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To cooperate or not to cooperate...? : collective action for rehabilitation of traditional water tunnel systems (qanats) in Syria

Wessels, J.I.

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Acknowledgements

How does a visual anthropologist turn into a filming human geographer? A question I should be able to answer. My first answer would be that you mix an environmental, ecological and spatial interest with visual talent and a strong curiosity to learn from other cultures and people. You also add a husband who is a physical geographer. But that does not automatically turn an anthropologist into a geographer. My personal story should give more clues about the events that made me become a filming human geographer. I started as an anthropologist after my Master degree in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Leiden in 1996. I had specialised in visual anthropology, using film technology as one of the main research methods. In addition to my studies, I also worked with a national broadcaster directing a monthly TV programme for young people. Soon after my graduation, I received a position as Associate Expert for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIS). My base was in Aleppo, Syria. I was seconded to the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI) as a public awareness and information officer. I knew nothing about plant genetic resources but had some clue about ecosystems, media, communication, spoke a bit of Arabic and knew how to “translate” complicated issues on biodiversity and the environment to the wider public. I was also very much interested in sustainable development, ecosystems, ethnobotany and traditional knowledge. Working with various ecological problems in the Middle East, it became increasingly clear to me that although loss of biodiversity and plant genetic resources were major issues, the most stringent problem for the Middle Eastern environment was the increasing scarcity of water.

In 1999, I wanted to go back to work as a social scientist. After my first term of two years with IPGRI, I developed my own proposal for an applied anthropological research project on ancient water tunnels (qanats) together with Dr. Aden Aw-Hassan at the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA), also based in Aleppo. I submitted the proposal to DGIS for consideration. I had already lived and worked for two years in Syria and wanted to continue my stay professionally. A more important reason was my personal relationship with a nearby rural village where the only water supply was an ancient water tunnel. My husband, a hydrogeologist, conducted a groundwater survey for ICARDA in an area close to Aleppo and we came upon this village when I joined him on one of his fieldwork trips. During weekend visits, we enjoyed spending time with the families of this village but also realised how urgent the water scarcity was for them. So I became interested in how these villagers work together using these qanats to cope with the harsh climate. I wanted to record their lives on film and learn

from them. The International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) had already agreed to host my project. Before the end of my first term, DGIS agreed to support me and I was glad that I could stay in the amazing country of Syria working with villagers in the field.

It also gave me the opportunity to work together with my husband who spent part of his working hours as a consultant hydrogeologist to the qanat project. We learned a lot from each others disciplines and it also contributed greatly to the integrated approach that I eventually took in my research. My work on qanats was initially intended as a short research project within my second term as Associate Expert posted in Syria. Instead it has become a big part of my life since 1998. As the project progressed and data accumulated, friends and colleagues often asked me why I did not want to write it down for a PhD thesis. At first, I dismissed the suggestion. I did not really think about it; my first priority was rehabilitating qanats with the villagers and documenting this on film to conserve the technology for the future. My second goal was to tell the story to the outside world in a film. Having finished my second term as Associate Expert late 2001, I received study leave in Damascus where I worked on my Arabic studies. Having won a grant in 2002 from the United Nations University (UNU), I stayed for some months in Amsterdam to work with the video material I had collected from my qanat work. I edited my first scientific film on qanats called "Little Waterfall" and returned back in the summer of 2002 for video feedback sessions with the communities. I had moved to the UK and set up my own documentary production company "Sapiens Productions" to work on a shorter film about the qanats for the Television trust for the Environment (TVE). But the idea of writing an academic thesis developed more and more in my mind. After a short initial search, I was lucky to find Professor Dr. Ton Dietz who was ready to help and supervise me to transform my research results into a PhD thesis. As he is a human geographer, it was the start of my transformation into a filming human geographer.

Through Ton Dietz, I became officially PhD student at the Research School For Resource Studies for Development (CERES). I was a so-called "free student" since I had to combine my PhD work with managing my own documentary filmproduction company. Qanats were the start of both activities. My first broadcast film with Sapiens Productions was a BBC World Earth Report produced by the Television trust for the Environment (TVE). The film "Tunnel Vision" was based on the anthropological film "Little Waterfall" that I had made from my research footage on qanats in Syria. Both films won prizes at environmental and anthropological filmfestivals. I carried on with combining documentary filmmaking, doing additional fieldwork in Syria and writing my PhD thesis. At times it was quite stressful since I lived in

the UK, had to travel a lot for my other films and in between concentrate on my PhD work for which my supervisor was at distance in Amsterdam. Luckily email communication with Ton was very good and I also had a co-promotor at King's College London, Professor Dr. Tony Allan, who provided crucial feedback at times.

Being part of CERES also gave me the opportunity to attend the summerschools and it was at the summerschool of 2003 that I presented my qanat films to my fellow students. It coincided with the start of an emerging group of fellow PhD students who were interested in using video for research. This convergence resulted in the implementation of a short video production course that I taught together with Jean Hellwig of Vista Foundation for CERES students. I am very proud to say that Vista Foundation still gives the video course twice a year and it continues to be very popular among geography students. In the meantime, successful filming geographers have emerged from the University of Amsterdam. The results can be seen online at www.geobrief.tv

Working as a free-lance filmmaker, it became difficult to concentrate on writing at home, so in 2004 I acquired workspace with the Centre for International Development and Training (CIDT) at the University of Wolverhampton. In 2005, I was asked to take up a part-time position as Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication for Development with CIDT. Now, it became even more difficult to focus on my PhD writing. The part-time work with CIDT focused on teaching and international consultancies on various development issues and the films I made with Sapiens Productions brought me to areas such as Surinam, Uganda, Kenya and Darfur. I had to resort to writing my PhD in the little spare time I had. Although all my professional work had to do with sustainable development and natural resources, some of it was quite far removed from my own academic research on qanats in Syria. The other qanat activity that I was officially involved in was the FOGGARA project of the International Research Center on Traditional and Local Knowledge (IPOGEA), an EU-funded project on the identification and conservation of qanats in Italy, Spain, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. It gave me the opportunity to visit various qanats in other countries. Then in 2006, I gave birth to my first child but miraculously I did find spare time to finish my dissertation and handed in my draft in March 2007.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisors Ton Dietz at the University of Amsterdam and Tony Allan of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and King's College in London for their patience, tireless input and supervision. I have learned a great deal from both of them and the positive feedback and guidance of both my supervisors always filled me with new energy. It was not always easy to juggle motherhood, running my own documentary film production company in

the UK, a part-time job at Wolverhampton University and writing a PhD in my spare time. Close relatives and friends often wondered if I slept at all !

In the course of this study, so many people have crossed my path who I would like to thank. First, I would like to thank the communities of Shallalah Saghirah and Qarah for taking me into their lives and sharing their views, concerns and experience. Knowing them has profoundly changed my life. My supervisor at ICARDA, Aden Aw-Hassan, research assistants George Arab, Nasr Hillali, Rima Mekdaschi and all my colleagues at ICARDA deserve my gratitude for providing me with guidance, ideas, overall inspiration and uplifting feedback during my fieldwork and while I was living in Syria. In Damascus, Bart Twaalfhoven of the Netherlands Embassy, Sandy Sandmann of the German Embassy and Pedro Zwahlen of the Swiss Embassy for their tireless support in providing funding and institutional back-up for the participatory qanat renovations in Shallalah Saghirah, Dmayr and Qarah. Kim Duistermaat of the Netherlands Institute for Academic Studies in Damascus for her close friendship and for always providing a place to stay in Damascus. I hope “my chair” is still on the balcony !

I would especially like to thank Professor Kobori-sensei of the United Nations University (UNU) in Tokyo, in my opinion the most knowledgeable man on qanats in the world. He visited us several times during the fieldwork in Syria. I feel privileged to know him personally and have met him on a regular basis during our joint work for the FOGGARA project. He kept my interest in qanats going and invited me to Japan in 2004 to visit the UNU and various qanat sites there. Adeel Zafar from the UNU was the main drive behind my UNU grant and made sure that I could continue my academic work with digital video in the field, even after my secondment to ICARDA had finished. I would like to thank Dale Lightfoot of Oklahoma State University for keeping in touch and providing me with his valuable data and maps on qanats in Syria. I thank Annika Rabo of the Centre for Research on International Migration and Ethnic Relations (CEIFO) Stockholm University for our valuable discussions in Aleppo and giving me her books on the Euphrates project.

In Amsterdam, Jean Hellwig of Vista Visuals provided space and guidance during the inventory of my video material. Being part of CERES enabled me to meet fellow PhD students like Arjan Sas, Kees van der Geest and Anna Laven to exchange views and theoretical insights. I am very glad to see that thanks to the energy of my fellow PhD students, the use of digital video is now firmly established within the AMIDst and CERES framework. Chiara Cavallo, to whom I am deeply thankful for always being there for me and providing a place to stay in Amsterdam. I thank Rutger Boelens of Wageningen University for introducing me to

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In the UK, I thank Sally Sutton for lending me her DPhil on Aflaj in Oman. I thank Martin Hollingham and Professor Gareth Wyn-Jones of the Centre for Arid Zone Studies (CAZS) of the University of Wales in Bangor. They spent their precious time having discussions with me and lent me a pile of interesting publications on Oman and qanats. I am sorry I returned them so late! I am grateful to Phillip Dearden, Mary Surridge, Bob Kowalski, Rachel Roland, Des Mahony, Ella King and all my other colleagues and students at the Centre for International Development and Training (CIDT) who were always willing to let their brains be picked and lend me an ear. The many discussions I had with them, provided me with academic support and new theoretical insights into collective action.

Writing this book was a steep but very good learning curve. I guess the combination of the path of my PhD research, my professional film-making and development consultant career now makes me a “filming human geographer”. At times it was not easy to shift between the commercial media industry, academic world and my teaching and development consultancy work. But I more or less managed to find a balance. In the meantime, I have moved back to the Netherlands after ten years abroad, also to give my children the opportunity to grow up in their own country and see their family more often. I continue to have my company Sapiens Productions and keep on making filmproductions on the environment and sustainable development. As a filmmaker and communication for development consultant I have various clients such as the International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC) and the European Centre for Development Policy and Management (ECDPM). I teach digital video to various groups and am also still involved with CIDT as an associate.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for everything, their love and support in finishing this study was essential. Last but not least, my utmost gratitude goes to my husband Robert Hoogeveen, whose input during the fieldwork and writing stage was absolutely crucial. Thank you for your support throughout. Your continuous patience and amazing ability to forgive during my ups and downs in this study pulled me through it all. I apologise if late night-time readings and early morning writings became at times a serious disturbance in our precious free time as a young family...and I promise I will never do it again!