

## Ethnoprimateology of Human-Bonobo gestural communication and conservation practices in post-war Democratic Republic of Congo.

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My PhD research focuses on environmental anthropology and examines the relationship between the cosmology and everyday practices of the indigenous Bongando people, and their interactions with international conservation organizations working on development projects in exchange for wildlife reserves within their ancestral forests. I have conducted nearly 18 months of ethnographic research in the Democratic Republic of Congo in order to examine peoples' relationships with their forests and wild/domestic animals, as well as the environmental politics surrounding great ape conservation.

Riley (2006) and others have argued that the emerging field of ethno-primateology, which focuses on the ecological and cultural interconnections between human and nonhuman primates, has great potential to bridge the disciplines of biological and socio-cultural anthropology. 'Multispecies ethnography' (Kirksey & Helmreich

2010) forms part of the recent turn in sociocultural anthropology, which aims to better appreciate human cultural and material worlds within a larger series of processes and relationships that exceed the human (Kohn 2007) – it was described as one of the 'four main themes of particular significance in terms of theoretical intervention and methodological innovation' in anthropology in 2010 (Hamilton & Placas 2011). My thesis also aims to speak to wider academic debates concerning environmental and indigenous politics, market-based environmental policy, the 'frictions' of encounter and post-colonial scientific knowledge.

In 2012, I undertook six months of preliminary ethnographic fieldwork among a euroamerican scientific community conducting their own field research on a community of great apes (the little-studied 'bonobo' (*Pan paniscus*), which is at the centre of many scientific and popular debates

concerning 'human uniqueness' (cf. Quammen 2013) due to its status as the closest evolutionary relative of *Homo sapiens*). These field researchers work with local Congolese collaborators, in the central rainforest of northern Bandundu Province, Democratic Republic of Congo. During these six months, I examined scientific knowledge-making practices, as well as the relationships between scientists, villagers, state actors, 'poachers' and the great apes being studied.

While anthropologists studying scientists have increasingly moved away from the laboratory and into the field (cf. Latour 1999), few of these studies have examined scientists' relations to the people and places in which they work. Building on contemporary debates in environmental anthropology which question the boundedness of communities and emphasize their links to wider political-ecological networks (Escobar 2008) in order to examine the 'frictions' (Tsing 2005) of encounter, I sought to examine the ways in which the scientists conceived of the perspectives of these local 'others' (including their attempts to fathom the perspectives and motivations of the great apes they were studying). My primary method was participant-observation; I collected data in the forest alongside the scientists, including the video and audio recording of bonobo vocal and gestural communication.

I became increasingly interested in the ways in which natural resources were conceptualized and inequalities in power, wealth, ownership and mobility were evoked and negotiated through the scientists' interactions with their

Congolese collaborators in the heterotopia of their research camp – as well as the ways these interactions were mediated through, and enveloped by, the materiality of the forest and the other living beings within it (cf. Kohn 2013). I therefore moved to another fieldsite, where I was able to refocus my research, engaging with these questions from the perspective of local people.<sup>1</sup>

In 2013, I conducted 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork in south-eastern Equateur Province, Democratic Republic of Congo. The material gathered from this research will form the core of my doctoral thesis. My research focussed on the ways in which the Bongando (a multi-subsistence forest people of the Mongo ethnic cluster) negotiate with state and non-state actors interested in accessing and controlling their ancestral forests; from international nature conservation NGOs and scientists interested in bonobos, to the paramilitary Congolese Wildlife Authority and elephant poachers. I aim to ground local peoples' aspirations and negotiations with state and non-state actors within broader Mongo cosmologies of capture, predation, influence and the redistribution of people, objects, animals and wealth.

My primary research method was participant observation. Other methods included: structured and semi-structured interviews with local and international NGO members, local politicians, local people and research scientists; in-depth and open-ended ethnographic interviews and focus group interviews;

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<sup>1</sup> I returned to this original fieldsite in January 2014, and am currently preparing a paper which I hope to submit for publication in the next few months, examining and analysing the ethnographic material gathered at that site.

audio recording of myths, proverbs and hunting stories; archival research at the Centre *Æquatoria* in Mbandaka (DRC); film recording (including of human-animal interactions). Biosocial society support was specifically solicited in order to purchase the equipment necessary for audio and visual recording devices as well as a field laptop and the solar panel and battery necessary to charge this equipment in the field. This has been invaluable in enabling me to conduct my ethnographic and ethological research.

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