

Kanthu Kali Munye: A Lesson in Listening and Learning in Rural Malawiⁱ

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Abstract

These notes chronicle fieldwork experiences that took place from June to August 2006 in Malawi. Starting from my pre-field preparation and ending with my reflections following fieldwork, I describe the rewards and obstacles one can meet in the field. Important discoveries included the limitations of a research design crafted thousands of miles from the context of study, the generation of ideas while in the field, and the many challenges of working on a large-scale research project.

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Introduction

The direct English translation of the Chinyanja proverb "Kanthu kali munye" is "Something is at the pointing finger." The meaning behind this proverb is "to know about the world you must be told. Listen and learn."¹ As I made motions to draft a dissertation prospectus, my advisor suggested a session of "soaking and poking", as it is called in the field of Comparative Politics. Before proposing my dissertation research topic, I needed more time in the field and a better understanding of the particular conditions faced by politicians and citizens in rural Africa.² In this paper, I discuss my experiences in rural Malawi during the summer of 2006. Recruited to work on a longitudinal survey project in its fourth wave of data collection,³ I capitalized on the opportunity to learn more about a large-scale survey project and to further develop my dissertation ideas into an actual dissertation prospectus. Armed with a clear research design, I expected to conduct a study during the time I was not committed to the survey project. However, after arriving in country I discovered the limitations of any research design crafted thousands of miles away from the field, and my initial research memorandum began to evolve with the generation of new ideas.

This paper is composed of three parts. First, I discuss my proposed research design and its implementation, or lack thereof. Second, I catalog the different research ideas generated by my time in the field listening and learning. Third, I describe the particularities of working on a large-scale research project.

I. Investigation of the interaction between local and non-local actors in HIV/AIDS interventions

Interested in the implementation of HIV/AIDS interventions in sub-Saharan Africa, I drafted a research design aimed at understanding the interaction between local actors engaged in HIV/AIDS implementations and the national or international actors that supported those efforts. I hypothesized that though local-level implementation personnel and national or international HIV/AIDS program managers had seemingly similar goals, their preferred methods to achieve those goals would be in conflict. Working under the notion that these actors are all part of the same group – at least, their end goal is the same: reduce HIV transmission and provide treatment and care to AIDS patients – I wondered what happened when this group disagreed on how exactly to reach their similar end goal.

Research Questions. March 25, 2006.

When intragroup conflict occurs, is one group able to impose its will on the other group? Or will the two groups engage in some bargaining? Under what conditions will local actors' preferred HIV programming prevail? Under what conditions will national or international actors' preferred HIV programming prevail?

I questioned whether prescriptions for HIV/AIDS intervention that dominate the corridors of power in the West managed to stay intact as they traveled to far-flung regions hard hit with the HIV epidemic. For example, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is constrained by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to allocate a significant portion of funding to abstinence-only

prevention messages⁴ while a local drama group hopeful for funding from such an organization presents an integrated prevention message that includes promotion of condom use as well as abstinence. Because USAID provides the funding, does it wield more power in making decisions about prevention messages? Or is USAID dependent on this local drama group to provide prevention messages because USAID lacks local knowledge and sufficient manpower to implement its own preferred policy? Is there any oversight of these drama groups and the messages they espouse?

Obviously, the questions I had about HIV/AIDS implementation could not be answered with data collection, but would require a bit of "listening and learning." I proposed investigating these questions through interviews of HIV/AIDS implementation actors in Malawi. The research project with which I was affiliated was based in three rural districts of Malawi, each representing one of the three regions of the country.⁵ The rural locations of the research project therefore would allow me to conduct interviews at the local level, regardless of my research site assignment. I also planned to spend some time in the capital city of Lilongwe, which would allow me to conduct interviews with national and international actors working on HIV/AIDS programs.

Research Plan. March 25, 2006.

I plan to conduct interviews of both local HIV/AIDS workers and national or international HIV/AIDS personnel to determine whether bargaining between the local and non-local occurs in provision of HIV/AIDS programs. I will interview local-level HIV/AIDS program providers (both for treatment and prevention) to get information about what programs/services are provided

and what programs/services are needed but not provided. I also plan to ask local providers what requirements they must meet in getting their funding/resources from the national government or international donors. With respect to non-local actors, I will interview national HIV/AIDS personnel and international non-governmental organization (NGO) or donor personnel to get information about what programs are most likely to be funded and if there are any specific requirements for continued funding.

Prior to my departure for Malawi, I conducted online research to draft a list of prospective interviewees. The initial research gave me leads to the national and international-level actors based in the capital city. Not surprisingly, my internet search for local-level organizations in the three rural districts in which the Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (MDICP) conducted its survey project came up empty. From my previous experience conducting interviews in Tanzania, I knew that trying to arrange appointments while I was still in the US would be fruitless⁶ and that it would be best to wait for my arrival in Malawi to coordinate meetings with the group of national and international actors I managed to learn about from my online research. My schedule in Malawi would be directed by the MDICP survey project, and I thought it best to coordinate with the field director of the survey project prior to making arrangements for the side research I planned to conduct on my own.

Upon arrival in Malawi, I learned that there was another student researching local level HIV/AIDS interventions. In addition to providing support to the longitudinal survey project, the student was also cataloguing all of the community-based organizations that have HIV/AIDS programs in Mchinji district. Rather than duplicate work, I decided to incorporate her interviews

and data collection in my research and focus instead on arranging interviews with national-level or international-level actors. Unfortunately, I had overestimated the ease of travel to Lilongwe, Malawi's capital city. Though the capital is easy to reach from the MDICP's central research site in Mchinji district, I found I would be stationed at the MDICP's southern research site in Balaka district. Balaka was too far away from Lilongwe to manage a day trip to the capital city for interviews. I decided to put off interviewing national and international actors in the capital until fieldwork was completed and I could return to Lilongwe before leaving for the US.⁷

I chose to use my placement in the south to interview local level actors in Balaka, but managed to conduct only four interviews at two local offices of international NGOs. Though small in number, these interviews provided me with a solid introduction to local-level implementations, and more importantly, one of those interviews led to the collection of a great deal of data on the funding of community-based organizations. Though not part of my research design, the collection of this funding data allowed me to explore a new but related avenue of research.

Overall, my experience in the field implementing the research memo I designed while still in the US would appear as a failed effort. Because of time constraints associated with my involvement in the journals and survey projects, and my overestimation of my availability at the conclusion of fieldwork, I was never able to schedule or conduct interviews in the capital. My research at the local-level was also never completely implemented. The benefit, however, of being part of a large group of collaborative researchers was that colleagues were more than willing to share any data they had gathered, including transcripts

of interviews. The research design I crafted in the states was too ambitious an undertaking to carry out while also committing to work for a large-scale survey project, especially when I was generating and exploring new research ideas in the field.

II. Research ideas generated in the field

Though my interest in the interaction between local and non-local HIV/AIDS intervention actors did not wane, I found the field to be rich with additional research opportunities. Perhaps because I was situated in a context where multiple academics or academics-in-training were housed together, working closely many hours of the day, it was difficult not to come up with multiple ideas for avenues of inquiry.

My roommate in the first research site was an undergraduate student at Harvard studying economics. She was shopping around for a senior thesis topic and, like me, came to Malawi armed with a research idea. She was interested in "the value of life" and had plans to conduct semi-structured interviews of government officials to help her get at answers for her research questions. After learning more about her interest in differing values attached to different people's lives, and after becoming more familiar with the MDICP questionnaires, I came up with a research topic that I thought the two of us could explore further.

The Value of Life as Seen Through an AIDS Death. June 15, 2006.

When someone is believed to have died of AIDS, do their fellow household members likely have smaller/larger or more expensive/less expensive funerals following their deaths? My hypothesis: any stigma associated with AIDS decreases the value of an AIDS patient's life and therefore,

the money put towards the funeral of an AIDS patient will be smaller than that of a non-AIDS patient. Similarly, on health care costs for those who likely died of AIDS, did families spend less on their health care costs than those who didn't likely die of AIDS? Using the mortality roster on the family listing questionnaire,⁸ we can see if a person's likelihood of death from AIDS affected a family member's contribution to the funeral and to health care costs. We can compare intra-household deaths that varied on likelihood that the family member died of AIDS. Things we would need to control for: age at death (does this matter – do Malawians spend less on funerals for the young?); location (is AIDS stigma higher in some places than in others?); relationship to the deceased (are mothers more likely to spend more on their children than on their sisters or in-laws?); wealth (using information on household items and livestock OR occupation).

Still within the first week of my arrival, I was consistently presented with new ideas for research. As I traveled from the capital city to the first research site in Mchinji district, I wondered whether distance from the capital would affect an area's access to HIV/AIDS interventions. Increasing distance from the capital presents an almost equally increasing cost to any national or NGO intervention actors based in Lilongwe to travel to outlying areas to provide HIV/AIDS interventions.

Penetration of the State and Non-State. June 16, 2006.
As you move further away from the capital, does HIV intervention by the state decrease? What would motivate Lilongwe-based bureaucrats to take public transport out to the distant districts away from the comforts of the city when opportunities to intervene against HIV were available in the peri-urban areas just outside of Lilongwe?

What about NGOs? Would international expatriates be any more willing to "rough it" in the villages to learn more about local HIV intervention needs rather than attend a variety of conferences and meetings in the capital city with similar humanitarian-oriented expatriates? Each of the MDICP's research sites are of varying distances from Lilongwe – I could explore whether distance from the capital affects state intervention against HIV. Similarly, I could check to see how far each of the traditional authorities in which we work are situated from the district capitals as another level of "penetration."⁹ All three research sites are nearer to regional capitals than to Lilongwe – does the regional government therefore hold more responsibility in dealing with HIV intervention? Where the national government is far away, do we see a higher incidence of non-governmental intervention?

These two research ideas are representative of the fruitful nature of being in the field. In addition to these, I drafted research design memos on corruption, global-to-local supply chains of HIV interventions, comparative environments for social movements and AIDS activism, and a social network analysis of local HIV intervention entrepreneurs. As previously mentioned, an interview with a local HIV/AIDS intervention actor led to my acquisition of data on funding of community-based organizations working on HIV/AIDS projects. I plan to use this data to examine what determines funding of local HIV/AIDS interventions. Conversations with the Malawian research staff on HIV/AIDS and politics gave me a different perspective about how to approach my research. Surrounded by other graduate students and productive research scholars further motivated me to explore different ideas in the field and to begin writing about what I found so that I would have something to work from upon my

return to a desk in a consistently-powered, well-lit, air-conditioned room far away from the context of my proposed research.

III. Working for a large-scale research project

My own research occupied less than half of my time spent in Malawi. The remainder of my effort was targeted at supporting the MDICP. One great benefit of working with the MDICP was the exposure and access to the wealth of qualitative and quantitative data that had been collected through the years. I was originally recruited to the MDICP to work on coding field journals kept by local participant-observers.¹⁰ My task was to read journals looking for specific content and highlight relevant passages using qualitative coding software. The first three days I spent in the field were devoted to learning the coding software and understanding the file management of the more than 500 journals already collected. The majority of my time in Malawi was to be spent reading and coding journals.¹¹

In addition to working on the journals project, I was tasked with assisting the longitudinal survey project. All graduate students benefiting from the learning experience of working for the MDICP were expected, in return, to provide assistance with "checking" survey questionnaires:

In addition to attempting to minimize interviewer error by careful construction of the questionnaire and by interviewer training, there were layers of checking. Checking was done first by the supervisors and then on the next day by a principal investigator and graduate student members of the

field team. This permitted us to detect possible interviewer errors when we were still in the survey site such that interviewers could return to respondents if there were missing data or if there were apparent interviewer errors (Watkins et al 2003, 15).

The primary goal of checking survey questionnaire was to ensure consistency and completeness. Most checking occurred during the evening after the research team returned from the field. Rapid turnaround reduced fieldwork costs as it minimized traveling back to villages where we had already managed to interview almost all of our respondents. Most field teams would bring along a graduate student to assist with checking in the field to make the task even more efficient. My first day checking questionnaires in the field occurred three days after I arrived in Malawi. The field notes I wrote that day emphasized a need for even more efficiency in the field.

Fieldwork: Checking Listing Questionnaires. June 15, 2006.

Around 8:30am, the field supervisor passed out materials to all of the interviewers. Interviewers crowded around her in a semi-circle as she stood next to the minibus calling out in a mix of Chichewa and English the various materials that would be needed for the day. She handed out different [language and gender] versions of the Listing Questionnaires, cameras, batteries, and pens. At some point, she ran out of batteries and there was a commotion among the interviewers. Some had cameras, but no batteries. There was no recording of who took what, and those interviewers with extra batteries managed to stay silent for what felt like an eternity. Since no new batteries

appeared and we were already in the village, the supervisor directed interviewers without batteries to team up with other interviewers whose cameras would be functioning. Some interviewers were also lacking a proper mix of Listing Questionnaires. For example, one interviewer was only equipped with questionnaires for men, though it was likely she would be interviewing female respondents... Just before 11:00am, we stopped in another village and sat on the main road checking Listing Questionnaires and awaiting the return of interviewers from the interviews of their first respondents. A few of the questionnaires I checked did not match the gender of the respondent – and in some cases, interviewers had attempted to mark various parts of the questionnaire to indicate as such. Why don't we set up prepared packets for interviewers the night before such that we know everyone is equipped with the proper materials? It would add time in the morning for interviewing rather than the melee associated with handing things out – and it would ensure that no research team ventures out to the field ill-equipped for the day.

After subsequent visits to the field, I found that the particular lack of organization I witnessed on my first field excursion was not terribly representative. Other supervisors managed to appropriately pack enough materials for a day in the field and used the time driving to rural villages to hand out these materials to interviewers. The level of efficiency varied a good deal from supervisor to supervisor and reinforced my appreciation for human resources in survey data collection.

Further along in the research project, I was asked to help direct the clean-up phase of data collection at the Balaka district site in the Southern region. "Clean-up" referred to the last part of fieldwork when we would reduce

the size of the research team to be nimble enough to travel to multiple villages each day to try and locate respondents not previously interviewed and to account for any inconsistencies in the survey collection. In addition to learning a lot about data management problems in the field, my experiences directing the clean-up phase of fieldwork taught me a lot about managing human resources. As we approached the clean-up phase, I found myself looking even more closely at the questionnaires turned in by interviewers to help determine who should be selected to remain on the research team.¹² Though I relied heavily on the opinions of the supervisors about which interviewers should remain on staff, I was also privately cautioned by a Malawian working for the MDICP that some supervisors might favor personal relationships over professional ones.

Fieldwork: Clean-up Crew. July 21, 2006.

I tried to make hints to [the senior supervisor] today about how I hoped the team of interviewers we selected would be the most effective and hardest working. With so many graduate students returning to the US, we would have few hands on deck to check questionnaires, so we are going to need interviewers who make few if any errors. I also want our team of interviewers to be quick with their work so we can maximize the number of respondents for our site. I trust [the senior supervisor's] judgment will be solid, but worry that his fellow supervisors might not have similar selection criteria, especially after my chat with [another Malawian on staff]. Let's hope the other supervisors caught wind of my hinting today.

The last days of clean-up were the hardest in terms of motivating some staff. Two members of our data team failed to show up for work on a critical day for fieldwork

preparation. This workday was an extra day, but all of the staff had agreed in advance that they would prefer to work the extra day and make additional money in order to help us finish fieldwork on time. Though both of the absentees owned mobile phones, I was unable to reach either of them all day. I had previously attempted to use monetary bonuses to motivate the staff, but apparently such incentives were insufficient.

Clean-up: A Day Without Data. August 6, 2006.

[A supervisor] and [a data entry team member] failed to show up for work today. I had gone to eat lunch in town to see if it might ease my stomach pains, and when I returned to the data room they had still not yet arrived to work. I tried calling both of them by phone, but no answer. I asked the other members of the data team and received only silence and shrugged shoulders in return. I managed to find [the supervisor] tonight in his room, far too drunk to get any work done. He told me he was sick and that he would take care of whatever work I needed tomorrow morning. The problem is I needed that work done today for people to have in-hand when they leave for the field tomorrow morning. I don't know if I should let this guy go since I need him for this last week. I just don't want the other staff to think this kind of behavior would be overlooked at the end of fieldwork. I need everyone to be working.

I eventually decided to keep the supervisor on staff. I docked him a day's pay and made him aware of my concern for his personal situation. The other staff member that failed to show up for the day was dismissed. This split decision was a difficult one for me to make, and I still wonder if it was, in the end, a fair decision. I needed to demonstrate to the rest of the staff that I was

equally good at using negative as well as positive incentives to get the staff to work hard, but I was not about to fire the one person I knew I needed to get through the remaining fieldwork. I am not certain how my decision was received by the staff. The human resource issues I faced in the field really impacted me. The day before I flew out of Malawi, I created a list of suggestions for future fieldwork.

Looking Back: The HR File. August 21, 2006.

- *People who are paid partial days on Sundays are less incentivized to work extra Sundays than those who are not paid partial days. If you are not required to work on Sundays, but are already given a 1/2 day of pay for every Sunday, you will not be motivated by the remaining 1/2 day of pay to work the full day. We should build into the payment structure some sort of overtime situation for Sundays worked by supervisors or other employees who receive partial day payment on Sundays.*
- *The bonus structure should be consistent across sites and should be decided upon before work starts (especially in the case of those employees who leave fieldwork early and need to be paid before they go). Unless it goes against a local labor law, I do not understand why bonuses are expected rather than earned. Just because someone worked does not mean they automatically deserve a bonus. A bonus is just that: something additional for work done well.*
- *Data from the surveys should be entered while in the field. It provides independent and objective review of the work done by interviewers. We could see how many respondents each interviewer interviews in a day, and we could see the number of times an interviewer has*

been sent back to a previous interviewee due to interviewer errors. This objective feedback would be helpful in determining who should stay on for clean-up work, levels of bonuses, and the quality of reference letters given to interviewers at the end of fieldwork.

My experience with the longitudinal survey component of the MDICP exposed me to the inner workings of implementing a large-scale research project. This endeavor requires a great deal of resources, both in terms of funding and human capital. The staff in country had a wealth of previous experience,¹³ and though we suffered hiccups in fund delivery during the summer, we managed to stay afloat – and in relative comfort. I learned not only from observing staff performance, but also from actively listening to the more experienced project personnel.

Conclusion

It is only now, with the benefit of reflection that I can grasp the value of what I learned in Malawi in the summer of 2006. The lessons go beyond assisting me in the framing of my dissertation research questions. My experience in Malawi reinvigorated my passion for research via idea generation and an appreciation for the efforts made by research scholars and local staff to produce a body of information to be consumed by academics and government officials. I came back to the US with a considerable amount of data, both qualitative and quantitative. Though I failed to implement my proposed research design, I managed to draft a dissertation prospectus incorporating my experience, create relationships with a diverse group of colleagues, and see

for myself the implementation of a large-scale research project. Most importantly, I learned more about a country, its politics, and its citizens. Yet, so much of this learning could not have taken place without my physical presence in the context of study.

Endnotes

¹ This proverb can be found in Chakanza (2000: 107) along with countless other Chinyanja proverbs. Another fitting substitute would be “kudziwa mphafa ya buluzi n’kumg’amba” translated literally as “to know the liver of the lizard, you need to dissect it” to mean “don’t just accept what you hear, try to find out the truth” (Chakanza 2000: 124). A great example of listening and learning in Malawi is chronicled in Englund (2006).

² Though I had previous experience in Tanzania, my experience in the rural areas was not a daily one, and was limited to villages near to the second-largest city, Arusha. As I hoped to do a cross-national study, my short exposure to one country was also limiting.

³ My work in Malawi was with the MDICP, a joint research endeavor between the University of Pennsylvania and the Malawi College of Medicine. You can find out more about the MDICP at <http://malawi.pop.upenn.edu>.

⁴ PEPFAR requires that twenty percent of its funds are spent on prevention programs. At the start of fiscal year 2006, the US Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003 required that of the twenty percent of funding spent on prevention activities, one-third must be appropriated to abstinence-until-marriage programs. The US Government Accountability Office recently criticized the abstinence spending requirement because of the further challenges it

makes in addressing local prevention needs (GAO 2006: 31-44).

⁵ Survey data collection for the MDICP takes place in Balaka district (Southern region), Mchinji district (Central region), and Rumphi district (Northern region).

⁶ Though it seems preparation of interview meetings would only progress research, one should be acquainted with a basic geography of the area to which you will travel to meet your interviewees before coordinating meeting times. What use is it to exchange multiple emails with someone on a different continent about an interview weeks away when the interviewee has little idea whether that day will be busy with other meetings and you will have little idea of how to reach the interviewee's office? I have found coordinating interviews on short notice via mobile phone was most fruitful, and even in a few of those situations I found myself needing to return on a later date due to an unforeseen change in the interviewee's schedule.

⁷ This plan also failed due to unforeseen circumstances. Fieldwork ran longer than anticipated, and I managed to fall ill at the end of my stay in Malawi. I departed Malawi a week early because of my illness and fieldwork ended a week late, leaving me no time in between to conduct interviews at the national level. I learned from this experience that even the best of plans may not bear fruit.

⁸ In this section I am referring to a particular page of the initial questionnaire about which all MDICP respondents are interviewed. The mortality roster was a new addition in the 2006 round, so no historical data existed that would get at this question on the value of life. Once we found out that data from MDICP's 2006 round would not be available until 2007, we realized my intended co-author would not be able to implement the research project in time for her to file her senior thesis.

⁹ Each MDICP survey site did not include respondents sampled from the entire district, but instead a sample of respondents

from a sample of villages in a given traditional authority. NGOs that work in "the villages" are typically headquartered in the district capitals, and make day trips out to villages.

¹⁰ Watkins and Swidler (2005) provide an introduction to the use of field journals as an innovative method of data collection. Watkins (2004) provides an excellent example of how these field journals provide context in which to understand the quantitative data collected in a longitudinal survey. More about the journals can be found online at: http://malawi.pop.upenn.edu/Level%203/Malawi/level3_malawi_qualjournals.htm.

¹¹ Reading these journals also generated research ideas in that they provided context of the AIDS situation in Malawi and offered me more information on the particular vernacular of HIV/AIDS interventions from a local participant-observer's perspective. Though the journals were focused on HIV/AIDS, a variety of topics could be explored including the role of government, NGOs, cultural practices, fertility, marriage, and linguistics, to name a few.

¹² In Balaka district, all supervisors were asked to stay on until fieldwork was completed. We reduced the number of interviewers by one-third and dismissed a driver for the clean-up phase of fieldwork.

¹³ Some interviewers and supervisors with which I worked had been on the MDICP since its initial wave in 1998. The co-principal investigators were in the field during the summer, one for a significant portion of fieldwork. A good proportion of the graduate students recruited to assist in the field had worked on the MDICP in previous rounds.