An African Case Study in Applied Collaborative Visual Anthropology
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I. Ethnographic Background

In Tanzania, Maasai and other pastoralist peoples constitute only 3% of the population. Yet these East African cattle herders have become famous throughout the world for their beauty and bravery, and the Tanzanian tourist industry uses their image of dancing and leaping warriors as a visual metaphor for the country as a whole. Tragically, in the last thirty years, since I first conducted research with Ilparakuyo Maasai near Dar es Salaam, these cattle-dependent peoples have lost their wealth and herds to disease, drought, shrinking grazing lands and government policies against transhumant pastoralism.

As a result, tens of thousands of Maasai have migrated to Tanzania’s cities, where their famous iconoclasm and “undeveloped” traditionalism have rendered most of the men incapable of employment except as night watchmen and hair dressers, and the women as bead workers and sellers of traditional herbs. Often Maasai in cities are only semi-fluent in the national language, Swahili. Further, they are often subject to discrimination – partly because of their insistence on wearing ilkaresh, the traditional togas in bright reds and purples which insistently distinguish them culturally from the city’s dominant non-Maasai ethnic groups.

II. Project antecedents

Since my first Maasai fieldwork, I have focused my filmmaking in Central and North America and have conducted several applied visual studies including work on HIV, racism and cultural repatriation. In developing the applied aspect of filmmaking, three factors have become most interesting to me: collaboration, facilitated screenings and project longevity. I will discuss these in relation to a pilot project in applied visual anthropology conducted among urban Maasai of Tanzania in 2008. Together with two Maasai-led non-governmental organizations in Dar es Salaam, and a graduate student, Shamia Sandles, I produced two social interventionist films relating to the crisis of migrant Maasai.

Our collaboration in the design, shooting, editing and screening of these films developed from the educational theories of Paulo Freire whose Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972) champions liberatory collaboration among the poor in Latin America. Like Freire’s work, ours sought a non-hierarchical, grassroots-generated educational plan. Our project also took inspiration from the transformation of film screenings into activist interventions. This transformation was first described by Engelhart (2003) and Levine (2003) in the STEPS for the Future project of Southern Africa. The promotion of conversations among audience members after films are screened allows personal problems to be recognized as being publicly shared. Post-screening activism promotes collaboration in a second sense: when audiences adopt new attitudes and approaches to their problems, they become part of the collaborative
process. Behavior change and empowerment of the audience are the reasons for making the films in the first place.

The *Maasai Migrants* project also sought longevity through the design of “appropriate messages” akin to appropriate technology. We are attempting to establish long-term collaboration with Tanzania Maasai NGOs, both through the development of a field school in applied visual anthropology in Dar es Salaam, and through the creation of many short educational films – in the Maasai language – that will spark urban Maasai to grapple together with their collective problems in post-screening discussions.

### III. Collaborations

The fact that I have so little time forces me to touch only on the surface of the issues that should be introduced. I will identify in outline the kinds of problems we faced in the *Maasai Migrants Project* and leave the details for later.

#### A. Maasai as production collaborators

Despite applied anthropologist’s desire to serve an entire community, we always only meet individual people whose individual qualities will color the work we do and the constituencies we can serve. Since *Maasai Migrants* was a pilot intervention, representing the first step of a long process, the collaborators I selected were not necessarily the most ideal. Yet they were very good and the best I could find under restricted circumstances. They also eventually led me to other collaborators with skills they did not have themselves. For the first year’s work, however, I was committed to them. They were Maasai from Arusha, a fact which burdened them in the eyes of individuals from other Maasai sections, and recent university graduates as well. They who had started and NGO to serve the pastoralist communities of their origin.

I was able to find these collaborators because they were at the university, and they were at the university because they had converted to Christianity at an early age: they had been recognized by their priests to have unusual intelligence and a capacity for study. But their removal at an early age from their traditional religion and community alienated them to some extent from those they wanted to serve. These facts had important consequences for our collaborative work.

#### B. Teaching non-hierarchical collaboration

Maasai society is strongly segregated by age and sex. My position therefore as an older man, who was paying all the project bills and working with Maasai men and women in their late twenties, also entailed considerable social baggage.

I found myself, for example, often nagging my Maasai female to assert herself and exercise in practice the feminist theory she had learned at school. Yet she had also been taught modesty and silence in the presence of men, and told me that a professor had never before asked her opinion – much less left important decisions up to her. My young male *olmurrani* (“warrior”) Maasai collaborator, on the other hand, was difficult to work with for very different reasons. Although he knew nothing about filmmaking apart from what I taught him, he sometimes took my words literally and he stridently complained if I changed my mind or offered a nuanced alternative to a plan I had earlier proposed. His cultural training as a commanding and assertive warrior sometimes made him difficult, for although my first goal
was to promote non-hierarchical collaboration in the team, that goal also obliged us to respect the expertise of each team member.

C. Collaborating in selecting the film topic

Before this project began, the olmurrani colleague and I had discussed the need for HIV and alcohol-abuse educational films in the Maa language. We also discussed several other possibilities for problem-area intervention films. But I was anxious to let the topic be selected by my collaborators at the time of my arrival for filming. I was happy to accept their consensus opinion that a more general ethnographic overview of the social conditions of urban Maasai would be more valuable – as our first effort – than any educational film we might make about a specific problem-area. My Maasai collaborators reasoned that such a film as the one they proposed could spark useful post-screening discussions among Maasai audiences. Equally important, it could show potential funding agencies that their NGO served a deserving and extremely disadvantaged community.

Rather than making a film about condoms, then, we made a more general ethnographic film about the poverty and sexism, and about the inordinate power that Maasai men in the urban context have over women. Here is the first segment of the eight-segment film which shows how one night watchman in a Dar es Salaam factory controls the fate – and sexuality – of many otherwise homeless women.

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D. Maasai as collaborating film subjects

The project team included – in addition to our two primary Maasai university graduates – three Maasai night watchmen and an urban Maasai mother. We sought in addition the willing involvement of a community of forty or fifty Maasai who spent their days in the garbage-strewn Mwenge region of Dar es Salaam. Yet this community was very difficult to reach. Their intense poverty – along with the famous independence that makes Maasai attractive to the Western imagination – made them very difficult collaborators. They were in such need that they had little largesse for filmmakers who could do nothing but promise good things in the distant future.

I am not opposed to paying or somehow otherwise reciprocating the energy and assistance given to a film project by its collaborators. Ideally, I should have found a gift that I could have given to the entire community. Elder and Kamerling, for example, provide an useful model in this regard, as they have often found excellent ways to reciprocate for the privilege of filming in Eskimo villages (Elder 1995). Unfortunately, in the event, I was forced to pay bribes to ilmurran gang bosses and then pay each participant individually. Traditionally, Maasai ilmurran are under strict control of their elders, but few elders migrate to cities, so the young toughs there were in charge. If my young NGO collaborators had been more experienced, they would have known how to step over the heads of the gang bosses to win approval for our project from age-set spokesmen. Unfortunately, it was only by the end of our five week stay that we came to understand what we should have done at the beginning. We hope to do better next year.
IV. Facilitated screenings

A. Maasai film viewers as collaborators

In the United States, those who seek public television funding for documentaries are told that they need to guarantee twenty million viewers. In applied visual anthropology, the goal is met if we have only twenty viewers per screening. This is true because, ideally, our audiences become our collaborators. The film is a “trigger” whose goal is to so move viewers by the conditions they see on screen that they choose to collaborate together – first in post-screening discussions, then outside in their communities – putting into practice what they have discussed theoretically in the screening room.

B. Facilitated screenings as group therapy

The Southern African STEPS for the Future film project demonstrated the power that can be unleashed when a skillful facilitator leads participants through the difficult process of self-disclosure. As is true with group psychotherapy, the public revelation of personal problems has therapeutic consequences both for speaker and listener. Such confessions allow listeners to recognize universality, to recognize that the intimate problems of their fellows are not idiosyncratic. Along with this interpersonal learning, self-disclosure can bring catharsis and a sense of group cohesiveness that are keys to productive social change. Since urban Maasai lack the presence of elders, group discussions also serve the psychological goal of providing a corrective recapitulation of the primary family group. People collectively find ways to compensate for what could not be provided from their homes. Here, the involvement of ilmurran age-set leaders can provide important remediation in distorted social conditions.

C. Cooptation of facilitated screenings

Unfortunately our NGO collaborators in the Maasai Migrants project were more familiar with the local Lutheran priests than they were with the local age-set leaders. Our first screening was therefore scheduled in a Lutheran church. And the screening was utterly co-opted by evangelicals proselytizing the Word of the Lord.

After all of our work, after finishing the film at 4:30 on the morning of the screening day, after all of our advertising for the Maasai audiences to attend, even after feeding our audience of seventy viewers at project expense, that audience was prevented from discussing the film because the church’s priest and others consumed 90% of the discussion time. Few people in the audience had a chance to hear one word about women living in garbage dumps and threatened by diseases whose existence they denied.

D. Training the facilitator

After this upset, we on the production collaboration team spent several hours debriefing. The man we had selected as our facilitator, an eloquent but young Maasai night watchmen, maturely acknowledged his errors and promised to do better. He had allowed the priests to speak for so long because they were his elders and religious cynosures, and Maasai traditional oratory demands that young men remain silent in their presence. But our facilitator was also unable to lead the discussion for other reasons as well. He had assumed that the social problems raised by the film with its concrete examples would spark abstract discussion and critical thinking about solutions that might be effective. But he was mistaken. Maasai audiences were no prepared to jump spontaneously into abstract analysis from the springboard
of the visual concrete than are beginning students in visual anthropology classes. People must be trained to see. Specifically, they must be trained to analyze critically and abstractly that which they see.

For example, in this collaborator meeting, I emphasized to the facilitator that the junior elder who is seen in the film gazing at a mirror and then forcing himself semi-sexually on “his cow,” a very ill woman under his protection, should not be accepted or understood as merely an amusing encounter, but rather as a token of a type. The footage gives an example of how the traditional sexual chauvinism of a junior elder in the non-traditional context of urban poverty and HIV – can have deadly consequences: the woman who are dependent on him for a place to sleep can no more reject him sexually than they can insist that he use a condom.

E. Contending with restrictive aspects of Maasai oratory

I have mentioned that traditional Maasai elders orate for as long as they please. Further, women are utterly silenced in such situations. For our purposes, the exclusion of women and existence of this gender inequality meant that we needed to create discussion sessions composed exclusively of women. Once we realized this fact, we did convene a successful women-only meeting. Maasai men are inclined to pontificate but the literature on group therapy suggests that conversational give and take, not the traditional oratorical style, is most beneficial. Not only must facilitators take women aside for their own conversations, they must also seek to transform orations into conversations. Facilitator must insist on new premises for post-screening discussions.

V. Longevity

A. Essential messages

The Maasai Migrants project progressed on the theory that post-screening discussions offer the best opportunity for applied anthropological films to promote their messages and spark behavior change. Following the model of group psychotherapy, facilitated film-audience conversations should be frequent. Frequent and regular meetings are most likely to encourage the emergence of a sense of group solidarity. Moreover, like group therapy sessions, the discussion topics of each post-screening discussion should be relatively restricted. This will keep conversations focused on problem identification and problem solving. For these reasons, a maximally affective applied anthropological film campaign, based on small group discussions, will ideally have a repertoire of media covering a reasonably large repertoire of social problem topics. HIV, alcoholism, the need for a night-watchman union, and employee rights are among important possibilities for future films.

B. Visual anthropology field school

Beginning next summer, therefore, I hope to lead as many as graduate students in a two month field school in which we will create four more topic films in Maa for use by local facilitators. This effort will not only give my students and their local Tanzanian counterparts a valuable experience in the production of break-neck-productions media, but will also help fill the need for longevity by contributing to the battery of Maasai-centered, Maa-language interventions.
C. Casting a wide net

With the arrival of monied foreigners – for example, monied visual anthropologists visiting Tanzania – local collaborators are tempted to isolate the foreigners and keep them to themselves. Anthropologists are a source of money, possible future employment, and prestige – and the act of sharing their wealth and social caché with other locals is challenged by understandable resistance. It is important, therefore, for activist anthropologists to refuse to become the private property of any single NGO or group. One of my collaborators prevented me from meeting the leader of a “competing” Maasai NGO for three weeks. When I finally insisted on the meeting, I learned that my new acquaintance had many strengths that my current collaborators lacked, and that I could do good work with the new group without compromising (in my own estimation) my obligations to the old. My new acquaintance had organized many HIV focus groups among Maasai and had filmed them. His footage, though the work of an amateur with an inexpensive camera – contained unique and essential emic data about which any HIV campaign for Maasai must be aware. I took his footage, translated it to English with him, and made a second film. It has already been used successfully as part of an effort to convince my new colleagues’ funding agency to approve his second round of funding. The same film that we produced for the funders will also be used in future Maa focus groups as the “trigger” to prompt facilitated discussions. Further, it will also be useful to applied and medical anthropology students who will realize from it how important it is to listen before designing a health intervention.

Here is a three-minute clip from this fourteen minute film.

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Elder, Sarah

Engelhart, Lucinda

Freire, Paulo

Levine, Susan