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media

Shooting Climate Change in the Maasai Mara

Aesthetics and Expectations in Participatory Filmmaking with Kenyan Pastoralists

Joana Roque de Pinho

> When you arrived, I heard about the school of video, so I decided to join you. Before, sometimes I went to the center [town] and watched the TVs, but I never managed to know how to shoot on my own. That's why I decided that I'd better not just watch what people have shot, but also learn how to shoot.

When Noolarami enole Kapirontoi, a mother of three who had never attended school, approached me with an interest in producing TV shows, I was surprised. My participatory filmmaking project aimed to research and provide a platform for Maasai pastoralists' perspectives on climate change. One idea behind visual Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods, such as participatory video, is to break down the traditional hierarchy between researchers and informants by offering the latter, usually from marginalized communities, the photographic or video skills to portray their realities in their own terms. Yet this 28-year-old Maasai pastoralist yearned primarily for training in film production. I later realized that climate change is not exactly what motivated local community members to join the participatory video project: like Noolarami, the other project participants came to us looking for an educational opportunity.

Another facet of participatory visual research is its privileging of the *process* over the *product*—a locally produced documentary, in our case. It is the process that potentially creates the conditions for critical consciousness and empowerment that can lead to community transformative action. What happens, then, when local filmmakers themselves view the quality of their product as central to their efforts? And how do you negotiate divergent expectations among participants, researchers, and community members? These are some of the questions that my experience coordinating the creation of a participatory documentary film with a group of Kenyan Maasai pastoralists raised.

My participatory project started under the auspices of a more traditional academic initiative. Colorado State University sponsored a project fostering dialogue about climate change and adaptation among scientists, Kenyan pastoralists, and representatives of Kenyan civil society. I was invited to produce and direct a (forthcoming) documentary about climate change in the Kenyan dry lands. The collaborative premise of Colorado State's project, however, inspired me to propose adding a participatory visual component to our initiative, aimed at more deeply engaging a pastoralist community in the production and communication of their knowledge about and experiences with climate change. A documentary film created by the pastoralists themselves might further facilitate the sharing of local knowledge across East African pastoralist communities and

Heavy, unseasonable rains in September: "Just a little help from Enaki *[God]."*

with outside policy-makers. We would teach video production to local community members and encourage filmmaking on the topic of climate change and adaptation. The resulting rich visual and narrative data would complement the CSU project's data from focus-group interviews and collaborative workshops. Moreover, drawing on the philosophy of Participatory Action Research, I envisioned that the collective effort and experience of local pastoralists researching and creating their own documentary—in other words, the filmmaking process—would inspire critical reflection and discussion. This process is key in creating bases for community problem solving. Here the main problem the Maasai participants might tackle was how to remain pastoralists under changing environmental and socioeconomic conditions.

Armed with such noble intentions and ambitious goals, I found myself in Mpuaai, a small Maasai community in Narok District, Kenya. It was September 2011, usually a dry month, and it was raining—a lot. Local pastoralists considered this unseasonal rain a "little help from *Enkai* [God]," a relief after the brutal failure of the April–May long rains which had sent cattle and herders out in search of distant pastures (see photo above). Ironically, the land was now green but largely devoid of cows. In this area, right on the outskirts of the world famous Maasai Mara National Reserve, Maasai pastoralists have faced new challenges. In addition to increasingly frequent droughts and other extreme climatic events, pastoralists confront restricted access to pastures resulting from the creation of wildlife conservation areas and land privatization. I hoped to

document visually how people on a local level were coping with and adapting to increasing climatic variability under those shifting conditions—with the collaboration of local filmmakers we were going to train.

The "Mpuaai School of Video"

My partner in the documentary project was Nicolas Tapia, an American professional cinematographer and the documentary's director of photography. Little did he know that he was also going to be a video production teacher. On arrival at Mpuaai, we were welcomed by two brothers, Sasine and Stanley ole Neboo, who had been recommended as cook and research assistant respectively. Their seriousness and enthusiasm made me hire them on the spot. Exhausted after a long day traveling, I explained to them our ambition to conduct interviews, shoot a documentary film, and do this project called "participatory video," whereby local people would become filmmakers for positive social change in their community—no less.

The next morning, a couple of young men were at our door enquiring about the "school to learn how to use the cameras." Word of our arrival had spread fast and these young pastoralists were eager to start. With little time to think, Nic and I debated with them how to best introduce the participatory video project in the community, recruit participants, and teach the video production course. Nic and I spent the remainder of the day presenting ourselves in the neighboring *enkangitie* (settlements), drinking sweet milky tea, and explaining our dual objectives to the local elders, who were surprisingly welcoming. Despite my familiarity with Maasai culture and language, after years of work in other parts of Maasailand, I had been apprehensive about conducting this project in a limited time frame, in a community where I had never worked.

Nic and I structured a tight course schedule to accommodate the prospective participants' busy days. The living room of our rented house welcomed about twenty people the next day, mostly men in their twenties and thirties. Their Maasai beaded dress ostentatiously revealed their part-time occupation as "cultural boma" dancers (i.e., villages where tourists attend Maasai dance performances and buy local crafts). Slightly more intriguing was the presence of four young traditionally dressed women. I strived to recruit women to the project, and I was impressed to find so many of them (compared to previous experiences in Maasailand). Introductions made it clear that most students were relatives from nearby settlements. As I explained the participatory video project, they were receptive to the idea of using video to tell stories about their lives, and any story, really—as long as they learned how to shoot, as I would later discover.

Using hands-on group games in and out of the "classroom," we spent a couple of hours a day over the following two weeks co-teaching and co-learning basic concepts and techniques of video making and discussing the ethics of camera use. Armed with two simple digital cameras, microphones, monopods, and tripods, the Maasai "video students" experimented with shot types and sequences, conducted interviews, and saved and edited footage (see photo).

Video training is a collaborative effort.

One initial challenge Stanley and I faced was to translate Nic's technical terms. Spontaneously, an idiosyncratic vocabulary emerged from students who spoke English: cameras had "eyes," "ears," and "SIM cards" (like cell phones); filmmakers were "shooters" who shot various "images" (footage), including "passport shots" (medium shots) and "close shots" (close-ups). Flexibility drove our approach to teaching video, and we let class dynamics unfold organically: every other day brought new faces to the classroom. Dropouts were replaced by newcomers who were brought up to speed by their colleagues without disrupting the course flow.

After focusing our efforts on video techniques, we were finally ready to pursue our interest in climate change narratives. However, when I introduced the broad question of local perceptions of climate change in an initial group-wide discussion, the filmmakers steered the discussion in other directions. They expressed concern with river pollution, fences, the problematic sharing of grazing areas by wildlife and cattle, and other community issues separate from climate change. Improvising a storyboard on the wall, the filmmakers then delineated these stories and allocated filming tasks among themselves. (See photo on next page.) With each square of the storyboard holding a distinct narrative of change in the community (rather than individual shots), the storyboard started to convey a bigger, more complex story than climate change alone.

As the Maasai filmmakers went about shooting their videos and regularly saved

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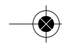

The storyboard helped define narratives and allocate shooting tasks.

their files on my laptop, they progressively created a rough draft of their documentary. As a group, we decided to invite the whole community and representatives of local organizations to a public screening of the filmmakers' work, and thereby thank the Mpuaai community for their support. The nearby evangelical church hosted the screening. As fate would have it, the unseasonal heavy rains transformed the surrounding plains into a gigantic swamp, and only a small motivated group managed to come to the screening. The church's sound system was no match for the roar of heavy rain on the zinc roof. Still, after the videos were screened, the sense of pride among the filmmakers and fellow community members was palpable, and we celebrated our accomplishments with sodas and goat meat sandwiches.

Group Dynamics and Empowerment

In the course of their daily practice, students freely divided themselves in small groups to shoot outside. At the end of each day, we projected their footage onto the living-room wall for group feedback and discussion. Noticeably, patterns emerged related to who got to shoot and to speak into the camera. Not unexpectedly, the female students' role in both aspects was almost nonexistent. As the students staged and filmed (with a large dose of humor) male activities such as a lion hunt, fire starting, the theft of a sheep, and slaughtering a goat, the women seemed to be, at the most, passive extras in these male "action movies." By the end of the course, invoking busy schedules, the women had dropped out, with the exception, however, of Noolarami, who was still assiduously attending class. So, one day, on impulse, as I saw Noolarami walk back to her home, I put a camera and a monopod in her hands and asked her to please go shoot something, jokingly acting as a teacher assigning homework. Half an hour later, Noolarami handed the equipment back. I was a little discouraged that she had returned the equipment so soon, but didn't give the incident a second thought. Later, when saving her footage, Noolarami pleasantly surprised me with two nicely framed interviews of elderly women answering her questions about positive changes in the community over the years. We saw clear advantages to Noolarami's "insider" footage: the grandmothers looked and sounded remarkably more relaxed in those interviews than in comparable footage Nic and I had shot for our documentary.

Other budding filmmakers such as Sasine, our dedicated and talented cook, chose to work individually. I had invited him to join the training, but had assumed that his cooking job would preclude his participation. Sasine had never attended school—his father sent his younger brother Stanley instead. Sasine, however, was hungry to learn filmmaking even while in the kitchen. Anytime a group was not using a camera, he would seize it and discreetly drift away. As his footage trickled in, it quickly appeared that Sasine was the best "shooter." (See photo on next page.) With a steady hand, he had an excellent eye for composition and carefully selected his subject matter. He shot and interviewed people engaged in unusual activities, for instance,

Sasine the lone shooter.

an elder praising his water-carting donkey, or a woman struggling to build a house because of the drought-related shortage of fresh cow dung. Sasine later explained that "I knew that the only way I would know how to use a camera was to practice a lot. So whenever I'm free, I use my time to shoot, to make myself perfect." Both Sasine and Noolarami, through their perseverance and talent, proved that formal education is not a prerequisite for mastering a digital visual medium. In the words of Noolarami: "I was very interested in learning a new thing, as I wish I'd gone to school, but haven't. […] I realized that nothing is difficult, it's only that you've not practiced."

Feelings of pride and empowerment shine through Noolarami's and Sasine's words as they recount their involvement in the project. Yet their experiences also show an aspect to be aware of: as democratic and inclusive as participatory filmmaking strives to be, individual within-group participation can be suppressed by gender dynamics (e.g., Noolarami) or can express itself differently from the majority (e.g., Sasine working on his own). In this case, flexibility and a little intervention ensured that motivated, but initially excluded participants, had a chance to practice and contribute their voices on issues close to their hearts.

The Importance of Lovely Filmmaking

Our last day in the Mara, after the community screening, the filmmakers worked late

into the night to edit their documentary. Too much cell phone charging by the filmmakers made our solar powered battery lose its juice. So, working by candlelight on a laptop with a dying battery, the final editing process involved one filmmaker writing down group decisions about sequences and timings. Nic and I later used this as a guide to make the final, internet-friendlier, edits to their documentary.

The narrative in their *Maasai Voices on Climate Change (and other changes, too)* participatory documentary (10 minutes) is in line with the larger Colorado State University *Pastoralist Transformations* project's findings: climate change is not perceived locally in isolation from other socioeconomic changes that exacerbate and are exacerbated by climatic variability. The documentary opens with an elder talking about how seasons have changed and that rainfall is no longer predictable. But it also portrays a diverse array of deep environmental and socioeconomic transformations on the land, such as the consequences of unregulated tourism and land tenure changes. It is clear that for Maasai pastoralists, climate change (perceived as increased variability in rainfall frequency and intensity), while critical for their livelihoods, is one among other crucial and immediate issues, such as the fences that crisscross the landscape and restrict grazing, and environmental degradation.

When I reflect on the lessons I learned in the course of this participatory video project, I realize that the production of beautifully crafted movies was everybody's priority. That included me, and I progressively focused less on the data collection and empowerment sides of the project. This, of course, runs counter to what Participatory Action Research advocates, namely that the *process*, rather than the *product*; is what matters; that participatory filmmaking entails sacrificing aesthetics and artistry; and that it is in the process that lies the potential foundations for community action. Our implicit attention to the quality of the product resulted from a combination of circumstances, such as my insecurity about my shallow filmmaking experience, having a professional filmmaker as a project partner, and above all, the visible keenness of our "video students" "to learn how to use cameras." Their eagerness is all the more understandable as Maasai pastoralists have been featured in countless coffee table books, films, and advertisements portraying them in highly stereotypical ways. And while some are quite aware of the power of their image, and others have used cameras loaned by tourists and researchers, being *behind* the camera is still perceived as an attribute of tourists. As they explained, this was their first opportunity to learn video. Naturally, they wanted to do a good job at it.

The filmmakers' concern with aesthetics manifested from the beginning. For instance, the female filmmakers wanted the first videos where they appear deleted because they were disappointed that they were not dressed beautifully enough. Daniel ole Mpatiany, recognized as the group's best director, expressed how much he enjoyed shooting and watching his dancing mates: handsome and "smart" with matched beaded necklaces and clothes. Otumoi ole Keeko explained how he applied his new skills for a beautiful result:

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> Today we interviewed the old man in the village. I enjoyed it so much. I zoomed to be closer, I zoomed to be far. I tried to use this skill that I now have to make the video as lovely as I can.

The pride of mastering a new skill to achieve a pleasant product is also evident in Benson ole Kirrokor's recollection of his favorite sequence:

> The video I like the most is the one I shot early in the morning at the river. I took a long shot of the river, and also a close [shot] of the water, and then an extremely close shot of the water. I enjoyed it because I am the one who did it and I used all the concepts required to make a movie.

The creative details of the filmmakers' directing and editing also reveal the importance they attached to making a good film. For instance, several actors metaphorically illustrate their hopes and intended strategies for a "sustainable cow future" by lifting up a sick cow. As Noah talks about river pollution, Daniel crouches behind him and dramatically throws water to the air. He explained that he intended to draw attention to water as the subject (prompting a colleague to suggest that a close-up of the water would also suit that purpose). Concerned that they lacked decent wildlife footage, the filmmakers asked Karim Kara, a Kenyan filmmaker who was giving us a hand, for some lion footage to illustrate their human-wildlife conflict story (in consultation with the filmmakers, we later removed that shot so their film would qualify as fully participatory).

Building upon and going beyond our guidelines, the Maasai filmmakers embraced their new ability to tell stories through video in ways they found aesthetically enjoyable. Did our attention to aesthetics, however, negatively affect the potential for empowerment and community action that the participatory video making process is known to facilitate? I would argue that this is not the case. The Maasai filmmakers' focus on the quality of the *product*, their documentary, did not detract from the *process*. Both are important and complementary, and their boundaries are not that easily distinguishable. Insofar as the filmmakers and their community value and see aesthetic merits in their film, resulting from their efforts and dedication, I believe this also contributes to the sense of community self-esteem and empowerment that Participatory Action Research methods strive to encourage.

Some aspects of *Maasai Voices* could be deemed bad filmmaking. Actors walk in and out of the frame while energetically and distractingly moving a stick in their hands. Interviewers punctuate interviewees' speech with frequent and loud interjections. Perhaps disconcerting to Western viewers, these characteristics, however, reflect Maasai communication style and rhythm, i.e., the way elders stand up and talk in meetings

Did our attention to aesthetics, however, negatively affect the potential for empowerment and community action?

(*enkigwena*), moving their stick for emphasis, and how two people "eat (share) the news" *(ainosaki ilomon*). I would argue that such characteristics should not be "corrected" in the name of good filmmaking. They reflect the expression of local participants' perspectives and knowledge in ways that Maasai viewers can relate to and also, potentially, facilitate their communication across other East African pastoralist communities.

Jobs, Facebook, and Other Expectations

The participatory documentary's focus on climate was dictated by the Colorado State University project's goals of exploring and sharing local knowledge of climatic variability in the Kenyan dry lands. The filmmakers and their interviewees, however, told a more intricate story of negative and positive transformations in their livelihoods and their present and future adaptation to these. They see formal education as key in the adaptation process. Noolarami, again:

> I wish for my children and grandchildren to be educated so they come to know about the challenges and changes that are going on. I'd like them to work hard so they come not to be dependent, to give them something else. I wish to see my children as drivers, as constructors, doing other [things], not just depending [on cows]. So I wish my children to learn to get alternatives; as well, to have few cows, but not to remain completely without cows.

Somewhat ironically, then, the video students' desire to diversify their livelihood options so as to navigate current environmental and socioeconomic changes is what drew so many young people from this community to our "video school":

> It's of great benefit to me because I might have wanted to study that course but I have never had the chance to go to school. Now I'm able to study for free and close to home. (Nickson ole Kirrokor)

> Before the training, I didn't know how to operate a camera. But now I know much about cameras. It's a new thing in my life and I see it as a big step. […] Maybe someday […] I can get someone to employ me for this skill and I can make a living from it. (Kuntayo ole Kirrokor)

This expectation of employment, especially in tourism, was heightened by their video production course certificates, which we provided at their request. (See photo on next page.) These introduced additional layers of expectations, perhaps not so easily fulfilled:

> After the training, I'll get a certificate and then I'll use it to get a job, and it will benefit me and my family. (Nickson ole Kirrokor)

> [Video] is very much helpful to me as it's something I learned and one day, you might find that someone is asking for a person who knows how to shoot, and I am proud to say that I know. (Noolarami enole Kapirontoi)

Noolarami and her video production course certificate.

The filmmakers, illustrating how participatory visual research can lead to community action, devised other beneficial uses for their new skill. Foremost is their goal of using footage of community problems to connect with policy-makers and claim financial compensation based on evidence:

> If something happens, we're going to use our camera and we record [what happened] and then it makes a reference for the future. […] If a lion attacks your cow, you can use your camera to record that information and you can take that video to the relevant authorities and ask to be paid (Kuntayo ole Kirrokor)

They also see video as a helpful tool for recording changes in the community and for educating the community—a key goal of Participatory Action Research:

> The movie we are making is very important for us and the community. It gives a comparison between the past and the present. Long ago, you could see that the Talek River was really a river. Now, it's not a river anymore. (Sasine ole Neboo)

The filmmakers' and their community's ability to take advantage of and develop their new skill, of course, depends on their access to the technology. Thus, the two

cameras and other gear stayed with them. All filmmakers officially agreed that this communal property would under no circumstance be sold. Control over the equipment, though, became a contentious issue—surprisingly, not among the filmmakers, but with other community members. Months after my departure, I received an email from a politically influential community member. He suggested that Sasine, of all people, had sold the cameras. An email from Stanley later clarified that Sasine was holding on to the cameras to prevent a certain person from appropriating them. While the details are not clear on either side, this episode illustrates how cameras are desirable for the power and prestige their control bestows on who "keeps" and uses them. Local leaders might think of themselves as more appropriate owners of the cameras in virtue of their position and formal education. And because cameras can be used as tools of political pressure, as some of the Maasai filmmakers explained, they may be perceived as threatening by local leaders. Cameras are never neutral.

Cameras are never neutral.

Recent news of the Mpuaai filmmakers is that after having waited for the results of the presidential elections (March 2013), they registered their group as an official Kenyan self-help association with a view to market their collective work and skills. They have "partnered" with a local NGO to store their new videos in its computers ("when the manager is not looking"). *Maasai Voices on Climate Change (and other changes, too)* was officially selected to screen at an international film festival in the Netherlands, a rather edgy "art event for independent artists exhibiting unconventional audiovisual art from all over the world." And Stanley ("I know all about Facebook") has promised to create a Facebook page for the Maasai Filmmakers Association. Stay tuned.

Note

All photos are by the author.

Acknowledgments

The *Pastoralist Transformations to Resilient Futures: Understanding Climate from the Ground Up* (PTRF) project was funded by the Livestock and Climate Change Collaborative Research Support Program (LCC-CRSP). The filmmaking component of the PTRF project and the *Maasai Voices on Climate Change (and other changes, too)* participatory video project received additional support from the LCC-CRSP and the CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS). The writing of this article was supported by a *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia* postdoctoral grant (SFRH/BPD/43242/2008). I am grateful to the Mpuaai community and the Bashir family in Nairobi for their hospitality and friendship; Karim Kara for his help in the field, Clement Lenashuru for translation verification and Katherine McCaffrey for insightful comments to earlier drafts.

The Maasai filmmakers of Mpuaai are Stanley ole Neboo, Noah Meoli ole Kaai, Sasine ole Neboo, Noolarami enole Kapirontoi, Kuntayo ole Kirrokor, Debra Seenoi Kaigil, Moses Simel ole Rarin, Alex K. ole Koshal, Otumoi ole Keeko, Daniel P. ole Mpatiany, Nickson ole Kirrokor, Benson Molonko ole Kirrokor, Denis Sasine ole

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Lenjir, Sabaya ole Mpatiany, Emily Soipanoi enole Kapirontoi and Miton ole Kirrokor. They can be contacted through Stanley ole Neboo: s_neboo@yahoo.com.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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Project Video Products

Maasai Voices on Climate Change (and other changes, too). http://www.imdb.com/video/wab/vi3403654681/

http://ccafs.cgiar.org/node/1733

http://ccafs.cgiar.org/node/1743

Noolarami on her filmmaking experience: http://ccafs.cgiar.org/node/1746

Trailer for *Of God, Rain and Motorbikes: Change in the East African Dry Lands:* https://vimeo.com/65117460.

Joana Roque de Pinho is a postdoctoral researcher in ecological anthropology at Centro de Administração e Políticas Públicas at the Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas (Universidade Técnica de Lisboa, Portugal). After a Ph.D. focusing on Maasai-wildlife relationships in the Amboseli Ecosystem, Kenya, her current research focuses on conservation politics and the roots of conflicts over natural resources within a national park in Guinea-Bissau. She is also currently engaged with ethnographic filmmaking and participatory visual research. A forthcoming documentary, entitled *Of God, Rain and Motorbikes: Change in the East African Drylands,* explores the livelihood options that pastoralists in the Maasai Mara are currently experimenting with. In a recently funded project, Joana will collaborate with local photographers from farming communities in Guinea-Bissau to investigate local adaptive strategies to climate change within a national park.