Dried fish stories

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Documentation of research findings with images and videos from study sites across six countries was an intended output of Dried Fish Matters at the scoping stage. However, COVID-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions severely hampered the access of research teams to fieldwork sites. The Visualization Group came into being as an organic evolution of the group process in discussing preliminary findings at the Working Group I on Social Economies of Dried Fish. Group members came together to form a sub-group of WGI because they recognized the challenge of documenting research findings within the context of a pandemic. However, they also saw an opportunity to visually explore dimensions of dried fish that emerged as important in the findings but were not usually revealed adequately through conventional scientific methods, especially sensory experiences and cultural and symbolic aspects.

Figure 1. Fish drying on hanging racks, Bangladesh (Photo by Mostafa Hossain)

In the discussion process of what and how to visualize, several objectives were expressed. First, documentation to complement and triangulate research findings remained a significant goal. Second, capturing sensory experiences, such as taste, smell and touch, and understanding the role of dried fish in cultural and symbolic traditions, such as cuisine and ritual, as well as providing a sense of home and place became increasingly important. Third, visualization was also perceived as a way to disseminate research findings in a way that would attract a broader audience beyond the scientific community.

This short essay reflects on the collaborative process of generating stories on dried fish from seven research teams across five countries, by creatively combining limited material from the field with internet and social media resources. These stories combined a mix of documentation with conveying sensory experiences and cultural significance of dried fish in a visually appealing manner. The essay also discusses the technical challenges of producing a video by a predominantly social science team.

The process

Once upon a time there was a group of seven research teams working in partnership within a very large research project called “Dried Fish Matters” in South and Southeast Asia. They had to visualise their preliminary research findings. They were caught in the middle of a pandemic called “COVID-19” with lockdowns and travel restrictions and had difficulties accessing the field.

Many had done literature reviews and some had done interviews in the field prior to or during COVID. But they did not have time or the right atmosphere to take enough photographs of the research sites or do recordings or take videos of their interviews. Rapport-building was challenging with masks and social distancing. One of the outputs of the project was visualization. So how were they going to visualise?

Their research so far had brought up important themes and issues. So, they put their heads together for a brainstorming session outlining each person’s ideas and expectations, and generated a storyboard elaborating some of these ideas and themes. This was about how fish changed hands from fishers, processors and traders to consumers along the value chain; the work done by women and men; their hardships, sorrows and joys; the taste and smell of dried fish in their cuisines; unique dried fish products in different cultures; the myriad ways of preparing favourite dishes; the offerings to deities and meanings attached to dried fish in their cultural heritage; the memories of dried fish carried by migrants, sustaining their identities and culinary traditions across the seas.

Then each team set about finding the ‘best story’ they could tell. They made an outline of their story and elaborated it by collecting materials. They put together photos or videos from the field. They searched for images, sounds and music on the internet and communicated with strangers to ask for permission to use this material. Each team went through several versions of their stories, receiving feedback from the others, making them more reflexive of what they were attempting to do. As time went by, the seven teams managed to come up with a set of stories. A core group within the team put it all together, a technical wizard converted it to video, inviting feedback again before the presentation at the MARE conference in June 2021.

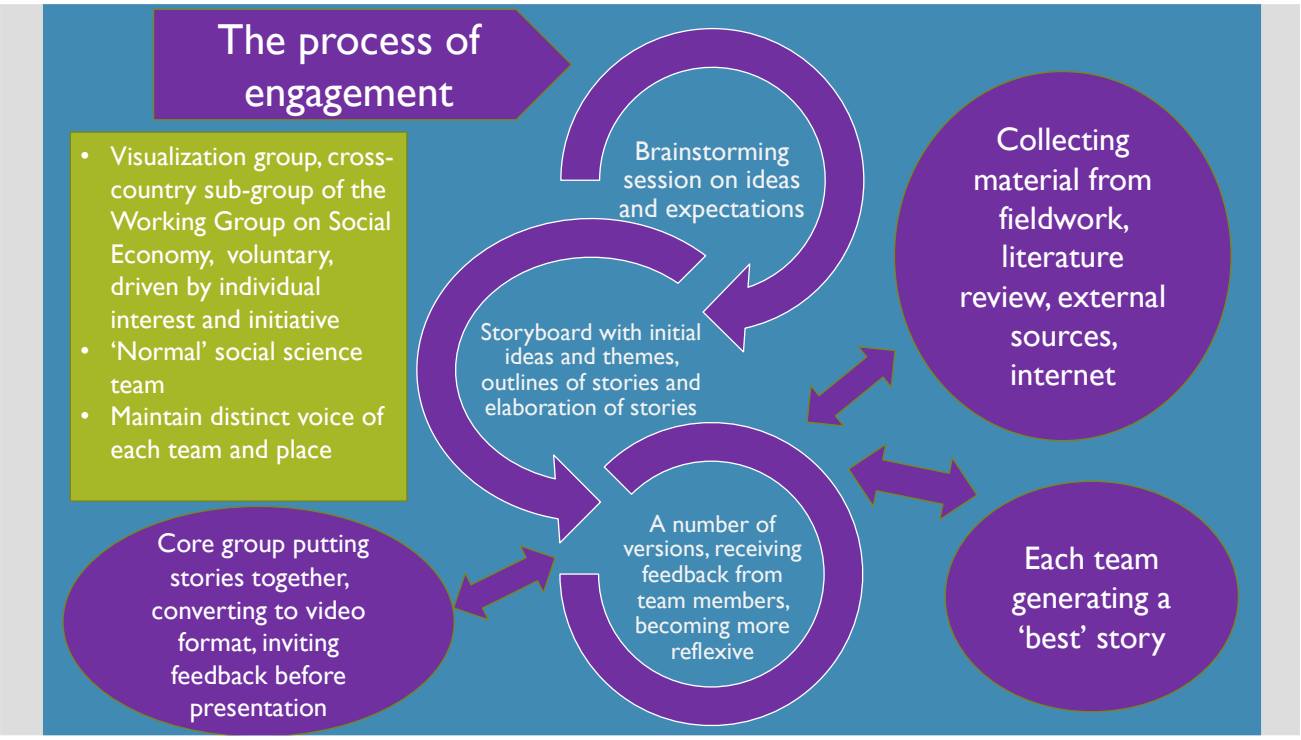

Figure 2. The collaborative video production process.

Until the Dried Fish Matters project is over, this will remain a work in progress, in process, of the findings, thoughts and experiences at this stage of the research project. It is conceived not as a finished product, but something that can be built upon into the next phase. It is now available as a YouTube video and feedback received from audiences will be part of the process, which is at the core of this method.

The video produced is the work of members of a 'normal' social science research team, not a product of professional documentary film makers or photographers or graphic artists. While putting this together, maintaining the distinct voice of each team and place was a priority. The main intention of the team members was to not confine themselves to academic frameworks and analysis, but much rather tell a story, be creative and have fun.

Storytelling as a method

What we have been doing here with the visualization initiative is interweaving three ancient methods of communication – storytelling, images and sounds – using modern digital technology.

Storytelling is an ancient and universal cultural practice. It is one of the earliest forms of ***communi***cation within and across ***communi***ties. The root word implies that communication, as a process, is linked to communities. Stories convey ideas, experiences and emotions to give us a message, while evoking a sense of time and place. Different cultures emphasise time or place. For example, many European cultures begin a story with "Once upon a time…" whereas Asian cultures like my own in Sri Lanka begin with "Once in a certain land…". Words in stories have been accompanied by sounds and pictures for many centuries – these make messages more vivid and powerful. Today's digital technology enables the continuation of this tradition of combining words, sounds and images in more complex ways to tell our stories

A scientific theory has some resemblance to a story. For example, ‘The Big Bang’ is an origin story, a grand narrative of how our planet earth emerged in the vast universe, that we call the Milky Way.

Scientific papers or presentations can also be perceived as telling stories. A good paper or presentation has a thread, not dissimilar to a plot, with an introduction and conclusion. Concepts are ideas that are shared among a scientific community. The argument in a paper or presentation is the theme or its message. The evidence to substantiate the argument constitutes elaborations to support the message. A scientific study is usually done in a specific location and time, so there is a place and time in science too. So what is missing in a scientific story compared to a regular story? Are there characters in a scientific story? Are there emotions and experiences conveyed in this story?

Stories include several elements. These include a plot or story line, constituted of sub-plots, as well as a beginning and an end. In a story there is always a setting or location, that provides a sense of place. Stories need to include characters with whom readers or listeners can identify. Stories have a theme or message that they want to convey. Finally, a story has a tension, conflict, contradiction or mystery that needs to be solved, resolved or deciphered at the end. A good story moves people, i.e. it is “moving”, dynamic, touching you at the gut level. It creates empathy - the possibility of walking in someone else’s shoes. A story builds a connection, a bridge between the storyteller and listener.

Thus, for example, the Thai team relates the story of the process of making, trading and consuming *kapi*, a fermented krill or shrimp paste, centered on an image of a young woman preparing a favourite Thai dish, accompanied by the sound of pounding (figure 3). The story gives a sense of the colour, texture and taste associated with *kapi* and its place in Thai cuisine, but also refers to some of the ecological and governance challenges associated with its production.

Figure 3. Still image from the segment “All About Kapi”, contributed by the Thailand team.

The story told by the Sri Lanka team begins with a favourite dried fish dish, *karavala hodda*, linking a consumer and processor, as characters located in different places along the value chain (figure 4). It uses music, sounds and images to evoke a sense of place and tradition, and refers to the smell of dried fish, which provides a twist to the high cultural value associated with dried fish. This leads to further elaboration of the sensory experience of smell of dried fish with a short vignette of a discussion by team members, as well as the story of Bombay Duck presented by the Western Indian team.

Figure 4. Still image from the segment on *karavala hodda* by the Sri Lanka team.

Technical challenges

One of the guiding premises of our visualization group was that our work should in fact be collaborative. Although we considered the option of having individual researchers or teams submit images, video clips, and text to be put together by an editor, the contributing teams expressed a desire to make the process more organic and participatory. We wanted the individual researchers and teams contributing to the audiovisual presentation to remain in control of what they shared and how it was shown. We sought to achieve this goal by insisting on a workflow in which contributors were able to use design tools that were already familiar and accessible to them.

In a conventionally produced video, a director or videographer might work with contributors to collect and edit images and audiovisual footage, but would make key artistic and narrative decisions on the others' behalf. To counteract this power imbalance, various participatory research and storytelling methodologies have been built around the idea of placing technology in the hands of contributors, including participatory video (Milne, Claudia Mitchell, and de Lange 2012), photovoice (Wang 2006), or digital storytelling (Worcester 2012). These approaches may emphasize a hands-off principle for trainers and facilitators, whereby only the participants themselves are allowed to touch cameras or editing tools. The results can be a useful, if sometimes clumsy, compromise between respecting the

voice of participants and creating a work that communicates their message in an effective and aesthetically satisfying way.

In our case, instead of providing training in a new video editing technology, we opted to use PowerPoint as a tool that was already familiar to everyone in our group, consisting of researchers with experience teaching and making public presentations. While intended primarily as a tool for generating slides to accompany spoken presentations, PowerPoint provides the option of converting a slide deck into a video, in addition to various related tools allowing users to record optional per-slide narration, insert a background audio track extending over several slides, create animated effects, and embed audiovisual elements. We initiated the process by supplying a template storyboard (figure 5), containing a base design and placeholders for different contributions.

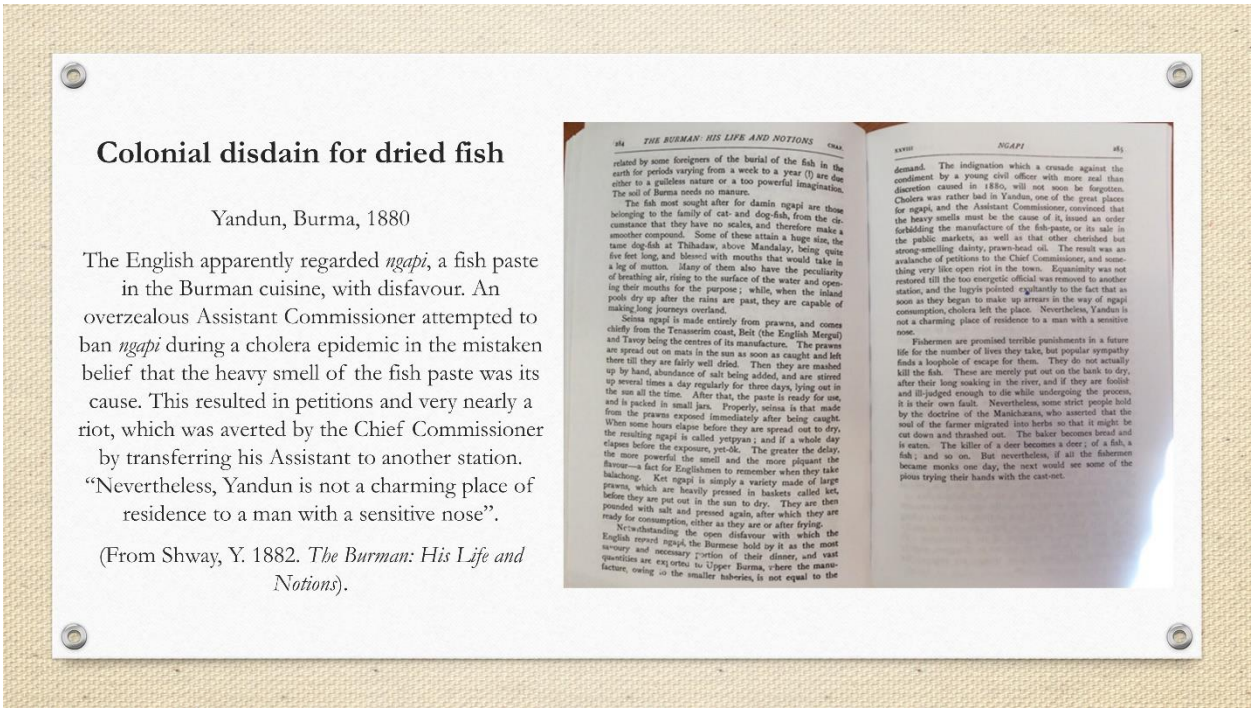

Figure 5. Mock-up slide from the "Dried Fish Stories" template storyboard, containing a summary text and image from the book *The Burnan: His Life and Notions*, published by British colonial administrator Sir James George Scott under the pseudonym "Shway Yoe" (Scott 1882).

While this process achieved its purpose, from an editorial perspective our reliance of PowerPoint introduced several novel challenges. First, the design structure suggested by PowerPoint – involving combinations of text and image/video blocks on distinct slides – is closer to the format of a museum exhibit than that of a conventional narrative video. Converting a static set of slides into a more fluid video presentation would require creative use of animations and transitions, potentially taking inspiration from documentary techniques for storytelling through still photographs as pioneered by filmmakers such as Ken Burns (Tibbetts 1996). Second, although PowerPoint is a familiar medium for academics, scholars are not always skilled visual designers; a researcher's idea of a 'typical' PowerPoint slide might be a wall of text. Given that a video might ultimately be viewed on a range of screens – including low-resolution mobile devices – it was necessary

for us to adjust the design of several contributions by enlarging the text and splitting it across several slides. We added transitions between the slides on most segments, including automatic pan-and-zoom effects for images, to enhance the visual flow of the video (figure 6).

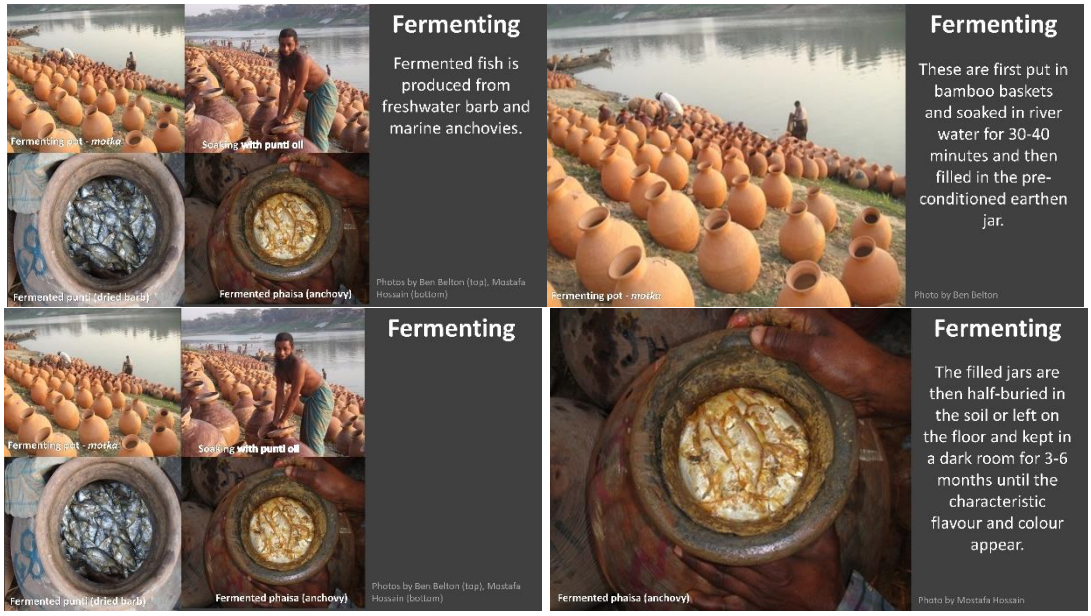

Figure 6. Image sequence on fermented fish from the Bangladesh segment of the “Dried Fish Stories” video. Originally supplied as a single slide, the text was split into three paragraphs and zoom transitions were implemented to highlight a single image next to each text block.

In segments that contained series of still images with audio commentary, we found it very difficult to adjust the timing of slides and their pan-and-zoom effects in PowerPoint to match the duration of the accompanying audio, and cumbersome to make changes that involved edits to the sequence. In the end, we imported the slide content into the video editor timeline to apply key frame animations, adjust audio levels, and insert a background audio track for titles and other segments with blank audio. Although segment authors were able to make or suggest further changes to the source PowerPoint files after viewing successive renderings of the compilation video, each change required us to re-implement those changes in the video editor. While we were able to capture the intent of each contributor in integrating their segment to the compilation video, we were thus unable to work entirely within PowerPoint as a video editing platform under the control of the contributors.

Methodologically, this experiment confirms to us that co-creation processes may be successful if they build on tools that are already familiar to participants, avoiding the demands of acquiring skills in an unfamiliar medium. Our experience also suggests, however, that the most satisfactory results do not necessarily come from all participants retaining direct control of all stages of the production, by using familiar or accessible tools from start to finish. We found that PowerPoint served as an excellent storyboarding medium, but that its technical limitations became, at the editing stage, significant barriers to creating a product that matched our aesthetic vision. While the translation of images, text, narration, background audio, and animations from PowerPoint to a non-linear video editor was a cumbersome process, this approach allowed us to incorporate expressive

opportunities for contributors into our project, and to create a final product that fulfilled contributors' vision without being entirely constrained by their technical skills. Ultimately, our team members wanted something that looked nice, not clumsy and unsophisticated; they wanted to be able to put together a storyboard of their own, but not necessarily deal with all the technicalities of turning the storyboard into a final product.

Representation

In narrating stories related to research findings from the field, representation is a critical issue. Whose story are we, as researchers, re-telling? As social scientists we consider it our responsibility to provide a voice especially for those whom we encounter as 'powerless' in the field. A story is an interpretation of the research findings. It will always remain a partial truth in terms of the 'objectivity' often perceived as a goal in in science. A story is best told from the perspective of its important characters. However, when we consider a value chain for example, which characters are the most important? Fishers, fish processors, traders, consumers? Can we always access the most important characters or the 'powerless', as for example, in the context of COVID-19? Thus, what emerges as significant is the reflexivity with which we tell our stories. We need to be especially mindful that researchers are part of the story. We are part of the story because we go into the 'field' to collect data for our research projects. However, in the case of dried fish value chains, we are also part of that chain as consumers. Thus, dried fish stories are our stories too, as much as that of fishers, processors and traders. The dried fish stories we produced also included discussions of sensory experiences of the researches themselves, as two vignettes on the taste and smell of dried fish. The video can be accessed at the following YouTube link: https://youtu.be/MCNlGcBJkfE

Lessons learnt

Working on dried fish stories together as a group within the Dried Fish Matters project made us aware that visualization is a unique method to compare and contrast results across research locations in different countries, as well as to encapsulate research findings in an appealing manner. Visualization helps to document research findings, as much as to explore sensory and cultural experiences that are often neglected using standard written methods of analysis, such as reports, papers and books. Most importantly, visualization helps to convey a compelling story to move people, calling upon them to reimagine the way they look at the world and act upon their insights.

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