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Hybridity in action: translating culture and power through the human rights discourse

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The subject of this research is an American non-governmental organisation well-known internationally for its reported success in promoting the abandonment of female genital cutting, a practice widespread in West Africa. Through an ethnographic lens, the paper examines the people who comprise the institutional framework of this NGO's programme, which is based on international human rights values, and discusses ideology, self-representation and practice among the diverse 'community' that makes up this organisation.

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"Cultural experience or indeed every cultural form is radically, quintessentially hybrid, and if it has been the practice in the West since Immanuel Kant to isolate cultural and aesthetic realms from the worldly domain, it is now time to rejoin them."

(Said 1993:58)

"Writing about cooperation and solidarity means writing at the same time about rejection and mistrust."

(Douglas 1989:1)

Introduction

This article is about negotiations, contradictions and hybridities in an international development context. The subject is an American NGO based in Senegal, founded by a former Peace Corps volunteer, who in her own words, arrived in Senegal in 1974 from the United States and "never went back".

The NGO has become well-known in the international development world for its "participatory" education programme, focused particularly on women, which reports success in facilitating the abandonment of female genital cutting, through the promotion of "human rights" values. Its stated mission is to "empower African communities to bring about sustainable development and positive social transformation based on respect for human rights" and the core of its activities rests in a 30-month programme in which participants are taught about human rights, democracy, and health matters, in their own languages. The Director claims that this programme results in communities voluntarily ceasing to practice female genital cutting through a transformation of what she terms the "social norm" driving the practice. In collaboration with academics in the United States, the NGO applies Schelling's (1960) 'convention theory' and a modified rational choice model, based on a comparison with the cessation of foot binding in 19th century China, to explain the apparent ability of the programme to induce behaviour change among target communities. The organisation has won several prestigious awards and its major donors include USAID, the Nike Foundation and UNICEF.

My experience with the NGO originated with my work in Senegal in 2007 as a volunteer in its monitoring and evaluation department, based in the town of Thiès, and included travel around the country to visit programme field sites and undertake surveys. This was followed in 2009 by an 18-month period of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork with the organisation for my doctorate in social anthropology. Fieldwork took place in Dakar at the NGO's international office, as well as a 6-month period in the village of Ouatta, in Casamance, southern Senegal. This predominantly Jóla village had taken part in the NGO programme from 2005 to 2007.

The methods I employed consisted primarily of participant observation, but also included formal interviews with village programme participants, and NGO management in Dakar, as well as textual analysis of organisational reports and blogs, newspaper articles and video and radio interviews. Over this period, I became familiar with the many faces of the organisation, and the lives of the people who form it. I take up Mary Douglas' view of institutions as "organizers of information" (Douglas 1989:47) and use as a starting point and challenge her interpretation of Fleck's theory of "thought worlds" and the internal structure of groups as "an inner elite of ranked initiates at the centre, the masses on the outside edge" while simultaneously considering individuals as members

of many groups and thought worlds, "each with its centre and rim, intersecting, separating and merging" (Douglas 1989: 14).

My research is an attempt to describe and analyse this institution in order to produce an ethnographic account of a transnational development organisation. In particular, I wish to contribute to critical anthropological accounts of development, bearing in mind the subjectivity of experience (Rapport 2002) and my position as someone from the global North living in the complex, globalizing, postcolonial milieu that these development encounters are situated in. As Gardner and Lewis put it, "development makes anthropological encounters with the Third World possible – just as colonialism once did" (1996: 24). Along with these authors, I take the view that development operates as a hegemonic discourse, in which the world is "represented, ordered and controlled in particular ways"(ibid.) and in the spirit of Arturo Escobar, I approach development as an "arena of cultural contestation and identity construction" in which actors constantly negotiate, translate and appropriate the discourses of development through ideology, self-representation and practice (1995: 15). Après Barth, my approach involves "anthropology's time-honoured naturalist task of working through a careful, meticulous description of a broad range of data" as the procedure of discovery (1989: 124). Even though this cannot be fully performed in the format of the present paper, I hope that some fragments and outlines of such a description indicate the substance of my argument and my ethnographic attempt to describe the particular social worlds and social movements which form and are formed in this development milieu.

Context: Senegal

Senegal is a secular republic with a governmental structure and legal code adapted from the French model. More than 90% of the population are Muslim. The Civil Code relating to family matters contains an option allowing Muslims to follow a version of Sharia law in relation to marriage, divorce, family authority, child custody and inheritance. Many of the provisions are drawn directly from classical Islamic text, but others have been amended, usually in the direction of increasing secularity (Sow 2003).

Creevey notes that, in pre-colonial Senegal, the more contact with Islam an ethnic group had, the more hierarchical and specialised the structure of government and the more patriarchal the society (Creevey 1996). The less contact with Islam, the more likely was a society to be matriarchal or matrilineal and the greater the role played by women in politics and decision-making. Islam was of course not the only major influence from the outside impacting on the social, political and economic structures of society, with French rule having perhaps as much or even more impact. Creevey argues that the very process of conversion to Islam was dramatically motivated by the incursion of the French (ibid.).

The relationship between religion and politics in Senegal is a reciprocal partnership, much as it was in the colonial period, when the French administrators used the *marabouts* (leaders of Sufi *tariqas* or brotherhoods) to gain the support and compliance of the general population (Evers Rosander 1997). In turn, the *marabouts* received government assistance and used French support to eliminate threatening rivals, unifying large areas of the country. Their leaders were national leaders and the French found it expedient, not only to allow this, but to promote it, and generally did not interfere in brotherhood politics as long as they did not challenge French authority. The French had

always been interested in limiting (and exploiting) the power and influence of Muslim (and Arab) leaders in West Africa. Schulz (2003: 134-5) writing about Mali, argues that "the French considered the Sufi lineages to be representatives of an established 'African' Islam capable of limiting the growing influence of a new group of Muslim entrepreneurs with strong intellectual and business ties to the Arab-speaking world" (Schulz 2003).

The spread of Islam in West Africa had considerable, and varied, impacts on the status of women. Women were removed from positions of public power and influence and a more strictly patriarchal state system was promoted within the traditional kingdoms. Additionally, the economic transformations which accompanied the French-inspired drive to get Senegalese farmers to grow peanuts resulted in "increased work and responsibility for women while men would have the option of joining the new economic hierarchy whose rewards were salaries, benefits and a new status which would be superimposed on the old rankings of society" (Creevey 1996: 277).

The specific impact of Islam on family and gender relations is related to the ways in which it attempts to regulates all aspects of life and does not distinguish between the sacred and the secular (Smith 1970). It defines a set of beliefs, a way of worship, an integrated system of criminal and civil law and an economic and political system. It stipulates the way to run the family, regulating matters of inheritance and divorce, dress, etiquette, food and hygiene, and the relationship between the sexes. Around a third of the *ahkam* (legal injunctions of the Qur'an) relate to the family and its regulation (Khurshid 1974). Ironically, despite the "immutable, unalterable nature" of Islamic texts, one of the reasons for the success of Islam in Africa compared to Christianity is its tolerance and flexibility (Creevey 1996: 278). Islam was able to absorb pre-Islamic practices (such as female genital cutting) in a way which Christianity could not so easily do. Creevey (1996: 279) argues that the end result of the conversion to Islam in West African societies was the legal justification for the reduction in the power and status of women, "a provision not violating the pre-existing norms which had thus discriminated".

Sow (2003) argues that the status of women is a matter at the core of people's ideas about society and culture, and is hence at the heart of the confrontations between Islam and modernity, between notions of Muslim 'Africanness' and Westernisation. Islamic fundamentalist movements criticise the concept of modernity, which they see as an imposition from the 'outside'. For them, the important issue is to reclaim traditional identity, with women seen as a symbol of ethnic 'purity' (ibid.). However, as Predelli points out, modernisation "does not inevitably liberate women but rather challenges them by removing traditional sources of influence, sometimes replacing them with male prerogatives" and calls attention to 'Islamic modernism', which she identifies as Islamic responses to European colonialism, and include support for women's rights in law, politics, education, and the job market (Predelli 2004:478). Additionally, Senegalese Islam in particular, while laying the foundations for moral and social life, has been "relatively gentle" towards women, recognising the importance of pre-existing family systems, be they matrilineal or patrilineal: "beneath the general principle that women should be obedient to men, women have a degree of choice in negotiating their status and their authority within the family and society" (Sow 2003: 71). Lee (2002: 52), writing about the conversion of women to Islam in South Africa, remarks how "a growing sector of Cape Town's Muslim population have internalised the process of conversion and their new religious identities", while simultaneously displaying a "resilient sensitivity" to pre-Islamic traditions, engaging in a degree of

compartmentalisation in order to preserve both sides of their identities harmoniously (Lee 2002).

The NGO

On entry to the NGO international office in Dakar, one is likely to be greeted by Adama Diouf[2], the receptionist. Adama, a young married woman in her late 20s and the recent mother of twins, is the only woman in the office to wear a veil, although most of the predominantly Senegalese staff is Muslim. Adama barely looks up, with a languid and disinterested air, as staff and the odd visitor pass through reception. Peering down at her over the fax machine and telephone is a framed photograph of a beaming Hillary Clinton, addressed "to the staff, with best wishes". I had overheard a remark once by the Head of the Monitoring and Evaluation department, an American, that he found it slightly annoying that Adama, the only veiled member of staff should be the first person the visitor should meet on arrival to the office, as it "didn't give a good impression" to the international visitors.

The building where Adama works is the NGO's international office in Dakar, where the Executive Director is normally to be found when not travelling abroad for fundraising or promotional activities. There are around 20 people working in the office, occupied in administrative roles including finance, programme and grants management and public relations activities. Most of the permanent staff are Senegalese, supplemented by a constant rotation of young volunteers in short-term support and administrative positions, most of whom are recent university graduates from the United States.

In this building, French, English and Wolof can be overheard through every office door, with French being the language of general business, as is the case in most such offices in the city. Any weekday morning will see the occupants of the dusty pink building arrive to work, greet Adama and any others seated in the reception area with a handshake, and sign their names on the large attendance book perched on her desk. The Senegalese staff, resplendent in pressed shirts, slacks and polished shoes, or a colourfully embroidered wax *boubou*, enter each room to exchange greetings with each other in Wolof and, in a slightly world-weary yet amicable way, in French and English, with the young volunteers taking up position behind their laptops, clad in cotton t-shirts, jeans and flip-flops.

The air-conditioned Dakar office is far removed, geographically and culturally, from the site of most of the NGO programme activities, which take place in mostly rural areas across Senegal and other countries in the region, in villages which rarely have electricity and running water. In July 2009, returning to Dakar from the village of Ouatta in Casamance, I arrived from the ferry port to the office, relieved after the long trip to deposit my bags, get my bearings and greet colleagues and friends I had not seen since my departure from the capital six months before. I was greeted with the smiles of welcome ready for all travelling team members who pass through the office. It is common for both staff and volunteers to spend weeks or months "on mission" to the regional or national offices. Most of the staff had no idea where I had spent my absence or what I had been doing there. To them, I was another young *toubab* (white person) returning from "mission", and I was welcome back.

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[2] All names are pseudonyms and I refer to the organisation in question simply as NGO.

As I stood in the hall sipping water from a plastic cup, my eyes were drawn to the notice board near the doorway. An animated UNICEF poster highlighting "human rights and responsibilities" had been pinned up, alongside a copy of a letter addressed to the NGO, in English, from Hilary Clinton. Next to it were some announcements in French, one of the upcoming marriage of a member of the Dakar staff and the other a notice of bereavement for a programme facilitator in a regional office. The hallway was dotted with a colourful painting here and there, no doubt by one of the artists to be found plying his creations on the streets of the city centre; long dark figures of women gracefully balancing baskets and bundles on their heads, silhouetted against colourful backgrounds of orange, yellow, green and blue. The stairs in front of me led up to the first floor, where the Director could be found behind closed doors, sharing a large office with her Director of Operations, a fellow American.

The village life I had just left was a world away from fast-paced Dakar, with its NGO workers driving rugged 4x4s on dusty streets alongside *talibés,* barefoot boys rattling tomato cans as they half-heartedly begged on behalf of their *marabout* (Qu'ranic teacher). Here in Dakar, over the months that followed, I accompanied NGO representatives to meetings at WHO and UNICEF country offices. I met visiting activists from Europe and the United States, who were devoting their time, money and energy to bringing about the end of 'female genital mutilation' worldwide and had come to learn from the 'on-the-ground' experience. In Dakar I met and discussed with other anthropologists and sociologists, both Senegalese and foreign. I spent time with the young, mostly American volunteers with the organisation, and was frequently mistaken for one of them by visitors and donors. Many of these young people were spending their summer vacation or gap year in Senegal, with varying motivations - some filled with a belief in the religious mission of development and human rights education, some to enhance their CVs to get into law school or start a career as a development worker, and some to simply enjoy the expatriate life in an exotic country. For many it was a combination of these and other motivations. I talked with the frequently discontent Dakarois staff of the international office, overworked, underappreciated and patronised, in their own words. I had lunch with visiting donors from large international philanthropic organisations. I saw where the money was coming from to fund the NGO programme, and how the programme was represented to these powerful, wealthy, usually well-meaning people. This multicultural 'development' world was a hybrid, a milieu where the lingua franca was that of the "international community" and the byword was "human rights". Along with Makua Mutua, I wish to use this backdrop to question the assumptions of the major actors in this human rights movement, to tease out the "explicit link between human rights norms and the fundamental characteristics of liberal democracy as practiced in the West, and to question the mythical elevation of the human rights corpus beyond politics and political ideology" (Mutua 2002:2).

Culture and the translation of international human rights

> *"Okay so the first thing we do is we ask people, in other words we try in the first instance to appeal to their own common sense: "does this make sense to you"? And generally if you look at human rights, one thing that's always struck me about all the human rights principles, I'm not talking about the different articles which are very abstract and somewhat complicated and there are so many…. We took some of the principles that you find in seven of the major instruments…*

when you look at those principles they really line up with moral norms, and values of people all over the world.

The vision for [the NGO] is human dignity for all…. Can you have human dignity when you have no health care, and you're sick, and you have a fistula, and you smell, and you have no place to go, and you're rejected and …. y'know, can you have your human dignity when your husband's beating you up, and you have no recourse, and you just have to… y'know, accept being abused, or being cut or being y'know…

*And those are some things we ask in the class and then we say, what do your traditional values say about this, would **traditional culture** agree that everyone has the right to be free from all forms of discrimination? And if they don't, what do you think about that in terms of modern day society?"*

- NGO Executive Director, personal communication, January 2011, my emphasis

The statement above revolves around a number of connected assumptions. First, it indicates a belief in the self-evident and universal nature of human rights. However, as historian Lynn Hunt argues if equality of rights is so self-evident, then why does this assertion have to be made and why has it only been made in certain times and places? In other words, how can human rights be universal if they are not universally recognized? (Hunt 2004).

Second, the assumption is made that there is such a thing as a community that will be involved in the participating and decision-making, and, that the community has a "traditional culture", a culture which is bounded, and in opposition to an acultural modernity. The perception is that 'they' have cultural or social influences on their cognition and perception and 'we' don't.

To paraphrase Barth, such a reductionist representations of 'culture' in the statement above provides only a rather "monochrome projection of reality", and a very partial representation of the structures in society (Barth 1989 :125) presenting an image of cultures as bounded entities with their own sets of values and practices. On the contrary, "people participate in multiple, more or less discrepant, universes of discourse; they construct different, partial and simultaneous worlds in which they move; their cultural construction of reality springs not from one source and is not of one piece" (ibid.).

In practice, these communities are collectivities that have been constructed and reified for the purposes of the programme itself. Similar to Bornstein's findings with a Christian NGO in Zimbabwe, I find that "participation was an agenda whose inspiration was external to communities, transnational and fiscally inspired. Even when programs were not participatory, participation was an NGO goal (and claim)" (Bornstein 2005:121). Participatory processes claim to discover the unknown, yet in practice they solicit known expectations. "When A considers that it is essential for B to be empowered, A assumes not only that B has no power – or does not have the right kind of power – but also that A has the secret formula of a power to which B has to be initiated" (Rahnema 1992:123)

> *"It's when the participants in the class understand those rights; that's the point of changing their value framework…. to put those behaviours into practice and create a new value structure around it. "*

- Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator, personal communication, May 2010

> *"You have all these local NGOs, who know nothing about the donor world, nothing about reporting. And… um… can't speak that language. So it's really about language...I think what I see [our NGO] always doing… if it's a Venn diagram and they're not touching… you have [our organisation] in the middle and we're sitting there and we're trying to hold onto both.*

- Director of External Relations, personal communication, January 2011

According to the Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator, for the NGO, applying human rights doctrine consists of the translation of international conventions… they "present not only the actual conventions, and the wording of those conventions, but breaking it down into understandable information that a non literate… person can understand". The head of Communications at NGO, claims that the NGO sits "in the middle", between communities and donors, speaking the correct "language" to each. The organisation's role is that of translation. As Sally Engle Merry (2006:42) argues

> "translators negotiate the middle in a field of power and opportunity. On the one hand, they have to speak the language of international human rights preferred by international donors to get funds and global media attention. On the other hand, they have to present their initiatives in cultural terms that will be acceptable to at least some of the local community. As they scramble for funds, they need to select issues that international donors are interested in— such as female genital cutting, women's empowerment, or the trafficking of women and children—and connect these agendas to problems that interest local populations—such as clean drinking water, more jobs, or good roads."

Merry claims such people "translate up and down" (ibid.). Here, human rights is not a once and for all defined programme of demands; it is a view of the world and the place of people in it and its translation is necessarily a space of continuing contestation, depending on translator and audience. The power of representation is illustrated in Appendix A, which shows the NGO's 'organogramme', or organisational model, produced for the benefit of donors. The structure has been flipped 'upside down' to place the beneficiaries at the top and the Executive Direction at the bottom. This simple inversion of the traditional organisational structure looks impressive to donors seeking to support 'grassroots development' but in itself is quite meaningless and does little to disguise the truly hierarchical nature of the organisation and its ideology.

The NGO's interpretation of human rights tends to be apolitical. The structural and historical causes of poverty and inequality are not addressed. It exemplifies Matua's assessment of the human rights movement's general apoliticization, "which obscures its true character and the cultural identity of the norms it seeks to universalize" (Mutua 2002:1).

Instead, poverty and deprivation are viewed as resulting from lack of knowledge, of capacity, in the sense advocated by Amartya Sen (Sen 1999). Liberal democratic values in the form of human rights and the resulting "empowerment" through the acquisition of previously lacking information are advocated as solutions: "empowerment is about having the *information* you need to make a difference in your life where that formerly would not have been possible" (Executive Director, personal communication, January 2011, my emphasis). Such a view reveals old narrative patterns as well as new ways of commodifying the African continent (Steeves 2008). Development and empowerment are commodities which can be purchased and conferred. The NGO's Christmas appeals message is illuminating in this regard (see Appendix B).   In this example, 'empowerment' is a commodity, and NGO represents itself as the middleman who can deliver it, in the process, reflecting hegemonic Western representations of 'Africa'. Here, Conrad Kottak's ideological elucidation on hegemony is apt - that an ideology explains why the extant order (politico-military and socio-economic) is in the best interest of everyone; the ideology promises much, and asks the ideologue's (believer's) patience (time) for the promises to be fulfilled (Kottak 2007).

As Ann-Belinda Preis claims, "in the process of negotiating…[human rights], power is far from absent. Various knowledge, or more broadly, discursive forms, are manipulated by various actors in specific contexts in the pursuit of certain ends and stereotypic positions abound" (Preis 1996:304). Eriksen's assessment of a UNESCO project could equally apply here. The NGO wants to "eat its cake and have it too; it promotes a relativistic view of development and a universalist view of ethics", while simultaneously "distancing itself occasionally from the 'vocal bullies' of identity politics and the mono-ethnic model of the nation-state, it does not, however, discuss the obvious contradictions between cultural relativism and ethical universalism, or the perils of identity politics at the sub-national level" (Eriksen 2001:133).

Mutua refers to international NGOs as "conventional doctrinists" because "they are marked by a heavy and almost exclusive reliance on positive law in treaties and other sources of international law" (Mutua 2001: 151). Overtly non-ideological, organisations such as this NGO are in fact highly ideological. As Mutua argues, "by taking cover behind the international human rights instruments, international NGOs are able to fight for liberal values without appearing partisan, biased, or ideological" (2001: 157). Melching talks about the adoption of human rights values as a consensus, and the result of dialogue and common sense reasoning on the part of 'communities'. However the end goal is always the same – adoption of the human rights values. Another question is also how successful this approach is, and how the 'communities' receiving the NGO programme negotiate these discourses.

Negotiation

Things had been hotting up in the Casamance civil war in the summer of 2009, even though there was a nominal peace agreement in place. Rocket attacks on army vehicles, armed raids of towns and villages, and hijackings of cars and buses were daily news items on the local radio, though nothing of this was reported on the official TV channel RTS1 and rarely made it into the national newspapers as the Senegalese government is determined to keep this conflict, the longest-running separatist movement on the continent, as low profile as possible. NGO had until then been running a pilot project

for its new 'SMS for literacy' project in my village and had pulled out, relocating to the Velingara region in the south-east of the country, much to the disappointment of those in the village who had welcomed the NGO representatives, accompanied by UNICEF New York staff, with much festivity, some months before.

The Jóla in Casamance have only recently - on their conversion to Islam, within the last fifty years - begun to adopt *sunay* (female genital cutting) practices as part of their female initiation ritual, the *ñakay*. The relatively rapid adoption of this custom among the Jóla in recent times can be contrasted with emerging challenges to the practice at both local and national level, by the Senegalese state and civil society organisations including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and indigenous community groups.

In my experience, women's excision rituals were still continuing to some extent in the village I had lived in. Now they were taking place in secret, acknowledged by all but not openly spoken about, and very deliberately hidden from my knowledge, as I was inevitably closely associated with NGO. For example, one day after I had returned from a day trip to the town of Ziguinchor, I was lounging under a shady tree with Ndeye Bintou, an 18 year-old Mandinka girl living in our house, the niece of Aïssatou, my host mother. Bintou had been sent to live with us two months previously as she was unmarried and heavily pregnant, and her family in a village two hours north had effectively disowned her. My relationship with Bintou was close, perhaps partly because of our mutual 'outsider' status and her knowledge that I didn't judge her shameful 'condition' and instead viewed the upcoming arrival of her baby with some excitement. She had also turned out to be extremely talkative after her original shy reticence and she clearly appreciated and enjoyed my availability to offer a friendly ear at any moment. She told me that the previous day she had been hanging out clothes to dry when she heard the sound of vigorous drumbeats coming from the compound adjacent. Not knowing the neighbours, or indeed anyone in the village (her 'shameful' state meant that she tended to stay in the compound most of the time, only venturing out to bring water), she had asked Aïssatou what the noise was about. Oh, they are doing the *sunay*, replied Aïssatou. Bintou reported with some glee to me (she had I had talked many times about excision and Aïssatou's insistence that it was no longer practiced in our village, which Bintou felt was clearly a statement for my benefit). According to Bintou the previous day's activities were in preparation for the upcoming *ñakay* in a nearby village, which the neighbouring family were going to participate in.

I did not approach Aïssatou to ask her about this. I knew that she would deny it. As the wife of the local district nurse, and a natural leader, she had been an enthusiastic participant and head of the Community Management Committee set up as part of the NGO programme. She was in fact continuing weekly classes with other women in the village, leading the lessons herself, largely with the hope, she confided in me, that NGO would give her a job as a programme facilitator (this indeed happened several months later, after I had left the village). I knew that Aïssatou was enthusiastic about the programme, and not just in public, but also privately. She had described to me once how she herself had been excised, and that she felt it was an unnecessary tradition. If she had had daughters, she told me (she had two sons only), she would never have permitted them to be excised. I believed her. After some time spent sharing her home, I believed I could tell when she was lying to me and when she was not. She was never a good liar.

The incident with the drumming caused me pause for thought. It did not seem unlikely to me that some families in the village were continuing to excise their daughters,

particularly the Mandinka families such as those in the house adjacent, who had been practicing the *sunay* for generations, I was told, unlike the Jóla, who had only started to practice it on their recent conversion to Islam. It also made sense to me that Aïssatou would deny that excision was continuing in the village, all the while knowing that it was, and simultaneously feeling personally opposed to it. As a local leader and public advocate of the programme Aïssatou was "translator" for NGO, and as such was in a delicate position, negotiating various perspectives and knowledge, while at the same time, striving to improve her own lot and that of her family. Translators such as Aïssatou hold a "double consciousness" juxtaposing transnational human rights values and local epistemologies (Merry 2006: 42). As Merry puts it, "there are clear parallels with the translation of human rights ideas from a transnational metacode of human rights law to local situations. Local leaders are often eager to appear compliant with human rights expectations while continuing to act in noncompliant ways [...] human rights translators, like development consultants, are often caught in the middle" (Merry 2006:42).

Two years after the Community Empowerment Programme was finished, the village still had no electricity, no running water, few regular classes for the children at the local school as the teachers were constantly on strike, as they hadn't been paid for months. The sun still shone, the landscape was lush and green as the rains came and the rice fields sprouted. During the rainy season the *konkuron* roamed the village at night as everyone shut their doors and covered over their windows to keep this marauding spirit from turning his attention – and his whip - to those in the household. The little boys were circumcised and celebrated with their *bukut* coming-of-age ceremony. The little girls were (not) circumcised and continued with their *ñakay* initiation ritual. The mobile phones were still charged at the generator under the massive *fromager* tree, even though the SMS project was no more in my village. The population of our household constantly changed as nephews, nieces, cousins and the children of neighbours came to supplement the permanent core of inhabitants. Life went on.

Conclusion: Development discourse and hybridity in action

While analysing the activities and ideologies of the actors outlined in this paper, I find it useful to consider the notion of hybridity, connected to the semiotic field of culture, as enunciated by Marwan Kraidy (Kraidy 2002:317) :

> "Hybridity needs to be understood as a communicative practice constitutive of, and constituted by, sociopolitical and economic arrangements. Understanding hybridity as a practice marks the recognition that transcultural relations are complex, processual, and dynamic […] Politically, a critical hybridity theory considers hybridity as a space where intercultural and international communication practices are continuously negotiated in interactions of differential power."

I use hybridity as a way of capturing the fluid character of relationships between centre and peripheries and the realization that cultural flows and the production and dissemination of discourses are not territorially or spatially bounded. I argue that the actors described in this paper are 'hybrids', translators who negotiate multiple realities, both geographical and discursive. As Foucault has demonstrated, the production and dissemination of discourses, such as the human rights values outlined here, are an

important component of the exercise and maintenance of power (Foucault 1977). Escobar argues that development, itself, has "fulfilled this role admirably" through the professionalization and institutionalization of the development paradigm (Escobar 1988:430-1). Notions such as 'underdevelopment' and "human rights violations" clearly have a concrete historical formation, and it is necessary to examine these notions in order to understand the systematic ways in which Western countries have been able to "manage and control and, in many ways, even create the Third World politically, economically, sociologically and culturally" (Escobar 1984:384). As Florence Babb notes, following Foucault, it is necessary to consider the dynamics of discourse, power, and knowledge, within the development framework, particularly as they have been constructed in the 'First World' and imposed on the 'Third World' (Babb 2001).

The 'hybrids' I describe are consciously apolitical but deeply ideological in their actions. Escobar asserts that development practices are "not only deeply political, having a very real effect on people, but also that they have to be rendered visible if we are to understand the functioning of development programs as techniques of power and knowledge and to pursue alternative conceptualizations and practices" (1988: 436).

In this context, 'participation' by all actors in the development process is not an open and spontaneous process whereby all participate equally leading to a 'free consensus' on the issues under discussion (Mayoux 1995). Cornwall (2003: 1326) notes the parallels between efforts to promote participation and gender equality in development projects, observing that "feminist and participatory research methodologies share epistemological, ethical and political principles" and that both value an ethic of commitment to social transformation. However, their de-politicization and appropriation as development buzzwords are additional areas of overlap. The apolitical character of the NGO's approach to a practice as internationally controversial as female genital cutting is reflected in White's broader observation, "what began as a political issue is translated into a technical problem which the development enterprise can accommodate with barely a falter in its stride" (White 1996:7). Cornwall argues that participatory development gained currency through debates about the cost-effectiveness of engaging 'communities', especially women, in development projects with such a mainstreaming leading to the dilution of development's political dimension (Cornwall 2003). She contends that "the rapid spread of participatory approaches led to their use by powerful international institutions to lend their prescriptions authenticity and legitimacy", effectively de-politicizing and submerging the more radical dimensions of participatory practice (1326-7).
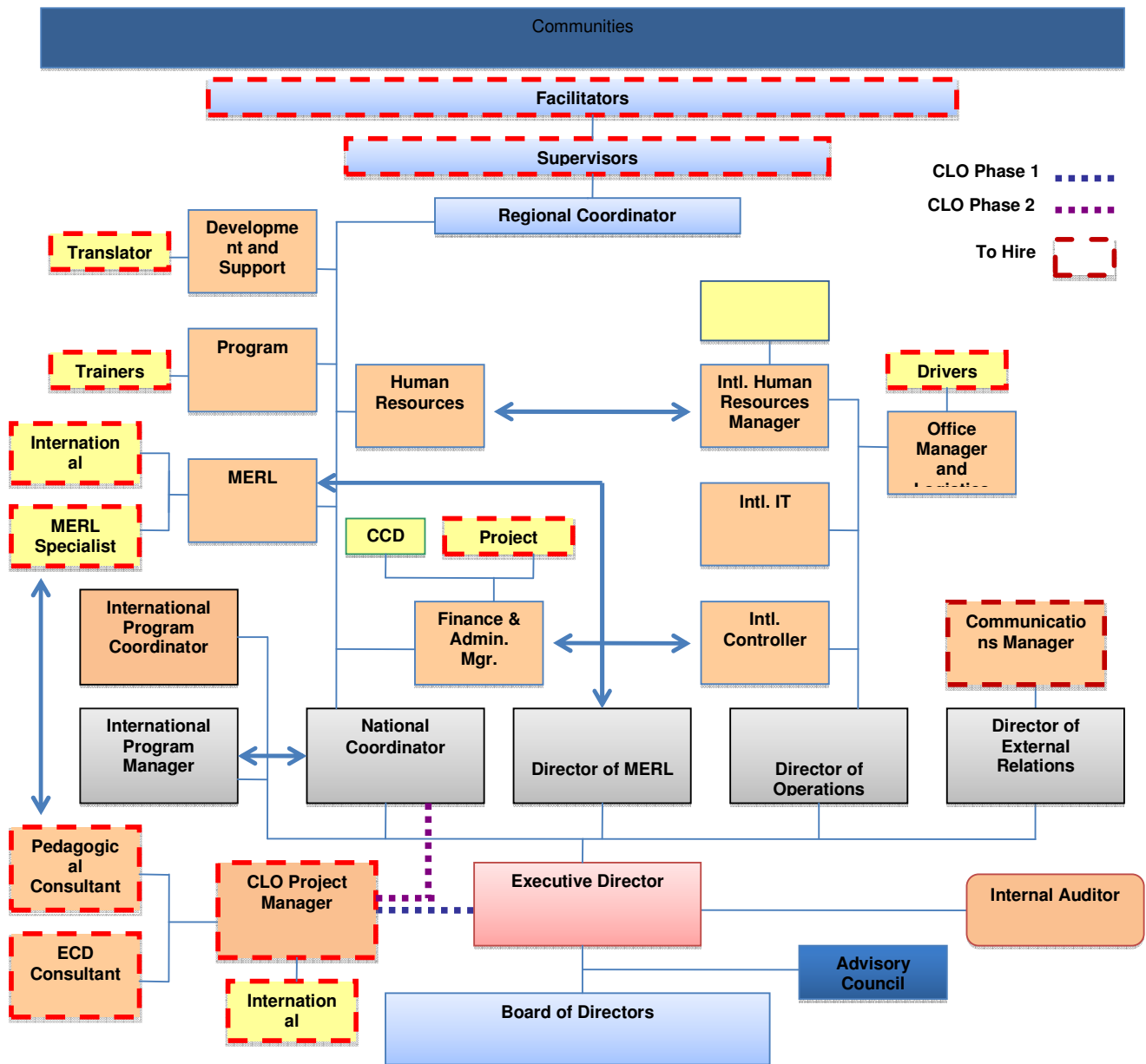
This paper has considered how a universalist façade can obscure the fact that things are still being done in local ways, with local actors, often eager to appear compliant with human rights expectations, adapt human rights discourses and interpretations for their own purposes in deft and inventive ways. As Lynn Hunt argues, human rights discourse is necessarily a space of continuing contestation as the threshold for what is no longer acceptable is constantly shifting (Hunt 2004).

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Appendix A: NGO Organisational Model

Communities

Facilitators

Supervisors

Regional Coordinator

CLO Phase 1 ·····
CLO Phase 2 ·····
To Hire

Translator — Development and Support

Trainers — Program

Human Resources

Intl. Human Resources Manager

Drivers

Office Manager and Logistics

International — MERL

MERL Specialist

Intl. IT

CCD — Project

International Program Coordinator

Finance & Admin. Mgr.

Intl. Controller

Communications Manager

International Program Manager

National Coordinator

Director of MERL

Director of Operations

Director of External Relations

Pedagogical Consultant

ECD Consultant

CLO Project Manager

International

Executive Director

Internal Auditor

Advisory Council

Board of Directors

Appendix B: NGO Christmas email appeal 2010

November 29, 2010

Dear Maire,

Happy "Cyber Monday!" I hope your holidays are off to a great start. As the season begins in earnest and our days get busier, I wanted to remind you of a unique and fun gift to send: a contribution to *[the NGO]* in a loved one's name.

Each year, more and more people are giving *[the NGO]* as a gift. Whether it's for that family member who cares deeply about the women, girls, and communities of Africa, or for a friend who is passionate about great causes around the world, your donation to [the NGO] can make the perfect gift. Plus, it's a thoughtful way to share your interests with others. And right now, it does even more!

A Rare Opportunity: Double Your Gift with our Year-End Match!

Until December 31st, your donation to *[the NGO's]* community development programs in West and East Africa <u>will be matched</u> by one of our generous donors. What does that mean for you? **When you give today, your contribution will be doubled instantly,** providing more education, tools and training to African communities.

Your gift will bring comprehensive, human-rights based education to villages across Africa, helping mothers and fathers and sons and daughters better their own lives through increased knowledge and skills. At the same time, you will spread good wishes and awareness in your own community by giving *[the NGO*] as a gift, **especially if you choose one of our popular greeting cards or e-cards for** *[the NGO]* **to send with your donation.** In fact, since your gift is being doubled, why not send two!

Now is the best time to give: $50 becomes $100 and $250 becomes $500 thanks to our matching program. And that's on top of the fact that our low-overhead, high-impact model is already one of the most efficient around, bringing democracy and human rights, problem solving, hygiene and health, literacy, technology, and project management to tens of thousands of families each year.
After all, why give electronics when you can give the gift of empowerment?

DONATE NOW

Wishing you all the best this holiday season,

Director of External Relations