Published as_*Perspective* in *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* (ISSN 2366-4142)

Reflections on Hunger in Burkina Faso

Melina C. Kalfelis

m.kalfelis@em.uni-frankfurt.de

Link to project: <http://www.sfb1095.net/forschung/teilprojekte/b-06-flexibel-aus-armut-selbstbeschreibung-und-taktiken-der-ressourcenerschliessung-von-nro-akteuren-in-westafrika.html>

Melina C. Kalfelis studied ethnology, psychoanalysis, and political science at Goethe University in Frankfurt/Main. Her Master's thesis concentrates on the life world of local actors in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Burkina Faso and their precarious life situation. Some of her results are published in her article "Flexibel aus Armut" in the journal *Paideuma* in 2015. Since December 2015 Melina C. Kalfelis has been a Fellow Researcher in the new collaborative research centre "Discourses of Weakness and Resource Regimes" located at the Goethe-University Frankfurt and associated with the *International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture* (GCSC) at Justus-Liebig-University of Giessen. For her PhD, she puts an emphasis on biographies of local NGO-actors, the history of local NGOs in Burkina Faso, and their relationship with international donors. Another emphasis is local poverty concepts and discourses of development.

Keywords

anthropology, fieldwork, reflection, emergency, development, poverty, hunger

Publication Date

Issue 1, May 30, 2016

How to cite

Melina C. Kalfelis. "Reflections on Hunger in Burkina Faso." *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 1 (2016). <http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2016/12059/>.

Permalink URL: <http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2016/12059/>

URN: <urn:nbn:de:hebis:26-opus-120597>

Reflections on Hunger in Burkina Faso

1_Introduction

The fight against poverty and hunger has been going on for decades. Statistics from the United Nations show that there has been some success: from 1990 to 1992 over a billion people experienced undernourishment, while from 2014 to 2016 the number declined to 794 million.[1] This is certainly a record of progress. Nevertheless, there is still a considerable amount of hunger and furthermore we do not fully understand this phenomenon. What feelings are connected to hunger and what strategies exist to mediate them? Who is still suffering from hunger today and why? How do social relationships affect hunger? How do people cope with the insecurities that are connected to it? At what point does hunger become an emergency? What consequences does it have? Are there different regional concepts of hunger? What is a useful way for us to think about hunger?

As an anthropologist I work with local NGOs in Burkina Faso in West Africa, a country labelled by the Human Development Report 2015 as one of the poorest in the world.[2] I am often confronted with both the realities on the ground and the methods used by local NGOs to communicate, describe, and fight against emergencies such as hunger. Nevertheless, it took me some time to begin to think about hunger as a phenomenon. Maybe this is because the reality of hunger or thirst seems to be easily comprehensible. All of us can probably say that we know the uncomfortable feeling of a rumbling stomach or dry throat. Yet this shared biological response does not enable us to understand what it is like to live with either the absence of proper nutrition or with famine. During my research I came to understand that hunger can be either a biological or social emergency that demands certain strategic responses.

_Starting Points

The idea to reflect on hunger developed from a daily situation that I witnessed at the office of a local NGO during a fieldwork in 2015. As usual, at noon I packed my stuff to drive home for lunch when one of my colleagues laughed and asked: "Melina, where are you going?" I replied: "I am going home, I will be back after lunch," and looked at my colleague, who grinned. It wasn't the first time I had the impression that my colleagues were laughing at me when I was about to go home to eat something. This time I asked: "Are you going to take a break too?" The group laughed even more and my

colleague shook her head. "But aren't you hungry?" I persisted. "Well, you know," she said. "We are used to it."

The core of anthropology lies within the ordinary: mechanisms unspoken but present. Sometimes you can find them quite easily; others you may never discover. If you are lucky, a small observation, a question or word can give you a moment of insight. This situation led me to one of these moments. It felt as if my view of reality collapsed like a sandcastle. Every day I visited this office and never consciously realized that my colleagues didn't leave their desks from 8 am until 5 pm. I rarely saw them drink, eat or drive home to take a break.

This made me think. Even though I knew about harvest problems, famine, and drought in Burkina Faso, hunger had never before been so concrete, emergent, and real to me. The idea that the people I know and I speak to every day had repeated experiences of hunger in their past had not crossed my mind. At this point, it is important to state that they had not experienced severe hunger that day or the week before, since many of these particular NGO professionals earn a salary. But the idea that they might not have lunch from force of habit raises questions about the circumstances that lead to this behavior. As a result, from that day onwards, I began to incorporate the question of hunger, and how one could experience it, into my research.

2_Methodological Options and Difficulties

I have never experienced hunger; it is therefore impossible for me to speak from experience. Participatory observation as a method has only a limited reach to an understanding of an experience such as hunger. One possibility would be to fast. However, this would only serve to reproduce some of the bodily experiences connected to hunger, because the season of fasting has a predictable beginning and end. The insecurity of not knowing whether there will be food tomorrow, and where to find it, cannot be imitated. The doubts, pressure, uneasiness, and misery connected to these uncertainties cannot be recreated. Fasting remains a possibility at this stage as a means of recording the reactions of my body, but the observations I make here are based on the experiences of other people.

There exist, therefore, epistemological difficulties with research on hunger. In addition, not only was I unable to observe by participating, but if I wished to speak about hunger, I always had to ask those around me specific questions on this subject. This

creates an interview situation, with certain expectations which the interviewee might want to fulfill. Yet the "question-answer situation" cannot be easily circumvented in this context, mainly because in Burkina Faso almost nobody speaks about hunger openly. Some colleagues explained to me that even if you ask someone whether he or she is hungry, they would probably deny it, even if it were true. One reason for this is that a lot of men and women are ashamed of those difficulties like hunger or starvation that are irrevocably linked to poverty. Although there appears to be an unspoken acknowledgment in Burkina Faso that many people live in reduced circumstances, the fear of being socially stigmatized dominates. Most people try to hide their suffering, worries, and problems from others. This creates the most significant obstacle to research, which is why I had to gain access to the topic through dialogue.

_Discourses of Hunger

I believe it is important to look beyond simplified statistics that state how many people in the world are suffering from hunger and start to analyze the complexity of the situation. Numbers seem to ignore that hunger can be a precarious emergency for persons who suffer from it. The stories recounted here are subjective and retold, but still give voice to those affected. In anthropology there are two main approaches that tackle hunger: The anthropology of the body and social dimensions of hunger. The former concentrates on feelings and bodily consequences that result from hunger. The social scope diversifies into dimensions of education, communities, and households. My approach does not choose between the two perspectives. Both angles will be used to reflect on this issue, since both were part of the stories, experiences, and feelings that were shared with me.

It is important not to rely on measuring hunger based on the number of meals consumed per day. Modern discourse of nutrition as well as development discourse often recommends three meals a day. This number of meals arguably creates a useful rhythm, especially for children who need regular nutrition to develop. Nevertheless, this model seems to be based on a daily routine of breakfast, lunch, and dinner. But these routines can differ. In Burkina Faso the day starts earlier, and therefore ends earlier. At noon it might be too hot to eat, so many people only eat in the morning and evening. Others have a different rhythm again. Even in my own social environment I know people who

eat almost nothing during the day, but have a full meal in the evening. Hence a recommended number of meals a day can only help to scale up the rough severity of food availability, but not how much food one actually requires. A person can eat two, three, or five times a day and still be too thin, suffer from malnutrition or get sick. This is why even early thinkers about hunger, such as Joseph Rowntree, conducted their critical studies by counting calories instead of meals. This method is still used in similar studies today. Nonetheless, my approach is an empirical one, and therefore more subject-related and qualitative; it's about hunger as a phenomenon that can become an emergency.

3_Feelings and Meanings of Hunger: The Bodily Dimension

Hunger can reoccur in any moment in any society; it is not static but fluid. It signifies a permanent threat. While a person can survive only two days without water, he or she can endure hunger for weeks. During this time different symptoms come and go. At first these are only bodily symptoms, but after some time hunger can also affect the personality. Hunger is like an anxiety of the body: it consumes a lot of energy, concentration, and drive. One moment it can be forgotten and the next it is overwhelmingly huge. Hunger changes the way you think, and influences decisions that have to be made. One's personality becomes unstable and changeable. Patient people can become hasty, peaceful people spiteful. Some have told me that they become aggressive, others that they become apathetic.

Hunger is the body's signal that it needs to eat. If this need cannot be fulfilled, the metabolism changes to consume less energy. Head and stomach-aches appear periodically. If a person has no fat reserves, muscle tissue is lost. In fact, the body faces an emergency. During my fieldwork in 2015 I spoke often with Jean, my teacher of Mooré (the most common local language in Burkina Faso), about hunger. We have known each other since 2009, when I first began to work at the NGO in which he also used to work. In 2013, when I returned to the field, he no longer had a salary and experienced some difficult years of economic insecurity. His life situation didn't change until he finished his teacher training in December 2015, which he was lucky to be able to complete. He told me that he regularly went to bed without having eaten anything. He depended on his friends to call and invite him for dinner. If they didn't he just tried to sleep.

I remember him telling me this, but I didn't realize what it really meant until I looked at some photos from 2009. Jean used to weigh maybe 15 or 20 kilograms more. I had not realized how thin he had become, and it distressed me how visible his lack of nutrition was. Sometimes the mind needs concrete signs of an incomprehensible hardship to understand it.

I also learned that training the stomach could make it easier to control hunger. The gastric muscle is elastic, meaning that the less you eat, the less it needs to be full. If a person does not eat except in the evenings, he or she can train the stomach to feel hungry only at night. Nevertheless, there is a limit to this ability. Another colleague told me about his time at school, when he could go hungry for days. He went into the forest to hunt, but had no success. In desperation, he drank some water with salt dissolved in it. This eased his hunger. Ultimately, he tricked his stomach.

Moreover, thirst and hunger seem to be strategically connected. As my colleague's salt-water story shows, the former seems to ease the latter, but the latter also seems to trigger the former. I once wanted to offer my Mooré teacher a biscuit during a conversation, but he refused — although he had once explained to me that it is rude to reject a present in Burkina Faso. His refusal should have alerted me that there was a cause I could not see. Instead, I insisted, since I knew that he had not much food available every day. He then ate the biscuit reluctantly and explained that this would make him thirsty. Again, I had a moment of insight: if you do not have much food to eat and water to drink, it is smarter to consume as little as possible. Salty food makes you thirsty; as I then realized, this would probably make him hungrier later too. I felt awful and never pushed somebody again to take some of my food or water.

4_Hunger in the Households: The Social Dimension

Many in Burkina Faso, both adults and children, only eat at night. The reason is that families in precarious economic situations depend on subsistence farming. During the day, a colleague explained, the parents "search for food;" they harvest and try to sell some of their crop or they just keep it for themselves. Sometimes they exchange food with other people on the market to obtain some variety. In the evening they cook and eat, if they can. Sometimes there are some leftovers for the next day, sometimes not.

The availability of food in a household that lives on subsistence farming is dependent on an endless number of factors, including weather, season, and soil. From January

to June people in rural Burkina Faso often rely on the fruits of the preceding wet season. Families have harvested their crops and food is available. From June to September, especially if there was too little rain, there isn't much left to eat and the new crops aren't ready yet. In Burkina Faso this period is called the "période de soudure" (period of welding). At this time households harvest cereals in a precocious state that are already consumable to shorten the period of hunger. Anyhow, this example shows why hunger can be a *seasonal* problem, an old chief in the village of Kogho told me. Conclusively the emergency of hunger can be, persistently, too.

Hunger can be an *economic* phenomenon as well. Since the government of Burkina Faso increasingly invests in cash crops like corn or cotton, whole households have begun to depend on these monocultures. Unfortunately, they often do not grow other food as a safety net, relying only on these commissions for profit. As a result, a bad season or the decrease of global market prices can plunge a progressively growing number of households into a hunger crisis.

Local chiefs in Burkina Faso have developed a strategy to help their village through such periods. After the rainy season they collect a definite amount of grain from each household to store in a so-called *baoore*. During difficult periods, they open the storage and distribute the food to the households. These safety measures are executed on the community level and for the benefit of all households who are able to participate.

But not every household is able to produce so many crops. For many, existence is hand-to-mouth. In such cases, the principle of subsidiarity comes into effect, and the closest relatives must support the person who is experiencing difficulty. I consciously use the verb 'must' instead of 'can,' because in Burkina Faso subsidiarity is more of a duty than a choice. If it is not acted upon — even if the person is just about able to survive on their own — social relationships are endangered. Logically, it follows that emergencies such as famines can lead to tension or even ruptures within social networks. The interplay of duty and expectation is delicate. Even if subsidiary relations of mutual obligation are usually strong enough to overcome individual crises, they are not always activated. This can severely overload social networks, or even destroy them. Ultimately, this can be disastrous for individuals, since these social networks function as important security nets. Some social groups, such as widows, are excluded from their husbands' families and can have no subsidiary networks at all. In such circumstances, hunger can be *commonplace*, a part of daily life for both adults and children.

Mooré contains the word *nin-bangla* (*nin* = eyes, *bangla* = pitiable). It describes the feeling you have when you see someone who is obviously suffering from hunger. It is the feeling you get, my Mooré teacher explained to me, when you sit at home and watch your children cry because they are hungry. In this sense, hunger is *visible*. It is interesting to compare this with the ideas behind pictures used by development organizations to visualize suffering, such as during the Biafra War in Nigeria, when pictures of gaunt children with swollen stomachs were sent around the world in an attempt to visualize famine in the area. In the case of *nin-bangla*, its meaning supposedly goes beyond the perception of a bodily condition. It includes both subjects, that which is seen and the person affected, as well as the feelings that are connected to the moment, such as the pain and pity of a mother when she sees her children cry because they are suffering from hunger.

_Coping Strategies

There are many coping strategies for household food crises, which is why I can only name the most common here. On the community level I have mentioned *baoore* as a coping strategy. Alternatively, households send their child away to other relatives or friends so as to have one less stomach to feed. It is not uncommon in Burkina Faso and perhaps even West Africa in general for children to grow up apart from their parents until they are independent. For the children who go into care, conditions can vary: some relatives need help at home, which the child being taken-in provides. These children work very hard, particularly the girls. In exchange the child has food and a place to sleep: very valuable circumstances that are worth striving for at any cost. Other children are sent to school and have to help during their free time.

Muslim families may also send their sons to Koran Schools. Most of these boys are called *talibé* children in Burkina Faso, a term that can be translated as "student children." Many of them spend their days begging on the streets on behalf of the marabout (an Islamic saint) and live in his courtyard, where they get some food and are allegedly often beaten. This example clearly shows how religious capital is transformed into economic capital, and vice versa. While the marabout uses his religious status and teaching role to make the children fill his pockets with money, the children acquire money by begging in order to remain a part of the group, learn about the Koran, and be included in the marabout's prayers. Another strategy, if one has a daughter, is to try to give her

away in marriage, because then the new husband is responsible for her care and the parents' household profits from the bride price. Other parents keep their children at home, and attempt to maximize their gain by having more helping hands in the field or at the market.

As a countermeasure, some schools and kindergartens offer lunch for the children or even some take-away food for dinner in order to motivate parents to sign them up for school. This strategy is reasonable, but does not feed all the members of the household. For the most part, because of school fees, only one child can go to school while the others are sent away or have to work.

School fees constitute a hurdle for many parents. It takes a lot of encouragement from NGOs to induce families to spend their small yearly stocks of money on school instead of on the basic needs of the household. Consequently, spending money on school means taking a risk. If someone gets sick or crops are poor, education buys neither medicine nor flour, which may be essential for survival.

It seems that setting priorities is both a danger and, at the same time, an important necessity for those living in poverty. If your wife or child gets sick, the chief from Kogho explained to me, you will have to think twice: do you sell your last chicken to buy medicine or keep it? You have to decide between health and nutrition, since it is not possible to have both. This, like many other similar situations, demonstrates that all actions and decisions come with consequences; in poverty these consequences can be existential, precarious, and far-reaching. They can lead to social disability, hunger or the destruction of choices.

5_Hunger and Education

Despite this, a growing number of children go to school. This is the result of NGO campaigns. While NGOs used to provide informal, free-of-charge schools for children who wanted and were able to obtain their primary school certificate, the number of these schools is declining. A more common method now is to pay the children's school fees while a co-worker looks after them during that period. One reason for this change may be to attempt to prevent NGOs from undermining the government's school system by founding informal schools.

These changes do not affect the fact that education remains an intrinsic part of development priorities in Burkina Faso. This seems to be based on several factors. Firstly,

education is unquestionably important. Secondly, the official school system in Burkina Faso can be problematic, not only because school fees pose a barrier for poorer families but also because children over the age of eight are no longer allowed to go to primary school. They cannot therefore begin their education from the start if they have been unable to attend school before the age of eight. This is why there still exist informal NGO-run schools that offer a primary school certificate for older children and adults. Thirdly — this being a personal observation of non-governmental development — education as a concept attracts resources and private donations. This may be because many of those who donate have received some education and feel that it is valuable, or because in economic discourses education is praised as a key factor of success.

_Education Without a Base

I do believe that education is important, but my observations in Burkina Faso indicate that no solution for an isolated problem can solve the multidimensional challenge of poverty. Providing a household with enough food every day does not eradicate illness or encourage hygiene. Providing medicine does not kill E. coli bacteria in the water gathered by a group of households in the local woodland. Building a stable house does not fertilize the vegetable patch. Supporting one child does not change the hopeless situation of its parents and siblings.

There seems to be a similar problem with education. Many children do not receive enough food at school. Burkina Faso has adopted the French all-day school system, which includes a long break at noon, but many children do not get any food at home and have no money to buy some.

Jean, my Mooré teacher, who is now also a public school teacher, told me of his experience of children being hungry in class. Sometimes, he said, they seem to have no concentration and are apathetic. They seem to lack energy, which is not normal for children. Some even lay their heads on the table or fall asleep during the lesson. Jean told me that he then approaches the children and asks them if something is wrong. He himself grew up as an orphan and knows what it means to be hungry for days. In general these children answer that nothing is wrong; only some admit that they do not feel well in their stomach. Sometimes Jean then gives the child a little money and allows him or her to go outside and buy some rice. Afterwards, he said, they have totally changed.

It is clear, therefore, that even if education is considered desirable, the social picture as a whole poses challenges. Like many other large-scale projects, education can fail when it is faced with the complex life situations of individuals. The social reality which has to be applied to global concepts is not taken into account sufficiently. When we talk about the importance of education, do we consider that some children are potentially too hungry and weak to learn? A large number of children in Burkina Faso have to repeat classes, as many of them come from households in unstable economic situations and may be affected by malnourishment. Another problem that derives from their situation is a lack of electricity, which means they cannot learn or do their homework after dark. Repeating classes doubles costs and therefore reduces the chances of a child continuing school. Here again, the interconnected circumstances of daily life pose interconnected problems that cannot be separately solved.

6_Conclusion

Hunger is like a shadow. Sometimes it is visible and sometimes it is not, but it follows the people, and affects them everywhere they go. It creates anxiety and desperation. As long as hunger is present, it remains an internal experience of the body and mind. Some of its different degrees of severity constitute an emergency.

In addition, hunger can also be a form of poverty, a social stigma, or a motor for subsidiarity as well as network ruptures. Therefore hunger is also socially relevant, and has an inherent impact on culture. It forces a person to put his or her body on trial, develop strategies, and struggle for solutions. It puts constraints on children. Everything connected to hunger is relative, except hunger itself as a biological fact.

Hunger can be an ordinary part of life, a seasonal one or a result of global change. The more frequently it occurs, the more of an impact it has on human communities. Experiences of hunger can structure habits, viewpoints, and attitudes. Even if these experiences lie in the past, they can still affect the future.

For myself, this reflection functions as a first exploration of what hunger can mean. I remember that it all started with a simple thought I had in the NGO office: I feel hungry, so I go and eat.

It seems that privilege like this can be ordinary too.

_Endnotes

[1] "Undernourishment around the world in 2015," accessed April 26, 2016, <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4646e/i4646e01.pdf>.

[2] "Human Development Report 2015," accessed April 26, 2016, <http://report.hdr.undp.org/>.