gather supporting audio-visual materials in relation to this, which included everything from photos taken on their smartphones, to videos or memes downloaded from the Internet. In all cases, our respondents wrote these diaries out by hand on paper, and then 'snapped' them on their phones, before sending them to us via WhatsApp (along with the accompanying images and videos).³ We then discussed the materials received between ourselves in our daily Zoom meetings, and from there developed further questions and interpretations.

Yet to what extent can this assemblage of methods and media be defined as 'ethnographic fieldwork', and, if so, what kind of insights has it provided into the effects of Uganda's lockdown upon cultures of mobility in the country? In this regard, recent decades have witnessed a series of expanding debates in anthropology over what the term 'ethnography' even means, and how it might be effectively adapted to be made more relevant for our contemporary, 'hyper-mediated' world (Soukup 2012). Although it is beyond our scope here to review these debates, we note that they were shaped by various lines of thought, including by a realisation that, unlike with other methodological terms used by social scientists, 'ethnography does not form part of a clear and systematic taxonomy' (Hammersley 2006: 3); by a recognition of ethnography's historical relationship to colonial modes of knowledge production (Apter 1999; Asad 1973; Clifford and Marcus 1986); and by a concomitant desire to reinvent ethnography as a more 'critical and productive form of social engagement'

(Jennifer Deger qtd. in Owens 2009; see also Irving 2011), one which is more oriented towards the co-production of knowledge and which is better suited to the digital age (Hine 2000; Hjorth et al. 2019; Pink et al. 2015). Although these debates have at times generated a wide range of diverse positions, they have also produced a consensus of sorts, which is that ethnography continues to refer to those forms of qualitative research which produce evidence that is *detailed* and in some way systematic in character, and which provides first-hand insights into other people's lived experience.

By these measures, the assemblage of methods that we used during the lockdown not only conformed to ethnography, but in some ways represented an enhanced version of it, in that it generated evidence about the situation in Uganda that was in certain aspects *more* detailed than previous methods used, that *was* systematic (albeit across a small cohort), and that included some deeply engaging first-hand insights. Moreover, we would further suggest that much of this stemmed from the intimacy of encounter that was generated through our adoption of video-conferencing as a tool for mediating our own collaboration. Yet it is important to recognise that this intimacy was initially shaped as much by the physical and material constraints in which our video calls were taking place as it was by any elements of the digital format *per se*. In other words, it stemmed as much from the fact that these calls invariably required us to be hunched over our laptop screens, leaning in to our microphones and speakers, and emoting in a most exaggerated fashion.⁴ So too these communications were invariably carried out from some or other solitary spot within the house, into which we had been forced in order to avoid the background noise and interruptions from other members of our households. On reflection, this combination of a peculiar *technique du corps*, being enacted in such unusual places, already lent these encounters a certain affective resonance even 'prior' to the communication itself. Yet this was then further amplified by the video format proper, which through its apparent magnification of facial expression, and of posture and gesture, appeared to further intensify the poignancy of the engagements. Indeed, it was because of all this that we found our new Zoom calls especially compelling. In consequence, not only did they tend to last much longer than our previous kinds of mediated communication, but the calls became themselves part of our daily routines during lockdown, part of the emotional texture of the whole thing. And from early on, we discovered just how

similar the embodied rhythms of our locked-down days had become: wake up after a restless night; have a 'lazy' breakfast; dutifully consume some news; try to do some work, despite a general feeling of distraction; eat a small lunch, due to a lack of appetite; walk around the immediate neighbourhood in an attempt to lift one's mood of confinement; Zoom call each other for the research; and engage in some or other 'relaxing' activity in the evening.⁵ Moreover, we were intrigued to later discover that a majority of our respondents' daily routines – irrespective of whether they were based in a town or a village – had fallen into broadly similar rhythms.

Yet beyond this kind of intimate auto-ethnography, what did our assemblage of methods reveal in relation to our wider project on roads and mobilities? Important here were the daily walks that we took around our local vicinities. Specifically, it was through these late afternoon sojourns that we were able to speak to others and to make some more general observations about the movements of people and things. These sojourns enabled us to then formulate further questions, which we asked our respondents to reflect upon during their own daily walks around their localities and to discuss in their subsequent diary entries.

What all of this produced was a rich ethnography of how Uganda's lockdown was deeply generative of a wide range of 'deviant mobilities'. In recent years, a growing body of literature in the historical anthropology of Africa has highlighted how, from the advent of colonial rule onwards, the building of new roads was always conceived more as a means for expanding the reach of the state, and the capitalist economy, and less as a means to facilitate the movement of African *people*. Further, and reflecting an imperialist mindset in which 'authentic' African societies and cultures were understood as rooted in place, when new roads did (inevitably) produce new forms of African mobility, officialdom often cast these as being 'deviant' in character – that is, as 'bad driving'; as movements made for subversive, even criminal, reasons; or as movements that produced other kinds of undesirable outcomes (Burton 2005; Ferguson 1999; Hodgson and McCurdy 2001). Moreover, scholars have in some ways continued to reproduce these same logics of thought ever since. As Joshua Grace succinctly puts it, throughout the academic literature 'Africa's roads are often analysed as malignant spaces that condense long histories of forced labour and capitalist penetration, and drivers are talked about as vectors of disease or dangerously reckless behind the wheel' (2013: 406). Yet in so do-

ing – and this in Grace’s point, and that of other, more recent, scholars of African mobilities – this may be to miss the many ways in which certain kinds of movement, even if these are cast as problematic by the state, may be nevertheless highly productive of new connections, novel solidarities and experimental ideas (cf. Dawson 2015).

Inspired by the work of these new scholars of African mobilities, our own project has noted that, from the time the current Government of Uganda launched its new road-building programme in the early 2000s, it too has almost exclusively cast its new highway projects in terms of an expansion of the state and the possibilities of a new global capitalism. Thus, both the programme as a whole, and practically all of its constituent projects, have been framed in terms of the central state’s ‘arrival’ into new parts of the country (i.e. into previously under-developed parts of the nation, into remote rural areas, etc.), and in terms of the increased volumes of trade – measured in terms of the speed and flow of goods – that they will facilitate (see ‘Vision 2040’ as mentioned in note 2 above; cf. Vokes 2019). Yet our work has observed how the government has frequently also cast citizens’ *actual* uses of the new roads in ways that frame them as deviant or problematic. Thus, in recent years, Ugandan officials have blamed individual car owners/drivers as the cause of everything from the country’s rising carbon footprint—generally blamed on older, and therefore heavily polluting, vehicles (see Muhumuza and Mutsaka 2020)—to Kampala’s legendary traffic jams. On numerous occasions, President Yoweri Museveni has blamed the country’s ongoing crime wave upon the actions of certain mobile groups. For example, in mid-2018 he claimed that a spate of murders in Kampala had been carried out by a Congolese-based rebel group, the Allied Democratic Forces (which implied that they had driven over 300 km to commit the offences) (Wambi 2018). More generally, if Uganda’s security state has significantly expanded over recent years, then it is while moving on roads – as drivers, passengers and pedestrians – that most citizens encounter this as part of their everyday lives, as they are stopped at the now myriad police roadblocks; questioned by an ever-growing number of parking inspectors and vehicle safety officers; and/or encounter one of the Ugandan Army’s (UPDF) ever more frequent foot patrols.⁶

Given this background, it is perhaps not surprising that Uganda’s COVID-19 lockdown was primarily enacted on roads through the deployment of ever-increasing numbers of security personnel,

mostly UPDF soldiers, whose job it was to restrict the movements of all but the most ‘essential’ of workers and all but the most vital of goods, especially food (see above).⁷ It is perhaps predictable that – as our assemblage of methods revealed – all of this generated yet further, and more complex, kinds of deviant mobility of people and things, each of which was nevertheless in its own way productive of new social ties. To cite just one example, during one of her evening walks along the main road through Nansana, Atukunda witnessed a UPDF team going door-to-door distributing food aid, which was strictly rationed on a per-person basis. Her subsequent discussions revealed that the timings of these distributions was predictable across different parts of the city, which enabled people to move illicitly into areas in which they did not actually live, in order to pretend to be members of households other than their own, in order to receive additional rations, which were later shared out. Our subsequent research revealed that these kinds of arrangements appeared to be generating new networks across the city, yet ones that were frequently ad hoc and often quite fraught – given that often the parties involved had not known each other beforehand.

To cite another example, during one of our own daily Zoom meetings, a few weeks into our respective lockdowns, we began reflecting on the general sense of boredom, and creeping malaise, that we were both feeling, and decided to ask our respondents to reflect upon their own experiences of these emotions. Such was our surprise, then, when one of the respondents, an older man living in Kampala, shortly replied that he had been feeling terribly bored himself, until he had decided to ‘drive around’. Since then, he had been driving ‘all over’, in what had clearly been a most exhilarating fashion. Yet how had he been able to do this? It soon transpired that our respondent’s brother is a senior doctor in one of Kampala’s main hospitals, and as such had not one but several valid vehicle mobility permits, which therefore allowed him to move effortlessly through all police and army checkpoints. By simply borrowing a set of these documents, our respondent had been able to drive around in his own car, unimpeded, for the past several days. As Atukunda remarked on hearing this story, this was in fact the ‘right set of documents moving, just with the wrong person!’ Yet our respondent had clearly enjoyed the whole experience. Indeed, he reflected that driving through Kampala at this time had been in fact ‘much better’ than usual, given that the city no longer had any of its usual traffic jams. He had even taken to giving people rides,

for all sorts of reasons, including ‘friends of friends’, and had therefore ‘made new friends’ along the way.

As anthropologists have long recognised, ethnographic fieldwork is not a fixed, or static, phenomenon, but has been always characterised by particular configurations of human and material relations that are subject to change over space and time. For many ethnographers, including for us, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated ‘lockdowns’ has been rapidly and radically disruptive of these relations. However, the process of such disorderings of the ethnographic assemblage is not in itself new. Indeed, on reflection, it may be even closer to the norm. This latest disruption has for many anthropologists highlighted what may be the greatest strength of ethnographic methods, which is their ability to be near endlessly reconfigured in response to such pressures. The purpose of this article has been to show how a rapid reordering of our own research relations, both human and material, has allowed us to continue with a study which has revealed how one of the main effects of the Government of Uganda’s recent ‘lockdown’ was, in fact, to generate new forms of mobility.

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Notes

1. Uganda’s lockdown was announced on 30 March 2020, and was gradually lifted from 2 June. It included, amongst other measures: a closure of schools, a ban on the movement of all private vehicles and many commercial ones (although exemptions included trucks carrying food), and a nightly curfew. Western Australia’s lockdown came into force progressively from 21 March onwards (the day on which social-distancing rules were imposed, and state governments across Australia began to close their ‘non-essential services’), and began to be lifted from 27 April.
2. This agenda has been articulated through a series of recent National Development Plans. The first of these plans, ‘Vision 2025’, was published in March 1999. The latest iteration, ‘Vision 2040’, was launched in May 2013. See Government of Uganda (2015).
3. All but one of our respondents owned their own smartphone. With the one person who did not have one, at first he recruited his nephew to photograph his diary pages and to send these to us. Later, we purchased a smartphone for our respondent in Kampala, and sent it to him in his distant rural home.
4. Certainly, over the course of these conversations we had our fair share of disruptions caused by computer batteries, memory lags and variable Internet connections. However, at times we doubtlessly over-compensated for these disruptions.
5. Our concept of ‘rhythm’ here is of course informed by Henri Lefebvre’s (2004) seminal treatise on the subject.
6. UPDF = Ugandan People’s Defence Force. We would like to thank Susan Reynolds Whyte and Michael Whyte for their discussions on this point.
7. This was on the main urban roads, inter-city highways and rural arterial roads. Interestingly, all of our respondents spoke of secondary roads – both in towns and in villages – that were deemed ‘too small’ for the security forces to move onto.

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