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An Undergraduates Perspective to Fieldwork

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Association for Africanist Anthropology

Roberto Carriedo Ostos

July 24, 2018

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Running through terminal three at the Chicago O'Hare International Airport, two thoughts crossed my mind: "I have to make this flight," and, "This is my McCallister moment." It was not until I was finally seated on my seven-hour flight to Heathrow that doubt began to creep into my mind. All of the trip anxiety that I had before leaving came rushing back somewhere between hours three and four of the flight: "What am I doing... I don't want to go to Africa... I hate camping... I'm going to be shitting in a hole for two weeks. I am way too cowardly. Do I even want to do this research? I'm not knowledgeable or good enough to do this." Uncertainty was clearly crawling in, but what could I do at this point? A couple in-flight movies later, my worries began to abate, and by the time my flight landed I was ready to start my first anthropological fieldwork research: an ethnobotany project documenting medicinal plant usage among the Maasai.

Once in Kenya, I remember being hit with an odd sense of home. Several times I could be heard saying how similar Kenya was to Mexico. Later, even my family remarked so when I showed them pictures. I was incredibly glad for it too, as the sense of familiarity helped me handle the slight culture shock. We were only in Kenya for two weeks, a very short amount of time compared to most ethnographic studies, and therefore we had a very busy schedule.

This brings me to the first skill that I had to relearn: time management. While in school, time management usually refers to the balancing of jobs, work, and a social life. However, in the field it refers to the massive amounts of waiting around time that you have to manage. On our first day in Nairobi, I accompanied my professor on an epic quest to gain a plant export permit. We ran through crowded streets, fought entrenched bureaucrats, stood in waiting lines like valiant heroes and, most importantly, retreated back to a cafe with free WiFi between meetings. Dull as our government adventure was, this was one of the most rewarding experiences of the trip. There's no class that shows you how to get research permits, who to talk to, when to haggle, or coerce, how to handle the secret bureaucracy behind research. I began to learn how to do these things during my first fieldwork experience, and, to be cliché, I learned much more.



Roberto learns how to name and sell vegetables in Swahili with the help of three Mamas. Kristin Hedges

Living with a Maasai family, riding public transportation, and just doing everything I could to blend in as a local was incredibly rewarding. It seemed everything I learned in my classes finally clicked. Anthropology coined the term participant-observation, which was repeated to me quite often and wholeheartedly many times in Kenya. Students can learn about it in class, they can even do semester long mini-ethnographies, yet nothing beats the *real thing*: “Ohh so this is what it means to do participant-observation,” I thought to myself as I milked a cow for our morning chai tea, cooked fish over a three-stone fire as my eyes teared up and I suffocated on clouds of smoke, drank medicinal tea in a market medicine bar, and helped sell vegetables on the side of a road. It was the combination of having to observe how those around me acted, interacted, talked; having to reproduce it as best I could; and then reflecting on the experience that made the term participant-observation click in a way that a classroom could never do. Kinship wasn’t a chart or the subject of an ethnography, but the people with whom I lived and the family with whom I interacted. Truly immersing myself in Maasai and Kenyan culture helped me connect the dots between abstract anthropological theories and the the discipline’s applied aspects.



Roberto learns to milk cows, as his morning chai tea depends on it. Kristin Hedges.

One of the key skills any anthropologist must have is talking to people. While I had practice with this during class assignments, conducting interviews on a college campus was unique. In Kenya, my status as a student was not really taken into account. I had to step my game up to get the data I needed. As a whole, there were obstacles I had to

overcome in the interview process: a language barrier, building rapport with interviewees, and getting descriptive answers that go beyond “yes” or “no.” What I found right away was that some of the questions we were asking did not have a direct translation. For example, there was no apt word for **pressure** in Swahili. The absence of a direct translation forced us to get more creative in finding ways to ask the questions. A more difficult challenge was building enough rapport with participants so that they would be comfortable with us audio-recording the interviews. Interviewing anyone with a recording device is tricky: it tends to freak people out. However, recorded interviews are so crucial to research. We had to find a way around the issue. To help our interviewees relax and think about the interview as more of a conversation we held interviews in cafes. Sharing tea, sodas, or a samosa together helped ease nerves and ended up yielding data before and after the interview when we would just sit and talk.



Roberto conducts an impromptu interview. Kristin Hedges

The principal reason I learned so much during this trip about everything from participant-observation to interviewing was because I was working side-by-side with my professor. This research was part of a **Grand Valley State University Student Summer Scholars program** that is aimed at giving students hands-on research experience. This trip was so fruitful because of the one-on-one nature of the program. I had a professor by my side who could focus on giving me personalized critiques, tips, and encouragement. As we worked together this summer, she has been able to tailor the research experience to suit my needs as a student and an emerging anthropologist. In classroom settings, it is often hard to personalize lesson plans, and if I’m being honest, not everyone is on the same mental playing field. Having the ability to go out in the field, do research, and work collaboratively with a professor is extremely rewarding. My first experience in anthropological fieldwork was, to say the least, incredibly worthwhile. It validated my four years in college, helped make sense of my classes, and gave me a role model who moonlights as my mentor.



Taking a break from research turns into an excellent participant-observation opportunity as we sample some of the medicinal teas. Kristin Hedges

Roberto Carriedo Ostos is an undergraduate student studying Anthropology and Political Science at **Grand Valley State University**. He is currently conducting the Urban Olosho Ethnobotany Project, a project aimed at understanding the uses of traditional medicinal herbs together with pharmaceuticals in young, urban Maasai families alongside assistant professor **Kristin Hedges**. "is is my McCallister moment." It was not until I was finally seated on my seven-hour flight to Heathrow that doubt began to creep into my mind. All of the trip anxiety that I had before leaving came rushing back somewhere between hours three and four of the flight: "What am I doing... I don't want to go to Africa... I hate camping... I'm going to be shitting in a hole for two weeks. I am way too cowardly. Do I even want to do this research? I'm not knowledgeable or good enough to do this." Uncertainty was clearly crawling in, but what could I do at this point? A couple in-flight movies later, my worries began to abate, and by the time my flight landed I was ready to start my first anthropological fieldwork research: an ethnobotany project documenting medicinal plant usage among the Maasai.

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