Land of Thorns:
A Filmic Attempt to Mediate
Issues of (Un-)sustainable Development

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One of the elements of the Karamoja awareness-raising campaign across Europe was the making of a documentary-film. This film, unlike other films produced about Karamoja, aims to raise awareness about the overall development situation in Karamoja, a region of North-East Uganda in crisis for the past thirty years.

In doing so, the film faces multiple challenges, from the representation of the other and the staging of authenticity to the communication of the complex concept of 'sustainable development'.

Written by one of the two makers of the film (and co-organizer of the overall Karamoja campaign), the present article articulates how the film-makers responded to these challenges.[2]

A Documentary Film for Awareness-raising

About 'Land of Thorns'

The documentary film *Land of Thorns: Struggling for Survival in Karamoja* was produced in January–April 2008 as a first step in the Europe-wide Karamoja awareness-raising campaign. The makers of the film (Steffen Keulig and Sacha Kagan) and its executive producer (David Knaute) were also actively involved in the awareness raising campaign as a whole, either as main organizers of the campaign (Knaute and Kagan) or as associate (Keulig).

The film was produced with the explicit aim to serve the campaign, showing the film to the different target groups, i.e. primarily the university students engaged in the campaign at the universities of Bordeaux (France), Groningen (the Netherlands), Lüneburg (Germany) and Prague (Czech Republic) and the pupils at the European high schools (in Bordeaux, Lüneburg and Prague) exchanging with schools in Karamoja. Hundreds of copies of the film on DVD were also distributed to NGOs, the EU, UN agencies and

other international organizations, and to academics, journalists and other 'multipliers' reached during the campaign, from May 2008 to April 2009. Furthermore, the film was also screened at several other awareness-raising and cultural events, including so far: the 'Salon des Initiatives de Paix' in Paris (Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie, La Villette, May 2008), the 'Biennale de l'Environnement' near Paris (Bobigny, September 2008), at the conference we organized at the Leuphana University Lüneburg on "European Awareness of Sustainability in Africa: Issues of Pastoralism" (October 2008), the 'Umweltfilmtage' in Lüneburg (January 2009) and the 'Native and Indigenous Film Fest' in Brno (May 2009).

As described on the campaign website (www.karamoja.eu), the film aims to "highlight several of the manifold dimensions of crisis in Karamoja and of the responses to challenges in the region. The film reveals the interconnectedness of the different mechanisms of unsustainable development in Karamoja, opening up a search process for sustainable futures." The film alternates expert interviews and scenes from Karamoja with a narrative thread woven around the life-stories of three Karamojong women: Pasca, a student at the Makerere University of Kampala, from a Tepeth community near the city of Moroto ; Abura, a young girl from a Manyatta (small village) near the town of Matany ; and Sabina, formerly exiled in the slum of Kisenyi in Kampala and currently living in a forced-resettlement camp in Karamoja.

Yet Another Documentary Film on Karamoja?

Although very few films have been produced on the region, *Land of Thorns* is of course neither the first, nor the last film to be realized on the situation of Karamoja. Two earlier films on Karamoja also deserve special attention: *Karamoja!* (1954) by William B. Treutle, a so-called 'shockumentary' made for an American audience, and *Ekisil – Peace* (2007) by Salvatore Braca and Giovanni Dall'Oglio, a docu-fiction made more especially for a Karamojong audience.

The comparison of the three films highlights some of the specificities of *Land of Thorns*:

- The thematic priorities of the three films are widely divergent. Treutle's *Karamoja!* depicts a culture "that lives backwards in time" and, full of a romantic fascination for the Karamojong, perpetuates an exotic, alienating perception of the indigenous cultures of Karamoja, focusing solely on elements of rituals and body ornamentations. *Ekisil* focuses on the violence of the conflicts between the Karamojong tribes and on the daily life of the people, delivering a strong pacifist message against the use of armed violence by the Karamojong warriors. In contrast to the previous two films, *Land of Thorns* approaches

a wider thematic spectrum, addressing the multiple issues of un-sustainable development in Karamoja, i.e. not only cattle raiding but also forced disarmament, migrations to the cities and forced resettle-ment, challenges to a sustainable pastoral livelihood and involvement of the international community.

- The goals of the three films are evidently divergent as well. *Kara-moja!* aims to entertain, shock and mesmerize its audience. *Ekisil*, with the active involvement of non-professional Karamojong actors who are engaged for peaceful conflict resolution, aims to achieve peace-building educational goals within Karamoja. *Land of Thorns* however, is aimed primarily at a European audience and conceived as an integrated element of an awareness-raising campaign.

- Under this light, it comes to no surprise that the self-presentation of the film-maker in the three films be also divergent. In *Karamoja!* the film-maker is both portrayed as an adventurer and as a knowledgeable Westerner (although he does, at times, praise the wisdom and qualities of the Karamojong). In *Ekisil*, the film-maker appears as a voice-over and shows himself in a short introductory sequence, articulating his educational and peace-building ambitions. In *Land of Thorns*, one of the film-makers (and author of this article) is shortly present in a scene at Matany hospital, thereby highlighting the link between 'our' in-volvement as 'developed' countries (through the World Food Program and UNICEF) and the treatment of symptoms of unsustainable devel-opment. However, for the rest of the film, the makers of *Land of Thorns* retreat in the backstage, leaving the front stage to a wide diver-sity of experts and protagonists (Karamojong people, their neighbours from Teso, officials from the Ugandan government and army, inter-national organizations and local NGOs).

- Although *Ekisil* is a docu-fiction, it represents the life of the Kara-mojong in a realistic way. *Karamoja!* also detains a certain degree of realism, following daily life up-close, but unfortunately spoils this quality with the excessively biased and logorrhoeic monologue of the narrating film-maker. The film then turns realism into voyeurism. *Land of Thorns*, on the other hand balances a large number of expert interviews and explanations of the humanitarian situation on the one hand, with the intermingled narratives of three Karamojong women (and at the very end of the film, a young Karamojong ex-warrior, named Lopeta, who is now a Hip Hop singer) on the other hand. In doing this, the film oscillates between subjectivism and realism, aim-ing at a multi-polar, pluralistic rendition of the complexity of the con-temporary situation in Karamoja.

The Awareness-raising Potential of the Film

Cognitive research pointed out time and again, that both attention and memory are linked to emotional involvement. Information which is linked to strong emotions is better kept in mind than information obtained in a less emotional context (Mandl & Huber 1983: 86). The potential value of a film for awareness-raising is therefore a priori considerable. Indeed, the medium of film allows building emotional relationships between the filmed 'object' and the film's recipient and may reach a wide range of target groups across different social classes, as noticed in the study of advertisement films (Westbrock 1983: 25-28). In *Land of Thorns*, the personalisation of the film around the central characters of Pasca, Abura and Sabina (and in the last sequence, Lopeta) reinforces the emotional effect of the film (Keulig 2009).

However, neither is filmic culture comparable across social classes and levels of education, nor do different individuals experience and process films in similar ways (Cordes 1997: 8). As students observed after watching and discussing the film (in a seminar I conducted at Leuphana University Lüneburg as part of the Karamoja campaign): "The discussions in the seminar showed that there is a big gap in the way people react to the film. This depends, among other things, on the sensitiveness, the previous knowledge and the attitude of the viewers. The given current situation in the viewers' private lives can also make a difference in their response" (Überham et al. 2009: 5).

Raising awareness about Karamoja also means raising awareness about the complexity of the questions of unsustainable development and of the crisis in Karamoja. Thorough research on Karamoja by the film makers and producer revealed indeed that any simple or streamlined discourse on development would fail to assess the situation in Karamoja, and would do more harm than good to the Karamojong people. Some critics of the film regretted that we do not focus on "the positives" enough; a former executive of the UNICEF even argued that "no business gets venture capital by showing negatives".[3] However, Karamoja has been already often enough the victim of simple discourses on development. Besides, considering themselves as independent researchers and as advocates of sustainability, the film makers clearly rejected the idea of producing yet another marketing/propaganda film as humanitarian organizations all-too often tend to do, drowning the film audience into the beatitude of "positive stories" meant indeed mainly to attract more funds to the said organizations.

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[3]   Personal communication (I prefer to keep this quote anonymous; my point here is not to point my finger at any individual person, but to criticize a general state of mind in humanitarian organizations).

Moreover, Sustainability in general is a complex construct which requires an interdisciplinary and systemic approach (Kagan, Pedersen, Ollech in this volume). Thus, the film makers were faced with the challenge of conveying the complex message of sustainability and of making the complexity of crisis in Karamoja, approachable and understandable for the film audience. How this challenge, together with other challenges, was tackled by the film makers in *Land of Thorns*, will now be assessed.

Challenges of Karamoja

Several challenges face the film-maker aiming to account on the situation in Karamoja. Among those are the polarization of antagonistic groups in conflict in Karamoja, the issue of staging authenticity and reality, which is all-the-more acute when approaching a profoundly different culture, and last but not least, the issue of complexity, i.e. how to account for the highly complex issue of long term unsustainable development in a crisis region.

The film-makers' choice concerning the first issue, i.e. the polarization of antagonistic groups in conflict, was to offer a pluralistic account of the situation, giving voice not only to three main parties that we identified, i.e. the Karamojong, their neighbors in Teso region and the national State authorities, but also giving voice to other actors such as local NGOs and international organizations.

However, the later two issues (i.e. authenticity and complexity) require lengthier explanation.

The Staging of Authenticity and Reality

The use of the filmic medium is intrinsically risky. Films seduce the audience into considering them as a more accurate device than written words, giving the spectators the idea of being part of the culture's reality and making them forget that the selection of scenes is subjective (Crawford & Turton 1997). According to David MacDougall, documentary films should not be mistaken for anthropological research: "ethnographic films are extremely powerful in conveying the plurality of the world; […] as for their anthropological value, however, [they] are not on equal terms with ethnographic writing." (MacDougall 1987: 58).

Nonetheless, the filmic medium should not be discarded as an element of the anthropological toolbox, as it allows investigating a wider range of human expressions than the written text (Crawford 1997: 71, Loizos 1997: 64). The filmic medium may also allow, better than the all-too linear discursive framework of scientific articles, to attain multiple forms of reflex-

ivity.[4] Indeed, the filmic medium allows combining multiple forms of cultural expression and communication (Feldmann & Hagemann 1955: 12) and therefore appeals to a diversity of human feelings and human 'knowings'.

One of the issues that arose in the making of the documentary film *Land of Thorns* is the question of the ethnographic representation of the other, i.e. the way an indigenous group is presented, portrayed, characterized throughout the film, and in parallel, the question of the filmic restaging of reality and its construction of a credible 'authenticity'.

In *Land of Thorns*, one especially "ethnic" or "traditional" representation is that of the ritual of the bull sacrifice. The choice to include such a scene stresses the traditional culture. However, in that scene, several of the participants are not wearing only traditional costumes, but also modern clothing (one can clearly identify a T-shirt from an American steak-house and another T-shirt from the European Union), thereby hinting at the mixing of traditional culture with "modern" elements.

The scene of the sacrifice illustrates the ambiguity of documentary film-making, when representing a ritualistic performance, i.e. restaging a staged scene. Precisely at this point in the film, an awareness of the film in its making may come to the surface and incite the watcher to adopt a critical distance. Indeed, in this scene the film makers and the participants in the ritual, are performing together as accomplices in the staging of real life.

Another such staging occurs in the scene of the burning of confiscated weapons. Once again, the film-makers are restaging a staged scene: The burning of confiscated weapons by the UPDF (Ugandan army) is, already without the involvement of the film-makers, designed as a spectacular performance destined to impress the local population. The presence of the film-makers, however, adds several more layers of performance and of interpretation: The authority and political influence of the UPDF division commander is increased because of the involvement of foreign film-makers. However, the editing of this scene of the film may also allow the film audience to adopt a slightly ironic and critical distance toward that military show of authority.

Therefore, the ambiguous playing with staging, although not perceptible at first sight, may be recognized by the film-audience, consciously or subconsciously, as a reminder that indeed, no documentary film may ever claim to 'objectivity'. At best, a film may attempt at presenting several perspectives, several subjectivities. This issue echoes the discussions around 'Cinéma Vérité' that Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin raised in the 1960's. Cinéma

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[4]   On the multiple forms of reflexivity and their relevance to sustainability, see Dieleman 2008.

Vérité, far from holding a claim to objectivity and neutrality (unlike 'direct cinema'), takes into account the role of the film-maker as an influential observer, and of course, director of a certain framing of reality. The truth of the documentary film is then not held in a naïve claim to objectivity, but in a specific filmic reality, i.e. a reality staged by the film (Bruni 2002).

Whereas Rouch and Morin (in the film *Chronique d'un été*, 1961) included themselves as well as the context of the making of the film as part of the subject matter of the film, to make this 'filmic reality' clearer to the audience, this was not the case in *Land of Thorns*. Indeed, as the goal of *Land of Thorns* was primarily to constitute a key element in the Karamoja awareness-raising campaign across Europe, the film-makers decided not to turn the film too much into a self-reflexive exploration of the ambivalent truths of filmic 'lies' i.e. the inherent fictional and subjective staging of reality in documentary film-making.

The issue of the ambiguous staging of reality also echoes the sociological insights from symbolic interactionism: Already before real life is turned into a filmic reality, the reality of everyday life is but a staged reality, where one plays in front of a "generalized other". The microsociological perspective of symbolic interactionism on society is based on the works of Georg Simmel, George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. It stresses that people always reflect behaviour and attitudes in the mirror of their social environment (self-reflection) and adjust them accordingly (self-monitoring). The self (or "me") is the product of self-reflection and self-monitoring. The self is the product of the generalized other, the adjustment of the self to the image of myself in the collective whole (Mead & Morris 1934, Blumer 1969).

Furthermore, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach further helps identifying how social agents instrumentalize their self-reflection in the mirror of the generalized other. His microsociological perspective on society is based on the permanent reflection of the self in everyday life. However, people do not only monitor themselves, they use this knowledge to manipulate their surroundings (impression management). The knowledge of the 'generalized other' is the foundation of presenting our self in everyday life. Life is a stage, divided in a front stage and a backstage. The front stage consists of setting and personal front (appearance, manner). Important is the consistency of all components of the front (setting, appearance, manner) (Goffman 1959).

The making of the documentary film is a chain of social encounters – all of them focused on impression management. In Goffman's terms, a "team" is a group of people in a situation who co-operate to maintain the appearance of consistency. As the ritual sacrifice scene and the weapons burning scene reveal, the people in front and behind the camera create such a team (such is

also the case in each of the interview situations in the film). However, a relative degree of ambiguity is maintained in *Land of Thorns* (most especially in the weapons burning scene with the speech of the division commander), so as to keep the film audience alerted about this very staging of authenticity and reality.

One may argue that the film nevertheless fails to sufficiently convey this ambiguity, allowing the film's audience to disregard the fact that documentary films are but reconstructions of reality. Moreover, the movement between the Karamojong, the UPDF's and other perspectives (through the great number of 'expert interviews' disseminated throughout the film) strives to establish a pluralistic balance of perspectives, but this may also lead the film's audience to believe in the film's objectivity and relinquish their critical distance. The later may appear as beneficial to awareness-raising in the short-term ; but in the long-term, such an effect would fail to enhance the target audience's competencies as citizens engaged in the search process for sustainability. This paradoxical analysis introduces us to what is probably the most crucial challenge that the makers of *Land of Thorns* had to face: How to properly contribute to an effective understanding of the complex and multifaceted issues of (un-) sustainable development.

Mediating Complex Issues of Unsustainable Development through Documentary Film

As mentioned above, a major challenge for the film makers of *Land of Thorns* was to mediate complexity while offering a broad-scale overview of the current situation in Karamoja.

The film accounts for most if not all dimensions of (un-)sustainable development, i.e. the economic, social, cultural, historical, political and ecological dimensions, progressively introducing issues of cattle raiding, arms trade, state policies, intercultural misunderstandings, food insecurity, marginalization, climate change, soil erosion, etc.

Central to the search process of sustainability are the building of intercultural competence, the connections between local and global realities, sensibility to gender issues and the promotion of bottom-up, participative processes among communities.

The very first interview in the film, i.e. Pasca telling about her first-hand experience, as a university student, of the prejudice that Ugandans hold against the Karamojong, strikes with its crudity. Indeed, as Pasca explains about her fellow students at Makerere University: "They could not believe I am a Karamojong, because they believe the Karamojongs have tails!" This sequence sets, from the start, the building of intercultural interactions as a

priority, not only between Africa and Europe but also inside Uganda, between the sedentary Ugandans and the semi-nomadic Karamojong.

Land of Thorns highlights the specific consequences of the cycle of violence and marginalization on women, revealing the gender aspect of the crisis, most especially through the story of Sabina: Her husband was killed in a raid. She then had to move to Kampala with her children for survival, but fell victim to rape and marginalization, before being forcefully resettled in Karamoja, where she has to sell firewood to ensure the survival of her children.

The film also highlights the global dimensions of the Karamoja crisis, for example with the focus on international arms trade, and with the focus on climate change.

In its final phase, *Land of Thorns* delivers a message of hope, not *despite of*, but actually in a meaningfully complex relationship with the difficulty of Karamoja's situation as described in the rest of the film. This message of hope is also clearly a promotion of participative, bottom-up initiatives for peace-building, with the interview of Patrick Abongi of the Katakwi foundation, a local NGO, and with the very final sequence where Lopeta is telling the story of his life: A former 'warrior', Lopeta strongly rejects violence and invites, through is Hip Hop songs, the young people of Karamoja toward peace-building.

Picture: Patrick Abongi (left) and Lopeta (right)

But the film makers' challenge does not end with adding up all the dimensions, one after another in a linear fashion. To allow the film's audience to acquire a systems view of the overall structures of unsustainable development, an overview of the linkages between different dimensions or levels of reality has to be reached. The film makers' original response to that challenge, in *Land of Thorns*, was to turn the 'syndrome approach', borrowed from the German academic community and used in the Karamoja campaign's research work (Kagan, Pedersen, Ollech in this volume), into a filmic 'mosaic'. A computer-made mosaic of video images comes up at about two thirds of the film, bringing together the ecological and socio-

economic dimensions of the Karamoja crisis and illustrating visually how a vicious cycle is operating (with the off-voice narrating the connections and feedback loops between the different dimensions). This filmic synthesis fits very closely to recommendations stemming from the academic community for 'sustainability communication' (Brand 2001: 12).

Picture: the 'mosaic' in *Land of Thorns*

But the 'mosaic' only acquires a power of conviction because it is placed at that late stage in the film. Indeed, at that stage in the film, the audience has built an emotional attachment to the protagonists (such as Sabina, fetching firewood on the lower-right corner of the mosaic) and has acquired a rational *and* sensible understanding of the different specific dimensions of the Karamoja crisis (for example, the consequences of cattle raiding, upper-left corner of the mosaic). Only then can such a description of a network of inter-relations as the filmic mosaic, be meaningful to an audience, i.e. when a sensibility is aroused that will then attach itself to this systemic information. But of course, a single film alone can only start arousing such a "sensibility to patterns that connect" (Bateson 2002). It cannot at once deliver to the film's audience, a long-lasting sensibility to the patterns that connect the threads of a more sustainable development. For such a sensibility to establish itself, many more cultural experiences of patterns that connect would have to be encountered by each individual and among groups of people.

The progress of cultures of sustainability requires that specific competences be acquired by social agents at the individual level, among which an enhanced intercultural competence and, as I argued elsewhere after Gregory Bateson, a trained sensitivity to "the patterns that connect" (Kagan 2009). With its focus on intercultural issues, right from the start of the first inter-

view, and with its 'syndrome mosaic', *Land of Thorns* constitutes an attempt to contribute to aesthetics of patterns that connect. For these reasons and despite the limitations of this specific film and of documentary films in general, *Land of Thorns* constitutes a primordial element of the Karamoja awareness-raising campaign across Europe.

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