The Red-Haired Chimpanzee: Integrated Conservation and Development, Engagement, and (Mis)understandings in Hoima District, western Uganda

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The Red-Haired Chimpanzee: Integrated Conservation and Development, Engagement, and (Mis)understandings in Hoima District, western Uganda

Abstract
Drawing on research completed in seven villages in Hoima District, western Uganda, in 2013, this paper explores the social complexities inherent to integrated conservation and development projects orchestrated by transnational ENGOs in developing countries. I frame this exploration through a discussion of a story from my fieldwork - the sighting of a "red-haired" chimpanzee - and use it as a metaphor to encompass the ways in which groups of people involved in such conservation and development work think about, act towards, and "other" one another. Moreover, this paper explores the role that anthropologists can assume in articulating the implications of, and mediating, these complicated misunderstandings.

Keywords
Integrated Conservation and Development, anthropology, environment, ENGOs, engagement, rumours, Uganda.

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Steven Slowka

Introduction

The conservation of the environment and its biodiversity and the alleviation of poverty are both highly-publicized and oft called-for global objectives for the 21st century. What is sometimes difficult to conceptualize, however, is the reality that practical steps towards achieving these "global" objectives are often lived out in much smaller scales. Such steps are often structured interventions initiated by international aid agencies, government departments, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in "local" contexts and relatively small geographic locales. The translation of such broad, global goals to smaller, pragmatic interventions in, often, developing or Southern locales is an exercise that has already received attention from anthropologists (Agrawal and Gibson 1999; West 2005). Anthropologists are uniquely situated in this context to consider the complexities inherent to the implantation of predominantly Western ideas and systems into said locales and the issues that can arise from such an imposition.

This paper explores the challenges inherent to the implementation of integrated conservation and development projects - those that aim to achieve conservation goals through the socioeconomic development and empowerment of people living in close proximity to natural resources - from an anthropological standpoint. This paper aims to discuss some of the social complexities of such interventions, focusing on the ways that different groups of people understand - or, rather, misunderstand - each other. Moreover, I will discuss how the misunderstandings that arise from engagement in conservation and development work transform and perhaps even further obscure understandings of the various groups of people involved in such work.

I will begin this discussion with a story gleaned from fieldwork interviews undertaken in seven villages in Hoima District, western Uganda, in 2013. The story of the red-haired chimpanzee, as well as the rumours it inspired among people who would soon participate in an integrated conservation and development project (the "Sustainable Livelihoods Project"), will serve as the paper's central metaphor through which problems of engagement and misunderstanding can be conceived and examined. I will then provide a background on the proliferation of integrated conservation and development projects as the mechanisms to enact "global" change, as well as a background on my research in Uganda. The paper will explore existing research regarding the ways NGOs implement such projects and the misunderstandings they often have in doing so. I will then discuss the ways in which local peoples - those targeted by conservation and development initiatives - misunderstand NGOs and foreigners and how this influences the sustainability of the outcomes of such initiatives in the context of my research. Through considering the ways groups engage with and misunderstand each other I contend that there is a sort of 'reciprocal othering' that can exist in integrated conservation and development work. I conclude with the suggestion that anthropologists can, and should, be a component in contemporary discourses of conservation and development.

The Red-haired Chimpanzee

The story of the red-haired chimpanzee came to me by way of a man I
met in a small village in Hoima District, western Uganda. I visited the area in 2013 in order to conduct research on behalf of the Jane Goodall Institute of Canada (herein referred to as JGI). My research was aimed at exploring the attitudes among local participants toward the institute's recent conservation and development project. Specifically, I wanted to understand how participants felt about the project’s governance and inclusivity, as well as their thoughts on environmental conservation and the sustainability of the project for the future. The project, overall, had sought to restore riverine-forest corridors between two forest reserves so that chimpanzee and other primate populations had a safe means to travel between them. Moreover, it sought to encourage people living in the area to conserve nearby natural resources by pursuing alternative and less environmentally-destructive livelihood strategies - through the adoption of goat-raising, bee-keeping, agricultural training, and a litany of other socioeconomic investment tools. The man who first told me about the red-haired chimpanzee lived in one of the seven villages selected for inclusion in the project.

It was the middle of the afternoon when I met the man, and we sat in plastic chairs in the front yard of his homestead. I had met with him to talk about his experiences with JGI's project and how his involvement had changed his attitudes toward the environment and his livelihood. We had been talking with each other for approximately an hour when the man brought up a "phenomenon of a red-haired chimpanzee" - something he had never seen before. As neither I, nor my interpreter, were aware of such a creature, I pressed the man to tell me more about it. He explained that his wife and children had seen a red-haired chimpanzee near their homestead several years ago while he was away in a different town. He said that he himself had seen it a few days after he had returned. He explained that it had come up from one side of his homestead and proceeded past it and over a nearby mountain. He said it was noticeably red-haired and very unusual-looking compared to chimpanzees he had seen in the past. Aside from some of his neighbours seeing it as well, he said that no one else had witnessed the strange chimpanzee. Moreover, he said that it has not been seen in the area since. He explained to me that he had seen the peculiar animal a few months before JGI showed up in the area with proposals for their conservation and development project.

Before JGI had arrived, there had been a geographer working in the area creating maps of the forest reserves nearby (Bugoma and Wambabya forest reserves). Everyone in the nearby villages knew that the geographer was working for JGI, surveying the land in the area. Interestingly enough, the man explained that the red-haired chimpanzee had disappeared after the geographer left the area and just before JGI was moving in with their project proposals.

Perhaps understandably, news of a red-haired chimpanzee being sighted in the area resulted in discussion among the villages in the area. My informant explained that some people were excited about the red-haired chimpanzee because it could potentially attract foreign tourists who would bring their money to the area. Others were excited about it because it perhaps meant that there was a new species of chimpanzee to be discovered by scientists and then protected by the local communities. Many other simply did not believe that it existed and thought it was nothing more than a rumour. He also told me that some people who heard about the red-haired chimpanzee thought about it as part of some larger conspiracy. The conspiracy rumour took two
forms. My informant explained that a few of his neighbours thought that the chimpanzee was a "hybrid" and that JGI had paid the geographer to map out a place "to drop the chimpanzee"; essentially, to hide it from local peoples so that they would not be able to benefit from its uniqueness. The more sinister version of the conspiracy rumour was that JGI had introduced an "exotic, foreign, and invasive species" of chimpanzee to the area and that the conservation and development project they were introducing was a means to "steal our land and give it to the chimpanzee". The man said that there had been dissatisfaction among some of the older people particularly, as they were concerned that having to give up land or conserve resources for the chimpanzee would negatively impact their ability to provide for their families.

Based on the accounts of other participants in my research, I contend that the majority of people who heard about the red-haired chimpanzee did not believe it existed and that those who believed it to be part of a land-grabbing, or otherwise sinister, conspiracy were a very small minority of the local population. Nonetheless, rumours of an "exotic" and "foreign" chimpanzee are thought-provoking. What was it that made the various rumours about the chimpanzee conceivable for people? What do these rumours reveal about the ways people come to understand the actions and intents of foreign-based NGOs working in their communities?

My aim in introducing the story of the red-haired chimpanzee is neither to debate the validity of the animal's existence, nor the validity of the rumours it spawned. My aim, rather, is to use the red-haired chimpanzee as a metaphor for the complex ways in which misunderstandings - about others manifest within transnational conservation and development work. While much scholarly attention had been paid to the ways in which environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) think about and engage with people living in close proximity to the natural resource areas they want to conserve (Agrawal and Gibson 2001; Duffy 2010; West 2005), often reifying homogenous and static notions of community or culture that obscure lived realities, there is considerable insight to be gleaned from examining the ways in which said local peoples think about foreign-based ENGOs. To better frame this exploration, I will first provide some context on the proliferation of integrated conservation and development projects around the world as well as the project about which I conducted my research in Uganda.

Background on Integrated Conservation and Development

The notion that local peoples can play important, even transformative, roles in nature conservation is not new. Discourses of community-based conservation (CBC) strategies - efforts aimed at incorporating local people's knowledge and modern scientific knowledge to improve conservation outcomes (Child and Jones 2006) - have existed among conservationists since the 1980s (Brockington 2002). While relatively newer, integrated conservation and development projects (herein referred to as ICDPs, but also referred to as ICADs) have been utilized throughout the world since the 1990s (Wells and Brandon 1992; West 2005).

One of the fundamental premises of ICDPs is that people living in close proximity to protected areas use that area's resources and that, if those people were provided with alternative means to maintain their livelihood, conservation efforts would
be more successful. Thus, the aim of NGO-initiated ICDPs, broadly, is to incorporate local, social, and economic development into conservation efforts (West 2005). Moreover, as set out by West, ICDPs "are about changing the actions and practices of local people in order to meet the end goal of conservation" (West 2005). Along with a myriad of socioeconomic investment tools, NGOs rely on administering conservation education programs for local peoples (Bettinger, et al. 2010, Dolins 2010), as well as maintaining open and transparent communication with local peoples in regards to the project and its intended outcomes (Webber, Hill, and Reynolds 2007). In essence, ICDPs function to incorporate local peoples into both the intellectual and pragmatic realms of conservation-focused ENGOs (West 2005). Moreover, there is a prime focus within ICDPs on achieving development that is sustainable.

It is important to note that the underlying assumption in ICDPs that poverty alleviation and development would increase community receptiveness and participation in conservation efforts has been proven to be highly speculative (Adams et al. 2004) and that ICDPs have seldom achieved their target outcomes (Garnett, et al. 2007; McShane and Wells 2004). That said, many have argued that the success or failure of the ICDP approach is dependent on their design and implementation, rather than their underlying presuppositions (Blom, et al. 2010). While the relative success of ICDPs has been heavily criticized, they continue to be an oft-used strategy among conservation-focused ENGOs (West 2005). This is likely due to the fact there are no established methodologies available in guiding such projects and that there are several case studies where ICDPs have achieved long-term success (Garnett, et al. 2007). What is it that makes or breaks a development-minded, environmental conservation project, then? As previously noted, many argue that the success of ICDPs has to do with more than simply ENGOs' attempts to supplant more lucrative resource activities with conservation-minded ones (Blom, et al. 2010), having more to do with the manner in which such projects are implemented within communities.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Project

The Sustainable Livelihoods Project (herein referred to as the SLP) was an integrated conservation and development project instigated by the Jane Goodall Institute of Canada, in partnership with the Jane Goodall Institute of Uganda and Heifer Project International (HPI). Funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the SLP was formally active from December 2009, to December 2012. It was administered in Hoima District, western Uganda, and was focused on a populated area in-between Budongo and Wambabya forest reserves. It targeted approximately 700 households in close proximity to Kanyegarebo and Kasoma rivers - which ran between the forest reserves - in the villages of Kyakatemba, Kigaaga, Rwamusaga, Kidoma, Nyakasinina, Butimba, and Kanyegaramire.

The project's main objectives were to improve the health, well-being, and livelihoods of local people living in seven villages through the more sustainable use of local resources and the introduction of more sustainable sources of income. The SLP also aimed to establish conservation education and awareness programs in tandem with ecological restoration work along waterways that ran between the two forest reserves. The SLP involved mobilizing members of the aforementioned communities to participate in ecological restoration efforts along these rivers to establish corridors between the forest reserves. Because there are few opportunities in the area to gain meaningful
employment, resulting in locals having to rely on nearby natural resources to maintain their livelihoods, the local ecosystem was largely degraded prior to the introduction of the SLP.

Also important to note is the emphasis that was placed on involving local people at every stage of the SLP. As noted by Sayer and Campbell, many ICDPs aim to empower stakeholders by involving them in every stage of the research, design, and implementation of the project in order to instill ownership of the project outcomes among participants (2004). The organizers of the SLP endeavoured took steps to ensure that there was local input gathered during the planning stages of the project and throughout its implementation.

(Mis)understandings in ICDPs

There already exists considerable scholarship that examines the ways in which transnational ENGOs think about the communities in which they undertake conservation work. I would like to draw attention to scholarship that looks at, in particular, the notions of "community" and "conservation" through which such organizations enact their projects. I use the term "project" deliberately here, as inspired by the definition set out by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing in her contribution to New Directions in Anthropology and Environment: Intersections:

“Natural and social landscapes are made and remade in relation to varied environmental projects. I use the term projects to mean organized packages of ideas and practices that assume an at least tentative stability through their social enactment...A project is an institutionalized discourse with social and material effects.” (2001: 3-4)

Through considering this definition and its application to the mandates of ENGOs engaged in ICDP implementation, it is possible to consider how the institutionalized discourses of "community-centered" and "conservation" can result in obscuring the lived realities of peoples living in areas targeted of natural resource conservation. Moreover, it is integral to consider how the social and material effects of such misunderstandings can lead to the remaking of local landscapes.

The concept of "community" has been recognized within the social sciences as being highly complex and hotly contested (Hillery 1955) and the debate around its definition has been long-lasting. Despite its ambiguity, the term has readily been adopted by conservationists and ENGOs - among others - and integrated into contemporary discourses of conservation and development that integrate "local participation" into broader discussions of conserving wilderness (Duffy 2010; West 2005). The problems that can arise from such adoption and application of the term in natural resource management were outlined clearly by Agrawal and Gibson (1999). They present three concerning assumptions that come with the use of "community": first, the term denotes a small spatial unit; second, it denotes a homogenous social structure; and third, it assumes all members share the same set of norms. In the first instance, the use of "community" in conservation discourses obscures the interconnectedness with, and dependence on, others. Moreover, as noted by Agrawal and Gibson (1999), the stationary nature of terrestrial resources, like forests, does not mean that they can be easily allocated to particular small groups. More important to my discussion of the SLP in Uganda are the notions of community as a homogenous social entity with shared norms. It is important to note that the SLP mobilized people living in seven
geographically-distinct villages. Not only are these villages inevitably intertwined with each other in complex social relations, but they are more than likely intertwined with other villages outside of the SLP, as well as with other regional, national, and international social systems. It would be difficult to contend that communities involved in integrated conservation and development projects ever exist in homogeneity. Moreover, it is important to consider how understandings of "community" affect the introduction and implementation of ICDPs and how they remake the social landscape of the area to which they are applied.

The notion of "conservation", similar to "community", carries with it its own set of assumptions that can potentially persist in opposition to local understandings of natural resource use. It is important, in this instance, to consider the foundations of "conservation". Institutionalized conservation is a decidedly Western paradigm for understanding and implementing a desired human-nature relationship, founded on unique cultural and historical changes in the conceptualization of the natural world. Conservation, as noted by Agrawal and Gibson, needed the protection of threatened resources. However, members of nearby communities often rely on such resources to maintain their livelihoods (1999). Moreover, communities are likely to have their own understandings of the environment in which they live; understandings that might express themselves in ways counter to those of Western conservation. Agrawal and Gibson noted this when they explained that "the capacity of states to coerce their citizens into unpopular development and conservation programs is limited...where resources such as fodder, fuel-wood, fish, and wildlife are intrinsic to everyday livelihood and household budgets, even well-funded coercive conservation generally fails" (1999). My own research found that, while all of my informants identified that conservation was important to them, many noted that they knew of people in their communities who did not care about the outcomes of the SLP and who often engaged in practices that were not environmentally responsible (i.e., clearing riparian vegetation).

(Mis)understandings among Communities

A less-oft written about component to the discussion of the social complexities inherent to ICDPs and their implementation are the ways in which local communities think about the institutions that target them and their environments for conservation and development initiatives. This, I contend, is integral to my discussion of the challenges inherent to the implementation of ICDPs in developing countries by transnational ENGOs as it illustrates the way that misunderstandings can increase tensions in such contexts. To illustrate this, I will rely again on the metaphor of the red-haired chimpanzee and will try to communicate, in the vein of Walsh (2005), the "obvious aspects" of the SLP’s implementation in Hoima District from the perspective of its local participants.

I would first like to bring attention to the ways in which some of the people I spoke with characterized the supposed appearance of a red-haired chimpanzee and the implications these have on attitudes towards JGI, and towards me. The rumours associated with the red-haired chimpanzee - if it was real - could...
bring economic betterment to the area through tourism or payment for conservation is reflective of broader desires for foreign money in the area. Integral to this notion were the understandings that people had about me. Day-to-day discussions with my research assistant and cook, both Ugandans of the area, occasionally centered on my impending departure, by airplane, out of the country. While I was on a "student's budget" throughout my research, the money I had was conceptually different than the money that locals were used to having themselves. Whether it is tourists or researchers, the people of the area are aware that their environment is of interest to foreigners and that foreigners, like myself, are willing to pay high sums of money in order to experience it.

Another set of rumours about the red-haired chimpanzee that illustrate the ways in which locals understand "foreigners" is that of the animal being intentionally planted in order to justify foreigners stealing local land. According to my informant, some people in the area were concerned that JGI was coming in so that only they could benefit from the chimpanzee, or, in a more sinister rumour, that JGI was arriving to evict them from their land in order to protect habitat for the chimpanzee. This interpretation of the red-haired chimpanzee story perhaps points to collective social memory of colonialism or underprivilege as a result of the world economy favouring the West. Or, perhaps in more recent memory, it points to the presence of a steady flow of foreigners to the region involved in the construction of an oil refinery a couple of hours away by car, near Lake Albert. The oil refinery, I was told by several people before starting my research, was a sensitive issue for people in the area. In fact, I learned over the course of my research that many people in the villages had been paid off by the oil company and that they would be evicted from their land in two to three years. In a sense, some of the reactions to the story of the red-haired chimpanzee only further develop the local understanding in the villages of foreigners as land-grabbers. While I, and many of those who I met during my research, understand that JGI had not entered the area with sinister intentions, the local idiom of the area was initially that of suspicion towards foreigners.

It is also important to consider the fact some people who heard about the red-haired chimpanzee applied the descriptors "exotic", "foreign", and "invasive" to it. As much as Westerners are criticized for exoticizing and homogenizing people living in "out-of-the-way" places, we forget that Westerners can also be subject to similar assumptions. In fact, I would argue that the people with whom I conducted my research conceptually homogenize foreigners as much as conservationists are said to conceptually homogenize people living close to targeted resource areas. Throughout my fieldwork I was occasionally referred to by Ugandans, most often in passing, as being of as far-reaching nationalities as Egyptian, Turkish, American, English, Indian, and Chinese. In fact, only once did a stranger rightfully assume that I was Canadian. As it was explained anecdotally to me by my interpreter, Ugandans have "colour blindness", in that, if one is not recognizably black-skinned, they could be anything. They are just simply, foreign. This "colour blindness" raises interesting and important questions in regards to the legacies of colonialism, economic marginalization, and resource extraction in developing countries by the West. It became clearer and clearer to me throughout my research that, at the very least, foreigners, in whatever manner, were often thought of as the bringers of change. This is important to consider as it addresses potential issues...
facing Western-initiated conservation in the developing world.

Again, while my fieldwork experience overall indicates that most people considered the red-haired chimpanzee to be nothing more than a rumour, the various interpretations it spawned are telling of complex social relationships and imaginations that quite possibly can have implications for the success, or failure, of foreign-based NGO work in the area.

Othering in Integrated Conservation and Development

In discussing the various misunderstandings held both by the institutions that implement ICDPs and the peoples whose environments are targeted by such projects, I do not intend to paint either in a negative light. Rather, by highlighting the ways in which institutions misunderstand communities in close proximity to resources and vice versa, I aim to bring attention to the reciprocal othering that is at work here. That is to say, groups involved in ICDPs in transnational contexts - but likely also in domestic contexts - inadvertently conceptualize the other as just that; the other.

This tendency, at least in the context of the theoretical foundations of ICDPs, is clearly noted by West (2005): "In much of the literature associated with ICADs local people are discursively constructed as a 'threat' to the biological diversity of their lands. At their base, ICADs are about...the integration of local peoples into commodity based systems of production as a strategy for the conservation of biological diversity." To further this othering, West adds that the ICDP approach to achieving conservation goals conceptually places local peoples in the intellectual, discursive and material terrain of conservation biologists and NGOs, effectively removing their agency to dictate their own use of local resources (2005). In a sense, it is argueable that conservationists and institutions "other" local peoples as the irresponsible users of pristine resources, the passive recipients of "development" in exchange for changing their resource use practices, or both.

That said it is clear that in many of its permutations, the ICDP approach does not entirely work (Garnett, et al. 2007; McShane and Wells 2004). This comes, at least in part, as a result of local peoples not subscribing to the environmental views and conservation ethic advocated for by those implementing ICDPs (Agrawal and Gibbons 1999). It is important to consider the ways in which people understand the conservationists or institutions they engage with and how such understandings will influence their participation in the activities of an ICDP.

While it does not necessarily mean that such othering takes place between every ICDP and it participants, or even that it happened to a great extent in the context of JGI and the SLP, the red-haired chimpanzee is a useful metaphor through which to consider the ways that people (mis)understand each other and reify obscured notions of homogeneity, community, foreignness, or suitability-for-conservation-participation in the context of ICDPs - effectively constructing an Other with which there is inevitable conflict. It is possible to extend this to thinking about how the actions of one group of actors in a conservation-development context results in new assumptions among the other group. What becomes problematic then, is the idea that each group - NGO and local communities - end up producing new assumptions about each other in response to new actions. No matter the discourse one group thinks and acts through, the success of their efforts is perhaps inevitably subject to
new assumptions and othering by the second group.

Conclusions

Through an examination of the story of a red-haired chimpanzee, I contend that there is considerable complexity to the social implications and interactions inherent to ICDPs instigated by transnational ENGOs in developing countries. I argued that the rumours associated with the meaning of the chimpanzee's disappearance had correlations with local idiomatic attitudes towards foreigners and that, while JGI's Sustainable Livelihoods Project proceeded with its implementation, ICDPs can serve as a site for the formation of misunderstandings between conservationists and local resource users, often about each other. Moreover, I argued that these misunderstandings lead groups of people to "other" the opposite group and that this reciprocal othering is a major challenge to the successful implementation of conservation initiatives in developing countries.

It is my hope that the ideas explored are valuable for understanding the complexities associated with contemporary conservation and development work and the role for new environmental anthropology to play in the mediation of such complexities. There is considerable room for anthropologists to contribute to the mitigation of challenges inherent to the refashioning of social and natural landscapes around the world.

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