

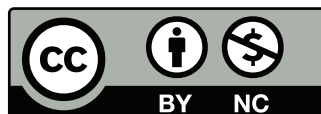
Boda Bodas and painted exclusion in Western Uganda

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Abstract

Motorcycle-taxi drivers in Kisoro, a rural district of Uganda, observed various processes around them which they termed “development” or “modernity”. But they also, in many ways, felt excluded from these processes. Through a combination of text and my own painted images, the aim here is to share as many nuances as possible of my interpretations of these drivers’ observations. I argue for the use of images to assist in describing visual experiences, and I compare and discuss the potentials of paintings and photographs, suggesting that paintings can clarify the ever-present subjectivity in social science-related research more expressively than photographs. In addition, I propose that paintings can bring the reader-viewer closer to the experiences of the informants. I conducted anthropological fieldwork among these drivers – locally referred to as Boda Boda drivers – and other workers of similar socioeconomic status in 2017. These young adults, most of them men, waited for more beneficial developments, while struggling to handle their current positions as more or less excluded spectators. In addition to identifying what my informants would need to feel fully included in the modernisation of their society, I discuss ways of improving research-related painting in order to involve informants further in this practice as well.

Keywords: Paintings, Visual Anthropology, Mobility, Modernity, Motorcycle-taxi, Development, Rural, Uganda



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About the author

Alexander Öbom is from Sweden and holds a master's degree in cultural anthropology from Uppsala University. He wrote his thesis about motorcycle-taxi drivers in Kisoro, Uganda, and their experiences of various transformations in their society. He is also a research assistant affiliated to the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), and an artist.

All images painted by the author.

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Introduction: watching development in Kisoro

This article is built around two central arguments: that young adults can experience themselves as being excluded from the visual processes that they call “development” or “modernity”, and that painted images constitute a suitable medium through which to highlight such exclusion to others. Ugandan individuals working as motorcycle-taxi drivers – Boda Boda drivers – are the focus of this study. “Boda” is said to derive from the word *border*, as the bicyclist predecessors of these drivers were first active in the Kenya-Uganda borderlands (Howe 2003). This group mostly consists of men, and as a consequence, the experiences described here mainly belong to men as well.

I chose these drivers as informants because of how much time they spent outdoors, parked or on the move, and because, as a consequence, they were able to directly observe many of the transformations taking place in their society. The society referred to here is Kisoro district, in the southwestern corner of Uganda (my own map of the district can be seen on page 20). It is a rural area of about 700 square kilometers with a population estimated at 281,705 in 2014 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2017). The district, which was created in the early 1990s when a larger district was divided, has a small central town with the same name. A major transformation occurred between 2007 and 2012, when a small network of asphalt roads was constructed, connecting the district to the rest of Uganda to the east, to Rwanda to the south, and to the DRC to the west. Internationally, Kisoro is probably best known for its national parks and its mountain gorillas, which are attracting a growing number of international tourists, although the tourism sector has relatively small direct importance for the local population in comparison to subsistence farming; an estimated 86 percent of the population depends on such small-scale farming (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2017, 4–5, 27).

My research questions are concerned with how Boda Boda drivers experience various infrastructural and economic processes in their society, as well as what we can learn by using painted images when interpreting and describing their experiences.

I am a Swedish man, born in 1991, and over many years I have spent time in Uganda and neighbouring Rwanda because of my wife’s connection with the region: she grew up in Rwanda. In 2017, I conducted a short period of fieldwork over six consecutive weeks in order to collect material for my master’s thesis in cultural anthropology; this article is also based on this fieldwork. Four weeks were spent in Kisoro, and two in neighbouring districts and in Rwanda, in an effort to gather contextual information.

First, I conducted eight short group interviews with motorcycle-taxi drivers, whom I spontaneously approached as they stood parked; after this, I held individual semistructured interviews with nine drivers in places of their choosing. I then spent several hours each day with a group of six individual drivers over the rest of the fieldwork period. In order to conduct participant observations and informal conversations I stayed at their side while they were waiting for customers and I sat behind them when they were driving around. Sometimes we sat in bars or restaurants together. Many hours of my fieldwork were spent on the move, in efforts to conduct “ride-alongs” (Kusenbach 2003, 464). I found talking while moving much more relaxed and helpful for both parties than more traditional interviews in which we sat opposite each other with no external input. I also visited five drivers in their homes to gain a deeper understanding of their life situations. As I had never been to this part of Uganda before my fieldwork, I had no local contacts prior to my arrival, and I met all but one of the drivers spontaneously while walking around. I met most of them while they were parked, and two when they were on the move after dropping off customers.

I did not encounter any women working

as motorcycle-taxi drivers. However, as I also spent a few hours almost every day among four individuals who worked in shops and bars, of whom two were women, women's views are not totally absent from my study. Both groups (the drivers and the shop/bar workers) considered these various jobs as alternatives to each other, belonging to a similar socioeconomic status; it was thus relevant to pay some attention to shop and bar workers as well. Most of my informants, motorcyclists and others, were in their late 20s. The majority of them were married and had young children. Some of the shop and bar workers were regular customers of the Boda Boda drivers, and it was through one of the bar workers that I also came into contact with one of my motorcyclist informants.

Qualitative information has been prioritised, rather than broad quantitative information, which means that the views of my informants definitely do not represent those of all drivers in the district. The fact that the small sample of workers with whom I engaged extensively was chosen simply as a result of which individuals were most willing to talk in depth to me – in English – makes my data even less representative. However, their views can nonetheless shed light on how various development processes may be experienced on the ground.

While reading through my notes, after returning to Sweden, it became clear to me that visual observations in my informants' descriptions were abundant, and that a visual presentation would therefore be a suitable means of representing them. I decided to hand-paint 21 canvas boards with acrylic colors, and I finally came to use photographs of 14 of these in this article. As Nick Sousanis (2015) has highlighted, text has for a long time been privileged over images in academic contexts, and images have been considered mere illustrations to text – not as being on equal footing. This is unfortunate, Sousanis argues, because text often constitutes a detour. Observations are, above all, images, and a textual description of an image is always

just a description – it is not the image itself (2015, 54–59). While I cannot claim that looking at my images resembles the experience of being in the place physically, watching events yourself, the images are at least made up of the same substance as on-the-spot observations: colours arranged in certain ways, in contrast to rows of text meant to evoke imagined colours. This justifies my use of images in this piece. Sousanis also argues that drawing is not just about projecting thoughts onto paper. Information also travels the opposite way, and puts the artist into conversation with her- or himself, encouraging reflection (2015, 79).

In accordance with the idea that anthropology cannot be anything but subjective and interpretative, as Clifford Geertz argued in the 1970s (2014, 166–169), other scholars have suggested that art can play a role in anthropology (see, for example, Krstic 2011, 81). As I argue later, in the section called *Countering the claimed objectivity of photographs*, it is possible that a painted presentation can express this ever-present subjectivity more transparently than other types of visual presentations, such as photographic ones. With reference to Geertz, paintings can add to the kind of contextualisation aimed at understanding what various symbols and processes mean to individuals, something he referred to as “thick description” (Geertz 2014, 166–169). This phrase has been used with reference to painting before (see Bray 2015), and although Geertz wrote that it refers to “unphotographable” elements, in contrast to the observable behaviour which thick description is supposed to contextualise (Geertz 2014, 167), paintings at least add to the description of what is clearly seen – i.e. images might describe visual elements more vividly and in less space than text – allowing the writing to be more focused on invisible and “unphotographable” context.

And despite the limitations of images in conveying the researcher's interpretations of invisible elements such as the informants' thoughts and feelings, I would nonetheless argue that it is possible to give hints of these

in the images themselves too. In fact, Lydia Nakashima Degarrod (2007) suggests that paintings can be even better than text at conveying feelings. In my case, the portrayal of body language could be one way of achieving this. Even if body language is open to interpretation, paintings can enable a more accurate description of it than words. Text is arguably even more affected by what information the writer presents, and what information is withheld, as the writer must choose which elements to include or dismiss, or the text will become very long-winded and unstructured. As Sousanis (2015) has highlighted, a text must be read in sequence, while a picture can, as well as enabling the viewer to focus on specific details, also allow the viewer to see it all at once (2015, 54–62). This may leave room to convey more information without creating confusion.

It also means that, in contrast to a block of text which requires the reader to pay attention before it can be found interesting, images can stand out enough to grab attention instantly, thereby reaching those who would not read research papers. Degarrod (2007), who displayed her fieldwork-based paintings in art galleries, reported that they evoked memories and discussion among viewers. I have similar experiences, and the fact that images can communicate despite language barriers, even with those who cannot read *any* language, can possibly make anthropology more inclusive. Towards the end of this article, I elaborate on how my painting strategy could be improved further to make this inclusion even more extensive.

Waiting

Waiting has been described as a common activity in several regions of the global South, often because many groups of people have become unemployed or underemployed as a result of large-scale economic reforms (see, for example, Jeffrey 2010; Mains 2007). Alcinda

Honwana's concept of *waithood* refers to how individuals have practically been forced to wait to be able to afford adulthood (Honwana 2013). There are strict norms in many parts of the world regarding how to achieve adulthood; they include building a decent house, and having the money to be able to get married and to provide for children, for example. But for an increasing number of people it is difficult to reach such a stage, and instead, they are more or less stuck in this state of waithood between youthhood and adulthood, even if they are aging. While many of my informants were actually married and had jobs, they were nonetheless in a state of waithood; they indicated that it was extremely difficult to reach beyond their current positions, or even to keep what they had achieved. "My biggest challenge is to be able to pay the school fees for my children," one Boda Boda driver told me.

As Honwana has also highlighted, waithood does not mean being passive (2013). The young adults I met had many ideas, often business-related, on how to change their situations for the better. The problem was that they lacked the resources to act on these ideas, and the best thing they could do to hope to achieve those resources was to sit still and wait, day after day, earning at least small amounts of money while spending as little as possible.

One of the most observable activities which various workers in Kisoro district were engaged in was indeed waiting. Although motorcycle-taxi drivers are often thought of as a mobile group, most of my informants' working time was spent in certain fixed locations, from which they watched their surroundings, seeing the movements and changes taking place around them. Below, I have captured this in painted form (Figure 1).

I wanted my images to contain a lot of relevant information in an effort to produce a "thick description". Movements and changes are symbolised here by people walking by, new commercial signs, and electric cables hanging above. I intended to illustrate that drivers observed what was happening around



Figure 1. Waiting motorcycle-taxi drivers.

them while complaining about the fact that they were standing still in the middle of it all. “Today it’s even worse,” one driver said, when I asked whether he had had more customers than the day before.

The wait was connected to anxiety and bad feelings, as a result of the fact that drivers were waiting for customers, and as a consequence, for income. “There are too many of us,” one said, and explained that it had been easier to make money in the past, when there were fewer drivers. Another man said he disliked the job mostly because of all the waiting; that he sometimes stayed parked the whole day without having a single customer.

Ever-increasing competition, from ever more drivers in relation to customers, had resulted in more waiting, Boda Boda drivers told me. The tough competition was also something that was clearly observable, both for me and for them. The sites where the drivers wait-

ed, locally referred to as “stages”, were often full of drivers parked close together. They sat on their bikes for hours and hours, stretching and conversing with their neighbours in order to pass the time. I tried to convey this in the next painting (Figure 2).

In the image below, I portrayed the new asphalt roads as well. Drivers often talked about them positively as a sign of “development”. But they also said that the development which these roads symbolised was insufficient, and sometimes even harmful. For example, one motorcyclist said life was easier before motorcycles were commonly available. Back then, around 2008, he had used a bicycle to transport people and goods; it required no fuel and repairs were less costly. This man did add, however, that motorcycles were part of “modernity”, and therefore something one just had to accept. He could not have competed with motorcycles if he had continued to use a



Figure 2. Tough competition.

bicycle, but his statement indicates that there was a problem with this development, or with the modernity which the drivers observed. For one thing, it was expensive.

When my informants talked about modernity and development – the two words were often used interchangeably – they referred to new roads, various consumer products, jobs, etc., but more generally, they talked about it as something which should bring improvements. Scholars have highlighted how it is difficult for various actors in society to define these concepts, but, on a general level, development should at least be connected to an improved standard of living and be all-encompassing in order to be conceived of as “real” development (Edelman and Haugerud 2005; Leys 2005), indicating that a development that leaves out the poor cannot be genuine.

But the driver mentioned above suggested that it might all turn around in the fu-

ture and become a more positive modernity. There was, he said, at least a chance that the dirt road leading to his home would also be covered with asphalt one day, that he would be able to afford a better house, and that he would become a “businessman”. He and many of the drivers with him were, in other words, not just waiting for their daily bread; they were also waiting in the long run for something they could really benefit from. It was not only the drivers who had these ideas; they also existed among the other workers.

Workers in shops and bars talked about their wait too, both their daily wait for customers and for their salary (which was often delayed), but also their long-term wait for both society and their personal situations to improve (Figure 3). One woman in a shop said she used to sit and imagine how she would one day go to university, and another woman, working in a bar, said her dream was to be able



Figure 3. Shop worker dreaming.

to buy her own car. There were no guarantees that my informants' wait would pay off, however, as there could be unexpected expenses. One informant said he lost his small savings when a family member needed hospital care, for example.

Although the drivers and the other service workers all told me they could probably exchange jobs with each other if they wanted, they were sure it would not help them escape the waiting, as they knew waiting was a widespread activity in their society. They saw their freedom on the job market as limited to choosing between a few alternatives which were all equally unattractive.

Exclusion

Even if my informants did see some alternative jobs as open to them, the alternatives were

few, which was, according to them, a reason why there were so many Boda Boda drivers. Several drivers talked about the lack of industrial jobs. Instead of being made in the area, an abundance of manufactured goods, including motorcycles, were imported from Asian countries. Scholars have pointed out that many regions in Africa have either not experienced much industrialisation, or have been deindustrialised (see, for example, Leys 2005, 114–116; Moberg 2013, 306–311; Meagher 2014), with the exception of certain more or less fenced off enclaves from which natural resources are extracted (Ferguson 2006, 13–14). James Ferguson points out that global networks “span the globe”, but that they “hop over”, rather than cover, the places where most Africans live (2006, 13–14). For the Boda Boda drivers, a clear sign of their marginalisation was the trucks delivering manufactured goods, which were often decorated with Euro-



Figure 4. Imports arriving.

pean logos, indicating that not only the goods inside them, but even the trucks themselves, were “from far” (Figure 4).

Some of these trucks were just passing through. Others stopped so that we could observe them offloading their goods. My informants certainly appreciated the presence of modern products, but they would have preferred to have their own industries making them, in order to have more jobs, and to be able to feel proud of their country and their district. “Uganda is behind,” one informant told me, and added “I don’t even think we have managed to export our beer.” It was important to them to feel included in development, as actors in control, who build their own progress – not just to be partially excluded receivers of it. “What kind of development is this?” one driver asked, after criticising the district’s lack of factories in general.

Since images allow several different

points to be made in the very same motif, another point which I wanted to illustrate with the image above is how rain stopped Boda Boda operations. Customers and drivers preferred not to get wet and cold unless they really had to (Kisoro is cold for a place so close to the equator), and muddy dirt roads full of sharp volcanic stones were dangerous until they dried up after the rain. While, on one occasion, we spent hours sheltering from the rain, we saw the trucks continuing to drive along the new clean asphalt road. The motorcyclists told me they were worried that they wouldn’t make enough money because of the rain. At the same time others in the world around them were apparently making money anyway, as indicated by the trucks. Modernity constituted something that my informants could observe but often not participate in. It was, above all, experienced visually – a fact that I think motivates a visual presentation of their experienc-

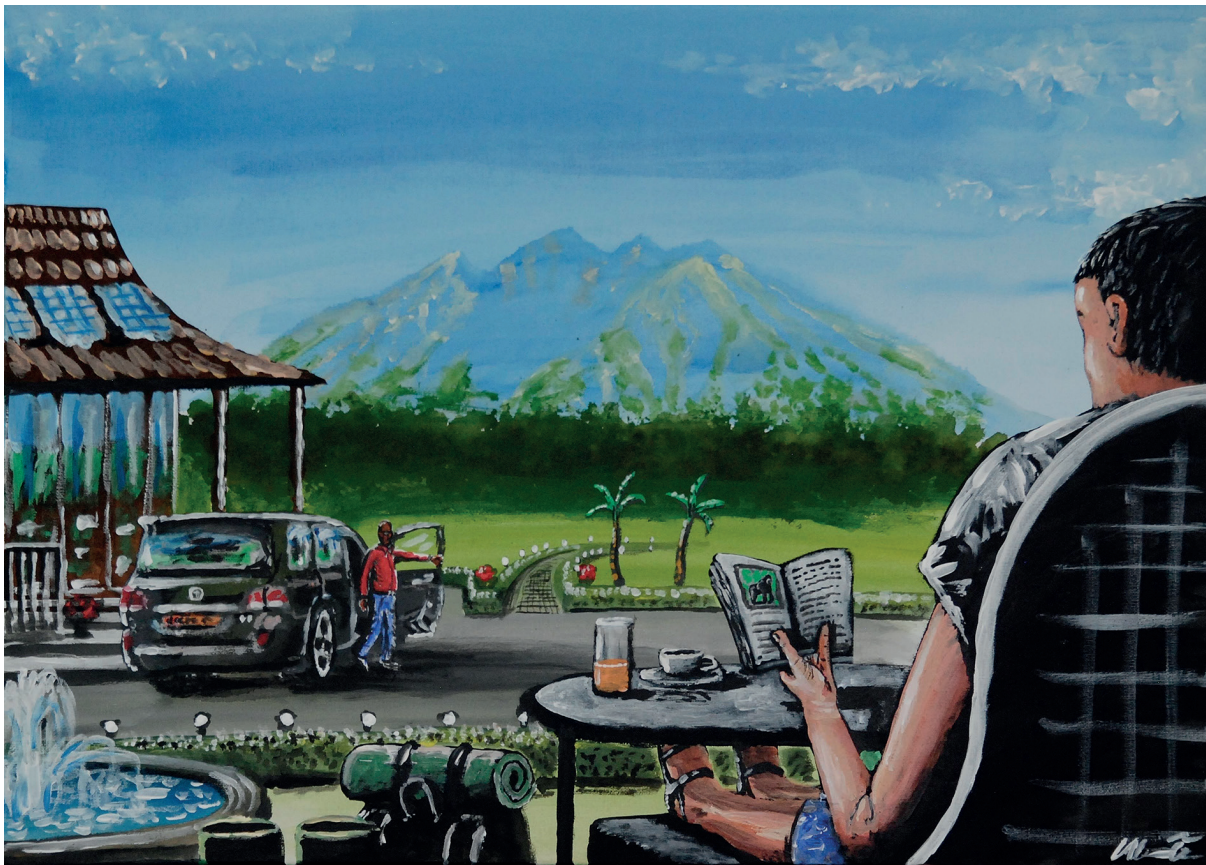


Figure 5. Isolated tourist resort.

es. Infrastructural and economic changes can often be clearly seen in the form of objects – objects which can be painted.

As the local manufacturing industry did not look promising, several informants had put their hopes on an alternative industry. They said that the tourism industry was helping their district to develop, and that it would continue to do so.

Tourism could one day make asphalt roads possible over most of the district, many young adults told me, and nice hotels might be built that would provide jobs to almost everyone. As in other places located near national parks and tourist destinations, the inhabitants tend to count on tourism as a driver of development, even if they recognise that the prospects are not that promising. Some of Brad Weiss' informants, working in barbershops in Arusha, Tanzania, hoped to somehow get tourism jobs one day instead (Weiss 2009, 4,

69), and my informants' views on tourism also resonated with how some of Filip De Boeck's (2011) informants in Kinshasa viewed a new development project which would evict them from their homes. They recognised that they would be the victims but thought it would be "beautiful" anyway if it became reality (De Boeck 2011, 278).

In Kisoro, a similar ambivalence affected my informants' belief in the potential of tourism. All of the new guesthouses did indeed need a workforce, but my informants said that these guesthouses provided only small salaries and poor working conditions. In more luxurious hotels and resorts, it was hard to find jobs at all. It was even more difficult to be able to afford to visit them as a customer, so these establishments were perceived as relatively sealed off from their surroundings (Figure 5). These were places for "bazungu" – white people/westerners – as one bar worker told me.



Figure 6. Bwindi national park.

A motorcycle driver said he used to see how tourists were driven into the resorts in SUVs, remaining there until they went to the national parks, which were also inaccessible to most of my informants.

Up until the 1990s, the local forests provided a livelihood for many. Locals hunted and collected various products from them, or traded with those who did (Adams and Infield 2003, 180; Twinamatsiko et al. 2014). But when two major forests were declared national parks, all those who still lived in or in proximity to them were evicted (Adams and Infield 2003, 180; Martin 2017, 4). By the time of my fieldwork, only those who could afford guided tours could access them. My informants could not, and relatively few locals were able to find work as guides or conservationists (Twinamatsiko et al. 2014, 50–52). Tourists I talked to in the area said they wished the national parks to remain as free as possible from human inter-

ference. So having lots of workers in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, painted above (Figure 6), would probably not be attractive for tourists, nor necessary for the ecosystem. The practical reality was that my informants could see, but not touch, the forest.

They were reminded of this fact through their daily view. One of the national parks was not only visible from up close, but from virtually the entire district; some of the large inactive volcanoes which separate Uganda from Rwanda and the DRC are located in Kisoro's Mgahinga national park. During fieldwork, I met tourists who were going to hike up to the top of these. As I wanted to visit the place myself, I asked one of my informants to drive me to the foot of the Muhavura volcano, painted below (Figure 7). On our way there, my Boda Boda informant mentioned that although he had lived in Kisoro for his entire life, he had never set foot on Muhavura. He had seen the



Figure 7. Muhavura volcano.

distant outline of it every day when the weather was clear, and he had driven a few tourists there, but he had never entered the park himself. He said he would like to, but he had to prioritise his family's well-being.

So while volcanoes, forests, and tourism in general were a source of hope and pride among my informants – “I think you have seen how Uganda is beautiful,” one driver said – they also acted as symbols of exclusion, adding to the feeling that development was not for them, as ordinary local people, but for somebody else.

(Im)mobility

One of the clearest examples of inaccessible modernity relates to the new road twisting through the hilly landscape, connecting Kisoro to the rest of Uganda. Inhabitants were oc-

cupied with their daily activities right next to it, fetching water and walking uphill to their homes, but often without using the road (Figure 8).

Mobility is highly limited for poorer people in the world today, as globalisation has not benefited them much (Khosravi 2010, 66; Graeber 2005, 170). In Kisoro, the new roads which led out of the district were relatively empty, and the limited traffic was largely made up of trucks carrying foreign goods and SUVs carrying foreign tourists. This highlights that not only were certain areas within the district inaccessible, but that the surrounding world itself was. I met many inhabitants who said they could not afford to travel away from the area, even if they wanted to. While the asphalt had made the trip to the nearby town of Kabale hours shorter, as one man pointed out to me, it did not matter much, since “development” had also put many people in positions where



Figure 8. Kabale-Kisoro road.

they did not have the time or money to travel further than from the villages of the district to the central town – using old dirt roads instead – leading to daily views resembling this next one (Figure 9).

In addition to the small network of new asphalt, there existed a much larger network of dirt roads, which tied the district together and which my informants perceived as the roads for ordinary locals like themselves, in contrast to the asphalt, which was meant for someone else. When one driver drove in zig-zag patterns between the cracks, he complained: “Our government is bad. Many people use this road, but look at it.”

Apart from walking, virtually the only means of transport many of the inhabitants could afford was the Boda Boda (Figure 10). Most homes were located in the countryside but most jobs were located in the central town. Both drivers and customers regularly com-

plained about the roads in between, and while motorcycles handled them rather well, some of the drivers as well as the customers talked about motorcycles as an emergency solution which those in power could promote, rather than upgrading the roads so that they could support cars and buses.

Another reason motorcycle-taxis were more common than other types of transportation was that they were cheaper to run. They consumed less fuel than most other vehicles, and if many people were squeezed onto the same seat, rides were not very expensive (Figure 11). Enforcement of traffic laws was rare, and so was safety equipment. All this is, as scholars have pointed out, typical of the various types of informal transportation in the region (see Rizzo 2011). Feelings were ambivalent among both drivers and customers whom I talked to, who said they appreciated the freedom which the unregulated nature of



Figure 9. Typical dirt road.

this system provided, and that helmets would constitute an extra cost. At the same time, they referred to the motorcycle-taxi system with disappointment, portraying it as a mere shadow of various transport systems of the past.

As in many other African countries, state-owned or subsidised bus transportation and reliable railroad systems, perceived by many as a more comfortable and a safer way to get around, eroded away a long time ago in Uganda (Kumar 2011, 9; Olvera et al. 2012). The way my informants talked about how Uganda in many ways used to be better equipped in the past resonates with the feeling of abjection described by James Ferguson (1999). Writing about people in Zambia, he described it as a feeling of not only being excluded from opportunities they had never had access to, but also of being “abjected” from opportunities they actually *had* had access to in the past (Ferguson 1999, 237–238). When

one man heard me say that there are no motorcycle-taxis in Sweden, he saw it as a sign that Sweden was too modern for it. “You have cars and trains, of course you don’t need Boda Bodas.” As Ferguson has highlighted, many people on and off the continent think of Africa’s informal economy as a shadow version of its Western counterparts (Ferguson 2006, 15–17). Locals I talked to about it said they would prefer to use some other type of transportation if it was available, as motorcycle-taxis were associated with many risks in the form of accidents and theft, or even rape and murder. Among my informants, the Boda Boda was generally perceived as dangerous – both as a service and as a job. It was considered especially ill-suited for women during dark hours, something often talked about among both women and men. This was one of the main reasons few women worked as Boda Boda drivers, I was told. Several drivers feared dangerous passengers, and



Figure 10. Commuting.

many passengers feared the drivers. “They are thieves,” one man said.

The Boda Boda job was seen as a low-paid, low-status service job among the other such jobs available, and none of the drivers I talked to wanted to continue for long. “In Boda Boda there is no money my friend,” one driver told me. This pattern is reportedly common in other places in Sub-Saharan Africa as well. Motorcycle-taxi jobs and other jobs in informal transportation have been described as a last resort for people looking for work, in the absence of any better alternative (Konings 2011, 233; Rizzo 2017; Kumar 2011; Olvera et al. 2012).

One reason that many inhabitants commuted to their jobs, instead of moving to the central town, was that they had to back up their small incomes with subsistence farming in the countryside (Figure 12). Since households were spread out across the whole district

as a consequence of all the farms, the minibus-taxis which characterise some other parts of Uganda were largely missing here. It would be hard to fill them, so motorcycles filled virtually the entire demand for transportation instead. People working in shops or in bars in town told me they felt trapped into their situations of daily commuting, constantly having to travel back and forth between the countryside and the town, on foot or by motorcycle-taxi, basically just to survive. This way of life was described as something new, something which was part of modernity, but it was not a positive part of it.

In figure 12, I wanted to highlight that power lines could be seen passing through the district, but often just over the rooftops, constituting an infrastructure that was visible but not available, as many households could not afford connection. Some people were at least lucky enough to have a solar panel for some



Figure 11. Cheap ride.

interior light and for charging their cheap mobile phones. My visual interpretation and attempted thick description highlights that my informants did not feel completely excluded in every way – some had access to motorcycles (which they often rented from somebody else) and jobs (albeit low-paid). They were at least partially included, but only in aspects of development that were somehow distorted. These did not constitute livelihoods they had chosen, but leftovers of modernity which they had to make use of since they were excluded from more beneficial aspects of modernity and from the lifestyles which they imagined that many other people in the world could afford – lifestyles of urbanisation, industrial jobs, a larger range of affordable services, pleasure trips to far-away places, and so on. My informants thus perceived even this partial inclusion as a form of exclusion. “My salary, I would

not even call it a salary,” one woman who had recently found work in town told me.

Ferguson has highlighted that what is often thought of as cultural difference, deserving to be approached with cultural relativism, is sometimes a matter of inequality (2006, 18–19). Many researchers have described how various groups in different parts of the world feel like they are being left behind while their surroundings, far away or close by, move toward the future (see, for example, Meagher 2014; Trovalla and Trovalla 2015; McGovern 2011, 2; Utas 2003, 150–151; Mains 2007). If my informants had the possibility to choose freely, I was assured, they would not live in small houses on small farms. Almost all of them would like to be businessmen living in big luxurious urban houses.



Figure 12. Small-scale farming.

Countering the claimed objectivity of photographs

Since many would probably consider photographs an alternative to paintings, I find it necessary to compare the potentials of these two mediums. As my informants were critical towards various other actors in their society, and since I could not guarantee that they would not be negatively affected when my work was published, we agreed that they were to be kept anonymous, and that meant I could not take very illustrative photographs of them. Paintings, however, enabled me to use both blunt and clear images in my work, without the risk of disclosing identities. The individuals featured in my paintings are fictitious, and while the painted settings are clearly reminiscent of those actually observed, settings which are connected to certain individuals do not resemble the real settings to such a degree

that they can be identified. Taking and using a photo of a scene similar to the one in the painting above (Figure 12), which was inspired by one informant's home, would certainly be problematic, but paintings or drawings do not necessarily compromise integrity to the same extent. As Kim Tondeur writes, citing Michael Taussig, drawing can be regarded as "a practice of 'making' more than 'taking'" (Tondeur 2016). "Drawings are far less intrusive than photography," he adds (Tondeur 2016).

In this context, an understandable critique which I have encountered from readers of my work is that images like mine enable the painter to present made-up fantasies and, as a consequence, they have little informative value. Even among anthropologists, photographs have been seen as more representative of an ethnographic reality than drawings (Soukup 2014). Clearly, paintings can only be an artist's version of a reality. But this is not



Figure 13. The only painted person based directly on a real person – me (left).

unique to paintings, I would say. It has been argued that even photographs do not actually portray things “as they are” (Johansson 2017). The fact that photographs can be edited extensively has blurred the division between photographs and paintings, and a photographer also chooses what to exclude from the frame. Anthropologist Sverker Finnström has described his own experience of how a video journalist visiting northern Uganda, in an effort to portray an “accurate” war situation, arranged settings which he intended to portray, and asked to interview certain categories of people on camera based on his own predetermined criteria, to such an extent that his reporting did not provide much accuracy at all. Finnström argues that in fact it stripped the subjects portrayed of their humanity (2020).

Instead of constituting a more subjective form of representation, the capacity of paintings and drawings to help us identify our ever-

present subjectivity might be the thing that is most beneficial and valuable about their use as an anthropological tool. They can “push [us] to look at things from multiple angles and help the researcher to realise – more than textual notes do – how subjective and biased his perceptions are” (Tondeur 2016). They “encourage the necessity to take time, observe” (Tondeur 2016), and while a photographer might catch something in the camera frame without noticing it, an artist needs to think about what everything really looks like. As a result, paintings may demonstrate, in a more transparent way, the artist-anthropologist’s selective awareness. The reader-viewer can see which features in a particular motif have been considered important to portray in detail, and which features, in contrast, are painted in a more careless, not so detailed fashion. A reader-viewer who has extensive knowledge of the place which is portrayed can possibly even see

what is missing altogether from a certain motif.

As long as the artist is transparent and reflexive, there are good reasons for painting in unrealistic, subjective ways, in order to “stick closer to the lived experience of the moment” (Tondeur 2016), and the ethnographer does not necessarily need to be an experienced artist for this purpose. For the ethnographer, drawing one’s own interpretations of the field, of one’s informants and of oneself could, moreover, be seen as a self-reflexive activity, as the ethnographer thereby gets time to think about how his or her own position and presence affects the research (Johansson 2017).

Painting others encouraged me to paint myself as well, in an effort to be less exotifying, since I was also part of the field (Figure 13). This picture illustrates a relatively typical semistructured interview in a bar, where I steered the conversation through my list of questions. I felt that several of my interviews became tense – I tried to convey that in the body language of this piece – and as a result, I later came to favour more relaxed informal conversations which gave more control to informants, and which also tended to give richer information. With this image I wanted to demonstrate that researchers can make their descriptions “thicker” by using paintings as a way of adding to the transparency of their research methods and their own evaluation of them.

As Ana Isabel Alfonso and Manuel João Ramos (2004) have described in relation to their own research, one way of illustrating scenes in a more expressive manner is for the artist to depict “only the elements necessary to make explicit our interpretations of informants’ discourses” (2004, 83). The artist can erase irrelevant elements from a motif, while squeezing together that which is relevant into one and the same image. A clear example is my map (Figure 14).

I decided to paint my own map, with hand-painted text, to resemble the various hand-painted signs common in the area. While

it is loosely based on Google Maps (and on my observations), I focused on highlighting what I thought was relevant, such as the location of the asphalt roads, the national parks and forest reserves, the central town, and the district and international boundaries, while leaving out all the dirt roads and trails which cover most of the district, as I thought that that would create a confusing mishmash of colors. While images, in contrast to text, allow the presentation of several different categories of information at once (Sousanis 2015, 54–62), there are limits to what can be included in an image, too, before the information disappears in confusion. The overarching but still very subjective perspective that my map provides clearly and visually illustrates why informants felt that the spread of asphalt roads was highly limited. As can be seen, most of the district had no access to them, especially those inhabitants living and farming in the northern parts, far from these roads. While, indeed, two new asphalt stretches were planned at the time of my fieldwork in 2017 – one from Kisoro town to each of the two national parks, one in the north (Bwindi) and one in the south (Mgahinga) – my informants saw even these as part of an infrastructure built for others, namely tourists. “They are building a new road to Mgahinga for people like you, for the bazungu,” one driver told me as we were seated at the taxi stop observing some construction workers working on the preparations.

My main point here is to suggest that painted images can highlight the ever-present subjectivity in research more openly than photographs or simple text, and that they can bring forth the researcher’s interpretation of what informants think is important in a clearer and more expressive way. Acknowledged subjectivity can be a way of countering the domination of claimed objectivity.

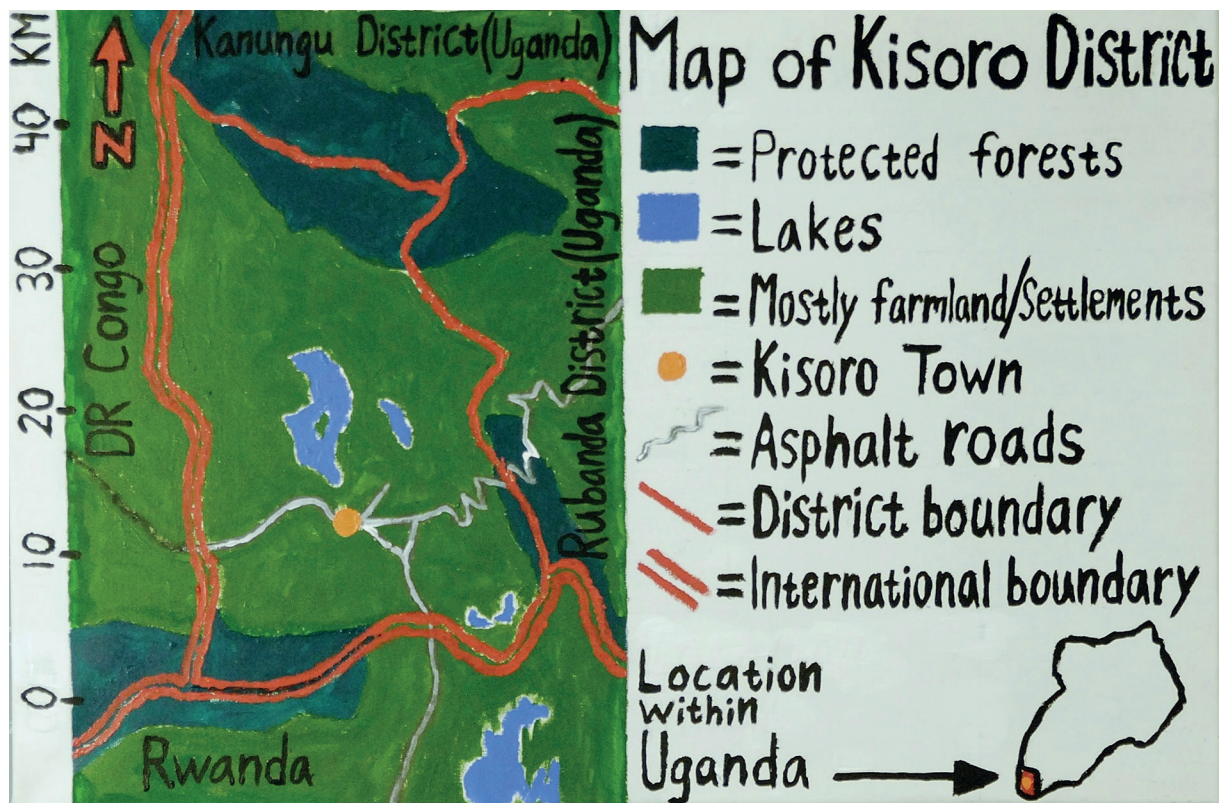


Figure 14. My own map of Kisoro district (2017).

Conclusion

I have sought to highlight how motorcycle-taxi drivers in Kisoro, Uganda felt excluded by various economic and infrastructural processes/transformations which they labelled as “development”, or “modernity”. I have also given attention to the fact that feelings of exclusion existed among other workers, suggesting that this experience is rooted in broader structures rather than in the motorcycle sector alone. This confirms patterns described by other scholars who have conducted research on how many groups of people, on the African continent and elsewhere, feel like they are being left behind (see, for example, Ferguson 2006; Trovalla and Trovalla 2015; Honwana 2013). My purpose is not to indicate that the responsibility for this lies solely on local leaders. After all, international actors have been highly involved in weakening African states,

affecting everything from trade patterns to economic inequality (Ferguson 2006, 11–12; Leys 2005, 114–116), and while more of the same – more “development” – would solve some problems, other experiences which my informants had, related to the problems of ever more motorcycles and the inaccessibility of tourist destinations, indicate that this is a question of kind rather than degree.

At the taxi stops, drivers waited, for customers, for income, and for better lives, while observing the changes around them and indicating to me that they felt more or less stuck. The Boda Boda drivers observed “development” but rarely took part in it. My understanding is that it largely constituted a visual experience loaded with emotions, something which motivates a transformation of this information into another visual form, rather than into simple text.

My paintings, combined with text, are

an effort to explore the paradoxes of modernity, to highlight visible and invisible aspects, and, through an alternative form of Geertz' thick description (2014), to bring us all closer together: the motorcyclists observed their society, I observed them observing, painting it helped my reflections, and the reader/viewer of this paper can observe my visual portrait of it all. This way, the reader is not just fed the ethnographer's textual descriptions of images (Sousanis 2015, 54–59). Instead, we are all – informant, researcher, reader – observers. There is arguably an unbridgeable gap between these three modes of observing, since we all come to our observations from different positions, with different resources at stake, and, to be fair, are also seeing fundamentally different images. Moreover, as Brad Weiss has pointed out for his informants in Tanzania, many feel that there is a “breach between the world as it appears and the world as it actually is” (Weiss 2009, 38), so pictures still do not provide the whole picture. Nonetheless, my argument is that paintings can at least make these various gaps slightly smaller, and understanding slightly more extensive. Paintings also do this in a way which clearly expresses the subjectivity involved in research. The researcher and his or her methods definitely affect the outcome, and researcher-made paintings offer an alternative way for the reader-viewer to see and interpret the researcher's focus. In addition, paintings can hopefully reach a wider audience, if not by being included in a research article, then at least in other contexts – through exhibitions, for example – possibly providing material for future studies while also making anthropology more accessible.

That said, my painting strategy constitutes an imperfect work in progress. So far, I have not been able to return to Kisoro since my fieldwork. I have, however, displayed my images there in digital form when possible. The reactions I have received from informants have been positive, although we have only been able to discuss their views via phone and social media. Some informants who do not

have smartphones have not seen the pictures at all. Unfortunately, these informants, who already felt excluded, were excluded from my painting process as well.

However, many of the sources cited regarding drawing or painting in relation to anthropology have described it as a more inclusive methodological tool. This may indicate a future path that anthropological painting could take. Johansson (2017), Tondeur (2016), and Alfonso and Ramos (2004) all describe how the anthropologist, or a co-worker, can make drawings during fieldwork, based on interviews and observations, in order to display them directly to informants. The informants can react to the drawings, discuss them, participate in redrawing them, or refute them, and the practice of doing this could function as a means of starting conversations, giving rise to more memories, and could provide visual material related to unphotographed experiences of the past, or invisible imaginations about the future. Alfonso and Ramos argue that drawing constitutes “a powerful methodological tool in anthropological research” (Alfonso and Ramos 2004, 76). I also see the potential of this, but I would not stop at the stage of sketches, as I still think there are advantages to creating more detailed paintings as well. Kisoro was a colourful area, literally – with lush green vegetation, fast-changing weather, bright commercial buildings and signs, multi-coloured markets and clothes – black and white sketches would not do it justice. Coloured versions lie closer to what I observed in the field. They can perhaps attract more attention than simple drawings, as the colours make them more eye-catching, and there is also a strong local tradition of colourful paintings in the area, meaning they can provide yet another means of engagement with local people.

A plausible next step to take this further would be to combine the methods described by these other visually oriented anthropologists with the types of paintings presented in this paper: making sketches, drawn hastily in the field with the help of informants, and de-

veloping them into detailed coloured images. This last step could be done after fieldwork if time is too limited in the field, and it would imply that the final visual presentation is – to a greater extent than what has been the case here – formed by informants and ethnographers

in collaboration. Of course, my informants' needs and wishes were much more extensive than this, but their inclusion in the painting process could at least be a small step towards inclusion in a wider sense.

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