Speaking Back, Striking Back
Calls for Local Agency and Good Fieldwork in Development Encounters

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ABSTRACT: This article explores local agency in development anthropology, a prominent form of applied anthropology that has encouraged reflection on the practice of anthropology itself (Mosse 2013). Drawing on specific fieldwork experiences from time the author spent working for the United Nations and international NGOs in East Africa, it discusses several complexities and moral questions that arose. In particular, it focuses on the challenges for local perspectives to be represented, given the subjective interests in which development encounters are embedded. It also looks at instances where ‘speaking back’ does occur, and where it arguably becomes ‘striking back’. In light of this, the article discusses what can be mutually exchanged between development and anthropology, with a particular focus on the accommodation of local agency and participation, and the need for fieldwork approaches based on sufficient time, trust and positionality.

KEYWORDS: agency, development anthropology, East Africa, international development, participation

Development anthropology is a branch of applied anthropology traceable back to the functionalist anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (Escobar 1991) and, beyond that, to histories of colonisation. Given the limits of purely economic understandings of international development contexts, development anthropology offers understandings of local society and culture that are relevant to the practical success of projects. Anthropologists typically work as ‘cultural experts’ to guide community-based, culturally sensitive approaches. In applying sociocultural or political information to development projects, they should enhance their effectiveness, highlight or facilitate relationships critical to project success and ensure interventions do not conflict with local values, systems and ways of life.

This article looks at challenges and moral questions associated with development anthropology. Common to these is the risk of subjectivity and ethnocentrism, an issue central to anthropology and indeed all social sciences whose fieldwork involves a subject and object traditionally separated by cultural, linguistic and social boundaries. Existing assumptions and biases on the part of researchers, the role of interlocutors (who may be local elites) in mediated encounters, and predetermined or politicised agendas can all conspire to diminish the objectivity of fieldwork in development anthropology. From the 1960s, postcolonial anthropology’s soul-searching over its subjective role and complicity in the power and governance of the British Empire generated accusatory labels such as ‘child of imperialism’ and ‘colonialism’s handmaiden’ (Shimizu et al. 1999). Development anthropology (or ‘post-development’ critique) in recent decades has echoed these themes, accusing anthropology of legitimising development as a moral and cultural neo-
imperialism, primitivising and profiting from the to-be-developed ‘other’ (Escobar 1995). Foucauldian narratives explain how strategic constructions of that other are mobilised to support projects of politics and power (Spivak 1988), and how local voices themselves are, almost by default, omitted in those constructions. The first part of this article, Speaking Back, combines aspects of a post-development critique with journal-style reflections on fieldwork to examine conditions that can create a vacuum for local voices.

A more recent ‘post critique’ narrative (Mosse 2013) shifts the focus from seeing development as a Trojan horse project of postcolonial hegemony to a process that is more negotiated and contested (even while still often being parasitic or exploitative [De Vries 2007, cited in Mosse 2013: 231]). Development is produced through existing categories, which it then transforms, and local agency plays its part in translating, re-ordering, re-working or even rejecting ideas and experiences. Local agency manifests in participatory inputs to development fieldwork and research, and most potently in fieldwork and research that is implemented by local actors (and activists) themselves. The second part of this article, Striking Back, references ‘post critique’ theory to explore fieldwork instances where local voices are raised in contestation and challenge.

The third part of this article deals with how to meaningfully secure a place for local agency in development anthropology, and the final part looks at how ‘good fieldwork’ can address the risk of subjectivity through stronger subject–object relationships and through researchers’ self-reflexivity. The fieldwork cited here came from a period spent working as an anthropologist for a United Nations East Africa regional office from 2012 to 2015, based in Nairobi with lots of travel to ‘the field’. While the examples reflect a particular set of sociopolitical and development dynamics, aspects of them are likely to be relevant to other contexts where development and development anthropology are in practice.

1. Speaking Back

Development anthropology seeks to reflect local values or community realities in policy and programming, and to do so by allowing local individuals and communities to ‘speak for themselves’. This is a constant thread in aid narratives, something seemingly upheld or aspired to by every donor and agency, large or small. Even in ‘purely’ academic anthropology, the relative inability to reasonably do this is the subject of much attention. Postcolonial discourse has spent decades criticising Western attempts at interacting with disparate cultures and raising local voices. Gayatri Spivak articulated this most poignantly in her 1988 essay, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ – a question which she answered in the final paragraph with the simple statement, ‘The subaltern cannot speak’ (1988: 104). She explored the topic in relation to various forms of lower-ranking ‘others’ – European working classes, non-elites in postcolonial contexts, lower castes and women – and used as a powerful example the Sati practice of widow burning in Hindu India, at that time much written about and anthropologised from every perspective except a local one. It is easy to agree with her that the political agendas at play contributed to this eclipsing of local perspectives: in the case of Sati, the barbarism of the practice was useful for justifying the ‘civilising’ mission of imperialism. Many have echoed this argument in other instances, or in general: Arturo Escobar pinpoints a ‘reluctance on the part of academic audiences in the First World […] to think about how they appropriate and “consume” Third World voices for their own needs’ (1995: 224).

Development anthropology (and arguably any form of applied anthropology) must certainly navigate this challenge in its attempt to raise local voices. Each development encounter is situated in power dynamics that stretch from familial to local to national and even international. This means that anthropologically oriented fieldwork may gather local voices, but these might then be obscured in the design of policy and programming, or be appropriated and consumed in an Escobarian construction of politicised (and by default non-local) knowledge.

To give context to the challenges for local voices to ‘speak back’ in development anthropology, due to the interests in which development encounters are embedded, I am including a personal journal account of fieldwork in northern Kenya by a group of development agencies supporting local government:

I was facilitating the community-based fieldwork for a ‘risk mapping’ exercise in Turkana, a remote and chronically underdeveloped County in northwest Kenya. Several development agencies were to create a map that would show the different risks affecting people and communities, allowing planning and investments to be better targeted. Having worked extensively in Turkana previously, I was to ensure the community perspective was captured in this. A priority for all involved was that the exercise be done
in support of and alongside the newly devolved County Government of Turkana.

After Kenya’s devolution its Counties received much more control, and funding. That was very empowering for those anywhere near power in the marginal but newly oil-rich Turkana. A metamorphosis of County governance structures had replaced dusty outpost offices full of yellowing stacks of paper and punished-looking civil servants into something altogether more assertive.

By the time we got to County capital Lodwar and embarked on a round of government meetings to secure the indispensable ‘buy in’, I was seeing a side of Turkana I had not seen before. Camels, tribesmen and the destitute still stirred the desert dust, but we drove past new signs for a luxury hotel called ‘County Palace’ and a restaurant called ‘Ngamia 1’ after the first oil installation. All on our way to the bustle of activity housing new government elites.

Behind a high wall crowned with razor wire, through a ‘multi zone x-ray scanner’ still wrapped in plastic and along a labyrinth of corridors, we met with several members of County government. In impressive offices we ventured our plan and received feedback. The idea of mapping risks was welcome, and we were reminded to capture the three ancient kinds: drought, floods and cattle rustling. We were also cautioned to take note of the significant and proud changes affecting the County, ones which required a shift in the perceptions of outsiders. With oil and funds, Turkana’s reputation as a place of poverty and mercy needed to be updated: trade and tourism were now more appropriate, modern priorities that everyone, including Western development agencies with their obsession for vulnerability, needed to get behind. In each office, and in meetings with other ‘stakeholders’ in the town, these messages about age-old risks and modern pride were reiterated.

From town we drove to a remote community, raising plumes of dust as we bumped along unsealed yellow tracks and across wide dry riverbeds. We passed skinny adults walking skinny goats the 40 kilometres back to Lodwar market, and children cheerful despite distended tummies. On arrival, the chief was kind enough to receive us with open arms and bring together a gathering of people willing to speak to us about local life.

These pastoralist men and women told us they were glad to be consulted, and glad of a discussion ‘on their terms’. We sat in their place, under their meeting tree, listened to their opening prayer asking for rain and health, and then asked for their thoughts on the risk mapping plan.

Hearing us explain that we would capture drought, flooding and conflict risks, they nodded. Asked whether this was a reflection of the main kinds of risk people faced, they began to offer another version. First a woman volunteered the risk that politicians make promises to get their votes, then forget them as they take power to get their allocation of resources. Then another told us that the biggest risk was NGOs that come with projects and plans … and then disappear overnight leaving less than they brought and a lot of dashed hopes.

The talking lasted until the sun was low, and then a dance brought everyone together before farewells. Driving back I reflected on the mismatch between the perspectives of town and country, or community and elite. From a safely remote distance Turkana is bundled up as a victim of timeless risks wrought by God and nature. The drought, the floods, the culturally inherited raiding and fighting – they all exist, but perhaps it is because they have always existed that when you ask local people about risks they will not cite them. It is the power and politics of outsiders and elites, not the ebbs and flows of natural and social life, that really brings risk. But how could we hold the mirror up on that?

For me this experience brought home the sense of confusion and compromise that can accompany applied anthropological fieldwork. This fieldwork was to be used in a major collaboration between development agencies and local government. But the politically dynamic ‘black box of implementation’ in international development, where practice is driven by a complex of relationships and politics rather than ‘good policy’ (Mosse 2004: 643), would likely do away with the community perspectives presented during that fieldwork. In the written outputs that followed, in which interests that pre-dated community consultations confidently took their place in a coherent and stable narrative matching political interests and policy theory, that seemed to be the case. Even an explicitly ‘bottom-up, participatory’ approach was structured by, rather than changing, relations of power, and seemed to express development as merely ‘the practice of politics’ (Li 2007, cited in Mosse 2013: 230). The community had been consulted, but they had not been able to ‘speak back’.

2. Striking Back

As I have tried to show, development anthropology is able to reveal the politics of representation in action, and show how the agendas that shape knowledge can leave little room for local voices to speak back. Yet it is also good at showing the limits of this. In this section I want to explore how in some cases
voices are raised to the extent that they are not merely speaking back but striking back. The work of Spivak, Escobar and others provides articulate criticism of international development analysed as a Foucauldian discourse through which ‘the West’ exerts control over ‘the rest’, even in a postcolonial world. Through this critique, development has been darkly portrayed as a ‘cloak of power’ (Mosse 2013). The previous section somewhat supports this perspective. More recently, however, a ‘post critique’ narrative has emerged that allows the politics of representation in international development to be seen in a more diverse or nuanced light. It envisages development as a negotiated cultural assemblage that can only be produced by ordering and transforming existing categories, rather than conquering and replacing them (ibid.). This makes way for more empowered local voices in development encounters, ones that do not just fall in line with a politicised ‘legitimation’ narrative but are able to challenge, transform and even override it.

The journal entry below attempts to illustrate this by describing experiences I had as part of research into ‘resilience’ from local perspectives in Somalia. Across the region at the time, development agencies were shifting their focus from ‘vulnerability’ to ‘resilience’ in the hope they could break cycles of short-term emergency assistance by strengthening local capacity to avoid or cope with shocks like drought, conflict, displacement and disease epidemics. While a resilience agenda had intuitive appeal for governments, the public and donors (who also saw it as more cost-effective), in many areas where communities had become used to relationships with aid agencies based on representation of vulnerability and receipt of short-term aid, it turned that on its head. The areas discussed here were marked by decades of short-term emergency aid from external agencies. Visiting as a researcher obviously linked to such agencies (and I will explore my own positionality in the next section), those I spoke to knew well the possible connection to humanitarian resources I represented.

To understand what follows, it must first be emphasised that the roles of informant and researcher are particularly well defined in development anthropology – so much so that in certain fieldwork encounters I felt on the receiving end of a community or informant ‘script’. Ideas of local vulnerability and related development needs seemed to have become internalised as a result of repeated exposure to development agencies, easily recounted for visiting researchers or consultants. I recount several of my brushes with formidable local voices in the following journal entry:

Today as I gratefully leave Somalia, I wonder if aid has not created a stage. I am relieved not just to have avoided being kidnapped, but also to have escaped the clutches of a series of very assertive women who presented themselves as community representatives and berated me in my perceived role as a development representative. Well-honed by repeated visits from aid agencies and researchers, these women told me repeatedly and in no uncertain terms that they needed aid, reproached me for not bringing it, and slammed me for wanting to talk to them again, when nothing ever comes of such discussions.

On all counts they were mostly right, but it struck me that this was more than the typical ‘assessment fatigue’ suffered by members of over-surveyed and over-researched communities. In launching, sustaining and wrapping up their tirade, it was obvious that they knew their role ‘by heart’, and that they thought I ought to know mine in turn. Here I was, asking them about their resilience, i.e. what makes them stronger and better able to avoid or cope with crises like insecurity, drought or flooding that affect people here … But folks like me have only ever asked about who is weak, and what makes them weaker, and who is the weakest. So in effect, I am trying to change the script, and these women are the ones to tell me that it’s not ok.

There were three in particular who stood out:

(1) The middle-aged woman in a desert town beyond Dolow who didn’t want her quiet old neighbour telling me about the traditional food preservation that enables their long nomad journeys through the desert. And who refused to discuss the community’s needs – strength and capacity somehow being a dirty offence to the whole point of the relationship between aid-giver and aid-receiver ...

(2) The group of heavily seated women at ‘State House’ IDP® camp in Hargeisa who pitched forward and yelled how weak and needy they were. While I, somewhat cowed into a corner, tried desperately to state and re-state my intention to talk with them about their resilience, their strength … But that is not on their agenda; that is not the point of encounters with the aid industry.

(3) The energetic lady brought to a United Nations workshop to represent IDPs and explain their capacities in order that these be better supported in development interventions. Unfortunately no-one was able to speak despite her, and repeatedly she confronted the workshop theme by repeating that her community needs cash and food (‘like yesterday’), that people are sick of discussion and ideas about development and want simply to be given relief.
It seemed that each of these women had taken on the role of advocate for the community and were to give outsiders like myself a suitable ear-bashing to make very sure they never came empty handed again, or mistook the community for anything less than the most pitiful, most vulnerable and most needy. Hinting at their strengths or suggesting admiration for their capacities, as I tried to do in discussions of resilience, the push-back was fierce. It commonly included metaphors shot back like missiles and intended to close the topic. Some that I was noisily bombarded with on these trips included: ‘We’re like orphans with no parents, no government, no help from aid agencies’; and, ‘We’re like a person with two broken legs and no one is helping us stand again’; and (slightly more opaque in meaning), ‘We’re so hungry here that we can’t even overhear secrets’.

All this took place in a country where people bemoan the lesser status of women and spend millions empowering them. It is not that they don’t suffer gender inequality, and certainly not that they don’t have needs: many have lived in a tumble dryer of trauma in their whole lives, their material wealth is scarce or fragile, and their access to basic services like health care is weak to non-existent. But it seems the aid sector’s theatrical relationships with real people with complex lives have created monsters called Needs, and villains called Vulnerabilities – and once they are on stage it is not very easy to change their role or the script.

Looking back on this entry, it seems unsympathetic and cynical, perhaps even a result of frustration at the un-achievement of research into resilience. But from an anthropological rather than development perspective, it reveals not a debate over the authenticity of vulnerabilities and needs but instead a demonstration of the vividly contested politics of representation that exist in development research. As with the previous example, it certifies the epistemological, political and personal implications of being involved in fieldwork that extends beyond purely ethnographic goals (Vargas-Cetina 2013). But the account also shows that people long regarded as development ‘subjects’ to be passively described are commonly taking active responsibility for self-representation, however confronting that may be for those who traditionally do the representing (or those who traditionally depict Western knowledge construction as a postcolonial hegemony). Resisting the shift in ‘script’ being asked of them with the arrival of development agencies’ resilience agenda, these women gave robust proof that they had internalised the prior narrative around vulnerabilities, and could use it themselves, in very assertive ways. They were an example of the ‘everyday resistance’ to development (Scott 1990), a phenomenon central to revised understandings of development as a negotiated process rather than something simply delivered and received. In the fieldwork instances given here, the terms ‘everyday resistance’ and ‘negotiation’ are in fact understating the sheer contestation and even combat involved in ‘speaking back’.

Speaking back becomes ‘striking back’ when local voices are not merely confined to fieldwork responses but are facilitating the fieldwork itself. In 1969 a Standing Rock Sioux scholar, writer and activist named Vine Deloria Jr burst onto anthropology’s (and America’s) consciousness with his book Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto. In this popular book, a critical chapter titled ‘Anthropologists and other Friends’ caused intense reflection and even shock that ‘a native struck back’ (Lewis 2007: 776). That theme was used again in Salman Rushdie’s 1982 article, ‘The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance’. Today, as the gap between fieldworker and researcher becomes ever narrower, and participatory and indigenous-led research grows in momentum, critical agency is set squarely on ‘both feet’. A good example is the contention of Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith that the word ‘research’ is ‘probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary’ (1999: 1). Smith, and others like her, are generating indigenous-led research that puts local agency front and centre.

3. What to Do About It: Local Agency in Development Encounters

To enable ‘speaking back’ and accommodate ‘striking back’, development anthropology (as well as anthropology and development in their own right) needs to recognise and accommodate local agency – the capacity of individuals to act and choose independently. Since the 1960s there have been calls for more egalitarian and inclusive approaches to research in general, based on growing hostility from subject communities who see research as linked to political-economic domination and inequality (Sillitoe 2015: xv). Specific to international development, Spivak called for ‘subalterns’ to speak for themselves rather than be represented by Western and/or elite agents (1988); others have called for local voices not only to speak but be heard (Maggio 2007), and calls for local agency are a ubiquitous part of most development aid (or ‘development cooperation’) rhetoric. Roughly in keeping with the themes of the earlier two sections, two main channels for empowering local agency are
participatory research as part of ‘engaged anthropology’ (speaking back), and ‘indigenous studies’ (striking back).

While references to local agency through participatory research or indigenous studies abound in the reporting, advocacy and proposals of international development, meaningful manifestations of these can be less easy to come by. In this section I will explore why obvious calls for increased local agency meet challenges and limits, and what some of the potential solutions might be.

First, the politics and power of international development (a multi-billion-dollar global industry) are a good place to start examining the less-than-sure foothold of local agency within it. The most convincing recommendations for how development agencies can accommodate and empower local agency call for greater trust in local people, and more sharing of decision-making power and responsibilities as well as resources (Harrigan and Changath Chol 1998). To achieve this, the causes of the relative lack of trust and meaningful engagement (typically in larger development agencies and certainly not in all) need to be explored. Lack of real trust and engagement may be linked to the big power and politics of development as Spivak, Escobar and others saw it (section 1), namely a development that never wanted or needed to incorporate local voices in the first place. Or, its causes could be more banal, such as the following, all of which were arguably present in the fieldwork contexts described in this article: cautionary histories of ‘misappropriation of aid resources’ that diminish trust between agencies and local interests (local redistribution and sale of food aid or other humanitarian commodities would be a routine example); presence of conflicts, insecurity and displacement that prohibit closeness between agencies and communities (certainly both fieldwork contexts mentioned in this article were affected by levels of insecurity that justify a ‘fly in, fly out’ approach by agencies); the gap between agency and community simply being too wide in terms of physical remoteness or differences in language, literacy and education (many on the receiving end of development live in isolated regions with poor access to formal education, while those designing the development often hark from an entirely different context, leaving little lingua franca between the two); and simply the inertia of how the modus operandi deals with people of another sociocultural context. To really ‘raise voice’ (Brocklesby et al. 2010) of local communities in order to secure their participation and agency, ‘the black box of implementation’ in international development (Mosse 2004) needs a good analysis, and the political economy of decision-making often needs a robust challenge.

Second, in many of the instances where participatory research in development does exist, it risks being tokenistic (as in section 1) or meaningful only at a level de-linked from real decision-making. Rarely is it accountable in terms of the decisions and resources attached, and rarely are local voices directly heard beyond community level. Statements and opinions may be recorded in consultations and transmitted indirectly (often post analysis) to the boardrooms and corridors of power where decisions about community development are made, but it is rare for local spokespersons and researchers to be present and vocal in those places themselves. During the years I worked in development agencies in East Africa, I can remember clearly the handful of instances where someone directly affected by an issue was physically present to design or discuss the solution – precisely because there were so few. Writing of the same context, Patta Scott-Villiers dedicates a powerful article to a single instance in a Nairobi workshop where a member of a pastoralist community was not only in the room but gave vocal challenge to the discussion about his community’s poverty – which left the room ‘in an uproar’ (Scott-Villiers 2011: 775). It can easily be argued that in many regions direct voice remains the near-exclusive preserve of those ‘doing the development’ rather than those ‘to be developed’.

Calling for a radical overturning of the authority and power linked to development anthropology and research is not a new cry, even though it is crucially important. At the same time, there are other, less audible concerns that should be raised. While it is straightforward to call for more local voices, participation and agency in international development and its research base, the ambition to make this happen cannot always be realised. The default settings of many of the developing contexts in which agencies work – chronic marginalisation, poverty and often conflict – mean that good intentions to incorporate indigenous or local researchers into development research cannot always be met by capacity to actually deliver this. I recall being told, by a very progressive manager at a United Nations agency I worked for in East Africa, not to pursue the idea of using an educated and research-interested local to draft a paper on a local cultural practice considered harmful to young women. She knew it would be valuable in terms of content, and she knew it would be powerful symbolically; but in her highly structured world of producing relevant and ‘action-ready’ documents to set standards and deadlines, she felt it would not
be possible. She may also have been concerned, in a region beset by corruption and tribalism, that prioritising one local voice over others could add to fears of ‘elite capture’ — where individuals and groups strategically represent themselves to influence resource allocation. Instead, interviews ensured his inputs were included, but in a mediated way that gave him indirect voice only.

These risks certainly are not present (or prohibitive) in all contexts, but many who have been involved in research in developing contexts may have shared the frustration that championing local researchers is the easy part, while meeting rigorous requirements and conditions in securing the intended deliverables is far less so (Sillitoe 2015: xvii). This may also explain the proliferation of ‘middle men’ services in development research, consultancies and organisations who essentially facilitate, edit, package and ‘quality assure’ local research products in the field of international development.

4. What to Do About It: Good Fieldwork in Development Encounters

Local agency in development encounters needs to be empowered, which can be done by prioritising local voices in meaningful and accountable ways (section 3). It can also be done simply by articulating the principles of good fieldwork in development encounters, which I will explore briefly in this section in light of the examples already given (sections 1 and 2). The two examples have a common theme: anxiety over subjectivity, or how ethnographic enquiry is being influenced by opinions and agendas. The first example (section 1) frets that the ‘truth’ of local perspectives will not be reflected in the development encounter’s written memory, since politicised agendas of non-local elites will edit it out. The second example (section 2) frets similarly, only this time it is decidedly local agendas distorting how ‘real’ experiences of local people are presented.

Good fieldwork is not held hostage to subjectivity. The pragmatic answer to this is that ‘the anthropologist must attend to subjectivity’ (Spiro 1996: 760). And in post-modern anthropology, this is typically done in two ways, reflecting the two-way encounter of fieldwork: ‘the anthropologist must attend to the subjectivity not only of the natives (the human object), but also his own (the human subject)’ (ibid.). Both these will be further explained here.

First, attending to the subjectivity of ‘the human object’, in this case the communities of Turkana or So-malia whose vulnerability and resilience were being explored, means attending to the quality and trust of fieldwork relationships with them. For all the time anthropology has been tormented by subjectivity, the fieldwork method known as ‘immersive participant observation’ has traditionally been seen as the discipline’s partial solution (Upadhyya 1999). Conversant in the local language and way of life, living within a community and even a family, the anthropologist using immersive participant observation as a method should be able to understand lived realities from the perspectives and in the words of another culture. This radically diminishes the chances of subjective experiences or politicised agendas distorting the findings of fieldwork.

While it is rightly upheld, such immersion is not always possible even in purely academic or ethnographic anthropology, and certainly not within the reporting timeframes and security protocols that constrain international development encounters taking place in some of the world’s most fragile places. The community-based portion of research in development is often whittled down to focus-group discussions and carried out in a matter of days if not hours. With important exceptions (e.g. Harrigan and Changath Chol 1998), the months and even years of classical ethnography based on relationship formation and participant observation is rarely a feature of development anthropology. These are the circumstances in which shallower, more subjective and more frustrating fieldwork encounters inevitably take place. The examples I have given are no exception. They were one-off and lasted several hours, which meant deeper relationships of mutual trust were not possible. In the absence of personal connections, these transient encounters were dominated by the official roles of those on both sides. Community representatives knew who I would relay their responses to (i.e. government and non-government development agencies), and which resources were therefore at stake (i.e. development investments in their community). These were fertile conditions for subjective representation of local issues, and a good reminder of anthropology’s rightful attachment to immersive participant observation.

Second, attending to the subjectivity of ‘the human subject’, in this case the researcher (and the author), means attending to one’s own role in an encounter and its production of knowledge. With the advent of the discipline’s ‘crisis of representation’ in the 1980s, and influenced by postmodernism and feminism, subjectivity in the construction of knowledge began to be debated in a new light. Reflexivity, intersubjectiv-
ity and positionality became ways to confront rather than overcome it (Thapan 1998, cited in Upadhyya 1999: 3362). Rejecting the ‘invisibility’ of earlier ethnographers, attempting to pull off what Haraway (1988) calls the “‘God trick’ of seeing everything from nowhere’, new disclosures of ‘self’ emerged with the intention of exposing and explaining inescapable subjectivity. These now range from contextualising caveats to distractingly over-personalised accounts. Yet they are relatively uncommon in anthropology or research related to development. Almost two decades ago, the discipline’s general lack of reflexivity was well described in the sentence, ‘It is sobering to find out just how differently aid workers are seen in comparison with the way they see themselves’ (Harrigan and Changath Chol 1998: 26). Today’s development workers (NGO employees, consultants, expatriate aid staff, volunteers and globally networked aid professionals) have occasionally been the subject of ethnography themselves – a growing body of ‘aidnography’ includes David Mosse’s depiction of them as ‘globally connected and permanent; but locally isolated and transient’ (2013: 235) – but there are limited accounts that could be called ‘self-reflexive’ in an anthropological sense. Those that exist are typically either heroic accounts of good deeds (often moral or religious in character) or the kind of backstage self-criticism and irony found in many aid-worker blogs (ibid.).

There are several explanations for what seems an obvious gap. Non-reflexive or ‘invisible’ development anthropologists are arguably a product of the fundamental power imbalance implicit in a field where the ‘under-developed’ – poor or vulnerable in some way – are being assisted by the ‘developers’ – implicitly capacitated and empowered to do so. There are dramatic differences in power which structure the fieldwork relationship, ones linked to differences in material wealth but also mobility, for typically the researcher has the power to enter and leave and the informant does not. This power imbalance is worsened when community informants are unable to summon the research back to them, for despite good intentions development studies do not always return or become accessible to the communities from which they were generated. Given these factors, a development anthropologist experiences relatively little pressure or responsibility to disclose and reflect on their own standing and the implications of this on the research; and it can be quite possible and acceptable not to do so.

At the same time, there is the additional consideration that self-reflexivity, which can be perceived as self-indulgent in research generally, seems especially so in development anthropology. The humanitarian contrast between subject (self) and object (other) can be stark: one has relative material, physical and social security whereas the other, to varying degrees, does not. Against this backdrop, it could be more generously argued that the limited self-reflexivity found in development stems from a moral objection to focusing on ‘self’ in a way that could be seen as excessive and distracting (and not merely from a power imbalance and lack of accountability).

Whatever the causes of limited self-reflexivity by development anthropologists and researchers, I am obliged to include a consideration of my own positionality here. I acknowledge that all the fieldwork encounters and reflections I have had have been influenced by my presence and its implications from a local perspective. In the two described here, I can assume that local informants perceived their female, British visitor, dropped off by an agency car with possessions that probably included a plastic water bottle and a mobile phone or voice recorder, as linked to several things: the Western world and its resources; Western ideas of development, work and women; development agencies and their resources; and possibly the government whose collaborative relationship with the development agency is well known. I fully expect that informants shaped their responses accordingly, and made representations strategic as a result.

There are other less obvious connotations that I have tried to be aware of, and to unpack in terms of their effect on the fieldwork encounters. The women in the second example, for instance, would have known quickly from my younger age and softer manner (relative to theirs) that they could overpower my agenda with their own (section 2), and that any nuance or diversity in the issues I was interested in could be silenced by the one loud message they needed to get across. Added to this, what was said in fieldwork encounters would also have been influenced by local perceptions of me that I could not always guess. While I try to explain myself to communities and informants, and invite reciprocal questions about myself, there will naturally be speculation. Sometimes this becomes evident. For example in Turkana in northern Kenya (during a much longer, live-in research phase), a keen-eared translator allowed me several times to ‘overhear’ some surprising insights about me. Among some baffling theories, one was that I must have no family since I had chosen to be there with them, just like other white runaways who had sought refuge in missionary or development activities in their remote and fairly formidable
More interpersonal dynamics are at play too. Perhaps this changed how they explained issues of community and family to me, things they considered me to be bereft of or naïve in? Perhaps it made them suspicious of me and less able to open up? Or feel pity for me and a sympathetic desire to help my research? I cannot know, but through the eavesdropping I was able to glimpse how many complex layers of expectations, relationships and agendas a fieldwork encounter is subjected to. Issues of politics, power and trust are primary, but a myriad of other more interpersonal dynamics are at play too.

Conclusion

Development anthropology faces much the same challenges as other forms of applied or non-applied anthropology: the politics of representation, a myriad of issues around subjectivity and a relatively uncomfortable relationship with informant/local agency and researcher positionality. Given the power dynamics development anthropology is usually situated in – ones that can be linked to considerable politics and resources – these issues are arguably more pressing than in anthropology done for ‘purely ethnographic’ reasons.

As a result, development anthropology is challenged by the limits for local voices to ‘speak back’, and rebuffed when they are able to ‘strike back’. Examining the moral and political dilemmas around how knowledge is produced from development encounters, calls for empowered local agency are well-founded and, despite inherent difficulties, sometimes well met. With the use of examples and using post-development and post-critique theory, I have explored in this article how the discipline must better collaborate with local agency while also maintaining key principles of good fieldwork in anthropology today. Collaborating with local agency includes more engaged and accountable participation plus so-called ‘Indigenous Studies’ approaches where local people themselves are designing and carrying out research related to their development. Good fieldwork, wherever it is done by, needs sufficient time to build trust and to incorporate participant observation where possible, while involved researchers also have an obligation to recognise their impact on the subjectivity of the knowledge created. Through insistence, development anthropologists can help normalise these approaches, and highlight their importance by articulating the risks of their absence: namely frustration or loss of faith in development processes that are set up to, and ought to, benefit those on the receiving end.

Exploring the moral complexities of fieldwork invites a certain amount of ‘hand wringing’, an extension of the angst that has beset both anthropology and development for decades. Ever since its ‘postmodern turn’, practitioners of anthropology ‘worry that their words and works will be seen as complicit with capitalism, colonialism, heteronormativity, or of objectifying or Orientalizing or eroticizing or universalizing the people they study. (And this is just a short list)’ (Lewis 2007: 777). The anthropology of development can be equally pessimistic, its ‘critical camp’ depicting development policy as a strategic technical discourse concealing hidden purposes of bureaucratic power or dominance, which are the true political intent of development (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990). This article has arguably provided grist for a postmodern mill, grinding issues of the politics of representation, subjectivity, local agency and researcher positionality. What I hope it did not do was diminish the need for ever-stronger partnerships between development and anthropology. For development, anthropology offers a way of examining how and why knowledge (and associated power) is constructed. For anthropology, development accelerates vital debates of local participation and agency and makes room for more collaborative knowledge production. For those on the receiving end of either, such partnerships could help facilitate the important processes of speaking back and striking back in development or fieldwork encounters, and increase the chance that those encounters have positive outcomes for individuals and communities directly involved.

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Notes

1. This particularly referred to the way colonial officials conducted anthropological research (which is generalised as non-participatory) in order to govern subject communities under imperial rule. Interrogating this in the 1960s sparked a critical reinvention of anthropology (Shimizu et al. 1999).
2. There are innumerable examples of the urge by development agencies to ‘give voice’ to local communities and affected people. A formative one might be the U.K. Government’s (DFID) 2000 Target Strategy Paper for Realising Human Rights for Poor People. Embarking on a rights-based agenda, its policy focuses on how poor people can be empowered to claim their rights. Of the three pillars of the policy – (i) participation; (ii) inclusion; and (iii) fulfilling state obligations – the first two speak to a widely shared international development agenda of ensuring those affected ‘speak for themselves’.

3. The binary of ‘the West versus the rest’ is increasingly hard to apply in international development (and beyond): increases in private-public partnerships, corporate and philanthropic foundations, South-South cooperation and BRICS countries’ development aid have rendered the term ‘Western development aid’ an anachronism. By using it in this article I have followed habit (and been unable to choose a suitable alternative).

4. ‘Subaltern’ means someone of lower rank or position, originally a military term. In critical theory and postcolonialism, subaltern refers to populations that are socially, politically and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure of the colony and the colonial homeland.

5. Vulnerability here means the diminished capacity of an individual or group to deal with hazards, shocks and stresses. In international development this is often expressed specifically through food insecurity, malnutrition, lack of access to social services and other factors that manifest reduced well-being and impaired development.


7. ‘Assessment fatigue’ is a term popularly used to refer to a condition in local people repeatedly subjected to questions because those asking them did not bother to learn from the previous assessment (and because there is a vast appetite for data in development, with less accountability in terms of what is done with this data).

8. IDP refers to an Internally Displaced Person, someone forced to flee his/her home but who remains within his or her country’s borders (as opposed to a refugee).

9. ‘Elite capture’ is where resources designated for the benefit of the larger population are usurped by a few individuals of superior status (economic, political, educational, ethnic or otherwise).

References


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