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Research Note:

Drawing Lines in the Mud: Giving Back (or Trying to) in Northern Cameroon

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Conduct is culturally coded, but these codes of conduct are not issued as neat checklists we can pack in our sacks as we head off to the field. Figuring out these codes of conduct is a result of interaction and experience, and probably will always be (for me at least) a work in progress. Though fieldwork and data collection (interactive projects themselves) are often relatively straightforward—we know what we are looking for and what it looks like when we find it—it is far less obvious what to give back, how and when, to the folks that have helped us along the way. This essay outlines my attempts to work out what is (and can be) exchanged, and how to manage those exchanges with integrity in situations of profound inequality.

I have spoken with people who, despite their strength and intelligence, felt unable to protect the resources they depended on for their livelihoods. I have spoken to people who had bullets still lodged in their bodies, who were hungry, whose children's bellies were bloated with worms from bad water, people who were frightened, who felt helpless, who bore the scars of injustice and held their hands out to God, hoping for an alleviation of these ills. Sometimes these people asked me directly for help—an old woman grasping my arm with her papery hands, worn as if they were smoothed down like a stone that had been below a current for many years, saying over and over again, "water, bring us

water"—or the nomadic pastoralist who ran after our research vehicle after an interview only to stop us and try to pay me to end the violence that had killed his brother before his eyes. Sometimes people never said a word, bearing up under unimaginable suffering with strength that I cannot fathom, or because they had stopped asking for help because it never came when they did.

How do I give back? How do I repay these people for sharing their time, their food, and their kindnesses with me? How do I repay a man for reliving the worst day of his life? Can these things bear a cost? Does the easing of misery have a price? What could I possibly do that would touch each and every person who had lifted a hand to help me? These are questions that I have turned over like stones in my mouth for months on end. I have found that answers to this question did not come readily. In fact, they lie stubbornly hidden. So this short piece is an attempt at examining the ways I have tried to give back, and the flaws, pitfalls, and successes of these attempts, and some rules I have established based on this journey.

1. A Bit of Background

My dissertation research was in Central Africa, focused on a national park that has existed as a protected area since 1934. The people in this area have seen all manner of development interventions. Many of their lives have been influenced in some way or another by colonists, international development agents, missionaries, scientific researchers, oil prospectors, Peace Corps volunteers, and tourists. Collectively, we non-nationals are called *nasara*, a word in Fulfulde (borrowed from the Arabic) which literally means "Christian" but now simply means white person—even if you are not really white. Many of these *nasara* have given to the communities in this region in various ways—some building wells that have either worked or collapsed, some developing community gardens and health centers, others throwing money and candy from car windows, and a few staying in these villages and working for years to develop tourism programs and failing. Because of these varied experiences, the expectations of the people living in this place are unpredictable and their presumptions variable.

In the years leading up to my research, the state of this park had deteriorated rapidly. When I arrived, the natural resources that local populations once quietly stole, or negotiated access to, were being stripped away by outsiders at a furious rate. Further, the park had begun being used as a base of banditry in the region. Criminals used the park to hold hostage the kidnapped children of pastoralists and villagers, murdering them or abandoning them if ransoms are not paid in time. At the same time, the water table in the area seemed to be dropping quickly and drought was never far away in that mercurial climate.

To do my research I travelled around the park interviewing people in the villages that were adjacent to it and visiting the pastoralist camps that surrounded it in certain seasons. I usually stayed for 2-5 days in each village. I travelled with two research assistants from the provincial capital to help me translate the ten different languages spoken in the

region. We usually travelled by truck or Land-Rover—whatever vehicle we could scrape up in a given week.

2. Attempts at Giving Back

I begin with two attempts I made at giving back that did not work as well as I had hoped—giving money and plastic water bottles to people in the villages where I did my research. I will end with three attempts that seem to have worked a bit better—giving rides, food (in specific situations), and advocating for the communities in which I worked. Though it might seem odd to talk about these specific experiences, it is attempts like these that helped me formulate some basic rules for giving back in this place.

2.1. Money

Two occasions in which I have given people money for their help spring to mind. The first was when our research vehicle got deeply mired in mud in the park's floodplain. The tires were fully immersed and despite laying down sticks, rocks, and dry grass my two research assistants and I were unable to make it budge. Members of the community came out to help. Eventually over 20 men were there with us, pushing, lifting, and pulling the truck. There is an unspoken rule here that if a car is stuck, passerby and village people will help, but after 4 hours the men stopped and had a meeting. They came to me and said that they could not continue working if I didn't pay them. We negotiated a price and they continued on, finally freeing the vehicle. This seemed entirely fair to me—they had all worked incredibly hard, walked a long way to get to us, and had given up their own work for a good part of the day. If anything, I wish I had paid them more—I gave them all of the cash I had on me. I did fret, however, that I had not been able to give each man an equal amount (I had only a few large bills). I gave the one sum to the fellow who seemed to be directing all of the other men (everyone called him "the president"). To avoid him simply pocketing the money I gave it to him in front of the group, but I still worry whether everyone got their share.

The second occasion I gave money was even less successful. I gave a small sum of money and extra food to a villager who had allowed me and my research assistants to stay in his home for the night. This man had not asked for anything, but I wanted to thank him for his kindness. Upon leaving he asked me for my phone number, which at the time I thought rather strange because he lived in a place that had no cell phone reception. I gave it to him and went on with my research in other villages in the region. When I returned to the provincial capital this man called me, telling me that he had used the money I had given him to come to town and he had no money to return to his home village. He made me feel as though I had forced him to come to town, and that he was going to be penniless on the streets if I did not give him money. To be honest, this made me very angry. I (of course) did not want to leave him in a bad position, but his presumption that I would pay his way home so that he could come to the big city was extremely frustrating. Though my Cameroonian friends told me to forget about him, I could not (partly because he called me non-stop) and finally I gave him the exact sum of

money it would take to get back to his village and told him never to call me again. The whole thing left me feeling taken advantage of, sad, angry, and tired.

2.2. Bottles

When headed out into the villages next to the park that I studied, I carried all of my water for a week with me in plastic water bottles. I did this because sometimes these villages do not even have wells—their small populations gathering water from open ponds, or if they do have wells, getting water out of them (due to fallen water tables) is unbelievably time-consuming. Not wishing to take water away from these communities, and needing filtered water anyway, I brought it with me. As the week wore on, I had a growing collection of empty plastic water bottles that bounced around in the back of the truck. I reused these bottles week after week, but often villagers would ask for them—they are coveted items because they are so rare in these remote places, useful for bearing water into the fields, out pasturing cattle, or collecting Gum Arabic in the forest.

Early on in my research I would give the bottles to those who asked for them. This turned out to be a mistake. Once I gave one woman, man, or child a bottle I was often overwhelmed by many others asking for bottles as well. I felt guilty, mean, and selfish for not handing out bottles to everyone, but there were almost never enough. I felt as though I was hurting the feelings of those who had not gotten bottles, or making them feel as if I liked them less or believed they were less deserving. In some cases this even affected my research—people being unwilling or hesitant to talk to me because they had not received bottles while others did. At other points I saw children get into fights over the bottles. I felt like the angel of discord in the community. After these initial experiences, and chatting with my research assistants, I decided not to give out bottles anymore. Though I still felt selfish doing this, I at least felt as though I was not favoring anyone or inciting jealousy and anger in the communities I visited.

2.3. Food

The issue of food was a difficult one in many of the villages where I did my research. Due to bad harvests, lost access to natural resources or drought many people either did not have enough to eat or feared that they would not in the near future. At the same time, however, due to many of these people's cultural traditions, sharing food is a necessary part of welcoming a stranger. Because my research team and I would usually sleep in the compound of the chief of the village, he and his wife/wives would almost always bring out heaping plates of rice, meat, fish, and sauces. When we stayed with nomadic or transhumant pastoralists, giant gourds of fresh milk would be delivered to our tents. Knowing that we were taking precious resources away from these people and feeling quite guilty about it, my research team and I decided that we should bring extra food with us. We would cook a large meal and share it with the chief and his wife/wives while they brought their food to us. In this way we felt that the chief and his wife/wives could be generous to us without suffering for it. Not only did this allay our guilt, it also allowed us to give back in other ways. Often we would go into the village in the evening and buy chickens, fish, or vegetables from local people. Also, we noted that if the food we cooked

was not eaten completely by the chief and his family, it was often shared with others in the village. Sharing food with the chief did not sow the discontent and jealousy that randomly sharing bottles with local people did. For the most part, folks in the villages and camps where we shared food with the chief saw this as a means by which we were showing respect for their leaders and their culture. Rather than fostering ill will it created stronger bonds between my research team and the community.

2.4. Rides

Giving rides was my favorite way to give back to the communities I worked with. Rides are ways to give back without strings attached—just clear, immediate, and simple ways of helping out. In this area there were not many roads that allowed bicycles to pass quickly or easily (acacia spines, bumpy savanna, and mud, all contribute to this problem), while motorcycles, cars, and trucks were extremely rare. People would ask for rides to larger towns to go to the doctor, to visit family, or go to weddings. We would transport people to markets, to other villages, and even in the direction of their herds of cattle. What was great about giving rides is that unlike material things—candy, money, bottles—rides were simply services, not things that would remain behind to be fought over or flaunted. People only asked for rides if they needed them. Further, like giving food to the chief, I think that the people in the camps and villages where we worked saw us giving rides as a kindness to the community as a whole. To me, the best part about giving rides was having company on our arduous travels across the often roadless landscape. The people who rode with us would tell stories, point out hidden landmarks (or dangers) and joke, making the trip far more enjoyable than it would have been otherwise. The only problem I ever had with giving rides was when two women we helped get to a wedding crushed two of my chickens to death with their baggage by mistake.

2.5. Advocacy

I would like to believe that I gave back in a larger and more meaningful way than eating dinner with village leaders and giving rides. Because many of the folks that I worked with were illiterate or so distant from government offices that their voices could not be heard easily (if at all), I tried to advocate on their behalf where I could, and continue to do so now that I am home. While in the country I talked to police and government officials about problems with security, with the availability of water, with natural resource use, and the influx of outsiders in the region. Though this kind of giving back is why I set out to do this research in the first place, I often struggle with it the most. Who exactly do I advocate for? Where do I put my emphasis? When I say that there needs to be more security in the region, am I actually bringing unwanted surveillance or unintended violence to the area? If I advocate for better wells am I drawing more people towards an already failing park? As I write about the interviews I have done and the things I have observed, I am working hard to step over my fears of the potential, unintentional effects of this advocacy and to point out, as best I can, things that simply cannot remain the way they are. I work hard to protect those people that I believe are

suffering and I try to encourage them to find and/or create advocates for themselves. But I often wonder if I am giving back in this way enough, or at all.

3. Drawing Lines in the Mud: Working Rules for Giving Back

From the experiences I have shared above, and many others, I developed five rules of giving back that I tried to adhere to while doing fieldwork.

Have a sense of humor about yourself. I think that being able to laugh at your complete lack of knowledge, the ridiculous way you brush your hair or carry water is a gift that will stay in the village for a long time. I am sure stories are still told of my attempts to pluck a chicken, to repair a car tire with a bicycle pump, and to shuck corn. Being a spectacle, entertainment, and fodder for endless jokes is not always easy (in fact it can be humiliating, frustrating, and painful) but I think it is one way of giving back to a community that you have lived and worked with. It can make the sour taste of inequality in everyone's mouth a tiny bit sweeter.

Allow people to be generous. I have realized that refusing food, gifts, or help from people who have next to nothing is one of the worst things I could possibly do. By refusing generosity you refuse people's dignity and their humanity. If someone offers me a gift, I take it with profuse gratitude and, if I can, I find a way to repay them for this kindness.

If I you can help in a non-material way, do so. By this I mean I will help in fields and kitchens; I will milk cows, tell stories, make bricks, carry water, give rides, and advocate for the community where I can.

Allow people to ask for the things they want, even if you cannot give these things to them. This is very difficult for me. When people ask for things I often want to brush them away or simply shake my head and move on, knowing I can do nothing for them. Sometimes I get angry, thinking (or saying) that this is not why I am in the field—I am not a development agent. But then I try to remember that those people who ask for things are often desperate, scared, or frustrated. If I were in their position, I would be asking for things too—from anyone and everyone I could. What I have learned also is that sometimes people just want to be heard. Even if I cannot do anything to help, and make this clear, people just want to tell me what is wrong, how they are suffering. I write these things down in my field notes and carry them with me. Again, I think this has to do with acknowledging people, acknowledging their pain, and acknowledging that though I can probably not change the things they complain about, I am listening and I do care.

Do not give non-consumable objects or money to people for no reason. As with the bottle and money discussions above, I try to avoid giving out things that can cause jealousy, anger, or expectations of future gifts. I will, however, always pay people for services rendered, and if I really want to give extra money to someone who seems to be in need, I will pay twice as much for one of their chickens, fish, or grass brooms.

Despite these rules I still want to give people water bottles and money. I still want to refuse food from hungry and struggling people—these are (I hope) decent reactions to these situations. But following my rules and overcoming those impulses are the means by which I try to make my interactions with the folks I work with as fair, fun, and culturally appropriate as possible.

Let me end by saying that much of this is speculation. If you went back to the villages I have tried to give back to in various ways and asked the people there about what worked and what did not, they may have completely different ideas and opinions than I do. From their perspective I may have done everything wrong. I can only speak from my own point of view (and those of my generous research assistants). Even after this discussion about ways I have given back I still feel as though I have not done enough, nor probably will ever do enough. I stay up nights thinking about those people who have looked me in the eye with pain, with fear, with a desire for something better, or for help. I simultaneously feel helpless, lucky, selfish, angry, and tired. At these moments I try to remember the words of my favorite poet, Jack Gilbert. In his poem *A Brief for the Defense*, Gilbert tells us that though there are people suffering, though there is deep sorrow everywhere in the world: "We must risk delight. . . . We must have / the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless / furnace of this world. To make injustice the only / measure of our attention is to praise the Devil."

And so I try. Despite the deprivation and inequality present in my field site, I dwell on the laughter and the delight of interaction I shared with the people there. I savor the gifts I have been given, I give thanks for the chances that I have, and I try, stumbling in the dark, to give back where I can.

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