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Article

Folk Filmmaking: A Participatory Method for Engaging Indigenous Ethics and Improving Understanding

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Abstract

On an assignment to produce videos promoting Cross River gorilla conservation to indigenous communities in Nigeria and Cameroon, I invited community members to join me. I followed decolonising and feminist methodologies to develop a form of participatory video production, 'Folk Filmmaking', in which participants present their own accounts of wildlife, conservation, and environmental values by performing stories. Through the films, participants shared their knowledge as morality tales, providing contextual nuance to moral challenges, clarity on local concerns, and opportunities for better understanding of local conflicts with conservation. Most films use gorillas as a plot device but orient the moral issues not to the ape's plight but to communal struggles with challenges such as marginalisation, modernity, and corruption. The films do not say how best to conserve the last 300 Cross River gorillas but they help articulate indigenous values and show the challenges conservation must overcome. This paper shares an account of lessons learned during the project through continual, critical reflection on my process. It describes my methodology and the films produced then offers an analysis and evaluation of the project. It concludes with notes on the potential and pitfalls of participatory video in contexts of cross-cultural conflict over conservation.

Keywords: Cameroon; conservation education; Cross River gorilla; decolonising methodologies; ethnoprimatology; folklore; indigenous knowledge; Nigeria; participatory video

INTRODUCTION: AN ABSENCE OF AFRICAN ACCOUNTS

Few non-Africans have heard an African story about gorillas. Gorillas were "discovered" by a German explorer, named in Greek, and popularised by western hunters, biologists, and conservationists (Schaller 2010; Newman 2013). As colonists reported on African animals, colonial control over knowledge production prevented the inclusion of indigenous accounts (Goldman 2007).[1]

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Sometimes Africans told colonists fanciful tales about gorillas, e.g. gorillas like to sit around dying campfires; silverbacks will steal and bite or break guns over their knee (Newman 2013). Africans also kept much of their knowledge about gorillas and their relationship with the ape secret, due to its sacred nature (Meder 1999). Indigenous knowledge explains gorilla behaviours and guides interactions between community members and gorillas. It differs from the objective, impartial knowledge sought by western science. When African accounts of gorillas included stories about how to interact, e.g. what to do if one meets a gorilla on a path, they confused westerners looking only for gorilla facts.

Westerners sought to study gorillas in their natural habitat, unaffected by people. Their intellectual orientation came from a long western tradition of separating humans from nature and of understanding nature as defined by lack of human influence. Primatologists sought evidence from objective, detached observation, not anecdotes of encounters. They did not research gorillas' interactions with indigenous communities, only how

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gorillas acted alone in the forest (Fuentes and Hockings 2010). This hierarchy of knowledge resulted in the omission of many African accounts, including folk stories, indigenous beliefs, and other ways of connecting gorillas to culture. Colourful and un-scientific accounts of gorillas appeared in the literature, but from western hunters, journalists, and scientists writing for the popular press (Sanderson 1937; Merfield 1956; Schaller 2010; Gott and Weir 2013; Newman 2013). African accounts appeared only in passing and via outside interpretations. As cultural relics, the global audience has King Kong, and no African alternatives.[2]

The history of hierarchy among knowledges continues to have repercussions for human-gorilla relations. It presents an epistemic injustice in exclusion of African knowledge and creates fundamental challenges for conservation efforts, including in efforts to educate Africans about gorillas (Fricker 2007; Anderson 2012). Conservation education programmes are a main strategy for seeking the support of indigenous communities, especially in areas of conflict. Conservation efforts for the critically endangered Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*) offer an example. Fewer than 300 Cross River gorillas remain, scattered over thirteen hillsites in the Cross River headwaters along the border of Nigeria and Cameroon (Dunn et al. 2014). Different conservation regimes span the gorillas' habitat, ranging from unprotected forests to national parks. Conservationists need the support of indigenous communities but locals often feel that conservation represents the interests of outsiders over their own, especially as they lose autonomy over their land (Ezebilo 2013; Nkemnyi et al. 2013, 2016).[3] Though conflict is usually expressed as community frustration at local meetings, it can be more violent and aggressive. Anecdotes and social media tell of heightening conflict on both sides: local hunters arrested as poachers, park rangers assaulted by forest-users.

The 2014-2019 Action Plan, compiled by an international team of over forty conservationists, targets threats of poaching and habitat loss. It calls for better law enforcement and legislation and maintains that indigenous communities will not support conservation without incentives and alternatives, and increased participation. To implement the plan, conservationists provide opportunities for community management, such as establishing local Gorilla Guardians to patrol habitat (Nicholas et al. 2015). They teach classes at local schools, start conservation clubs, and contact hunters and forest-users, offering them livelihood alternatives such as beekeeping and giant snail farming.

The plan also called for bolstering education and sensitisation programmes with media.

Primate conservation education efforts increasingly include media (Wright 2010). In Cross River, conservationists broadcast a radio programme, "My Gorilla, My Community", and hold film screenings. Around the Nigerian hillsites, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Nigeria began by screening BBC programmes featuring gorillas.[4] The screenings proved popular but did not elicit the response conservationists hoped for. The programme narratives focused on the lives and needs of the gorillas, as voiced by a British narrator. They featured few locals or connections with indigenous communities; they were designed for a different audience. While studies show the programmes increase support for primate conservation in western countries, their impact in primate-habitat countries remains unclear (ibid).[5] Conservationists responded by producing media tailored to the indigenous communities.[6] The success of *Ajani's Great Ape Adventures* (van Weeghel 2013), a series of films about a Ugandan boy's interactions with gorillas and chimpanzees, poachers and rangers, inspired WCS Nigeria to produce a similar series for Cross River gorillas.[7] WCS invited me to produce the films.[8] I chose to make the films not only for the communities, but with them. Participatory methods offered a chance to address both, the need for media tailored to indigenous communities and the lack of representation of African accounts of African apes.

This paper critically evaluates my attempt to apply participatory methods while producing media for conservation education. Section Two describes my methodology. Section Three presents the results. Section Four analyses the effort. Throughout, I relate lessons learned through continual reflection on my process.

METHODOLOGY

Whose stories do wildlife films tell?

Wildlife films are a distinct genre of movies focused on telling animal stories. Though western audiences expect and often demand scientific accuracy in wildlife films, decrying staged events and blatant manipulation, scholars challenge the notion that wildlife films are nonfiction documentaries (Brockington 2009). Bousé (2000) describes the artifice in their craft and construction, and notes the genre's many tropes including a focus on beauty and drama, pristine settings and charismatic species, and an avoidance of people, politics, and historical references. Struggling to find audiences and funding, filmmakers often exaggerate and over-emphasise certain events (predation, mating) while obscuring the more common and mundane (Mittman 2009). Igoe describes how such image-making can be "true without being accurate", promoting select fragments of space and time as representative of a reality of which they are only a part (2017: X). The abstractions help the films produce distinct ideas of wildlife. Brockington argues that wildlife film "by its very nature, and throughout its history, has always involved careful constructions that interpret nature, rather than reveal it" (2009: 44). Wildlife films come almost exclusively from a single interpretation of nature, that of an industrialised, western perspective stressing the separation of humans and nature (ibid).[9] The films are produced by people whose understanding of modernity dissociates them from the very nature they produce (Igoe 2017: 8). Meanwhile, their films continue to reassert and reinforce their idea of what nature should look like (Brockington 2009). The erasure of people in the genre reflects the way indigenous communities were removed to create space for colonial inhabitation (Hughes 2010; Igoe 2017). The separation and abstraction of the interpretation reinforces the erasure, and not only excludes indigenous communities by controlling the narratives around wildlife and therefore the conservation space, they "elide conflict and eschew competing imaginaries" of wildlife as well (ibid: 12). The continued impositions on indigenous land and knowledge are connected (Smith 2012).

Conservation films are a sub-genre of wildlife films focused on action as well as entertainment. They aim to move the audience from passive contemplation of wildlife to active engagement (Igoe 2017). Designed and deployed as propaganda, they describe what needs to be protected, from whom and what it needs to be protected, and who should do the protecting. Conservation films are used, both, to raise funds from foreign audiences, and, to raise awareness among local communities. Igoe describes how they transform actual spaces of nature into images, "which in turn are transformed into money, which can be used to fix and transform actual spaces of nature and produce more images. As demand for these spaces and images grows over time, these looping transformations often intensify and perpetuate" (2017: 9–10). The films have power.

By controlling the narratives around wildlife, conservation efforts assert a particular perspective and dominant idea, in deliberate and intentional efforts to justify, control and grant particular rights to particular people in the same place (Mbembe 2003; Garland 2008). Conservation films tailored to local communities present yet another iteration of "the indigenous problem": the idea that the main threat facing wildlife, the locus of the problem, lies within the local community itself, rather than social, political, and structural issues (Smith 2012: 94). The limited scope of problem orientation helps conservationists reaffirm their own beliefs, even as they ignore their historical and current role in the environmental problem. They are "deeply implicated in the very ruination that [they promise] to repair" (Igoe 2017: 110). This orientation obscures the relationship of the West to the plight of Cross River gorillas, leaving out colonial gorilla hunting and logging of forests, contemporary global appetites for cocoa, timber and other resources, the inequalities inherent in conserving gorilla habitat for ecotourism and science instead of for non-timber forest products and local use. By omitting their culpability, international conservationists from the global North grant themselves the position of objective judge. They authorise themselves to determine conservation values and sensitise indigenous communities to these values because the communities are in need. By seeking to "teach the value of wildlife" and enlighten, these conservationists further establish their position of superiority. Only they know how to solve the problem of gorillas going away. As Smith describes, the disrespect and hypocrisy of this position exacerbates the problem, "for indigenous communities the issue is not just that they are blamed for their own failures but that it is also communicated to them, explicitly or implicitly, that they themselves have no solutions to their own problems… [This nurtures] deep resentment" and "radical resistance" (Smith 2012: 95).

Indigenous values often differ but they do not necessarily oppose conservation. They may oppose the methods of international conservation efforts but not the idea of conservation. Participatory methods could help indigenous values inform alternative understandings of wildlife and alternative possibilities for conservation.[10] Local social institutions, such as totems and taboos, offer one way of understanding how indigenous values might motivate conservation.

Indigenous beliefs appear to be powerful, persistent, and often an effective rationale for primate conservation around the world, including in nearby regions of Nigeria, e.g. for chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) in the Taraba region and for tantalus (*Chlorocebus tantalus*) and mona monkeys (*Cercopithecus mona*) in Igoboland, where Sclater's guenon (*Cercopithecus sclateri*) is protected entirely by traditional beliefs (Riley 2010; Nyanganji et al. 2011; Baker 2013). In Cameroon, Etiendem describes how, at the Lebialem hillsite:

> "…it is social norms, rather than governmental juridical laws and rules, that determine human behaviour. People do not disregard taboos against hunting gorillas because, if they do, they may be punished by the ancestors or traditional institutions, unlike the wildlife law which is either poorly understood or hardly recognized" (2008: 15).

Taboos protect value, storytelling describes it. The manner in which taboos are shared–myth, narrative, apocryphal accounts–addresses the deeper question: why conserve? Local myths help a community express and reinforce its values. Baker (2013) notes that retelling local stories, where they originated and among expatriate communities, can affect people's values and relationship to the natural world. Indigenous ecological knowledge is rarely featured on film, even though filmmaking offers an ideal platform for the oral storytelling indigenous communities often use to share their knowledge.[11] Collecting and reinvigorating indigenous beliefs through participatory methods might provide an appeal through shared values, helping address conflict with international efforts by showing how conservation can be an indigenous idea. Inspired by studies locating conservation-positive beliefs and promoting conservation and indigenous knowledge together, I began the project two sets of questions:

1. How does indigenous knowledge describe Cross River gorillas and guide gorilla-human relations? What are local perceptions, anecdotes, and accounts of the gorillas?
2. Can this indigenous knowledge help co-produce a shared, non-imperialist moral rationale for conserving Cross River gorillas? If so, can this rationale be presented through participatory video? Can it apply to 21st century challenges and be included in media for conservation education?

My approach had many problems, beginning with its limited focus on identifying only indigenous values that could be deployed for conservation. Too often, outsiders engage indigenous knowledge and select only conservation-positive beliefs and values, precluding understanding of alternative ideas and nuance, ignoring challenges, and undervaluing indigenous moral systems. Such assumptions assume the authority of one's values and belie the infirm ethical foundations of western conservation (Vucetich and Nelson 2013). Maintaining a moral hierarchy does not respect the indigenous communities' knowledge but merely employs it to one's own ends. As Smith warns: "It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations" (2012: 1). Filmmaking is one of many ways the West has "taken" indigenous knowledge over the centuries (ibid).

Conservation-positive traditional beliefs can also create a trap for indigenous communities. Sometimes international efforts, dependent on these beliefs and worried that that they will be lost or diluted, seek to arrest the communities' growth or change (ibid: 89). Traditions become an affront to agency; communities are expected to conform to a romanticised past rather than engage in the mess of modernity with the rest of us. The tradition defines their identity; they cannot be complicated, diverse or contradictory, only the West has that privilege (ibid: 77).

Another problem came with my desire for resolution and plan for adjudication. I hypothesised that conflict often stems from failure to justify conservation to local communities. Perhaps our project could address the central moral question—why should a community conserve gorillas?—not through values education but through storytelling. By using filmmaking as a form of discourse, we could reason through the issue together, and then represent the reasoning through the resulting films. Adequate moral justification requires discourse and understanding. The authority to assert moral claims, e.g. a community should conserve gorillas, comes from endorsement of a justificatory practice, not from cultural superiority. In other words, justification comes through agreement with how a moral decision is made. Disputants need to agree to methods of reasoning and be able to employ them; they need a conversation, not a lesson (Jaggar and Tobin 2013). If conservation requires a community to compromise other values (e.g. autonomy, development, use of forest resources), the community needs to endorse how they chose to prioritise the value of gorillas. Imposing outside values may only exacerbate local concerns by challenging indigenous moral reasoning and sovereignty. I understood this in regard to the problem of asserting conservation, but failed to recognise myself doing the same by asserting deliberation for adjudication. There were issues both with my notion that conservationists and indigenous communities could find shared values and with my ignorance of my complicity and desire in pursuing participatory methods as a way to achieve adjudication (Kapoor 2002, 2005).

The Folk Filmmaking Method

I developed my research methods attentive to critical thinking about ethnography and cross-cultural filmmaking, particularly concerns over authorship and authenticity, aesthetic and narrative control, and crises and ethics of representation (MacDougall 1991; Harper 2012; Lempert 2012; Jaggar 2014). Collaborative and participatory approaches appealed to me as ways to address these concerns (Elder 1995; Barbash and Taylor 1997; Gubrium and Harper 2013; Pink 2013; Bali and Kofinas 2014). Methods of participatory filmmaking vary but the general idea is that the subjects become participants, gaining at least some control over the process of production. In some instances, participants choose a topic and direct the filmmakers. In others, participants receive the training and tools to produce their own work. Both activists and researchers employ participatory methods to address power inequalities and improve communication and understanding with their subjects. Participatory projects tend to focus more on process and content than on the final product.

I call my method "Folk Filmmaking", because it is focused on folklore and retelling stories through performance. Similar to how visual anthropologists invite participants to use filmmaking to present their own ways of seeing, I invited participants to use narrative filmmaking to express their values through morality tales (Worth and Adair 1997). I began by inviting participants to think collectively and critically about their moral beliefs and then helped them to represent those beliefs by performing a story. Participants dictated how moral issues were raised and framed, and how they were addressed. I introduced an initial prompt: Cross River gorillas are going away. What should we do about this? Is this a problem? How did you deal with this challenge before? Participants answered these questions indirectly by creating a script and performing a story. The form freed them to address the issues as they chose. Researching as both a filmmaker and a philosopher, I studied the process as a form of cultural exchange in a moral debate over what to do about the gorillas (Chalfen and Rich 2007).

Kapoor shows that an issue with participatory approaches is that, even in the desire to relinquish control, facilitators exhibit their control; "it promotes the sharing of power, but manages to centralise power" (2005: 1208). Far from being impartial arbiters, facilitators dictate the terms of the project, manage the process, and ultimately translate (and benefit from) the results. The facilitators' apparent benevolence helps mask their power and the way they commodify their relationships with participants, even as participatory methods are meant to address these very challenges (ibid). Facilitators also hold participants to a higher standard than they hold themselves, asking participants to solve local aspects of a problem while avoiding the broader issues in which they are complicit (ibid). Working on a random issue abroad allowed a young researcher like me to study a conflict with conservation while avoiding the awkward and more challenging politics of working within the complexity and confusion of my own home and sphere. Ignorant of local complexity and lacking local relationships, I could dodge complicity and feign objectivity. Once again, indigenous communities produce "the wealth and the possibility of the cultural self-representation of the "First World""; we benefit while we avoid responsibility (Spivak 1990: 96; Kapoor 2005: 1216). My Folk Filmmaking method did not escape Kapoor's concerns. Perhaps in the context—the assignment to produce films for gorilla conservation education–participatory methods helped. The alternative may have been even more hegemonic. To succeed, Folk Filmmaking and other participatory methods require reflexivity, and constant openness to scrutiny and debate. Despite my attention to methodology, I could not transcend these critiques.

Over four months, we made seven films with communities neighbouring gorilla habitat. After producing two films in Nigeria with Louis Nkonyu, I received a grant to create a filmmaking team and continue the project in Cameroon with a local organisation, the Environment and Rural Development Foundation [ERuDeF]. I trained and equipped a team at ERuDeF, led by Ndimuh Bertrand Shancho and Immaculate Mkong, to assist me on the project and then continue filmmaking on their own. They produced two more gorilla films after I left. Throughout my fieldwork, the team assisted with logistics, politics, and translations. I led shooting and editing but they helped with both. Together we edited participant performances in Pidgin English and the local languages. As each indigenous community had its own language, a local participant-producer facilitated throughout, translating in production and postproduction, helping with casting, locations and other arrangements, and guiding us through social and political aspects particular to working with each community.

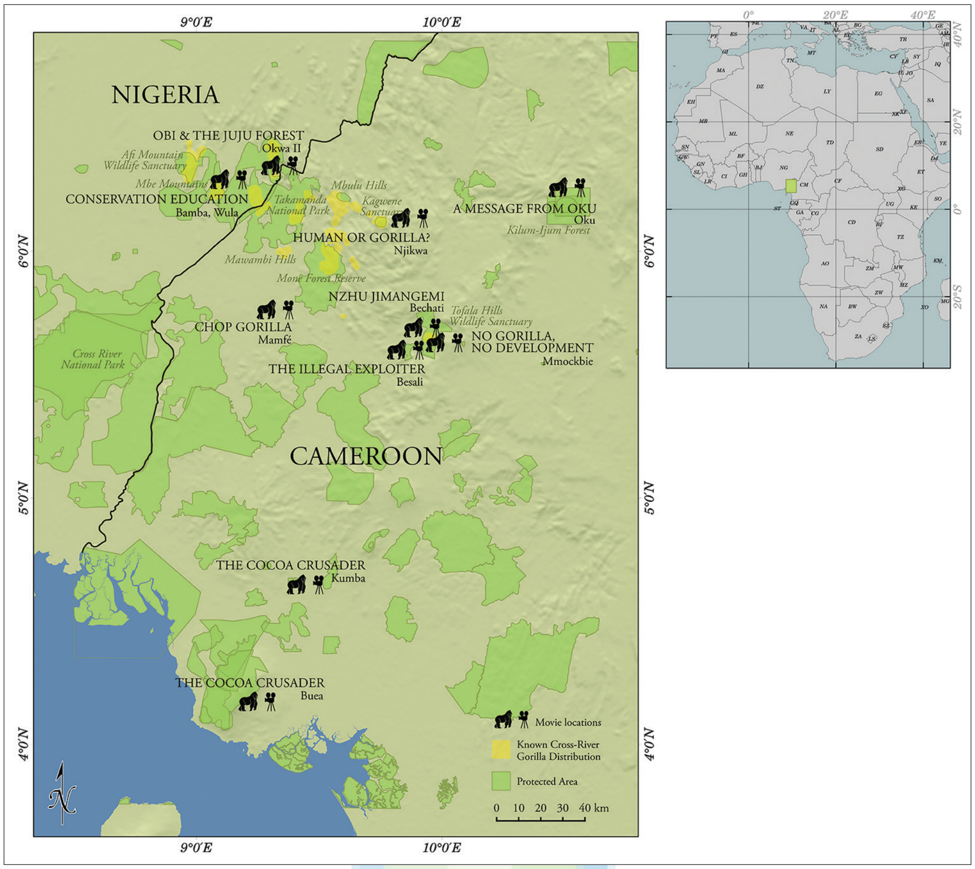
My lack of language skills meant that I could not direct the performances nor edit the films without collaboration and input. At all stages, the need for assistance helped me relinquish control. Meanwhile, my desire for the films to have a professional polish had me exerting control over technical aspects of the filmmaking. I asked participants what they wanted covered and how they wanted to show it, but operated the camera and computer myself. I thought higher quality craft would garner greater respect for the communities' gorilla stories. High production quality might also help encourage conservationists, local and abroad, to pursue participatory projects for other education programmes. I do not know how to remedy concerns for craft with limited time and resources for participant training but I question the value of the facilitator being so involved in the filmmaking.[12] I am not sure how to parse my pride from my concerns that the films' form would obscure or detract from their content.

The participatory aspects differed for each film but followed a general sequence. First, we would identify a participant-producer, often on recommendation from a local leader. S/he and I would conduct formal and informal interviews and explore local concerns with conservation. Then we would mock up a script and present it to a group of community members. They would offer ideas and edits for the story. Next, with their help via chain-referral and other networking, we would cast community members for the lead roles. Our participants differed on each project. On one, we worked with a local, professional film troupe (cast and crew). They heard I was in town, with cameras and hoping to make a film, and approached me. On another, we cast a secondary school drama club. Rather than assume our method would include a diversity of perspectives, we made sure to work with different people on different projects. We invited subsistence farmers, university students, and journalists with advanced degrees, Fons (chiefs), herbalists, village jokesters, women at the market, motorbike drivers, curious bystanders, conservationists, hunters (with promise of no punishment), and park rangers. We changed the lead characters, alternating between men and women, rural and (relatively) urban, in pursuit of fairness and inclusion.

Together, we read through the script, and made changes as the cast saw fit. Then we were ready to shoot the story. Each script was little more than a skeleton. Every member of the cast, with remarkable creativity and charisma, ad-libbed and improvised their lines and scenes. As the participants cast the characters and chose their outfits, props, and shooting locations, they determined the aesthetics, helping the films reflect local style and identity. During the script meetings, I would help choose an issue regarding gorillas or conservation and then worry I had too much influence on the project. Yet each time our script proved only a spark from which a story—local, unique, and surprising—would grow. Our participants adapted the stories as they went. We would film for as long as our participants were available, sometimes just for one day, other times for almost a week. Then we would roughly edit the film, subtitling the local dialect, tweaking montages, checking the scenes. Each film ended up dramatically different from the initial scripts and ideas.

GORILLA FOLK FILMS FROM THE CROSS RIVER HEADWATERS

Each of the Gorilla Folk Films addresses a different moral issue related to Cross River gorilla conservation. *Obi and the Juju Forest* (filmed with the community of Okwa II, Nigeria) tells of traditional conservation, before the British arrived. *Conservation Education* (Bamba and Wula, Nigeria) is a story of modern conservation education classes and an argument between a school girl and a gorilla hunter. *A Message from Oku* (Oku, Cameroon) shares what it means to lose gorillas for good. *Chop Gorilla* (Mamfé, Cameroon) is a comedy about a gorilla hunter who will not stop hunting, despite arrests by forest guards and protests from his friends and family as Ebola begins to erupt in the news. *Nzhu Jimangemi* [*The Gorilla's Wife*] (Bechati, Cameroon) incorporates the gorilla totem belief into a tragic love story. *Human or Gorilla?* (Njikwa, Cameroon) explores the many threats to gorilla habitat—including deforestation, trapping, fire, and corruption—through the mishaps of a park ranger trying to enforce conservation. *The Cocoa Crusader* (Kumba and Buea, Cameroon) ponders culpability and the threat posed by cocoa production. It follows a reporter trying to figure out whom to blame for the explosion of cocoa and concomitant loss of forest. *The Illegal Exploiter* (Besali, Cameroon) highlights the temptation and risk of bribery and corruption for small, rural communities. *No Gorilla, No Development* (Mmockmbie, Cameroon) struggles with the challenge of balancing community and conservation needs (Figure 1). The films show similarities and differences across the communities affected by Cross River gorilla conservation, and a variety of iterations of Folk Filmmaking, including where the method worked and where it faltered.


9°0′E
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5°0′N
4°0′N
NIGERIA
OBI & THE JUJU FOREST
Okwa II
Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary
Mbe Mountains
CONSERVATION EDUCATION
Bamba, Wula
Takamanda National Park
Mbulu Hills
Kagwene Sanctuary
A MESSAGE FROM OKU
Oku
Kilum-Ijum Forest
HUMAN OR GORILLA?
Njikwa
Mawambi Hills
Mone Forest Reserve
NZHU JIMANGEMI
Bechati
Tofala Hills Wildlife Sanctuary
CHOP GORILLA
Mamfé
NO GORILLA, NO DEVELOPMENT
Mmockbie
Cross River National Park
THE ILLEGAL EXPLOITER
Besali
CAMEROON
THE COCOA CRUSADER
Kumba
THE COCOA CRUSADER
Buea
Movie locations
Known Cross-River Gorilla Distribution
Protected Area
0 10 20 30 40 km
N
0°
20°E
40°E
40°N
20°N
0°
20°S

Figure 1

Film locations in relation to Cross River gorilla populations and protected areas.
Source: Benjamin Leutner

EVALUATING THE PROJECT

The initial interviews, meetings, and discussions showed that local accounts described gorillas and guided gorilla-human relations in a variety of ways. Community members who directly interacted with gorillas, such as hunters, had particularly nuanced knowledge, echoing studies showing that, though hunters often directly conflict with conservation goals, they also tend to have deep and complex relationships with wildlife (e.g. Goldman et al. 2013). In Cross River, local hunters expanded conservationists' understanding of the gorillas' range and found more nests in one year than conservationists had over eight years of surveys (Nicholas et al. 2010: 55). They also provided us the most stories of gorilla encounters, behaviour, and cultural importance. Hunters helped on many films, providing props such as guns, traps, dogs, and gorilla skulls, and sometimes playing themselves or advising stand-ins. By participating, they made the moral conversation more complex. Many argued that modern poachers come from afar; locals know better than to hunt gorillas. No one subsists on them.

Themes and Narratives in the Gorilla Folk Films

All the films were prompted by the same issue (Cross River gorillas are going away), but the various communities oriented the moral challenges differently. They presented varying moral claims in response, often along with different moral reasoning. For example, in one story the ethical argument focused on concern for harm and health, in another, on an affront to tradition. Neither a consistent moral issue nor argument arose across the series. As the subjects, challenges, and contexts changed, the narratives did, too. The films meandered around the topic of conservation but the series represents a collection of moral challenges to justifying Cross River gorilla conservation.

Despite a lack of theme, a few arguments repeat throughout the series. In three films, characters justify breaking conservation prohibitions by stating that they need to send their children to school. They worry about the best for their children—the immediate, next generation—before they worry about an animal or any future generations. Other arguments focus on the gravity of not conserving gorillas: they will finish. Nigeria will have no more. Cameroon has a substantial lowland gorilla population in the East (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*), but Anglophone Cameroon, the Grassfields, and the South-West region, will lose their distinct subspecies forever. Participants make this case in three films. Another, implied argument references lack of direct responsibility, or at least moral culpability, for the problem. In one film, hunters blame the efficiency of modern technology for the plight of wildlife. In another, a journalist shows how difficult it is to attribute the impact of cocoa to any particular party. In two more, characters threaten the survival of gorillas simply by trying to survive themselves. Most films use gorillas as a plot device but orient the moral issues not to the ape's plight but to communal and individual problems. The films became vehicles for narratives about deeper struggles, e.g. marginalisation, modernity, and corruption. The films do not say how best to conserve the last 300 Cross River gorillas but do help guide cross-cultural conversations about why conservation causes conflict. They help articulate indigenous values and show the challenges conservation must overcome.

Acknowledging the moral complexity of the issue helps challenge the idea of a clear moral arbitrator. In the films, sensitisation efforts look odd and out of context. In three films, local hunters are as able to offer compelling arguments as the park rangers chasing them (and enforcing someone else's will). Local moral arbitrators appear in the films—a fon or a native doctor, an elder or a teacher—but their authority is visible because of their role in the community; none have the invisible authority of conservation programs (authorised in part because they come from the West). While not asserting who should arbitrate, participatory methods helped contextualise relevance to the moral debate, showing how strange it appears for an outsider to arrive and make moral claims.

The methods also left space for the participants' agency, including regarding the facilitator. In one film, they cast me to play a western aid worker who comes to tell a hunter to stop hunting. He asks what I'm doing there then promptly pushes me off a bridge.

The Reception

Initial reviewers asked if the films were successful. Foster (2015) offers criteria to evaluate the success of arts-based, collaborative research for social justice, such as its artistic merit, engagement with its audience, and how well it presents a challenge to the status quo. She argues that effective arts-based research does not convey a sense of truth but challenges it, inviting appreciation for different ways of knowing (ibid). While the Folk Filmmaking method presented indigenous ways of knowing gorillas and helped challenge current efforts at conservation, success here may have impeded its ability to engage a broader audience. WCS Nigeria's invitation presented a clear audience: the indigenous communities around the Nigerian hillsites and the conservation educator screening the films. Collaborating and more senior conservationists offered a secondary audience. With the grant, the primary audience expanded to include ERuDeF and Cameroonian hillsite communities. The sponsors of the grant became another secondary audience.

The primary audience responded positively. Often, people enjoyed simply seeing themselves and their communities on screen. Some noted never having heard their local dialect in a movie before. Others offered edits. In 1950, Rouch filmed hippopotamus hunting in Niger and then scored it with "a very moving hunting air, played on a one-stringed bowed lute" (2003: 42). When he screened it for the hunters, they demanded he remove the music: "What? When did you hear music during a hippopotamus hunt?... the hippopotamus underwater has very good ears, and if you play music, he'll escape!" (2003: 157). When we screened a film for our participants, they asked where the music was. They instructed us to add a soundtrack and make the movies pop. After another screening, a participant went and got the soundtrack and sound effects he wanted, delivering them to me on a flash drive a day later. After I added them, he took the movie to the capital, Yaoundé, copyrighted it, and began printing and selling DVDs.

Our other primary audience, the local conservationists responsible for screening the films, approved of them. They use the films during education programmes. In 2016, our Nigerian colleague screened films from our series 112 times in 51 villages around the Nigerian hillsites to 25,258 people (Nkonyu 2017). He reports that "the people love them especially the chop gorilla while most people in Okwangwo love obi and juju forest. The language use make[s] it easy to understand the films compare[d] with other GAFI [Great Ape Film Initiative, the BBC] films." Our ERuDeF collaborators screened the *Gorilla's Wife* in Bechati and reported people were "very enthusiastic about watching the films they participated in." They used screenings to motivate participatory videos with Besali and Mmockmbie, neighbouring communities, and gave copies to interested community members. Beyond this, ERuDeF has only held a few screenings around local schools, lacking the funding to screen more broadly. Our contact there noted that he thinks "the films are really good but for Chop Gorilla, which I am afraid may not hold given that ebola seems not to have a place again in Africa."

We provided copies of the films to the collaborating organisations and received no response from senior officials. They may be wary of the moral ambiguity presented in the films. Even if the primary audience enjoys the films, the project's engagement is limited without support from the secondary audience of conservationists. If conservationists are reluctant to relinquish control of their message, participatory videos will struggle to reach even their primary audiences.[13]

The grant sponsors also did not show interest in the films. The secondary audience seemed more concerned with utility than content. Our sponsors asked for surveys showing local attitudes before and after screenings, evidence that the series changed community sentiment. Primate conservation education programmes often evaluate their success through surveys (Kling and Hopkins 2015). Social surveys assess change in knowledge, attitude, and behaviour via interviews and questionnaires; biological surveys of ape density, abundance, and hunting pressure help assess changes of impact (Breuer and Mavinga 2010; Kuhar et al. 2010; Tagg et al. 2011; Leeds et al. 2017). Such evaluations are premised on the idea that conservation education only works if it convinces locals to adopt pre-determined values. The design of such evaluation reiterates the enlightenment trope, belying continued orientation to a hierarchy of knowledge:

the community needs to learn that the conservation values are better than their own. Some conservationists are sympathetic to this concern. Malone et al. (2010: 781) explicitly ask: "Are we justified in our attempts to 'educate' local communities to the value of biodiversity protection?" They do not want to give up on wild primates nor dismiss the local communities' concerns. They note the great ethical calculus required to weigh risks and benefits, uphold local community rights, and practice cross-cultural respect when engaging distant communities in conservation. They question by whose accounting this calculus should be judged:

> "If our ethics are a reflection of our values, then we have to examine our own valuation of primates along ecological, economic, scientific, and moral/cultural lines. In addition, how do we prioritize competing values when there is a disconnect between the values of the primatologist and those of local communities?" (ibid: 782)

In these "tournaments of value", outsiders must be wary of how their power, position, and orientation affects their judgment, and heed the many ways fair adjudication might be comprised (Igoe 2017: 84; Jaggar and Tobin 2014).[14]

Compatibility with Indigenous Methodologies

Another way to measure the project's success is to assess how well it advanced indigenous interests and affirmed indigenous values, following guidance from Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012). As a method, did Folk Filmmaking help or harm? To decolonise, the method must advance a self-determination agenda. It not only needs to feature indigenous communities as active participants, it must include "bringing to the centre and privileging indigenous values, attitudes and practices rather than disguising them within labels such as 'collaborative research'" (Smith 2012: 128).

In indigenous methodologies, process matters more than outcome. Smith describes that projects should include "consultation, collective meetings, open debate and shared decision making" and "lead one small step further towards self-determination" (ibid: 132, 130). She reminds that researchers must maintain reflexivity and constant critical analysis of their processes, asking: "Whose [film series] is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its [story] and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will it be disseminated?" (ibid: 10).

When done well, participatory projects can not only help illustrate indigenous knowledge, but expand engagement. The people who retain folktales and traditional beliefs, often elders and women still fluent in the language and retaining "specialized knowledge pertaining to the land, the spiritual belief systems and the customary lore of the community", are those first and most marginalized (ibid: 115). Participatory methods can help re-centre these knowledge-keepers and provide them with a platform for presenting and sharing their wisdom, privileging their unique knowledge and position. When done poorly, participatory projects can make them more vulnerable. Not only does participating take their time and energy, asking for more labour, the process might make indigenous belief systems available for more mining and exploitation (ibid: 6). Participatory projects cannot continue the process of taking indigenous knowledge, fragmenting it, and leaving it in pieces for indigenous communities to try and recover later (ibid: 61). There is also the danger for participants of "revealing themselves" (ibid: 37). Openly challenging conservation can be dangerous for locals, whose counter-narratives may be read as backwardness or ignorance. By participating, they risk their accounts being co-opted, misinterpreted, or even used against them. The onus is on the facilitator to prevent this. The facilitator needs to assure that participants are safe and can use the opportunity to elucidate and validate their perspectives.

Our project had potential here. Consider bushmeat. When previous campaigns addressed bushmeat, they sensationalised the gruesome aesthetics to raise a call for action (Peterson 2003; Rose et al. 2003).[15] They invited proud hunters to pose with their kills, locals to pose with their primate pets, market-sellers to display their cuisine. They then sent the images out to a distant, decontextualised audience as displays of barbarism. When the images return to indigenous communities, they tend not to resonate as a conservation issue (they are familiar images of butchering meat) but as an unsavoury image of themselves, being taken and promoted by outsiders. When outsiders reflect these images back at them, it may feel less enlightening than accusatory and unfair, a select and limited account of a broader issue.

Folk Filmmaking presented bushmeat in a different way. In two films, providing bushmeat to the community brings glory and celebration. Another film presents bushmeat as a source of livelihood and as a delicacy. It features a bushmeat hunter, a bushmeat seller, and a literal bushmeat gourmand. None of the films justify bushmeat hunting or consumption any more than decontextualised photographs justify its immorality. The films add moral dimension and nuance. They show bushmeat's cultural value and relevance. They raise questions of nutrition, livelihood, and community.

The bushmeat example shows the importance of another indigenous interest: representation. Smith describes how "representation of indigenous peoples by indigenous peoples is about countering the dominant society's image of indigenous peoples, their lifestyles and belief systems. It is also about proposing solutions to the real-life dilemmas that indigenous communities confront, and trying to capture the complexities of being indigenous" (2012: 152). The performance aspect of Folk Filmmaking invites self-representation. The simple re-orientation can have dramatic effect on narratives of right and wrong. For example, the method helped participants broaden culpability and describe it differently. In the films, locals make moral mistakes rather than act out of aggression or malice. A young man makes a foolish, teenage choice to break a taboo and hunt in the juju forest. A hunter acts out of pride and against the warnings of his community, caring more about showing his prowess than the risks of giving bushmeat to his family during an outbreak of disease. A trapper's snare harms a gorilla by accident and to his distress; he set it for squirrels. Even if characters make poor choices, their motivations and reasons are granted more depth and consideration. Their actions become understandable and contextual. The films show that gorillas are not being slaughtered because of some moral vacuum, lesser ethics, or barbarism. The alternate orientation changes not just moral culpability but resulting moral prescriptions as well.

The challenge for the method and the facilitator is, as Smith clearly states: "Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes" (2012: 29). What do they need the facilitator for? And, Kapoor would ask, why did you come? Both Smith and Kapoor advise facilitators to be explicit about their reasons for using participatory methods, to explain their intentions, and to reveal their broader politics and strategies, their values and assumptions. Our project's goal was to improve relations and understanding between indigenous communities and conservationists. We sought not only to represent indigenous interests but to foster constructive dialogue, and to create a record of these examples of cross-cultural conversation, perhaps to inspire and motivate more.

CONCLUSION

Participatory methods can help remember, re-learn, and re-imagine relations with wild animals. They can also help improve understandings of conflicts with conservation. Folk Filmmaking helped represent competing visions of how nature should be valued, without resolving them. The method is not against conservation or biology, but is for supporting alternative ways of knowing and relating to wildlife. It offers a platform for "counter-memory and alternative storytelling" (Igoe 2017: 112). Folk Filmmaking and other participatory methods can help indigenous communities affirm their knowledge about wildlife, conservation, and morality.

Spivak argues "the question 'Who should speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?'" (1990: 59). To be successful, participatory methods must help indigenous communities be heard. They must help teach conservationists to critically assess their own assumptions, motivations, and values. By challenging characterisations of locals' apathy and ignorance as the source of conflict, participatory methods can help return control of the moral debate to the communities with the most at stake. Successful collaborations on conservation depend less upon locating conducive local beliefs than upon working from mutual respect. If conservation directly conflicts with local values, it only has more onus to justify its imposition. Participatory methods offer one tool to begin a process of justification.

Ideally, such methods can help improve understanding of conflict between indigenous communities and conservation across the world. Conservationists constantly compose moral messages to wide audiences (Jacobson 2009). As environmental issues continue to elicit cross-cultural moral debate, and films remain a popular tool for raising awareness and garnering support, a niche exists for participatory projects. They are well-suited to the context of international wildlife conservation, where charismatic wildlife and beautiful natural spaces invite passionate people hoping to do the right thing. As long as efforts continue to include media components with plans and budgets for outreach tailored to indigenous communities, more opportunities should arise. Participatory methods can help outsiders orient less towards instilling pre-determined values and more towards learning about and from indigenous communities. Initiatives can be redesigned to educate in both directions.

Building understanding across cultures may help find solutions. As Smith writes, "to hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges… [which] can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things" (2012: 36). She adds that, "communities are the ones who know the answers to their own problems" (ibid: 160). Participatory methods can guide outsiders who want to help. They provide a tool for navigating competing values in cross-cultural environmental disputes, particularly when pursuing a moral agenda in contexts of inequality and diversity. Even if imperfect, the methods' focus on principles of humility, restraint, and reflexivity encourage improvement.

AFTERWORD

Last year, war erupted in the Cross River headwaters. After thousands of Anglophone teachers and lawyers went on strike, protesting the imposition of French curricula and Francophone teachers in the schools and French law and Francophone judges in the courts, Cameroon's national government deployed troops, cut off the Internet, and imprisoned leaders. Separatist groups arose and declared the independence of Ambazonia (their name for the Anglophone region of Cameroon). Fighting broke out. Schools became sites of violence, teachers and students were attacked and kidnapped. The UN reports hundreds of people killed and hundreds of thousands displaced (UNHCR 2018). More than 30,000 Anglophone Cameroonians have fled over the border into Cross River, Nigeria (ibid). Our Nigerian colleague wrote that the constant danger and closings of schools forced families to bring their children to his area. He described increasing hunger, great suffering, and that many refugees:

> "are not used to city life and as such they find it difficult to adapt. Some complain that the monthly stipends provided cannot take care of their kid's fees and other needs. Most preferred to stay in Okwa [a village in Cross River National Park] because they are comfortable there. I think it's because we belong to same ethnic group, inter-married, date back. What the Nigeria forest community did was to give them free access to collect forest resources from the protected area. This mounted much pressure on wildlife and non-timber forest products. On Monday this week [Oct 2018], someone from Takamanda died in the camp at Ogoja. This instilled more fear in some refugees who were

> intending to move to the camp at Ogoja" (Louis Nkonyu pers. comm. 2018)

From Cameroon, another colleague reports that security concerns prevent rangers, researchers, and conservationists from attending to protected areas. One conservator has not visited his park in months (Bertrand Ndimuh Shancho pers. comm. 2018).[16] The situation in the region is now dramatically different from that described in the article above. I write with great concern for all in the Cross River headwaters and across Anglophone Cameroon and hope the crisis finds a quick and peaceful end.

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NOTES

1. Notable exceptions include Du Chaillu 1862, Jenks 1911 and Merfield 1956. Meder 1999, Sicotte and Uwengeli 2002, and Etiendem 2008 provide recent examples.
2. Though planned to showcase wild gorillas in Congo, *King Kong* became a drama shot in studios. The "gorilla" film that preceded it, *Ingagi* (1930), faked footage with orangutans, a set in a zoo, and an actor in a gorilla suit. It was so scandalous contemporaries feared it threatened both gorilla conservation and the nascent genre of natural history films. See Mittman 2009: 49–55.
3. "Indigenous" and "local" are not interchangeable. "Indigenous" references a historical connection to place and a corresponding, distinct culture. Viergever (1999: 335) describes: "In most articles and studies on indigenous knowledge, indigenous simply means traditional or local. The difference between traditional and indigenous knowledge peoples' communities is that indigenous knowledge peoples' communities, despite the pressure to integrate within the larger society of the national states of which they are part, still have their own distinct cultures. Local communities, on the other hand, usually do not have a cultural identity that sets them apart from the larger society, or at least not to the same extent as in the case of indigenous peoples' communities." I take care with my use of the two terms.
4. He screens excerpts from: Alexander, S., R. Gloyns, and N. Pope. prods. 2010. *Mountain Gorilla.* 3 episodes. 59 min. BBC Two; Bristow, J. dir. 2002. *Ape Hunters.* BBC Wales; Cordey, H. and M. Salisbury. prods. 2003. *The Life of Mammals: Social Climbers.* 59 min. BBC.
5. Wright (2010) adds that the films do have at least a short-term impact, as many of the Cameroonian audiences she screened for had not seen apes in the wild and were struck by their similarities to humans.
6. Examples include: Rouxel, P. dir. 2005. *Losing Tomorrow*. 52 min. Tawak Pictures; Sullivan, R., dir. 2013. *Meet the Monkeys.* BBC Two. 59 min.
7. At the time, the evidence of the Ajani films' success was anecdotal but recent studies support it. Leeds et al. (2017) found that the films raised Ugandan students' awareness of great apes and threats to their conservation, and taught them actions to help. The study also noted improved attitudes towards great apes, particularly as students recognised similarities between humans and apes, and argued that developing such connections can lead to positive environmental behaviour. A similar study, evaluating the effectiveness of screening films in the Republic of Congo, also noted an increase in knowledge of gorillas and in positive attitudes towards them (Breuer et al. 2017). The authors recommend continuing such programmes, and tailoring them to each specific audience, but acknowledge challenges in assessing the screenings' impact on community behaviour.
8. I was invited after I wrote a letter offering to come study conflict with conservation, and mentioned I was a filmmaker. WCS Nigeria did not pay me but their conservation educator covered my expenses and logistics in Nigeria. While working with WCS, I received a Fauna and Flora Flagships Species Fund grant to expand the project to Cameroon in collaboration with ERuDeF. I was not paid but I received funding to cover some expenses, to sponsor an ERuDeF team, and to compensate local participants for their time.
9. India offers an exception and its own collection of wildlife films and filmmakers. There are surely others I do not of.
10. They could also do the opposite. Lee (2010) argues that indigenous communities often have negative perceptions of and relations with wild primates, due to crop-raiding, disease transmission, and other challenges of sharing space.
11. Some ethnographic films explore the relations of indigenous cultures with animals, but the genre does not provide the same platform for indigenous narratives to show nature "speak[ing] for itself" with seemingly self-evident truth, as in the manner of wildlife films (Brockington 2009). While international conservation narratives are masked as accurate accounts of an objective truth, indigenous ecological knowledge is presented as particular to the community on screen.
12. Late in the project, I met a local team of music video producers. Their work screened on television in Africa. Such talent could be ideal for the technical aspects of participatory projects, helping outsiders move further from an explicit role in production to one more of facilitation. That noted, if the audience includes Western conservationists, a Western filmmaker may help too.
13. Without organisational assistance, broader distribution proves a serious challenge. Many communities around the hillsites lack basic means to access media, some even lack electricity. In Nigeria, Nkonyu screens using a projector and generator. The generator's roar overpowers his speakers; he hollers the dialogue out to the audience. Artistic merit may help compel more grassroots distribution. Our collaborator's embrace of particular films may show that some hold more merit than others. The most popular film (the one being sold on DVDs) starred the professional film troupe. Greater artistic merit, such as that achieved through higher production quality, may help participatory projects reach a broader secondary audience of conservationists and even a third, more general audience. *Virunga* (2014), a big budget documentary about gorilla

conservation in Congo, gained international promotion and distribution. It features few Congolese and tells the story of a Belgian conservationist and French journalist. Higher production quality brings higher stakes and expenses, reducing opportunities and control for participants. Successful participatory projects may require balancing artistry and accessibility, assuring the process remains open and collaborative while also producing films strong enough to garner distribution.

14. Tobin and Jaggar provide a method for studying "real-world moral disputes in which people lack shared cultural assumptions and/or are unequal in social power" (2013: 409).
15. Accounts of bushmeat are usually more careful in the text and academic literature but lose their nuance in public presentations during campaigns and when distilled for outreach efforts.
16. A journalist, Shancho covers the conservation situation in Cameroon at https://voiceofnaturenews.wordpress.com/. See also: Atabong, Amindeh Blaise. 2018. Cameroon crisis threatens wildlife as thousands flee to protected areas. African Arguments. https://africanarguments.org/2018/07/12/cameroon-crisis-threatens-wildlife-people-flee-protected-areas/. Accessed on November 14, 2018.

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