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Telling Us your Hopes: Ethnographic lessons from a communications for development project in Madagascar[1]

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Abstract
This article discusses ethnographic lessons from a “communications for development” project in Madagascar. Analysing the project’s methodology of participatory oral testimony, the article argues that anthropologists can learn from an explicit focus on empowering informants to become active producers of ethnographic knowledge, and highlights the vital role of communicating joint research findings to influential decision makers. The multiple, differing actor groups united by the project are also assessed, demonstrating how ostensibly incompatible rationalities became creatively translated into mutually acceptable forms, generating unforeseen, new social expression rather than a predictable, universalist development agenda.

> *“There are many ways to benefit from the knowledge that belongs to the poor, to minorities, to the powerless: The anthropology student gains a PhD and academic advancement; the development consultant gains another tax-free contract [...] But what of those who freely share their views and experience?”* (Slim and Thompson 1993: ix)

Introduction

This article explores ethnographic lessons from a development project in Madagascar. The findings are based on a year of PhD fieldwork in the south-eastern part of the country, which included assisting with an oral testimony project in an area of rapid social and environmental change. I emphasize the need for anthropology to acknowledge relevant methodological innovations from outside our discipline, including those used by development practitioners when engaging with our “informants” and producing ethnographic knowledge. As such, this article aims to explore how engagements with development practice might transform anthropology and bridge the gap between ethnographic observer and observed “informant”.

Through the lens of an oral testimony project developed through a partnership between two Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (one in the UK and one in Madagascar) I assess the scope for turning informants into ethnographers. Concurrently, I suggest that the anthropologist’s role should include giving voice to marginalised people by facilitating access to written and online media, providing the necessary background context, and by translating and communicating joint research findings to key audiences, including the narrators themselves, the media and relevant decision makers. I thereby situate my argument within the field of Participatory Action Research,

which explicitly focuses on the proactive empowerment of our research collaborators. Ultimately, this article is thereby a call for a more publicly engaged anthropology which does not merely "translate" other cultures, but which opens up for people to conduct their own ethnographic research by asking their own questions and capturing each other's voices, stories and hopes as ethnographers in their own right.

Building on Tsing's (2004) notion of "friction", this article also explores how the different groups of actors united through the oral testimony project, despite being motivated by differing understandings of the project and its objectives, can be analysed as generating new social action based on "productive misunderstandings." I identify several instances where the rationality and objectives of the villagers who participated in the project and the NGO staff funding and managing it did not directly correspond. As joint interests were presupposed and differing rationalities creatively translated, I argue that these productive misunderstandings ultimately allowed for new social action, and for new modes of knowledge production and social representations which provided a challenge to those of more powerful groups of actors. This thereby counters the argument that development projects inevitably entail a predictable, universalist development agenda.

Telling us your hopes: a case study of oral testimony and development

"Development" is not a single set of ideas and assumptions, as Grillo (1997) reminds us, contrary to the influential arguments by anthropology of development analysts such as Ferguson (1990) and Escobar (1995). Rather, social action classed as "development" is created by multiple agents who often have very different understandings of their work. As I experienced during my PhD fieldwork, both by becoming a part time development practitioner myself and when encountering "in-house" anthropologists of private companies and reading their analyses, anthropologists have themselves become caught up in the development process as "experts" able to "bridge discursive gaps", as Grillo (1997: 25-26) has put it.

However, if anthropologists take on the role of development "expert", we must ensure that it genuinely benefits the people we are supposedly representing, and that they have a chance to represent themselves in their own words, and access the tools necessary to participate in the debates around their own livelihoods and futures. It is here that I propose we can learn from what is happening in a sub-field of development, focusing on giving politically marginalized people voice through oral testimony.

"*I am glad to have this opportunity to express my ideas and concerns, as well as the problems in my life. I must let them out of my head so I that I won't have a headache. If I keep all my concerns in my stomach, I may risk having a beer belly!"* (ALT and Panos 2009: 51). These are the words of Sambo, a subsistence fisher and farmer, and research collaborator in an oral history

project in Madagascar, as reproduced in a book of oral testimonies. During my PhD fieldwork, which explores changes in natural resource access related to mineral mining in south eastern Madagascar, I became familiar with some of the NGO actors in the area. As part of my fieldwork I assisted one of these NGOs with finalising and evaluating a project called "HEPA" – "*Hetahetam-po ambara*," "revealing the wishes of your heart," or as the Anglophone NGO staff put it, "telling us your hopes." The project's aims were to communicate the life histories of people in rural settings with rapid social and environmental change, where access to land and natural resources had been restricted due to a combination of mineral mining, infrastructure development and nature conservation initiatives aimed at offsetting mining impacts.

The HEPA project methodology was one of peer–to-peer interviews, based on training a selection of people (young and old, women and men) in conducting life history interviews. The training covered diverse issues, from methodological techniques of asking open ended, non-directive questions to the technical aspects of using voice recorders.[2] Selections from the interviews were broadcast on local radios and subsequently published on the web and in a tri-lingual book. My work consisted of assisting with translation and clarifying contextual issues, evaluating how the exercise had been perceived by the narrators, and taking pictures for the publication.

The HEPA project was both co-funded and implemented by two partners, an international NGO called Panos and the Madagascar-based NGO Andrew Lee's Trust (ALT). The methodology had been developed by Panos, which had started doing participatory oral testimony during the late 1990s, beginning with a Sahel Oral History Project which by default made use of purely locally-based interviewers, as national-level research organisations were too expensive (Slim and Thompson 1993: 128). In the end, oral testimony came to be seen by the NGO as a process as much as a product, a way of building local skills in documenting their own experiences of socio-economic and environmental change, and acknowledging and amplifying the voices of non-literate, marginalised people in various media (ibid: 138).

Thus a key aim of this approach to oral testimony is to increase opportunities for people to speak out in their own words on issues which concern them, rather than having their views defined or interpreted by others, and to amplify the words of those who are too often ignored or spoken for by "experts" (Panos 2003). This seems to create both a challenge and an opportunity to anthropology: By highlighting the ethical problems of speaking "for" other people, which is arguably what anthropology sets out to do, it is an opportunity for ethnographic innovation by encouraging our research collaborators to themselves become ethnographers. The role of the anthropologist here becomes one of facilitating access to recording media in any form (written, audio and visual), mobilising the necessary financial resources, translation (both between languages and the "cultural translation" of explaining the local context according to intended audiences), and communication of the testimonies to the media and to policy makers. The latter in particular is often neglected by anthropologists, although we are often in a better position to do this than our local research collaborators, and we

therefore arguably have an obligation to actively communicate our ethnographic stories to the media (c.f. Bird 2010).[3]

As such, as anthropologists, we need to acknowledge the politics of representation in which we are engaged (c.f.: Mosse 1998). There is a need to analyze the complex politics of information production and use in development, as political decisions are justified in terms of “information” (ibid: 24-25). Therefore, for actors at all levels, information can be understood as an important source and instrument of power. As key mediators of information, anthropologists can contribute to helping different players in negotiating alternative outcomes – a process which can make us more self-conscious about the underlying relationship between information and power.

In this context, oral testimony must be considered as a complex social transaction, and subsequent interpretation is not a simple process. In their review of the Panos approach to oral testimony, Slim and Thompson (1993: 138-139) emphasize the need for awareness of the complexities and responsibilities involved, such as the nature of memory, value of opinion, the impact of the interviewer, implications of transferring testimony to secondary format, and a consideration of the extent to which individual testimony is “representative” . Anthropology here seems to have much to offer, with its focus on highlighting the diversity of human experience, values and aspirations. The discipline has grappled with all these issues, from how to represent “social fact” to interpretation of “the native’s point of view”, and has sometimes taken the more radical step of the oral history approach by simply letting people speak, with a minimum of interpretation.[4] However, there seem to be few cases of letting our informants turn into ethnographers themselves, by letting the people in our field site interview their neighbours. An exception to this is the field of Participatory Action Research, which explicitly aims to empower research collaborators in a democratic process of knowledge production involving awareness-raising and building capacity for getting heard and gaining voice as subjects and active researchers rather than being reduced to objects for investigation by outsider “experts” (c.f.: Bradbury and Reason 2001b).

The work of the anthropologist here becomes that of facilitating, transcribing (in the case of illiteracy), translating, editing (a crucial task which does involve authorship and re-framing of narratives) and broadcasting the result. The anthropologist then becomes more of an editor and disseminator, although in order to present the material in an understandable way, still needs to be well acquainted with the local language, socio-political situation and history, social dynamics and events being referred to in the testimonies. This means that fieldwork remains a key aspect of the anthropologist’s work, but she or he will be less of an authoritative voice, and more of a facilitator of the voices of other people. Are we perhaps afraid of losing our authority as authors and scientists, or to put it more radically, of doing ourselves out of a job, if we relinquish some of our authorial power as ethnographers?

Voices of change: Writing oral testimony

The HEPA project started with a workshop led by facilitators from Panos who explained the oral testimony approach to the local NGO in Madagascar. Subsequently, local community members were nominated during village meetings and trained as interviewers, with a focus on including both sexes. The training focused on both technical skills such as using voice recorders and techniques of conducting semi-structured life history interviews, including clarifying project ends, gaining consent, asking open-ended questions, active listening, and – an issue specific for the site – avoiding any direct, leading questions about the mining project which was a politically sensitive issue. Forty-five oral testimonies were recorded, transcribed in Madagascar and translated into English. These testimonies were also broadcast on local radio, and twelve of the testimonies, selected based on variation in themes, gender and age, were selected by Panos and edited for broadcast on the web and for publication in published form in Tanôsy,[5] the local Malagasy dialect, French, an administrative language in Madagascar, and English, in a tri-lingual book entitled "Madagascar Voices of Change: Oral Testimony of the Antanosy People". Editorial content was written by the NGO ALT to help the reader understand the background to the local sites, some of the main issues referred to in the testimonies, and the overall testimony process. The whole process took over two years not including dissemination and various follow up efforts by the NGO teams.

The HEPA project uncovers a multitude of individual perspectives and interpretation of events, although common perceptions are also identifiable. My analysis of the testimonies, in the context of on-going marginalisation from natural resources in a situation where the region is supposed to be experiencing major "development" due to multi-national investments into resource extraction, is as follows: First, the narratives illustrate how poverty is relational, rather than an anomaly to be rectified through technical means such as ever-improving, expert-led "development" projects, as development strategies usually presuppose. Second, that nature and landscape are not just resources to be commercially exploited or set aside for biological conservation, but provide people with social orientation, meaning and history. The testimonies bring out several themes that I propose to look at briefly, at the risk of simplifying rich and complex stories and defying the purpose of the oral testimony project.[6] However, I feel that a few excerpts will give the flavour of the stories that were collected.

Powerlessness and lack of political voice, the framing of gender and social hierarchy, and a lack of trust in the state and the political system due to a history of colonial extraction of people and resources in the region come through strongly in several testimonies. Olina, an elderly widow from St Luce village, expressed her feelings in this way: "*If someone, or a woman like me, tries to complain and talk to the mayor, he may say, "What does a woman know about this problem?" I may be treated like someone who has too much to say; women and children know nothing about problems and should not get involved. Even if a man complains, the mayor will not necessarily listen... Only someone who is richer, or has money, can be heard in the village."*

The role of oral testimony in promoting a sense of voice and opening up for a feeling of being listened to, as well as a sense of frustration about a perceived lack of power linked with illiteracy and lack of formal education, is also best

explained in the narrator's own words. As Constand, a young subsistence fisher and farmer, explains, "*I came to the conclusion that only the government can work out a deal to claim back the local community's rights… It is a huge challenge for people to draft a letter and send it to the respective authorities. Most of us are illiterate... The only opportunity for the people of St Luce [coastal village] to express their complaints is through interviews like this."* This lack of voice is also directly expressed by Sambo, an older fisher and farmer from Ambinanibe village where land had been appropriated for port development: *"I think lack of knowledge is a disadvantage, because my siblings and I could not argue to demonstrate the real value of my father's land. So right now, we are sad about what happened".*

The lack of access to information about "development" processes that were supposedly participative, were also expressed, for instance by Jean-Claude, a young fisher and farmer from Ambinanibe village displaced from his landing site due to port development, who points out that *"You never know what the government and the foreigners are planning... At the beginning they started building a road; afterwards they built another road that led to Somatraha [the site of a new mining-related port funded by the World Bank]. We thought they came here for some agricultural activities, but we were wrong. Once we signed the letter, our farmland became their property."*

Changing relations with landscape, nature and access to natural resources are also voiced in many ways, and illustrate how people's identity and traditions are linked to their land. Say Louise, a single mother from Ilafitsignana village, where people had lost land and some had been displaced due to mining-related quarrying, explains that *"COLAS (a French construction company) tears down our mountain where the forest grows... That is where they quarry the rocks to supply their construction works... It is amazing to see how they flatten the mountain. Our children will deny the very existence of this mountain some day... Now, people just ask a doctor to circumcise their children without a big ceremony. Not only do the resources [such as honey from the forest] needed for such a ceremony no longer exist, but [people] also lack the money to provide food and drinks [for their guests]."* Say Louise also highlights the incommensurability between the notion of receiving monetary compensation for loss of land and the intrinsic value of land in terms of heritage, identity and belonging, as well as food security: *"In terms of the distribution of money in return for our land, maybe some people in my village would say it was positive, but I would not say so... When my family received the money, since the land was our ancestral land, every family member had to share it... Our land was also undervalued because the government said that we did not have crops on it when they took it. They claimed that our land was not productive and thus was not worth much. However our land was vast and fertile."*

Notions of loss of landscape as loss of history were also voiced, and clearly influenced perspectives on the future. Sirily, a subsistence farmer and father of six from Ilafitsignana village, points out that: "*People did receive money from QMM in return for their land but the money was not enough for everyone. My grandparents have many children, and the land that was taken*

belonged to our ancestors, not to a single person, so anyone descended from that ancestor had to receive some of the money. Since we are Malagasy we have to respect the notion of having a large family…" As Jean-Claude, the fisher who had lost his landing site, pointed out: *"We inherited land from our ancestors... So this land should belong to our next generation but given the current situation, I don't think my children and grandchildren will enjoy it."*

In the regional history of colonial resource extraction, confusion and fear about the intentions of powerful foreigners was also voiced. This was frequently articulated within the context of a neoliberal alliance of mineral mining "offset" through corporate and NGO-led nature conservation. Constand, a fisher and farmer from St Luce village near endemic littoral forest, recalls the events as follows: *"Lately, QMM (the mining company) came to the village... They said that they needed the forest to be protected... QMM collected signatures from each individual in the village to get approval for the transfer of forest management to them... The local community, along with the local NGO, registered their opposition to QMM's plan to manage the forest. But this could not prevent QMM from appropriating the forest around St Luce... [They said] deforestation threatened St Luce Forest so it was time to take action... People in St Luce believed...they would still have access to the forest... So they did not oppose the plan vehemently enough".*

As Rosette, a middle aged single mother, and subsistence fisher and farmer, from the coastal fisher and farming village of Ambinanibe, expresses it, *"Some of us were sceptical and did not want to trade their farmland for money... some were convinced that once vazaha [foreigners] were involved in taking our land, there was no way to oppose them, so it was better to accept their offer [of money]... Some of the people were happy with the money, and some others immediately regretted it, realising that the amount they had received would not last long enough to feed their grandchildren in the way their farmland would have done".*

Kazy, a middle aged woman and farmer from a coastal village near the endemic littoral forest of Petriky, voices similar fear and powerlessness in the face of foreign resource grabbing: *"We are really going to suffer if we lose this forest because it is our life, and the river is also our life. However, we do not dare oppose "vazaha" [foreigners]. Instead, we accept them with fear... Each time they find something that they like, they can easily acquire it, and they will move us to a different location... This land is our tanindraza [land of the ancestors] and QMM [the mining company] are also going to take our harvests... Even if they give us money for our land, it will not be enough to last us for the rest of our lives, because we still have small children to raise, who also need to survive – and the land will no longer belong to them. It is for this reason that I said that they are going to kill us by taking our land."*

The loss of food security linked to loss of land is also poignantly expressed by Sambo, a fisher and farmer from Ambinanibe village, where people had received monetary compensation for lost farmland, some of which was used to build new houses: "*It is funny to think that one lives in a nice house, but*

starves to death. Sometimes I see people in their improved homes, yawning all the time because they are undernourished."

Another theme that emerged in many testimonies was gender identity, in particular the loss of a male identity being linked to the loss of land and lack of ability to provide for the family. Bruno, a farmer from Ilafitsignana village, points out that: *"We are sad because we have not received any money in return for that land [near the quarry] being acquired by QMM [the mining company] but only money for lost crops [...] We have to go elsewhere and find part-time jobs to help our families… This does pose a problem...because we will be separated. My family will be sad, and they need me every day, since I am head of the family, the one who manages their lives on a daily basis. Also, I...will miss my family*... *I have to leave if it is necessary. But the consequence is that I cannot take direct care of my family. As head of the family, I should stay in the village."*

Sirily, fisher and farmer from Ilafitsignana village who had lost his farmland put it like this: *"Now I work for a foreigner… If we [do not have a job] our family suffers, because there is no money to bring home at the end of the month… Fishing activities give people more flexible time to work around their house [whereas] I must work every day, otherwise I won't receive a full salary... some people still have money from QMM's payment and some others were hired to work for QMM. However, if QMM stops hiring some day, then our hardships will be exposed… Our children seem not to have a bright future*." A similar thing was expressed by Jean-Claude, a fisher and farmer who had lost a boat landing site and farmland, from nearby Ambinanibe village: "*Even if we got work for foreign companies, this would not be a sustainable activity that would help us forever. You could get fired any time, if your manager wanted."*

Friction in the field

As mentioned, apart from being broadcast on local radio, the oral testimonies collated during the HEPA project were edited and published in a tri-lingual book. This book was a product of multiple groups of people meeting at various interfaces and communicating across great distances. Communications spanned across continents, from the Panos headquarters in London to the local NGO ALT's offices in the remote Malagasy town of Fort Dauphin, and to even more remote rural settings near littoral forests impacted by new restrictions in land, shore and resource access due to mining-related conservation and infrastructure development. The book is presented as "the first published account of the lives of the Antanosy people in their own words", and "an important opportunity for local people to speak directly to decision-makers about their difficulties in the face of climate change, food insecurity, and rapid development due to mining" (ALT and Panos 2009: 3).

A comparison of the English and Tanôsy language versions of the book's introduction seems an apt illustration of what Tsing (2004) terms "friction." Tsing (ibid: xi) defines this term as "zones of awkward engagement, where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to

speak". Rather than being halted by incommensurable world views, she argues that such situations allow for new social action in spite of people's different perceptions. This perspective helps account for how social change such as forest destruction and environmental advocacy represent "persistent but unpredictable effects of global encounters across difference" (Tsing 2004: 2), wherein we can trace the "productive" moments of misunderstanding that occur when placing a particular context as a mere type of universal mobilising concepts such as capitalism, environmentalism, development or gender. In this perspective, "local knowledge" cannot be analysed as an antidote to "universalist expertise," as opposed to what anthropological analyses of development often propose. Rather, the ethnographer should focus on knowledge that travels and mobilizes, creating "new forces and agents of history", with the universal mobilising concepts only effective within particular historical contexts that give them content and traction (Tsing 2004: 8). Tsing (2004) terms these mobilizing concepts "engaged universals" which themselves both change the world and are changed by it, as they inevitably rely on mobilizing and engaging with adherents.

This helps account for some of the oral testimony book's creative translation of what might be termed "untranslatable universals." In the English language introduction to the book, we find that the oral testimony approach is meant to make up for the fact that "local debate and information sharing is usually confined to village meetings where traditional hierarchies are prevalent, and women in particular are excluded or dismissed as unknowledgeable. Fear and taboos also play a part in restricting the flow of debate, especially where opinions are dissonant with the status quo" (ALT and Panos 2009: 3). However, this section, originally written by the English director of the local NGO with an international audience in mind, was translated into Tanôsy dialect as "in most village meetings, there are no women present, because women don't feel like they have enough knowledge [to participate]. This is exacerbated by ancestral traditions, which say that the decisions taken in a meeting must be respected."[7]

The word "hierarchies" have been left out of the Tanôsy version, as it is not a concept openly mentioned in Tanôsy society, where silence and omission is used instead.[8] This illustrates how what is to Western ears a universal, scientific word is clothed in what is arguably deceptive neutrality, which does not translate universally. Further, by focusing on the women's own feelings of inadequacy rather than their being "dismissed" by men, the meaning of a gender ideology with universalist pretensions has also shifted in the Tanôsy version. However, I would not consider this a case of being lost in translation, rather these two versions of the book's introductory passage arguably represent an example of "friction" (Tsing 2004): An application of concepts with universal goals such as "social equality" and "gender equality" in a setting of hierarchy and gender-defined public participation through creatively translating between languages. This represents a way of accounting for cultural differences that allows the unspeakable to remain unspoken and thereby lets the book be published to the satisfaction of both local and UK actors supporting the initiative. This enrolling of supporters based on a translation of universalist goals into specific form allows for social action to

unfold and produces new constellations of actors and particular stories worthy of ethnographic analysis.

Other than unspoken local hierarchies, another challenge when doing oral testimony is dealing with local politics and conflicts. As an employee at the oral history programme of the NGO Panos told me, “you have to accept that aspects of your project can be uncomfortable.” According to her, things are always political, and one person’s testimony can always be considered a “thirty minute drama for your benefit,” operating on many levels. In other words, the NGO acknowledges that testimonies cannot be considered neutral representations of people’s experiences, but rather represent performances in specific contexts of hopes, expectations and perceived opportunity.[9] The incommensurability of objectives and perceptions by different actors in the project is here referred to openly by the NGO project staff. By acknowledging this difference without abandoning the project, she seemed to agree with Tsing’s (2004) description of the “friction” between the universalist aspirations of oral testimony as generating “democracy” in knowledge production and the particular locally enacted testimonies marked by situated encounters, personalities, agendas and interpretations which might differ from the professed objectives of the project funder or instigator.

As the Panos staff member explained to me, the oral testimony narratives were supposed to focus on issues of development and environment, which can arguably be analysed as examples of Tsing’s (2004) “engaged universals” given shape in the encounter with the local context. According to this UK-based project staff member, there were lengthy passages on local customs and rituals which were edited out as they were deemed less relevant to the project’s purpose. However, some of these sections were broadcast on local radio, which many narrators told me they had heard and were pleased about. This also led to further social action by the creation of a Tanôsy cultural association, a product of many of the older participants voicing a feeling of loss of traditions and knowledge of their own history in the face of rapid social change led by mining and conservation-related changes in access to land and natural resources. Though not part of the original intentions of the oral testimony project, the NGO supported the creation of this association, which produced a newsletter in French and Tanôsy dialect setting out its objectives of salvaging local culture in the face of rapid social change.

In the bilingual newsletter of this association, the Tanôsy and French versions differ in a seemingly small, but interesting way: The association’s objective of “giving a voice to the indigenous communities in Madagascar so they might express their needs”[10] became in Tanôsy “to make it possible for all Malagasy to reveal their needs.”[11] Indeed, the notion of “indigenous,” although arguably another example of Tsing’s (2004) universalist concepts, does not exist in Malagasy in terms that are not offensive as they might reveal unspoken, but ongoing hierarchies from the complex regional history of kings, commoners and slaves in a society which officially espouses social equality (Somda 2009). The closest term might be “*tompon-tany*”, “master/owner of the land”, which implies primordial rights of land ownership to certain groups, excluding groups such as recent immigrants and those considered descendants of

slaves.[12] However, for the purposes of the common aim of creating a space for the recollections of local history and customs, this "misunderstanding", rather than leading to inaction, became instead a socially productive engagement. In the end, it allowed for new social action, and might open up new benefits related to the reductionist, but productive notion of "indigenous people".

This leads us to what I consider another "productive misunderstanding", that of the HEPA book's sub-title of "oral testimony of the Antanôsy people." Such an essentialist label is problematic in anthropological terms, and several of the narrators when I asked them told me that they considered themselves Tandroy (from the neighbouring Androy Region), rather than Tanôsy, although they spoke the Antanôsy dialect as they had lived in the area for a generation or more.[13] When I asked some of these narrators why they still considered themselves Tandroy, they explained to me that although they buried their dead in their new homeland, they still threw their newborn childen's umbilical cords (an act known as "*fañaria-pôtsy*") in the ocean near their ancestral lands in the Androy region – so for them, it was a matter of geographical origins and ties to the land of the ancestors rather than an essentialist notion of ethnicity.[14] However, initiatives such as the oral testimony booklet generate new understandings of such labels, in this case arguably within the "friction" (Tsing 2004) of the application of the "universalist" concept of "indigenous" to the local context of the project.

As Li (2000: 170-171) points out, international support in cases of loss of land or resource access is easier if people make use of a mobilising discourse in idioms relevant to foreign NGOs and the media, for instance by deploying a clear cut "indigenous" label. Multiple studies have been written on the notion of "indigenousness", with two differing arguments of relevance here: On one hand the concept tends to essentialise local people, smoothing over local history and hierarchy, and forcing them to adopt behaviour which reduces their identity to what Western NGOs expect of them, thereby reducing the scope for alternative behaviour such as gaining jobs with multinational companies (Bending and Rosendo 2006: 226). In contrast, Li (1996) argues that representations of local peoples' struggles over resources and property rights in terms of "indigenous people's rights" in a project in Indonesia changed the official images of local communities from one of primitive people intruding on government land to one of people who could also claim rights to the land, which in turn helped them access political support.

In the end, the second of these two possibilities seems more relevant here: the book's notion of presenting the voices of "the Antanosy people" elides differences in perceptions about being "Tanôsy" between NGO staff and village narrators (who had no influence over the book's title, and in many cases could not read) and leads to possibilities for new social alignments of support. Ultimately, this might open up for claiming new rights in a highly politicized field where access to land and resources is at stake, as can be found in the testimonies themselves.

Nine national press articles about the project were published during the week following the book launch in Fort Dauphin, the Anôsy Region capital, and it was also mentioned on local radio stations. However, the French language newspapers did not touch on the controversies over loss of land and environmental resources raised in the testimonies, publishing the news mostly in their culture and society sections. Only in *Taratra*, a Malagasy language daily, were these issues brought up, mentioning that people were experiencing “the grabbing of their land due to their proximity to the black-sands [ilmenite] exploitation by QMM, because they do not have legalised land titles” (Nangonin’i Njaka 2009).[15] This might be because a Malagasy language daily would be less likely to be read by corporate and World Bank management, powerful mining project proponents which many newspapers would be wary of criticising. The mention in Malagasy language might also be related to issues of land grabbing by foreigners becoming a highly politicised theme just as the book was published, with the highly publicised “Daewoo case”[16] being directly linked to the political unrest in early 2010 which led to a violent change in government (c.f.: Andrianirina-Ratsialonana and al. 2010).

Finally, the testimonies were brought up at the 2010 Annual General Meeting of the multinational corporation which owns the mining project. In a setting of momentary and relative equalizing in the “power to set the agenda,”[17] a corporate management ardently stressing their adherence to Corporate Social Responsibility ideals were placed face to face with both shareholders and community activists. The oral testimony book was brought up by a Malagasy activist, who posed questions about issues mentioned in the book, such as complaints over land compensation payments and loss of natural resource access, raising applause by other activists. The company’s Chief Executive responded that

> “I’ve been visiting Madagascar a number of times and during that period there have been quite a number of oral testimonies, oral complications [...] I can’t go into the specifics of but I know we’ve got opinions from everyone in every one of the communities in the area [...] The poverty that was in the Fort Dauphin area, the deforestation going on in the Fort Dauphin area before there was any [mining] activity going on was quite extreme. It was extreme in context of Madagascar and Africa, and I will say that there has been considerable uplift in the economy of Fort Dauphin and those communities on balance are better off.”

It can be argued that the exchange represents a struggle over the representation of reality, with the corporate response an attempt at “rendering technical” (Li 2007), i.e. solvable through technical expertise such as economic governance, and thereby depoliticising, a contested reality of struggles over land and natural resource access. As the NGO representative who had invited me along pointed out to me, such annual encounters with corporate executives are more of a “circus” and corporate ritual than substance, and yet it does provide some space for campaigning groups to make themselves heard, both by corporate executives, shareholders and other activists. Corporate management is forced to justify and reiterate their

commitment to social and environmental standards, as struggles over the representation of reality take place, although the most directly affected people were unaware of the meeting, and were only present through the oral testimony book and its interpretation by more powerful players.

"We gave you our story, what is the reply?" Local understandings of the project

Building further on the notion of "friction", there is the question of the perceived benefits of oral testimony to the research participants, who did not always share the officially stated understandings of the project's "engaged universals," such as the value of a more democratic knowledge production, or in other words, having been given "voice". The oral testimony narrators were largely illiterate and frequently expressed research-fatigue after experiencing numerous extractive research initiatives from impact assessments and development planning by NGOs, UN bodies, the government and the mining corporation. Armstrong and Bennett (2002), in a review of the PANOS oral testimony project on the San people, found that some of the participants in the workshop clearly had hopes of tangible benefits such as cash grants, and that it took time for them to shift their expectations - or indeed to see anything else as having value. This was also the case in the Madagascar project.

A group of women in one village when hearing that I was asking questions about the project went up to me and asked me "*ino ñ'valin ti raha tihô*?", "what is the answer to this thing"? An old woman complained to me that *"until now there is no reply. We are simply hoping for something positive. We are tired of doing signatures, of "fiches de presence" (attendee lists), and focus groups. We are simply hoping "in a void", without knowing what is happening."*

However, the value of having their stories told was also articulated by several of the participants. As one narrator, a fisherman from St Luce village, told me, *"There have been many interviews and surveys of people here, but until now no reply. I hope that my story will be broadcast all over the world, so that we will get help [...]. Because if my story gets on the radio, the complaints that I told, for example: about the price of lobster, and the lack of buyers, and how the middle men dominate us, then maybe more operators will come and the prices will increase. Also, in terms of people's livelihoods, we might get help, such as access to the forest, which at the moment is making life very difficult."*

Another participant also expressed perceived benefits of the different approach of the oral testimony project: *"I hope there will be a positive reason for getting my story heard, because if you send it to the whole world, then maybe it will be good for us. For example, others who have done surveys and questions here, then when it is over, that is it, it stays in Fort Dauphin [the regional capital], so we never know what happens next, or if there were any responses to our information. It will not be passed on to the government or President!*"

One older man told me that it was important to him that many people would hear about the worries of "villagers like himself", because normally complaints were only heard by people in the village, not by outsiders, and he felt it important for people to hear his story and say "*it is true*". In other words, it was important to him that his version of events was recognised by people elsewhere, with more power. Similarly, a woman stated that *"many more people would like to be interviewed [...] It makes people happy as they feel really lost, so they are happy with this project."*

As Gaventa and Cornwall (2001) argue, drawing on Lukes, Gramsci and Foucault, more than a mere strategic resource, power also involves agenda setting, shapes consciousness and meaning making, and crucially, they add, involves a relational and productive element which is a pre-condition for any subjective experience. This, they argue, is not merely negative, but opens up an awareness of the arbitrariness of the limits of one's subjectification to certain regimes of knowledge, and the right to participate in shaping the boundaries of what is considered possible (Gaventa and Cornwall 2001: 72, citing Hayward).

In this context, illustrating the importance of broadcasting in a media accessible to the participants, a young man told me that "*we in St Luce [his village] all have similar feelings/thoughts: we all like that the stories are broadcast by radio [...]. Radio is better than newspaper – newspapers you have to buy, so not many people read them, and you can only find them in Fort Dauphin [the regional capital]. Many people here listen to the radio, it encourages people to go on."*

Finally, an example of what Tsing's (2004) "productive friction" of different understandings by groups of actors uniting around the supposedly common purpose of the oral testimony project was expressed by two participants. One young man argued that "*the project is good as it may lead people to have better communications between themselves. One person's thoughts will not count and cannot be broadcast, but the thoughts of many people can be broadcast."* This was similar to the opinion of another older man, expressed as typically by respected elders in Madagascar through a proverb: "*It's important to broadcast the thoughts of many people, and not just of one, as 'one finger cannot crush a louse.'"* This notion of the need for common voices rather than individual testimonies defies the project's objective of capturing individual life stories, replacing it with the local ideal of communal voice and action as morally superior to individual expressions (as set out through the Malagasy moral norm of "*fihavànana,*" kinship and unity). Again the project can be considered as a site of productive "friction" – different actors had different perceptions of the purpose of the project, but they engaged productively in joint social action in spite of these differences.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates the multi-faceted reality behind the problematic label of "development", and calls for the need for anthropology to acknowledge that if development in certain cases functions as an "anti-politics machine," some

development projects explicitly seek to change power relations to the benefit of marginalised people. One example is the NGO-led oral testimony project in Madagascar analysed in this article, which I argue explicitly sought to capture and publish the voices of marginalised people experiencing dispossession of land and natural resource access due to private sector-led “development.” I have demonstrated how this particular oral testimony approach, by facilitating opportunities for knowledge-creation by marginalised subsistence farmers and fishers, opened up debates around the impacts of “development” by widening access to the media and the production of authoritative knowledge. This went against the version of reality promoted by more powerful actors, who, I have argued, sought to reduce the many contested issues to “technical” problems to be solved by economic and social experts in order to avoid challenges to their land and natural resource access. Ultimately, then, the article calls for an anthropology of giving voice, closing the gap between observer and observed.

As the NGO engaged in oral testimony points out in a presentation of their approach, whatever the outcome of oral testimony, it is important that the process of listening does eventually result in acknowledgement and action, and that those who have given up their time to talk, know that their words have been taken seriously (Slim and Thompson 1993: 1-2). The notion of “applied” oral testimony is what gives the process a particular relevance and differentiates it from becoming a “voyeuristic” and merely extractive exercise, or a purely academic study. As I have pointed out, this aligns my argument with the Participatory Action Research approach, which emphasises democratic knowledge creation and building capacity for gaining voice as subjects and active researchers (c.f. Bradbury and Reason 2001a).

Oral testimony, though it has its limitations, is an attempt to democratize information gathering and dissemination (Armstrong and Bennett 2002: 196). Surely this is a prerequisite for any political debate about issues of profound importance to many of the people portrayed in anthropological studies, and which certainly arise from the Madagascar oral testimonies: access to natural resources. Ultimately, it gives people a chance to represent their own versions of reality and thereby challenge representations by powerful groups which may have profound effects on people’s wellbeing. The representations of local people by “experts,” including anthropologists, sometimes hired by multinational corporations, can thereby be more directly and equitably engaged with by these people themselves.

This need for an engaged anthropology is not a new endeavour. Further, from the “development” discipline’s perspective, there are new engagements with anthropological research, with collaborative, cross-disciplinary ventures increasing, and participatory research more acceptable in development circles ((Armstrong and Bennett 2002: 200). What might be useful for anthropology in order to remain socially relevant is an active engagement with communications for development approaches. In this light, I have argued that, as anthropologists, we must strive towards empowering our research collaborators to make their own voices heard, and facilitate the conditions for this, rather than them being dependent on “expert” outsider intermediaries such as, arguably, anthropologists. This leaves the ethnographer the roles of

facilitator, translator and communicator of joint findings of such research, notably to audiences beyond the ivory towers of academic institutions, such as policy makers, development practitioners and the media, who all influence the lives of people with whom we do fieldwork.

NOTES

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2 The methodology is set out in Panos (2003).

3 Bird (2010: 5) points out that anthropological engagement with the media is insufficient, to the detriment of our discipline, because "news is the one popular genre that claims to describe reality for the public." She argues that anthropologists therefore need to become more adept at actively working with journalists, in order to tell ethnographic stories more effectively.

4 Caplan (1997) provides an example and an overview.

5 Whereas in official Malagasy language the socio-linguistic term used for categorizing people from the Anosy Region is "Antanosy", local people themselves use the word "Tanôsy," which I have therefore chosen to use throughout.

6 The book can be downloaded on the website http://andrewleestrust.org/hepa.htm

7 "Gny hakamaroan'ny gny fivoria an-tanà, indindra gny ambanivohitsy dra tsy misy apela nohon'ny gn'apela ailiky vô izy tsy dra ampy faheza loatsy. Magnampy an'izay avô koa gny fomban-draza, mamehy amy ze raha ifamoria" (my translation).

8 See Somda (2009) for an ethnographic account of Tanôsy traditional hierarchy and the importance of secrecy and silence when describing unequal social relations.

9 According to Bakhtin (1986: 71), utterances, and the speech genres they feed into, such as life histories, are not mere reflections or descriptions of the word, but purposive interventions in the world. From this perspective, Gaventa and Cornwall (2001: 75) suggest that the role of the anthropologist can include the clarifying of historical and cultural contexts of specific dialogic encounters, treating situated representations not as empirical facts or reified expressions of "local knowledge", but as positioned utterances based on multiple axes of difference within a given "community."

10 "donner une voix aux communautés indigènes de Madagascar afin qu'ils puissent exprimer leurs besoins" (my translation).

11 **"**mba hahavy ñy gasy maro afaky hañambara ñy hetahetam-pony"(my translation).

12 Several ethnographies of Madagascar have discussed the concept of "*tompon-tany*" and its articulation of hierarchy and land access, including Feeley-Harnik (1991) and Evers (2002).

13 Rakotoarisoa (1998: 154-155) points out that the "tribal" label of "Antanôsy" is used for administrative purposes, but has no primordial meaning, as the term covers a number of sub-groups which consider themselves as distinct based on sub-region of origin, associated dialect and certain ritual practices.

14 For an analysis of the placement of umbilical cords, social belonging and ties to ancestral land in southern Madagascar, see Middleton (1995).

15 “[...] ny fakana ny tanin’ireo nonina nanodidina ny fitrandrahana fasimainty ataon’ny QMM, satria tsy manana taratasy ara-dalàna” (my translation).

16 The South Korean company Daewoo’s reputed free access to over a million hectares of arable land for export oriented agro business by the then Malagasy government in return for infrastructure investments and employment opportunities.

17 Arguably an example of Lukes (1974) second dimension of power, that of agenda-setting, c.f. Gaventa and Cornwal (2001).