

LIFE/HISTORY: PERSONAL NARRATIVES OF DEVELOPMENT AMONGST NGO WORKERS AND ACTIVISTS IN GHANA

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LIVES AND HISTORIES

The 2003 annual board meeting of one of the largest Ghanaian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was held in a newly built hotel in Kumasi, where over an elaborate buffet I sat with a number of the board members. Most had known one another for a number of decades, their friendships originating at university and in the social activism of their youth. Prompted by a throwaway comment about the excessive lavishness of the hotel, the group started to reflect on the changes that have taken place in the country since the early 1980s when the organization was set up: 'We've really been through a lot in this country', one remarked, a reference to the political upheavals of the past two decades. Others in the group warmed to the theme, reminiscing about the days when they started out: 'We used to travel on the back of shea nut trucks just to get around,' recalled one; 'we'd be queuing up just to catch a ride on an articulator – there weren't even *trotros* back then!'¹ Another recollected how he used to take his typewriter around with him: 'It wasn't like this,' he pronounced, casting his eyes around the grand hotel dining room, 'we've come a long way.'

Throughout the conversation, the maturity of Ghana, the nation, resonated with talk about their own coming of age, the very existence of the hotel seemingly concretizing the political and economic progress of the country, just as their presence within it demonstrated their success as individuals. The hotel thus stood as a demonstration of both personal and national development. Yet the progress of their lives and of the nation were not seen as simple synonyms. Those present explicitly imagined national development to have taken place in part as a result of their own 'ideology', 'commitment' and 'sacrifice' as NGO workers and activists.

This article explores these related ideas as they appeared in the life-histories of NGO workers in Ghana. In particular it focuses on the self-identification of many NGO workers as 'activists', examining the distinctive ideological beliefs that are seen to underpin this identity, and the forms of personal 'commitment' and 'sacrifice' which this gives

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¹In the early 1980s a number of factors including the low international price of cocoa, the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria, and poor harvests caused widespread economic hardship (Brydon and Legge 1996).

rise to. As well as looking at the kinds of identities that such life-histories enact, the article also explores the narrative forms through which these operate, in terms of their contribution to the construction of particular forms of 'self'.

In examining these testimonies, the account seeks to counter the widespread assumption that for African NGOs moral discourses are nothing more than a charade behind which selfish acts of accumulation and aggrandizement are concealed. For political scientists such as Chabal and Daloz (1999), and in a similar though more nuanced vein Bayart (1986; 1993), NGOs are seen to present a set of resources that elites exploit to their own advantage. In this light the cynical appropriation of various development-related resources is regarded as an instance of 'extroversion', whereby educated Africans exploit their positions of social privilege for personal gain.

From a rather different perspective, the anthropologist Ferguson (1994) also submerges moral issues, arguing that in the case of Lesotho development organizations have acted to reinforce the position of the ruling elites by naturalizing political and economic inequality through ostensibly apolitical bureaucratic discourses. More recently Englund's (2006) ethnography of NGOs in Malawi takes up similar themes, suggesting that paradoxically the language of human rights has often been used to create the very distinctions between elites and 'the grassroots' that they purport to overcome. This perspective importantly highlights the extent to which such discursive frameworks act to exclude the perspectives of 'the poor' and by doing so entrench inequality. However, a focus on discourse largely precludes analysis of NGO workers' intentions – good or bad – and therefore negates a sense of the personal choices and moral conundrums encountered by particular aid workers.

The moral discourses of development workers may, as these authors suggest, at times be a façade. Yet to assume this position from the outset seems problematic in the context of Ghanaian activists, whose own narratives themselves focus on issues of morality and ideology. As Werbner notes, a general 'Afro-pessimism' in the literature on African elites focuses attention on the apparently irrational acts of kleptomaniacs and self-serving bureaucrats, foreclosing understanding of African concerns for the public good. Against this, he suggests, 'The way forward for public anthropology in post-colonial Africa is through . . . biographical ethnography, illuminating the study of public man and the forum as process' (2004: 10). Thus I focus on the moral discourses central to the life-histories that activists narrate. However whilst Werbner rightly argues that the 'commitments' and 'sacrifices' professed by African elites are often very genuine, it is nonetheless necessary to appreciate the sociological work that these terms perform and the claims they are used to support.² Thus my account aims to

²The inextricability of conceptual and sociological distinctions is eloquently described by Bourdieu, who suggests that: 'Principles of division, inextricably logical and sociological,

foreground the self-evaluations and individual choices that Ghanaian development workers' life-histories privilege, whilst accounting for the wider discursive and moral frameworks through which they are narrated.

LIFE-HISTORY AS PERFORMANCE

The anthropologist Weiner is critical of life-histories, asserting that these are a poor substitute for the density of social life and the intimacy of social relations: 'Formal procedures of interviewing, building life-histories, have the effect of forcing our interlocutors into artificial subject positions which are then taken as the positions they occupy in real life' (1999: 77). But on what grounds can the life-history in fact be separated from 'real life'?

For Weiner the answer lies in the degree to which the researcher comes to dictate the terms of engagement with the subjects of research, forcing a specifically Western form of narrative upon people who may not view their lives in these terms. This fear may be well founded and, as anthropologists have reported in a variety of cultural contexts, it is a mistake to assume that people everywhere regard biographical information as interesting or revealing in the way that many in the West imagine (Abu-Lughod 1992; Hoskins 1998; Kratz 2001).

Indeed it is important to acknowledge that the accounts on which this article is based arise out of specific encounters in which the narratives that resulted were partly shaped by my own interests and expectations and by the inter-subjective dynamics of these interviews (for example, Cohen *et al.* 2001; Summerfield 2004). However, as Miescher persuasively argues, 'the importance of the researcher in the production of the narrative should not be over-emphasized. Narrators have their own agenda... in addition to the one of the researcher' (2001: 164). Moreover for Ghanaian development workers personal histories were regarded as significant in a variety of contexts other than in interviews. During NGO workshops, for example, important delegates were often introduced through a narrative that wove together biographical details and achievements in a manner imagined to be revealing of personal qualities and attributes. In this context such details as the places people had travelled to, the organizations to which they had been affiliated, their education and the projects they had undertaken did not simply provide information about their professional and technical competencies but also, implicitly, about their personal and moral outlook. Thus in conferences and workshops biographical details provided delegates with a way of socially placing themselves in relation to one another. Such narratives also acted to confer status, elucidating the wider social and organizational networks to which

function within and for the purposes of struggle between social groups; in producing concepts, they produce groups, the very groups which produce the principles and the groups against which they are produced' (1979: 479).

various development workers belonged. Implicitly, employment in, or membership of, certain organizations also enabled delegates to infer information about ideological and political outlook. In this way, the evocation of various organizations and activities created the subject as a node in a wider network of people and places.

The private discussion of biographical information was also common amongst NGO workers, most notably during the various social events that accompanied workshops and conferences. Partly such conversations were valued for their perceived capacity to reveal aspects of people's true 'self': NGO workers discussed their own and others' pasts in order to shed light on who they were in the present. Political affiliations, for example, were often seen to be telling of the 'real' nature of people's beliefs and were thus regarded as a gauge of 'underlying' or 'genuine' motivations.

Such discussions do not constitute life-histories in the more restricted sense that many scholars would use the term,³ yet they are, I suggest, underpinned by a similar logic in which biographical events are linked in an overarching frame. In talking about their own and others' lives, NGO workers sought to draw out common themes and motivations, linking otherwise disparate organizations, ideas and events in coherent narratives that, as I argue below, were both premised upon and reproduced the idea of a particular kind of 'self'. Indeed, the structure of the life-history with a beginning, middle and end acts simultaneously to delimit the parameters of the individual 'self' and the parameters of the narrative.

Thus I use the term 'life-history' not simply to describe the narratives that developed through my own interviews with informants, but also to designate a wider set of conventions that regulated the way in which people chose to render biographical information about their own and others' lives. Whilst the testimonies I explore arose through interviews in which I alone constituted the immediate audience, they were narrated in the knowledge they would be written down and hence with a wider public in mind (cf. Miescher 2001). Writing about the life-history of an Indian Chhattisgarh steel worker, Parry suggests that aspects of the narrative 'appear to fly on automatic pilot and to reproduce not the memory itself but the memory of how he has told the story before' (2004: 285). Similarly I would argue that Ghanaian activists' accounts often assembled pre-fabricated narratives that had been told (or heard) in other contexts, even as these were improvised and embellished in relation to specific questions. As such they can be seen as part of a more widely recognized set of conventions,⁴ which cannot easily be set apart from 'real life' in the way that Weiner suggests.

³ Linde (1993), for example, sees the 'life-history' as a specific mode of ethnographic data collection.

⁴ As Barber (1991) notes of oral history, such narratives have a degree of stability: whilst each performance is fluid and emergent, there is a discernible internal logic and a sequence of stages that can be grasped.

In this vein it is important to note their 'performative' aspects (Ebron 2002). The evocation of personal history is intended to *do* things in the present. As Barber (1991) notes of Yoruba *oriki* texts, this performative aspect means that there is a sense in which such accounts are not accessible when viewed simply as words on a page. The main focus of this article is on the way in which life-histories make particular claims and identities evident. These are evinced not simply through what is said but also *how* it is said. As has been widely noted by other scholars (Ebron 2002; Hasty 2005; Piot 1999; Yankah 1998) rhetorical skill is an important aspect in the consolidation of status and identity in a variety of West African contexts. As 'Big Men' (or Women) of the NGO sector, knowledge of a variety of scholarly and development-related discourses was demonstrated as much as asserted through linguistic competence.

ACTIVISM AS IDENTITY

In Ghana, as in other parts of Africa (Fischer 1997), the NGO sector has flourished over the last two decades as a response to both changing donor policy and internal political changes within the country (Amanor *et al.* 1993; Nugent 2004: 326–68). The latest NGO directory⁵ lists a total of 445⁶ NGOs and elucidates the diversity of these in terms of scope, size of operation and ideological influence. Organizations listed range from 'local NGOs' with few or no full-time staff to well-funded international NGOs such as Care and Oxfam. Whilst the majority of these are engaged in the provision of services of one sort or another, there is an increasing trend towards engagement in policy-related advocacy.

Despite this diversity, however, NGO workers commonly referred to 'the NGO movement', seeing unity of purpose in terms of the contribution of such organizations to the opening-up of new public spaces and the creation of a vibrant 'civil society' (cf. Reddaway 2002). In this account, I focus on a group of people commonly referred to, by themselves and other NGO workers, as 'NGO pioneers'. Now mostly in their forties and fifties, these individuals hold prominent positions within a variety of national NGOs, many of which they founded. Though the concerns of such organizations are diverse, ranging from advocacy over issues such as gender, media expression and water privatization to the provision of more tangible services to communities, people often described the connections between these organizations in terms of both longstanding friendships and shared ideological positions. Many of these people engaged in activism during the 1980s, as

⁵ GAPVOD/ISODEC (1999).

⁶ The directory suggests that this figure is likely to be far lower than the actual number, including as it does only those who responded to the survey. Whilst more contemporary information is lacking, NGO workers are unanimous in claiming that the sector has grown rapidly since the survey was undertaken in 1999; it is therefore likely that the figure today is much higher.

members of socialist political organizations such as the June the Fourth Movement (JFM) and the New Democratic Movement (NDM), and also through a number of related organizations loosely referred to as the Young Catholic Movement (YCM). This activism was regarded as a source of friendship and solidarity but also of tension, disagreement and personal enmity. In general the creation of alliances and factions was seen to result from the existence of common ideologies and beliefs, which were explicitly seen to transcend differences of ethnicity and geographical placement. Beyond the various inter-personal connections and differences that arose from this experience, however, 'NGO pioneers' generally expressed a common bond arising from the sheer fact of shared historical experience.

Broadly speaking this experience related to political and economic developments of the 1970s and 1980s.⁷ Following a succession of military regimes and the economic difficulties of the 1970s, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings deposed the Akuffo regime on 4 June 1979, citing corruption and economic mismanagement. After the execution of many of those associated with these regimes, elections were held in which Hilla Limann's left-wing People's National Party (PNP) came to power. However the PNP's time in office was dramatically cut short when on 31 December 1981 Rawlings again took power by military means, denouncing Limann's failure to address economic stagnation and widespread corruption, and establishing the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) as the ruling body.

Despite the populist socialist rhetoric in which the 'revolution' was proclaimed, initial support came from a relatively small section of society (Nugent 1996). Socialist political organizations such as the New Democratic Movement (NDM) and June the Fourth Movement (JFM) initially supported the revolution that brought Rawlings to power and were at different times more or less organizationally coterminous with it (Shillington 1992). As the regime became increasingly totalitarian, however, tensions developed. These were often phrased in 'ideological' terms, as the JFM and later the NDM highlighted the 'betrayal' of the socialist principles on which the revolution ostensibly was founded.

Following the development of an increasingly authoritarian political culture during the mid-to-late 1980s, members of such organizations often described how they were forced into exile, with many continuing their fight against the regime through organizations and activism based in the UK (Yarrow 2005). Others went 'underground' within the country, attempting to pursue their political ideals through increasingly covert means. With the formal return to democracy in 1992, however, activists described how the political situation 'opened up'. The changing political climate and increasing donor funding led to the

⁷ The political and economic history of this period has been explored extensively elsewhere (Bright and Dzorgbo 2001; Hansen 1987, 1991; Jeffries 1989; Nugent 1996; Yeebo 1991). Here I simply sketch the major events in relation to which life-history narratives were told. In the following account my concern is not with the historical accuracy of such accounts but rather with the forms they take and the positions they are used to support.

expansion of the NGO sector. Activists related how these provided new opportunities for the advancement of social and political ideals previously pursued through overtly political organizations.

In describing the course of their lives, such NGO pioneers often saw their identity as 'activists' to persist in the face of changes in the political climate and the kind of work they undertook. By contrast to social scientists who have attempted to define and understand 'activism' at an analytic level (Alleyne 2002; Keck and Sikkink 1998), my account is concerned to explore the designations that the term ethnographically acquires. These, I suggest, are less to do with the normative definition of particular organizational forms, and more to do with a particular kind of orientation towards the world (cf. Andrews 1991).⁸ Since informants did not themselves agree on the nature of this orientation, the identity of 'activists' was at times contested.

For example, a number of people who described their involvement in political activism during the early 1980s took positions in the government of the time. For such people, activism was imagined as work intended to bring about social and political change in accordance with their beliefs. To the extent that the government supported these beliefs, being an activist and engagement in party politics were not mutually exclusive. For others, however, 'activism' was defined in opposition to the pursuit of party politics, which were seen to compromise the independence and idealism in which, for them, activism inhered.

In the following section I explore a single life-history, which introduces a number of themes and serves to highlight some of the narrative strategies and forms employed. This is followed by a more thematic analysis based on a wider range of narrative vignettes.

DRIVEN BY HISTORY

Now aged forty-nine, Yaw⁹ is the director of a high-profile international NGO offering advocacy on issues relating to democracy, globalization and civil rights. I interviewed him in his office, a large air-conditioned room in a smart new building situated in the leafy Accra suburb of East Legon, where I started by asking him about the things that have led him to the kind of work he does today.

He began by talking about his childhood, suggesting that the contrasting backgrounds of his parents led to a sense of 'living in two worlds':

My father . . . went to England and trained as an accountant. You know, he was given a scholarship as part of the colonial transition And he came back and became a public servant And after that he worked as a kind

⁸The anthropologist Fortun (2001) also addresses these issues, albeit less explicitly, in the context of Indian activist networks in Bhopal.

⁹To preserve the anonymity of informants I use first names only.

of business person He was a kind of comfortable middle-class person. So there was this interesting duality in the way that I grew up: between my mother's single room in her father's house, and we kind of slept in front of the fire, and my father's nice house in North Labone where he had this fleet of cars and so on.

In describing this history, he emphasized how exposure to an acute 'duality' led to consciousness of wider social and economic inequality. Whilst life in his father's house in a wealthy Accra suburb gave him 'a profound sense of the tyranny of wealth' he suggested that his mother's outlook contributed more directly to the formation of his own ideas:

She was a very active person, not in the kind of political way that I was but hers was rooted in the community and church I mean when I look at some of my own things, although ideologically we disagreed, the fact about equity and kindness and worrying about other people, that was something we shared.

In this way his narrative renders childhood experiences as the origin point of a 'basic consciousness' that underpins later activities. In doing so, however, the 'consciousness' is abstracted from the people and situations who are seen to contribute to it. Subsequent involvement in student politics arises out of this consciousness, but in turn 'shapes' and 'defines' it. Thus he described the importance of exposure to a variety of left-wing ideologies whilst studying for his degree in law:

Left ideologies, Marxism, revival of communist ideas, that was the diet on which we were brought up on the campuses. There were some lecturers on campus who were very, very radical. You know, when they had debates on campus, the halls were filled. Religion was quite absent in those days, it was a very materialist, philosophical, you know, talking about the nation's future. People were into great themes and, you know, great ideas.

Such Marxist and communist ideas are construed as 'influences' that originate in a particular historic moment, but explain and justify future activities and decisions. The subsequent decision to undertake a PhD in Warwick is thus described as a move away from the 'futility' of law to a more 'engaged' way of life:

There were some very well-known . . . Marxist legal theorists in Warwick seriously discussing law in development and then also in theoretical terms in a kind of Marxist paradigm. I wanted to kind of move away from this being clever with rules and interpretation. I didn't want to be a barrister. I wanted to come back to teach, to be an activist and maybe occasionally to practise.

A similar desire to be 'politically engaged' informed the later decision to suspend his PhD in order to involve himself in political activism following the 1981 coup that brought Rawlings to power: 'I decided I was going to take part in what was unfolding, much to the chagrin of my parents, supervisors and family members who all thought I was mad.' He went on to describe how he re-connected with political allies

forged through student politics, leading to involvement in the Marxist New Democratic Movement, and later to work as part of the Worker's Movement in Tema. Through these activities he was appointed as an economic adviser to the government but left in 1984, following 'ideological disagreements'. In this vein the decision to work against the government as a 'freelance activist' is construed as a matter of 'commitment' to an underlying set of beliefs, necessitating 'sacrifice' in terms of his own way of life. Thus he described the difficulties he and other activist friends faced during this period, undertaking covert activities for which they received no pay and risked their own lives.

In 1989, however, it had become apparent that such activities were largely futile in the political climate of the time and following time in prison he made the decision to return to his PhD:

I had a degree I hadn't finished. I kind of gambled it for a major political undertaking which hit the wall. And I felt a personal need to fulfil that, to feel fulfilled. And of course being a good student had always been part of me—I didn't realize how important it was for me to feel successful—that I hadn't failed.

Here, then, the 'sacrifice' of involvement in activism gives way to a more 'personal' set of motives and aspirations, and to the fulfilment of a different aspect of his 'self'.

During this period, he described how he continued involvement in activism, attempting to put pressure on the Rawlings government by writing and talking about the situation in Ghana, and becoming involved in wider anti-racist causes. However, the fact that these were 'not terribly influential' and the related feeling of being marginalized from Ghanaian politics led to increasing personal dissatisfaction:

I finished my PhD. I didn't want to stay a day longer. I've invested a lot of my intellectual and emotional energies in the politics of this country and it had related costs. Quite frankly, you know, in the UK the most satisfaction I could get as a black person would be in solidarity work, activists' work and so on. And I didn't think with the experience that I had been through I would be satisfied with an essentially fairly marginal and largely frustrating existence. I wanted to come back here and pick up those threads.

Thus in 1994, he returned to Ghana to help set up the NGO he now directs. Reflecting on his present situation, he saw his own predicament as part of a wider frustration felt by those who were engaged in left-wing political activism during the 1980s. The destruction of these movements, he suggested, resulted in 'ideological disorientation', and an increasingly right-wing political environment makes it harder to operate. In this context he described the 'compromise' entailed in working for an NGO: 'I'm acutely aware of the limits of the NGO as a political thing. NGOs are not going to change the world, I am very acutely aware of that. But NGOs can contribute to the forward movement of particular sectors of society.'

Whilst NGOs thus represent a political compromise, they are also seen to enable personal reconciliation of different aspects of the self: 'For me this is a nice balance between working, being an activist and being an intellectual.' In this vein the final passage of the narrative slips into the present tense, elucidating how current preoccupations pursued through his NGO work arise out of earlier ones that developed through socialist political activism.

Greenhouse (1996) notes how life-histories are demonstrations of personal autonomy and agency, but yield this 'difference' in terms of commonly understood forms. In this vein I suggest that whilst the specificities of this particular life-history are unique, they are underpinned by more general narrative strategies. Indeed, one of the attributes shared by all the life-histories I collected is the focus on defining a sense of 'self'. Yaw's story takes the form of a series of anecdotes and observations in which other people, things and ideas are cited as 'influences'. Yet in elucidating the contribution of such influences to the course that his life has taken, the influences are abstracted from the 'consciousness' that results. In other words, stories and anecdotes illuminate the steps through which a distinctive 'self' develops but are not reducible to it. Events and relationships with particular people are construed as the more tangible though more transient counterpart to the less tangible, more enduring 'ideology' that arises.

Such stories also act to delimit a self through the relation of discrete episodes into overarching themes. The historian Metcalf (2004) suggests that for autobiographical accounts in the Indo-Persian literary tradition chronology is irrelevant since the essential personality is regarded as present from the start. By contrast, Yaw's narrative takes the form of a series of events and activities that appear as consecutive revelations, each examined in terms of the light it sheds on the kind of person he is today. This person is explicitly seen to have 'different aspects' which may indeed be contradictory and in tension. Yet the resolution of these is explicitly regarded as a key requisite for personal satisfaction.

The desire for a coherent self (Linde 1993; Summerfield 2004) seems to have its counterpart in the coherence of the narrative itself. In this way new stories are related to existing themes. For Yaw, the importance of social equity is introduced at the start in relation to the disparate social worlds occupied by his parents, a concern that is later cited as the rationale for subsequent decisions. In this narrative, as in others, the sequence in which events are related is therefore crucial in terms of the establishment of causality and motivation. Where events are construed as points of successive revelation about the 'self', lives are temporalized in terms of development and progress.

Aspects of these narrative forms are more generally recognizable. Yet I suggest that the activists' accounts on which this article is based are unusual not only in terms of the content of the beliefs expressed (the 'kind' of self), but also in the extent to which personal lives are often regarded as shaped by wider 'political' and 'historical' events. In this vein, Yaw tells his own life in relation to, and at times defined by,

a series of political events. For him, both ‘history’ and ‘politics’ are seen as forces with which he variously ‘connects’ and ‘disconnects’. Whilst history is regarded as an external agent that shapes the path his own life has taken, he explicitly sees himself as an historical actor, whose actions have shaped the path of history. In this as in many of the other narratives, historical events of national importance are thus identified as moments of ‘personal’ importance. The development of the ‘self’ is identified with the development of the nation.

ORIGINS

The anthropologist Alleyne (2002) describes how British anti-racist activists locate the origin of contemporary ideologies and activities in particular ‘epiphanic’ (Denzin 1989) moments. By contrast to this narrative of epiphany, many Ghanaian activists described how their work in development came about through a more gradual process of evolution.

For example, Amelia recounted how her work both as a political activist and as an NGO worker developed at a very early age, seeing precedents for her later political work in her ‘anti-authoritarian’ attitude towards school. Now in her early forties, she grew up in a middle-class family in Accra and went to one of the country’s elite boarding schools. Though some of her values were seen to originate in her mother’s belief in equity, she suggested that her radical outlook largely came ‘from within’. In this way, she described how her education and her later involvement with various socialist organizations made her aware of the ideas and beliefs that she already held:

Later on I got to know that I was on the left and had socialist inclinations. For me it was about equity, about social justice, about processes through which resources can be distributed and everybody benefits no matter what your social status is. But at that early age I didn’t know of any of the political philosophies – but I knew what burnt in me.

For her, activism was not a way of life to be consciously chosen, but something ‘within’ that was ‘innate’. Her ‘politics’, she suggested, existed even before these ideas found formal expression.

By contrast most activists located ‘radicalization’ in the conditions of their upbringing, and in the exposure to a particular set of social conditions. Since ‘class’ and ‘social background’ were evoked in such accounts as idioms in which claims to legitimacy were made and disputed, these cannot be viewed as simple sociological reflexes. In her account of British Marxist activists Caplan (1997) contrasts middle-class ‘abstract’ and ‘ideological’ reasons for conversion with the ‘direct experience’ of those from working-class backgrounds. Yet the opposition she asserts between ‘ideas’ and ‘experience’ was employed by Ghanaian activists self-avowedly from different kinds of background. Indeed, for many, activism was seen to result from the conjunction of ‘life experience’ and exposure to particular kinds of ‘ideology’.

For example, Charles, who currently directs one of the country's largest national NGOs, located the dawning of his own political consciousness in social inequalities he encountered in 'the village' during the 1970s. Born in a rural village in the Upper East region where most were illiterate, his success at school led him get involved in the village development association at an early age, a formative experience in his development of a 'social perspective'. Thus he suggested that his ideas originated in the village's struggle for land rights against the 'bureaucrats' and 'rich merchants' who had acquired the land. Yet if these experiences were imagined to provide the impetus, then 'radicalization' itself came through contact with Catholic liberation theology:

I was in secondary school . . . and there we started student politics It was Paulo Freire . . . it was basically a consciousness-raising thing that you need to know that you have power and you need to ask questions about why things happen the way they do. And you need to understand that you can make a change So it became a radicalizing ideology for many of us.

Experience of 'poverty' in 'the village' was more widely imagined as a stimulus for engagement in activism, making visible social inequalities that were concealed for those who came from towns. In such narratives 'poverty' is a category with rhetorical force (Werbner 2004), used to make evident personal integrity and commitment.¹⁰ By the same token, activists questioned the commitment of others, by highlighting their 'elite' backgrounds, or by disputing the reality of the 'experiences' that other people claimed.

In the same way that those from 'the village' described the 'direct experience' this gave them of particular issues, those from the north of Ghana often suggested that the experience of living there revealed social contradictions not confronted by those from the south. The sociologist Denzin (1989) suggests that the family is universally cited as the 'zero-point' of origin in life-histories, yet the narratives of Ghanaian activists often locate an origin point in much wider social units in which the family figures incidentally, if at all.

Whilst those from the north frequently located their radicalism in the 'experience' this gave them of social inequality, many of the older generation of activists perceived their radicalism to stem from the social and economic inequalities they experienced when they were younger.

Now aged forty-nine, Francis works as a marketing manager for the drinks company Guinness. As an active member of the YCM in the early 1980s he helped found an NGO with the intention of putting the ideas of liberation theology into practice. During the 1970s he was still at school but described how he was radicalized by his experience

¹⁰ The historian Arnold (2004) similarly describes how Indian political activists in the 1930s premised their claims to political authority and national leadership on the basis of the 'suffering' that resulted from extended periods in prison.

of the period and in particular the political and economic corruption of the time:

I remember at secondary school I was trying to work out the social forces around me . . . and I found that I did not have a framework within which to place the happenings of the times. Even though I thought there was something basically wrong, I did not know how to articulate it. . . . And here I was a young man sitting in the middle not knowing how to judge these big forces sweeping around me. . . . I just felt that there was something wrong somewhere and I didn't really understand what. And I guess it was this search to understand what the issues really were—probably those are the forces that helped to drive me in a certain direction.

Whilst social, economic and political turmoil of 1970s was therefore often cited as a radicalizing influence, the older generation of activists also suggested that the ideological influences of the period led them to strive for social change. A former NDM member related his own experience on campus in the early 1980s:

It was a time when we had all been introduced to very exciting concepts. In those days there was socialism and communism, which was all over campus. It was a new experience for people. It was all very new and a big inspiration to a lot of us. It was exciting and there were a lot of possibilities. It is not surprising that a lot of people were driven into social action.

In this vein the lack of ideological alternatives of today's 'globalized society' was contrasted with the 'radical thinking' of the past. As in activists' accounts more generally, past experiences are thus sited as the origin points of a distinctive outlook, characterized by 'radicalism', 'ideology' and the 'commitments' that these give rise to.

COMMITMENT

Although the Marxist rhetoric of organizations such as the JFM and NDM might seem a far cry from the liberal NGO discourses of human rights and democracy, life-histories of former political activists often emphasized the extent to which their work in the NGO sector was simply an extension or continuation of an earlier set of preoccupations. In this sense activists' narratives more generally highlighted the 'commitment' that underscored engagement in ostensibly distinct kinds of activism.

Such ideas appear throughout the account of Kwame, who currently directs an advocacy NGO for the protection of media freedom in West Africa. In narrating his life, he outlined how some of the experiences in his past have contributed to the work he does today. In 1971 he studied journalism in the United States and during this period became involved in the civil rights movement as well as in the support for the liberation of African colonial countries. After completing his degree he returned to Ghana where he lectured in journalism, and became involved in the NDM. In common with many other NDM members,

he initially supported Rawlings but distinguished his support for the earlier Marxist ideals of the coup from the 'repressive' regime that later developed. In 1990 he helped found the Movement for Freedom and Justice, an influential organization campaigning for the return to democracy. Whilst he suggested that the kinds of covert tactics such organizations had to pursue contrasted with his current work within the NGO sector, he nonetheless saw continuity in terms of the pursuit of 'freedom of speech', 'anti-repression' and 'democracy'. In this vein he explained, 'My thinking hasn't changed: it's the same kind of thing that propels me to do what I do now. I'm focused on one area, but the general questions of change are still there—you know, poverty. . . . All the things that don't make our society move forwards.'

Activists more generally invoked the idea of 'commitment' in suggesting that changes in the kinds of 'tactics' and 'strategies' they pursued were underpinned by an underlying ideology. Tetteh directs one of Ghana's leading advocacy NGOs and similarly saw continuities between the anti-globalization agenda of the organization and the anti-imperialism of the Marxist organizations he participated in during the early 1980s. For him, the prevalence of former members of organizations such as the JFM and NDM in the contemporary NGO sector was explicable as a pragmatic adaptation to the circumstances of the time: 'The destruction of those [socialist] movements meant that NGOs were the only places that you could raise those issues of policy. So charity work was directly turned into political work.'

In this vein he recounted how his own life has been constrained by political developments within the country. In 1982, during his final year at university, his readings of Marxist writings led him to become 'politically active' within both the NDM and student politics. By 1984, however, increasing disillusionment with the revolutionary process led him to pursue higher education in the UK. The intention had been to return on completion of his Masters but he suggested that engagement with Ghanaian politics became 'futile' towards the end of the 1980s, as the regime became increasingly authoritarian. Thus he became involved in a variety of left-wing organizations in the UK, including the New Times Group¹¹ and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. In 1994 he returned to Ghana as the political situation opened up following the return to democracy. In narrating these events, he suggested that whilst his activism was partly a pragmatic response to the wider political and economic circumstances, the various causes and activities were underpinned by 'some simple but profound problems' arising from social inequality.

In a similar vein other former political activists suggested that a 'toning down' of the radical rhetoric of the early 1980s was a 'strategic' response to more recent political circumstances, as the right-wing 'Busia politics'¹² of the current Kufuor government have changed the

¹¹ A Marxist splinter group that emerged from the British Communist Party.

¹² The 'left' and the 'right' in Ghana are often referred to by reference to Nkrumah and Busia respectively. Following Independence in 1957 Nkrumah was the first President of

political terrain in which NGOs operate. As one former member of the JFM put it, 'There are trade-offs between your personal convictions and the realities within which you must operate. It's about adapting to a current political environment.' Despite the current government's increasing tolerance of criticism, it was suggested that 'left-wing agendas' are harder to pursue where the ruling party is ideologically to the right.

Since ideological commitments were taken to endure, in making evident ideological developments during their youth, people explicitly placed themselves in the present socially, ideologically and organizationally. For example, differences between the NDM and the JFM were seen to explain contemporary factions within the NGO sector. As a former NDM member put it, 'the political fault lines that appeared in the 1980s are still very vital'. In this vein he described a recent split within one of the country's leading national NGOs in terms of ideological disagreements between senior staff that had belonged to different political factions in the 1980s.

Ideological similarities were sometimes identified between people whose interest in NGO work originated in political activism and those who became involved through their membership of YCM organizations such as the Young Christian Students and Pax Romana. Members of these Catholic organizations subscribed to a radical form of liberation theology espousing the need for social and political transformation along broadly Marxist lines. During the early 1980s, a number of prominent Roman Catholic priests publicly supported the Rawlings regime, while Rawlings, himself a Catholic, had sympathy for the doctrines of liberation theology. Political activists spoke of collaboration between organizations such as the JFM and NDM on the one hand and the YCM on the other, and described the friendships that developed between members of these organizations on university campuses. These personal and ideological connections were sometimes used to explain an essential difference between the broadly 'left-wing' orientation of contemporary NGOs founded by these activists and the 'right-wing' or 'apolitical' stance of others. By the same token, however, ideological differences between the religious orientation of the Young Catholics and the secularism of socialist organizations was taken to account for an essential difference between the service NGOs set up by the former and the 'more political' advocacy NGOs set up by the latter.

Beyond these ideological differences, however, the very fact of 'commitment' was said to give rise to a particular orientation that differentiated those whose beliefs were 'genuine'. The older generation of NGO workers who engaged in activism during the 1980s thus commonly contrasted themselves (regardless of ideological persuasion)

the country, advocating industrialization and development along socialist lines. After the overthrow of Nkrumah in the coup of 1966, military rule was established under the National Liberation Council before return to democratic rule under Busia. By contrast to Nkrumah, Busia employed a more liberal economic discourse and re-engaged with Western donor organizations such as the World Bank and IMF (see Bright and Dzorgbo 2001).

with a younger generation of NGO workers, whom they perceived to be more concerned with professional advancement and financial gain.

As with commitment, the idea of 'radicalism' was often used to describe a desire to bring about social and political change. Yet in older activists' descriptions of their lives, many differentiated their enduring commitment from their waning radicalism.

For example, Ibrahim described how he became 'radicalized' during his time as a student at the University of Legon, shortly after Rawlings came to power. Whilst not formally involved in the NDM or JFM, he had friends in both and was active in the 'leftist tendency' of student politics. During the coup of 1981 he was president of the Student Representative Council, and took the decision to suspend university in order to allow students to help with the government's attempts at economic reconstruction. Looking back, however, he described the youthful naivety of their actions: 'Our radicalism was fuelled to a large extent by the books we had read, the radical thinkers we had met. But coming back to the ground, we realized that things don't just happen like that. It takes a lot of very incremental change to change society.'

Thus he contrasted his earlier radicalism with his more recent work as programme coordinator of an international NGO. Whilst activities such as picketing the university 'produced a lot of noise', he suggested that they had less social impact than the less overtly radical activities he now performs. In this sense waning radicalism was seen as evidence of greater 'commitment' to the cause of 'social justice'.

As in activists' life-histories more generally, 'commitment' to a particular way of life is seen to be anchored by a set of 'ideological' beliefs. In these narratives 'commitment' is made tangible and 'real' on the basis of its endurance over time (cf. Andrews 1991). Thus it was suggested that activists who abandoned their earlier beliefs were never genuinely committed in the first place. In this vein, activists often spoke of former colleagues having 'sold out', citing their change of career or lifestyle as evidence that commitment was never 'real' in the first place.

IDEOLOGY

Whilst activists imagined the events that constituted their life-histories to be underpinned by commitment to an unchanging set of values, these did not have their origin in a canon of received thought. Rather, they regarded themselves as borrowing 'pragmatically' from different strands of philosophy. Ideas in this sense were simply a means to an end: their strategic effects were emphasized over and above an 'academic' interest.

In describing how his work as an academic related to his work as an activist, Kwame saw a complementarity between the two, suggesting that the ideas he wrote about could be put into practice through his NGO. Yet the motivating force for his human rights activism was not located at the level of 'ideology', but in his 'direct experience' of

repression of rights and freedom of speech. Whilst he had 'sympathy' for Marxist thinking, he did not see this as an important determinant of his perspective. The important thing was not the 'ideology itself' but the ends to which it was used. Thus he suggested 'academic debate' is futile in the context of his work as an activist:

The kind of work we do, we rarely get involved in philosophical and ideological debates. A journalist is murdered in cold blood in Côte d'Ivoire, that's what my work entails: to find out who did it and see what can be done. Now if anybody came to raise a philosophical question about that, I'd say they are crazy. . . . Philosophical things should not be the basis for conflict among human rights organizations.

The capacity to bring about change, he suggested, requires that conflict be minimized between different NGOs and activists. In so far as 'philosophy' and 'idealism' were a source of such conflict, they were not seen to have a place in the context of activism.

Andrews (1991) describes something of the particular relationship between belief and action in the life-histories of British Marxists, suggesting that these are characterized by an unusual degree of synchronicity. Actions are purposefully made to conform with beliefs, just as beliefs are seen to derive directly from experience of the world. In this vein Ghanaian activists often strove for consistency between their 'ideas' and their 'actions', and attempted to evince this consistency in the ways that they narrated their lives: ideas were said to inform the actions that people took, just as these actions were ideally motivated by a consistent set of ideas.

In narrating his life, Nicholas suggested that the political activism he engaged in during the early 1980s stemmed from his upbringing in the north and the social difficulties and inequalities he experienced growing up there. In 1978 he studied at the University of Ghana, Legon, where this sense was moulded by his exposure to a variety of intellectual currents including Marxist thinking and liberation struggles within Africa. He described how at this time 'There was a sense of hope, that change was possible, that life was about change and that had to be brought about by active struggle.' These ideas produced a desire to bring about action and thus he became involved in student politics as well as in the JFM. Through his political activism and support for Rawlings, he was given a position on the Interim National Coordinating Council, an influential organization set up following the coup of 1981 to coordinate the activities of grassroots organizations that grew up in support of the revolution. In November 1982, however, following wider 'ideological' disagreements between the JFM and Rawlings, he was imprisoned for a year and on release became an exile in the UK, where he collaborated with other political exiles, attempting to destabilize the regime. During this period he described a sense of 'frustration' at being 'far removed from reality'. This sense of frustration arose from a situation in which he was unable to translate his ideas into action.

Although activists can be characterized by the extent to which they attempt to achieve synchronicity between their beliefs and their actions, in the ultimate irreducibility of these terms there is always the potential for critique. In this vein Nicholas described his decision to leave the JFM as arising from the fact that its members were 'too ideological' and that their academic interest in various Marxist philosophies precluded 'concerted action'. Thus he justified his decision to set up an NGO for Ghanaian refugees in the UK, suggesting that he has been able to bring about greater social change through this and his more recent work as a development consultant than through work as a political activist: 'Political rhetoric has some value but if it doesn't make a difference to people's lives then there's no point.'

Against this assumption that 'ideas' and 'actions' should conform, debates amongst activists often focused on the extent to which this ideal was compromised. Thus in talking about their former activism both political activists and those involved in the YCM commonly highlighted the others' lack of 'action': whilst Young Catholics construed their 'grassroots' development projects in opposition to the 'ideology' of political activists, a symmetrical argument was put forward by political activists, who suggested that without engaging in politics it was impossible to bring about 'real change'. The issue of what was to count as 'action', in other words, was a contentious one.

Berglund argues that 'activism [is] a heightened awareness to the negotiability of human relationships' (1998: 7). I would add that Ghanaian activists' understandings of the relationship between ideology and action amounted to a heightened perception of the negotiability of the world more generally. This capacity to see things not as they are but as they ought to be was often regarded as a matter of 'idealism'. As such it was valued for the way in which it sustained 'commitment' and the desire to change things.

SACRIFICE

For activists, intractable commitment to a particular perspective necessitates flexibility and compromise in other areas of life. Thus life-history narratives often elucidated how commitment and idealism resulted in lives that did not take straightforward paths (cf. Alleyne 2002).

In this vein, Rudolf suggested that 'life is about struggle', describing how his own attempts to bring about social change have led to 'personal sacrifice'. A Catholic by upbringing, he recounted his radicalization during secondary school through membership of the Bishop Romero Youth for Development organization, whose development efforts were motivated by the teachings of liberation theology. These ideas, he suggested, laid the foundations for the political activism he later engaged in whilst a student. During this period he worked as head of the JFM Youth Wing and in 1982 was made regional coordinator of the People's Defence Committees, making him a member of

the Interim National Coordinating Committee.¹³ In 1982, however, he left, citing the increasingly 'neo-liberal' direction of the PNDC government. After his resignation he began working covertly against the government, forming 'resistance cells' and helping to found the United Revolutionary Front, a political organization campaigning for the return to democracy. These activities had a price. He described his brutal treatment at the hands of the government in terms of harassment, beatings and ultimately imprisonment. Yet whilst many left the country during this period, he spoke of his own decision to stay:

I just had this true conviction that all these ideals we'd been talking about – integrity. . . . They couldn't come from outside [the country]. So somebody had to be here to be the link and that was why I was here. I was talking to all of [the other activists]. I suffered a lot for it but a lot of them salute me for that.

Whilst staying in the country compromised his safety and financial security, he saw this as a necessary 'sacrifice' for the realization of his ideals.

This idea of 'sacrifice' had wider currency amongst NGO workers, who would often elucidate their morality and commitment by reference to the possibilities for material gain they chose to forego. Yaa, for example, came into NGO work through journalism, where she developed interests in gender inequality that she wanted to address 'practically'. After finishing her Masters, she was offered a well-paid job at an international NGO but described her decision to take a relatively poorly paid job at a national NGO, talking of the 'financial sacrifice' entailed in working for an organization that would enable her to be 'closer to the grassroots' and more in tune with the thinking of 'real people'.

Against these ideas of sacrifice, personal accumulation through NGO work was regarded as anathema. The paradox is an acute one since NGOs pay 'dollar' wages and are increasingly regarded by graduates as places to build good careers. Thus activists frequently expressed personal moral anxiety deriving from a tension between their values of social equity and the money to which NGO work gave them access.

Whilst a number of academic accounts highlight the cynical exploitation of NGOs by African elites, this critique is to a large extent made redundant by the very criticism such people themselves voice. Fears that people only work for the money and that social inequality is often perpetuated by the very organizations that purport to address it are central to a discourse in which NGO workers themselves participate. My suggestion is not that such people are inherently 'moral', but rather that such discourses provide the medium through which a variety of moral questions are raised and resolved.

¹³ People's Defence Committees were established throughout the country following the 31 December coup as organs intended to bridge the gap between the PNDC and 'the people' (Nugent 1996). Soon afterwards the government established the Interim National Coordinating Committee to coordinate the activities of these organizations.

Whilst a tension between moral commitment and material gain was sometimes registered by individuals, it was also expressed in generational terms. For example older 'NGO pioneers' expressed fears that the younger generation were 'only in it for the money', highlighting a 'lack of commitment' amongst those who had not experienced the 'hardships' of their own youth. As one activist put it: 'a lot of people are coming into the NGO movement pretending to be politically engaged but only in it for material gain'; the 'pioneers' spoke of 'moral corruption' setting in, as agendas and ideas are increasingly subordinated to money.

Younger activists employed similar rhetorical strategies in criticizing those that came into NGO work through political activism. Thus an NGO worker in her thirties suggested that for many of those involved in the YCM their radicalism was a 'charade': 'All of these radicals, I am yet to see one of them convince me that they are still radical. . . . The bottom line is that what's in practice is very different to all the theory they shout about.'

For others, the very idea that NGO work was a form of activism was disputed. In this vein it was suggested that activists' commitment to particular ideologies blinded them to 'the realities'. The dogmatic pursuit of a particular set of beliefs was reported to make them less able to respond to the specific needs of particular communities, or to particular problems or issues. Such people professed commitment not to an ideological perspective but to the values of neutrality and professionalism, as enacted through the proper adherence to organizational process (cf. DuGay 2000).¹⁴

CONCLUSION: HISTORY AND AGENCY

Despite considerable variability, life-history narratives of Ghanaian NGO workers and activists are unified in the enactment of a particular 'self' in which individual gain is ideally subordinated to ideological commitment to transformation and improvement of society. As many of my informants themselves recognize, this ideal is not always realized, yet it does provide a moral and ethical framework through which people assess their own and others' actions. Such narratives thus counter prevailing scholarly portrayals of African elites, whose apparent concerns with public good have often been dismissed as dissembling appearances (Werbner 2004: 8). Through revealing the diverse and complex ideas that motivate such work, they also challenge the tendency to view 'development' as a morally bankrupt domain in which self-interest prevails.

Accounts of activist life-histories from other parts of the world document similar concerns with 'ideology' and 'commitment' (for

¹⁴Kaufmann (1997) reports in her study of British development workers that whilst NGO workers often stressed 'political' motivations, civil servants more generally saw their involvement in development work as 'professional'.

example, Alleyne 2002; Andrews 1991), and describe parallel ways in which ideas of personal 'sacrifice' may be used to confer legitimacy and status (Arnold 2004). Yet it is also important to recognize that such accounts arise from and describe a particular historical trajectory. Ghanaian activists' testimonies themselves emphasize how specific historical circumstances lead to the development of particular kinds of beliefs, interests and motivations.

In recent years, life-history approaches have increasingly come to the fore in the social sciences. These have often explicitly sought to counter the concealment of 'agency' in the purportedly static 'sociological abstractions' of a former age (cf. Arnold and Blackburn 2004). Thus, the historian Johnson (1996) suggests in the context of British Trotskyism that life-histories add a dimension lacking in documentary accounts, proposing the need to 'weave together human agency and social structure' (1996: 46). Similarly, McCaskie (2000) argues that it is problematic to reduce biographical circumstance to sociological generalization, proposing that through biography it is possible to show the presence of 'individual agency'. Within anthropology, the recent focus on biography and life-history (for example, Caplan 1997; Crapanzano 1980; Herzfeld 1997; Holland and Lave 2000) has similarly been conceived as a way of introducing concerns with 'agency', in contrast to former concerns with larger social and cultural units of analysis (Caplan 1997; Denzin 1989; Shostak 1981).

Yet the narratives of Ghanaian activists demonstrate the problem of conflating 'agency' with an analytic focus on 'the individual' and that which is 'personal'. For such activists their own sense of agency – their perceived capacity to act on the world and bring about social and political change – was defined not in opposition to historical 'structure', but through and in relation to it. To tell of their 'lives' was to tell of historical developments in the country and the political movements of which they were a part. Indeed many activists' narratives focused on historical developments to the extent that reference to more ostensibly 'personal' aspects of their lives was entirely lacking.

Following Greenhouse (1996) I suggest that the connection of 'personal' and 'national' histories was enabled by the existence in both of a common temporal form. As Greenhouse argues, 'If personal history is to be fitted into national history, autobiography must be constructed out of the same elements as the collective story of progress modern nation states claim for themselves' (1996: 180).

Thus activists' narratives presented their lives in terms of a series of events unfolding progressively through linear time. Personal 'progress' through careers was seen as a series of linked but discrete events that have their counterpart in the nation state's image of time unfolding progressively through history. It is because both the 'personal' and the 'state' narratives take the same temporal form that these narratives can be understood as being part of (and relevant to) bigger 'national' issues. Life-histories are not therefore simple expressions of personal autonomy or agency, since individual 'difference' takes a form that is legible even before it acquires its specificities.

With this in mind, I return to the ethnographic vignette with which the article opened. If board members of this Ghanaian NGO were able to read their own 'personal' development as synonymous with 'national' development, this was because both were imagined to unfold in a common temporal form. Greenhouse notes the way in which this common form allows nations (and institutions) to claim the agency of individuals as its own. These NGO board members, I suggest, reverse this, appropriating national development as a demonstration of their own agency. Here agency is not made visible in distinction to social or historical context, but through its very invocation.

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ABSTRACT

Widespread assumptions about the extractive and self-serving nature of African elites have resulted in the relative neglect of questions concerning their personal ethics and morality. Using life-history interviews undertaken with a range of Ghanaian development workers, this article explores some of the different personal aspirations, ideologies and beliefs that such narratives express. The self-identification of many of those interviewed as 'activists' is examined in terms of the related concepts of 'ideology', 'commitment' and 'sacrifice'. Much recent work within history and anthropology uses the 'life-history' as a way of introducing 'agency' that is purported to be missing in accounts focusing on larger social abstractions. Yet it is the very opposition between abstractions such as 'history' and 'society' and their own more 'personal' lives that such narratives themselves enact. The article thus interrogates the various ways in which development workers variously imagine their lives in relation to broader social and historical processes.

RÉSUMÉ

Les idées répandues sur la nature extractive et intéressée des élites africaines ont conduit à un désintérêt relatif des questions concernant leur éthique personnelle et leur moralité. À travers des entretiens de récits de vie menés auprès d'un éventail d'agents de développement ghanéens, cet article explore les différentes aspirations personnelles, idéologies et croyances qu'expriment ces récits. Il examine l'étiquette d'activiste que se donne un grand nombre de personnes interrogées, en termes de concepts liés d'«idéologie», d'«engagement» et de «sacrifice». Beaucoup de travaux récents menés en histoire et en anthropologie utilisent le «récit de vie» comme moyen d'introduire l'«action» qui est censée manquer dans les récits centrés sur des abstractions sociales plus larges. C'est pourtant l'opposition même entre des abstractions (comme l'«histoire» et la «société») et leur propre existence plus personnelle que ces récits interprètent eux-mêmes. L'article interroge ainsi les différentes manières dont les agents de développement imaginent leur existence par rapport à des processus sociaux et historiques plus larges.