

Designs for dwellings; strategies for managing human-animal contact in Sierra Leone

Project Background Information/Introduction:

The interaction between human beings and animals is beneficial but is also characterized with unintended consequences often threatening to humans, animals and their environment (Atlas and Maloy, 2014, Nading, 2013, Brown and Nading, 2019). Across sub-Saharan Africa where human and animal interaction often takes place within and around social and domestic spaces, human relationships with animals are sometimes marked with a host of unwanted contacts. For instance, in many agro-ecological settings in sub-Saharan Africa, people are familiar with animal pests that raid farmlands and ravage crops, and also infiltrate homes where they destroy reserved food grains and property. Rodent pests are identified as a major cause of food loss in farming communities in Africa either through direct consumption or spoilage, which pose significant impact on rural food production and consequently threatens global food security. Furthermore, there is evidence of the emergence and re-emergence of infectious diseases transmitted into the human population through contact with infected animal hosts, in the case of Lassa haemorrhagic fever, Ebola virus disease and the present COVID-19 pandemic that the world is grappling, for example. Because many of the contacts that amplify zoonotic disease take place in domestic settings where people's livelihoods are also impacted by unwanted contact with animals, and little is known about the ways in which people share their everyday lives with animals, there is a need to extend anthropological approach into exploring the social dimensions of lived spaces, dwelling patterns and local knowledge of how people manage their contact with animals.

Research Aim/Objectives/Questions/Hypotheses:

The aim of this project is to explore the strategies used by rural people in Sierra Leone in managing their contact with animals within their social and domestic spaces, with the hope that the outcome of my research will be of significance in the formulation of policies and modification of models and intervention approaches in dealing with zoonotic or animal related infections and supporting the development of interventions for livelihoods or wellbeing that require separations from animals. The research questions of this project includes: What kinds of contact with animals concern people and why are they a matter of concern? What kinds of animals do people of different genders and life stages come into contact with on a daily basis? Where and when do unwanted contacts with animals take place? What kinds of strategies,

techniques and technologies do people use to avoid unwanted contact with non-human animals and insects? How do people adapt their lived environments to reduce unwanted forms of contact with animal? How can indigenous strategies for control be developed into wider scale intervention?

Data/Methods/Analysis:

The main research approach of this study is an ethnographic method of participant observation, this involves actively participating in the activities of the people being studied in the study sites. In the course of participating in those activities considered legal and safe to participate in by my research participants, such as joining and helping people in agricultural crop cultivation, communal hunting and fishing and helping in trap setting, questions are asked about practices observed and the reasons behind those practices, while I take information about the unfolding realities of their perceptions and interactions with animals, housing infrastructure, methods of managing contact with animals and the gender dynamics in animal handling. Furthermore, activities of wild as well as domestic animals in the township and in the farm is also observed to understand for example, how domestic animals are reared, who takes care of domestic animals in the households, where are they kept and how do they relate with humans? By engaging in a participant observation, gives me the opportunity to gain direct knowledge of not only the physical environment under observation, but also acquire an understanding about the subjective and primary realities of their everyday encounter with animals and animal management strategies in their day-to-day life. Moreover, by observing participants, gaps and links between what is told during interviews and what actually exists are identified.

Contributions to the SDGs:

This study contributes to SDG 3, on good health and wellbeing (SDG 3.3 specifically), however, taking into consideration the impact of animal pests on rural farming and global food security, this project also contributes to SDG 2 on zero hunger by 2030.

Lessons learnt and key takes/reflections:

In many rural settlements in sub-Saharan Africa, human interaction with other organisms such as plants and animals goes beyond the physical. For instance, in the rural farming community in Sierra Leone where I am doing my studies, the connection people have with animals is also spiritual and deeply rooted in their inherited practices, which is being transmitted from one generation to the next through socialisation. Therefore, the approach of this project in dealing with human health from the point of view of our co-existence with animals has helped me to identify and understand some of the gaps in health interventions approaches, for which many of those interventions have failed to achieve their desired outcomes. In these rural settings, there is a strong reliance on inherited knowledge and practices, even in the face of modernisation and the advancement in western science, people in these rural farming

communities are still glued on to their use local herbs in the form of leaves, plants roots and stems, animal parts and reptiles in treating illness, such as the use of toads as a cure for whooping cough and the use of red palm oil as an antidote for poison. From my observations, people combine indigenous knowledge on herbal medicines and animal husbandry with scientific understanding. Local knowledge, techniques and practices often shapes people's behaviour towards accommodating and adopting new ideas, and public health messaging is sometimes at odds with these practices and ways of knowing. For instance: 'HimbEh gbilena ar wa, ar gbia wangahunlor?' Meaning: 'Is every emerging disease from animals? And also 'HimbEh nyamu gbi ar biya tawahunlor' Meaning: 'Every dangerous disease is from the big towns.' These were among the critical questions and concerns I had to provide explanations for during the course of my ethnographic field work so that my research participant could realise the relevance of participating in my studies. Responding to those concerns and questions among others raised by my research participants, reaffirms my posture that, the knowledge, perception, social life and practices of rural people is critical and should not be underestimated in shaping health intervention models and public health education messaging, especially in communities that are still traditional and largely illiterate.

Project Information:

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- Project Resources (funded by): Durham University
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