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Ethnographic filmmaking as narrative capital enhancement among Atauro diverwomen: a theoretical exploration

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a project involving the development and release of an ethnographic film about the women divers of Atauro Island, Timor-Leste, and suggests a theoretical framework to interpret its outcomes. It describes the project aims and the filmmaking process, and reports on its results. In doing so, the paper explores the potential use of an agent-based concept of narrative capital focused on collective agents. The article suggests that the ideas of narrative capital and transformations of capital by collective agents can provide a valuable interpretative framework for the design, implementation, and analyses of results of development interventions involving filmmaking.

Cet article présente un compte rendu sur un projet concernant l'élaboration et la sortie d'un film ethnographique sur les plongeuses de l'île Atauro, Timor-Leste, et suggère un cadre théorique pour en interpréter les résultats. Il décrit les objectifs du projet et le processus de réalisation du film, et en présente les résultats. Cet article examine aussi l'utilisation potentielle d'un concept basé sur des agents du capital narratif concentré sur les agents collectifs. Il article suggère que les idées de capital narratif et de transformations du capital par des agents collectifs peuvent fournir un cadre interprétatif prometteur pour la conception, la mise en œuvre et les analyses des résultats des interventions de développement faisant intervenir la réalisation de films.

El presente artículo da cuenta de un proyecto que implicó el montaje y el estreno de una película etnográfica sobre las mujeres buceadoras de la isla de Atauro, Timor Oriental, y propone un marco para interpretar sus resultados. En este sentido, examina los motivos que dieron lugar a este proyecto y el desarrollo del proceso fílmico, presentando luego los resultados obtenidos. Específicamente, el artículo analiza el uso potencial de un concepto de capital narrativo basado en agentes que, en este caso, se centra en agentes colectivos, sugiriendo que las ideas vinculadas al capital narrativo y a las transformaciones de capital llevadas a cabo por agentes colectivos pueden proveer un marco interpretativo prometedor para el diseño, la implementación y el análisis de los resultados de aquellas intervenciones de desarrollo en que esté implicada la cinematografía.

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Introduction

During the last 20 years, the notion of social capital has powerfully entered into everyday language (Portes 1998). Rooted in various intellectual traditions, the wider concept of capital has evolved in seemingly different ways within the various disciplines and epistemological traditions of the social

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sciences. The current use of the notion of social capital is therefore far from uniform. Amid the different fields where the concept of social capital has permeated, development discourse and analysis stands out. Within the sector, current debates focus on the linkages between social capital and economic development, or the connections, both positive and negative, between social capital and state institutions. Woolkock and Narayan suggest a multidimensional yet unsatisfactory notion of the concept of social capital, defined as "*the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively*" (Woolcock and Narayan 2000, 226).

These kinds of definitions, which have been dominant in development policy research, find their roots in Putnam's seminal work (1993), which suggests that economic development and social welfare derive from the historical accumulation of associative horizontal experience. This conception of social capital takes as a departure point a structuralist approach by which capital refers to a set of resources (cohesion, solidarity networks, ties) that a community or entire society can accumulate – with no internal divisions of class, gender, or any other. While this notion of social capital has provided prolific analyses within development policy research, a different notion of capital, focused on individuals and collective agents and rooted in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, has barely entered development discourse. Bourdieu understands social capital as the resources that an individual acquires from belonging to a group. In his approach, the accumulation of sets of capitals determines power relationships within a field, understood as a space of forces within which contending agents struggle for power (Bourdieu 2002). Hence, his idea of capital refers to the resources (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) by which agents reproduce their social status and the social structure as a whole (Bourdieu 2000; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013). In the process of reproducing or contesting power relationships, agents invest their efforts in acquiring new capital and transforming their existing capitals: for example, an individual who benefits from belonging to a social elite (a good deal of social capital) will have more chances to gain economic capital, and his/her descendants will have more opportunities to complete a higher degree at a reputed university (cultural capital), where they will have the chance to maintain their social capital.

The concept of narrative capital has been explored and furthered in recent times by a number of social scientists. In contrast with the idea of social capital, its use is not so widespread and has even been rejected by some scholars who call for an avoidance of the proliferation of types of capital. As with social capital, some authors have opted for a social-oriented approach by which narrative resources are accrued by entire groups or organisations, while others have opted for an approach more focused on the agent's use of this kind of capital (Noy 2004; Baldwin 2010; Goodson 2013; Alonso-Población and Fidalgo-Castro 2014). Goodson defines narrative capital as "*an armoury of narrative resources with which we not only render accounts but flexibly respond to the transitions and critical events which comprise our lives and equip us to actively develop courses of action and learning strategies*" (Goodson 2013, 74). In a more recent discussion, Alonso-Población and Fidalgo-Castro (2014, 259) define narrative capital as the:

> "… narrative resources of which an agent makes use to access power, either by raising one's own profile or by discrediting the other's domination. This accumulation … may contribute to social reproduction, but also to the questioning of the social order and hence, to social change."

Yet, while understanding narrative capital as a resource to access power can provide a promising standpoint to frame and analyse development interventions, a focus on individual agents may hinder the promises of this endeavour. In contrast, an approach focused on collective agents' use of narrative capital can provide a better framework for development policy research. From this point of view, narrative capital is not only accessed and mobilised by entire communities or social groups marked by administrative boundaries (as is the case among many authors following Putnam's framework), but by specific collective agents bounded by class, gender, or any other social division.

In this article we suggest that the notion of narrative capital and the idea of transformations of capitals can provide a valuable conceptual framework to interpret results of development

interventions involving ethnographic filmmaking. Following Watts (2008), a crucial aspect in understanding the interlinkages between power and narrative, is narrative capability, or the capacity to be heard and acknowledged. Although the acquisition of narrative capabilities can be restricted to specific social groups – for example, those with formal education (as shown by Alonso-Población and Fidalgo-Castro 2014) – we explore how ethnographic filmmaking can lead to the enhancement of narrative capabilities. In this article we describe the process of implementing a project which developed a film aimed at raising visibility of women's roles and how we linked the documentary with other community projects. We interpret the results as transformations of capitals. In doing so, we suggest that the use of a collective agent-oriented idea of capital can provide an interpretative framework to design development interventions and understand results, especially from a gender perspective.

Framing the project aims: women in the fisheries sector, narratives, and films in Timor-Leste

Despite growing interest by researchers and analysts in Timor-Leste after the country gained independence, little has been produced about its fishing sector.[1] Recent papers show that the fleet is dominated by small non-motorised canoes and solo fishing (Alonso-Población 2013; Alonso-Población et al. 2013), the availability of fishery products in country is below regional averages (AMSAT Int 2011), and that the sector faces important challenges triggered by market constraints and eating patterns (Alonso-Población 2013). As reported by McWilliam (2003), the people of Timor-Leste seem to have maintained an inward, land-based orientation (McWilliam 2003). An exception however, can be found on the island of Atauro, where a strong fishing tradition has been long reported by early colonial officers, missionaries (e.g. Barros Duarte 1984), and others. However, no specific references are made to the participation of women in fishing activities.

During the Indonesian occupation, the New Order regime promoted the establishment and development of fisheries cooperatives in the pursuit of a productionist revolution (Gunn 2003), provided equipment, and introduced new fishing techniques.[2] However, Timorese did not fully benefit from the fisheries programmes, and during the period of Indonesian withdrawal after the referendum, there was widespread destruction of fishing vessels, gear, and infrastructure.[3] Since independence, government and non-government actors have focused their efforts (Gunn 2003) on boosting production and developing a regulatory framework. These measures have had little influence in triggering significant changes in the sector (Alonso-Población et al. 2013).

If the knowledge available on the sector is still scarce, even less is known about the women's contribution. Beyond their roles in craft making, household labour, and livestock rearing, available documentation has succinctly reported on their roles in mending nets, post-harvest and drying, financial management, seasonal shore fishing, shellfish gathering, and reef gleaning (see De Carvalho, da Silva Guterres, and Delimas 2007; Alonso-Población et al. 2013). However, their contribution is still not acknowledged by institutions and external observers and has even been considered "marginal" (Lloyd et al. 2012) at some specific locales. This lack of visibility was the main reason for the development of the Wawata Topu project.

However, the "invisible" is not only what external observers cannot see or hear. In Timor-Leste, as in many other locales in the region, narratives are a crucial factor in accruing power in the local arena. Specifically, every individual pertains to a specific origin house group, which has a set of narratives of origin that, by linking the kin group to the realms of the spirit of the land, provide the group with a special status and specific rights over land and ritual power in a given locale. In these contexts, narratives set the social order of precedence (Fox 1995), by which certain groups are close to the origin, and other kin groups come after (as they are considered migrants). Not all people can however recount these narratives of origin; they are accrued by ritual authorities, who are mainly men. The order of precedence is however widely contested (see Alonso-Población and Fidalgo-Castro 2014) and its operation and importance cannot be generalised

across locales.[4] Nevertheless, in a social context where narratives have such historical importance and where for the most part they are mobilised by men, the film raised women's voices through their narratives – although their narratives were not related to origins but to their life, expectations, and the barriers they face. In this vein, the film fills a gap in the body of films produced in or about Timor-Leste, which mainly focused on stories of war, resistance, grief, and suffering. The primary idea was to represent the everyday stories of common people, focusing on women.

Wawata Topu (diverwomen)

Adara is a small fishing village located in the western side of the island of Atauro. The island, with 8,602 inhabitants and area of 140 km^2, is located around 25 km from the capital Dili, surrounded by the Indonesian islands of Alor and Wetar. During the Portuguese era, the island was used as a prison, so the eastern side of the territory received many immigrants. The hamlet of Adara is located on the opposite coast to the main centres of the island, including the sub-district administrative centre. Its 318 dwellers speak a form of the Wetarese language (locally known as Rasuah or Duadua) and consider themselves Protestants (Assemblies of God), as are the majority of Atauro islanders. Inhabitants of the hamlet practise a mixed livelihood strategy, combining livestock rearing, small-scale agriculture (especially maize), harvest of forestry resources, small-scale fishing, and reef gleaning. In contrast to other hamlets on the island, in Adara a number of women earn their main income from fishing.

We got to know about the diverwomen through photos taken by local artist and photographer Nelson Turquel, who a year before had been invited by a local Catholic priest to travel there and document the women's work with his underwater camera. David Palazón (co-director of the film) had already been working for several years in the audio-visual sector in Timor-Leste and had previously worked with Nelson on a number of projects. Enrique Alonso (co-director), anthropologist, had been working in the fishing sector in the country for a number of years as researcher and practitioner, and holds a special interest in gender issues. These photos were the starting point for the idea of bringing attention to these women's work. Fortunately, Enrique and Mario Gomes (assistant producer of the film) had also worked together before on several projects. Mario was from Adara, and he acted as the main link that made it possible to access the women and the community at large. The initial interest from the first discussions with community members was soon materialised in a project proposal that raised the interest of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, who provided funds for the development of the film.

As with any initiative coming from the outside, the first step was to seek the approval of the chief of *suku* (village) and the chief of *aldeia* (hamlet), who granted permission to implement the project provided the women were willing to participate. We then had a first meeting with the women's group to explain to them the reasons and objectives for making the film. One of the main arguments was that by being part of the film, the next generations would be able to know how their life was – to convert their recounting of their lives into a shared narrative for future generations. The day ended with a group photo and acceptance by the women's group to participate in the project.

Filmmaking as an event

The team visited the island at the beginning of June 2013. It was formed of David Palazón and Enrique Alonso, the local artist and photographer Nelson Turquel, and Mario Gomes as assistant producer. During the first weekend, Nuno da Silva and Beatriz Marciel, development practitioners with experience working in the country and master divers, accompanied the team and undertook some of the underwater shoots. While most of the shooting was accomplished in ten days in June 2013, further visits were conducted up to September to get additional footage and interviews.

During the stay in Adara we decided to transform our presence into a social event, something that was already unintentionally happening. We had brought a projector with us as part of our equipment.

The first night in the hamlet, we organised a communal dinner and screened some films. We also prepared printed copies of Nelson's photographs taken one year before and gave them to the diverwomen in a public event. During the following nights we screened the underwater footage taken that day, involving all the community in the filmmaking process and creating an environment of confidence and feedback with the protagonists.

Diver and fisherwomen: discovering social boundaries

While our focus was on the diverwomen, we quickly realised that economic boundaries existed in the community. Albertina, a fisherwoman who fishes alongside her husband, stated that: "*Men and women are one life. This is a good life* [*Feto ho mane moris ida deit. Moris di'ak maka ne'e*]." However, not all dwellers of Adara have the chance to work hand-in-hand with their partners. Young Angelita supports her family with the fish she gets from diving and fish netting with her father, as her mother got sick and can no longer contribute to fishing. The father of 18-year-old Sara died some time ago. She had previously left school because of her father's disability, which meant he was not able to provide income to support the family. She was the one who used to help him with the fishing, and together they were able to pay for the studies of some of her household members. Dina, 37 years old and mother of two, had to withdraw her older son from the school; she was abandoned by her husband and explained that fishing is not enough to provide for all their needs, including school expenses. Similar family stories are heard from other divers: disabilities, sicknesses, or health issues within households. As Maria, the first women diver in the area, explained the reasons why she decided to dive: "*There was no money or food; so we went diving … because we were hungry … we went diving* [*Osan la iha, hahán moos la iha; bá luku … tamba hamlaha … bá luku*]."

This socio-economic condition had a narrative parallel. Following the initial excitement after knowing of our interest in making them protagonists of a film, the first days of shooting were frustrating. Although the underwater filming was ongoing, we were not able to shoot the divers recounting life stories. When in front of the camera, they only timidly talked about issues related with diving. One day, we asked to have a meeting, where all sat together and had a discussion. We told them that in order to get a film ready we would need to hear their stories. Albertina was included in the group. She was the first one to talk and seemed the bravest speaking in public. Timidly but progressively, the diver women started to join the talk. The availability of adult manpower in the household production units seemed to be a determinant factor in the stories of the Wawata Topu. Unfortunately, the camera was not shooting that day; the tapes sold by the electronics shop in Dili had been exposed for too long to the heat and humidity of the tropical city. After this hindrance, it was time to start again. From that day on, the women started progressively to speak openly in front of the camera.

Film style and themes

Wawata Topu was not intended to be a participatory video, but a collaborative one. On the one hand we wanted to get insights on specific topics that we considered relevant; on the other, we were constrained by issues of time. Furthermore, the project as it was presented for donor funding was aimed at raising the visibility of the women's work and we considered a participatory process would require a longer engagement and a different perspective – even a different objective as it seeks to be a transformative process in itself. However, we managed to combine a top-down with a bottom-up approach in the selection of the topics. We considered it important for the community to talk about some themes, such as patterns of locality, kinship, and the issue of *barlake* (the bride price), which is a controversial topic among gender professionals in the country. We soon discovered many contradictions in local discourse about men and women's roles and the preference for patrilocality. These issues also had to be reflected. Interviews were focused on the

economic strategies of households and mostly, the film was nurtured by life stories. These interviews and life stories shaped for the most part the argument of the film, but their importance was raised during the analyses of their content, not beforehand. However, along with these themes, we were asked by the protagonists to reflect two issues in the film that they wanted the general public to be aware of: one was the lack of health facilities in the village and the problems they face because of that; the second was the long distance that children had to cover to go to school.

Along with the topics selected, some themes were not included in the film. As stated above, the diver women occupy a low status in the social scale and some were heads of household units marked by disabilities or health problems among adults. We soon realised that these were sensitive topics the women were reluctant to talk about. For this reason, we focused on those informants who were willing to tell their stories in front of the camera. The result is a short film (33 minutes long) that portrays an ethnographic picture of the life in Adara: the achievements, the wishes and expectations, the economic differences among households, the contradicting discourses, and the barriers faced by this group of women divers and fish sellers. The film focuses on the multidimensional and complex economic and social processes taking place in a fishing community immersed in a rapid social change marked by the increased access to formal education and the emergence of new aspirations and the potential development of more attractive livelihoods not linked to the sea. In doing so, we preferred not making use of voiceovers or comments by us (in the form of text or otherwise), avoiding their narrative being overlapped by external voices or imposing our narrative over theirs.

Transforming narrative into economic capital: linking the project to other community based initiatives

Mario was the first in the hamlet to study for a university degree. He took courses in fisheries in Yogyakarta. In informal conversations, Mario explains that he feels indebted to all involved in letting him achieving this goal. He recounts that when departing for Yogyakarta for the first time, all the inhabitants of Adara helped with his farewell, and even those with fewer resources offered their assistance.

Mario is the son of two fishers. In the first year, he was able to study thanks to the support of a foreign friend of his. What his parents thought as unfeasible when he first talked about the possibility of studying abroad, was made possible. Isaul, his father, proudly recounts that by fishing, they were able to pay for his studies from then on. In order to do so, both parents had to work hard both inland and at sea.

During the last two years, after completing his studies, Mario had been working both in a famous eco-resort at the other side of the island as well as for international development projects, and was able to save some money that he spent thoughtfully: he wanted to build some cabins for tourists in his hometown, through which he could generate some employment for others from Adara. There have been some tourism initiatives in the hamlet in the last few years. Currently, foreign operators offer expensive trips, which include diving in the corals around the west coast of the island and visits to Adara's stunning beach. However, inhabitants were concerned about how little benefit they obtained from such activities, mainly piecework wages received by young males for unloading equipment and food from the boats. Furthermore, Indonesian builders instead of the local inhabitants had been contracted to build the bamboo cabins where the tourists stay. The aim of Mario and his fellow villagers was to gain ownership over the tourist sector so that all villagers get their share, mostly those with fewer resources. In coordination with the chief of hamlet and a women's group, they created a cooperative involving those women who wanted to participate in the tourist project. The members together agreed on developing a rotation system by which each day a visitor stays in the cabin, a group of women prepare the meals and obtain the corresponding income for their work. The first cabin fully built by local inhabitants was completed in September 2013.

Devolving outcomes

After shooting in June 2013, work continued up to September, comprising editing and postproduction, artwork development, and a Facebook page. However, before the final result was released to the wider public, a final version was shown to Dina, Sara, and Angelita in order to seek their approval. They were shown the film first because they were the ones recounting more intimate accounts. The day we showed them the final version they cried and asked us to screen it again three more times. They did not request any changes, liked the film, and gave their permission for us to continue. Once granted by all involved, the premiere screening was organised in the hamlet. The event had a double aim: first, giving back the results to the protagonists; and second, promoting the newly opened guesthouse, which the women expected to provide a complementary source of income to their fishing activities. In order to do so, the screening was attended by 30 guests from abroad. A big ex-pat community, mostly formed by aid workers, lives in the capital, Dili. They are one of the main consumers of domestic tourism. However, domestic tourist options are limited, mostly to destinations close to the capital Dili easily reachable for weekend trips.[5] Hence, it was considered that the event would be the perfect opportunity to promote the newly completed cabin of Adara. Before the screening, a big meal for all hamlet dwellers and foreign visitors was organised and the event was accompanied by a handover of DVDs and a public acknowledgement for all Wawata Topu.

Immediate results: from narrative to social and symbolic capital

In the international arena, the film gained unexpected recognition.[6] At the national level, it was screened as part of many initiatives all over the country. But the most important event in 2013 for the film protagonists occurred in November, during the National Day of Timorese Women, when they were recognised by the Secretary of State for Promotion of Equality of the Government of Timor-Leste.[7] Maria Cabeça, the pioneer diver woman, was granted the Woman of the Year Award for her determination in contesting social barriers and striving to dive along with men. Maria, 71 years old, who served as an example for the coming generations, had never left the island before. The women were invited to Dili, where they spent two nights and were granted the award in a public event that include the political and social elite as well as the media.

Furthermore, the promotion of the local guesthouse during the initial release and through the Facebook site helped boost visits. The community members have already built two more cabins and occupancy rates have increased significantly. In March 2014 the inhabitants of Adara received a visit from the current President of the Republic for the first time, who publicly recognised the social value and economic function of the small social business. Managing the impact and the flow of tourists is a new challenge that the community will have to deal with. However, for the moment, tourism has begun to be seen as a real source of income through which the women's group can complement their incomes with wage work at the guesthouse. A second challenge for the hamlet's women is to ensure they keep benefiting from the local tourist initiative so that the business keeps its initial socially oriented spirit.

Finally, another source of income has arisen: selling DVDs of the film to visitors. As guests have shown interest in having copies of the film, the protagonists have started to sell them. Discussions have already started among the members of the association in order to decide how to invest the common savings from the film sales.

Conclusion: results as capital transformations

In this article we have presented the results of a modest project consisting of the development of a documentary film and its distribution. The project was run in parallel to a local tourism initiative through which local inhabitants expected to take ownership of tourism revenues and through which women from the most disfavoured households expected to complement their economic

sources. The project resulted in several outcomes: (1) the film increased visibility over women's crucial roles in the local economy and put them on the fisheries map in the country; (2) the project contributed to an incipient local tourism project through which women are able to get complementary income to their fishing activity; (3) the women's group found a complementary economic activity in the sale of DVDs to visitors; (4) women raised their profile by the public recognition of their work; they have received new visitors interested in their daily activity and were awarded the Woman of the Year by the Secretary of State for Promotion of Equality.

Recapping the discussion from the first section, we suggest that all these outcomes can be interpreted as transformations of capital. In Timor-Leste, as in many other locales within the region, narratives and power are inherently connected, as they provide social status, and legitimacy over spiritual and land rights (Fox 1995). In this context, narrative capabilities are accrued by certain individuals (Alonso-Población and Fidalgo-Castro 2014), who are mainly men. We suggest that the ethnographic film had as its primary outcome the enhancement of the women's narrative capability, or their capacity to be heard and acknowledged (Watts 2008); however, in contrast to origin narratives, their capital is based on the narrative of their everyday life. In this vein, economic benefits arising from the new opportunities, social and symbolic benefits as derived from their contact and acknowledgement by social and political elites, as well as international audiences, can be interpreted as second level but not less important outcomes. We suggest that all these second level results can be viewed as transformations of narrative capital.

As a final remark, contrary to the common trend of the spread of use of community-oriented notions of capital in development policy research, development discourse and analysis could benefit from the use of an agent-based conception of capital focused on collective agents.

Notes

1. With the exception of the overview article by McWilliam (2003) and a paper by Gunn (2003) on the copying strategies of Timorese fishers after the Indonesian withdrawal. A recently released dissertation by Alessandro Boarccaech contains descriptions on productive practices as well as interesting insights on the interconnections between fishing and religious beliefs and identity (Bicca 2011).
2. Furthermore, during the Indonesian era, use of cyanide, fish bombing, and other unsustainable fishing practices have been reported. See De Carvalho, da Silva Guterres, and Delimas (2007).
3. Data from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries reported that only about 200–300 paddle canoes and around 100 motorised canoes remained operational at the time of independence.
4. The Protestant Church in Atauro (Assemblies of God) promoted a rupture with many indigenous rituals (Bicca 2011) and practices regarded as "traditional" (*adat*, *lisan* or *kultura*), however people still know, recount and hold some value in certain origin narratives in Adara.
5. Tourism is one of the focal economic sectors for the government in its plan of transition to a non-oil economy. As such it is reflected in the National Development Goals.
6. The documentary is available online, and has been translated into several languages (German, Spanish, Italian, French, English, and Portuguese), screened at festivals all around the globe, and received the best Foreign Documentary Award at the American Online Film Awards and the Special Prize "Chandrika Sharma" at the International Festival "Pêcheurs du monde" in France.
7. See http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=9284&lang=pt (accessed 31 October 2014).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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