A Village and its NGOs: Community Embedded Utilisations and Understandings of NGO Presence in Rural Northern Malawi

Thomas John McNamara
Student ID 266500
4/8/2015

Submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Abstract

There is a wealth of literature that examines the influence of NGOs’ projects on rural communities in the development world. While some of this literature is problematically unreflective, several excellent ethnographies critically examine how communities change in response to an NGO’s intervention. However, these ethnographies are typically focused upon the NGOs themselves, with the communities explored through their reaction to an NGO’s projects.

In this thesis I seek to shift NGOs from the centre of analysis. I instead explore villagers’ actions and interactions. These villagers often utilise, or are guided by, the presence of NGOs, but their actions are not wholly caused by them. My aim requires conceptualising NGOs as macro-actants that influence villagers’ interactions and intra-community meaning making. It also demands an exploration of the entirety of an NGO’s presence, including the symbols it omits, the demeanour of its staff, and the relationships of those who associate with it, rather than just focusing on the effects of the NGO’s projects.

To this end I conducted eleven months of ethnographic field-work in a close-knit Malawian community that contained three NGOs and a large British funded CBO. The fieldwork focused upon how NGOs were invoked in everyday conversation, which villagers interacted with the NGOs and how this changed their relationships with their peers, and what villagers understood NGO presence to signify about their own lives and the village’s changing place in the world.

I argue that NGO presence encouraged these rural Malawians to see development as entering their community from an external ‘modern world’. This often reduced intra-village obligations but added to the personal entitlements of an emerging elite who convolved market competence, education and modernity. Further, specific villagers’ social roles placed them in the disjuncture between NGOs and the community. These people were temporarily able to elevate their intra-community social status by being seen to guide the NGOs. However, in doing so they reinforced dominant development narratives and intra-village hierarchies.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

1. The thesis comprised only my original work except where indicated
2. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used
3. The thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps bibliographies and appendices
Acknowledgements

Many people have made it possible for me to conduct the research for this PhD. Most obviously I have been lucky enough to have an excellent supervisory panel. Both Prof Andrew Dawson, my panel chair, and Dr Violeta Schubert, my co-supervisor, offered invaluable insights into my research and took a keen interest in my progress. I am most indebted however to my primary supervisor, Dr Nadeem Malik, whose intellectual and academic guidance has been integral to my graduate student experience. Other staff within the School of Social and Political Sciences that have enhanced my time here include Dr Bina Fernandez and Prof Monica Minnegal, who offered me significance support as well as the opportunity to teach their classes.

I have frequently been told that writing a PhD is an isolating experience. However this has not been my experience. I have shared either an office or a student area with Hannah, Bron, Ruth, Gordon and Ryan and have made what I hope will remain firm friendships with these people, as well as other graduate students including David, Lachlan, Bibiana and Morgan. This thesis reflects many ideas that I have bounced off all of them in the pub or corridor. I can also say that it would not have been completed without the tolerance of my long-term officemate Sophie, who, in addition to putting up with my company just about every weekday for several years, suggested that I make a wall out of waste paper bins that would segregate my writing desk from the nearest internet terminal when my writers’ block was in full swing. I have been similarly supported by my family and by the community of scholars at St Hilda’s residential College.

Most importantly, there are myriad Tumbuka who I would like to thank for their involvement in this project and more broadly for allowing me into their lives. Many, though not all of these people appear in this thesis under a variety of pseudonyms and for this reason I am hesitant to name them. I would like however to end my acknowledging VH Bweteka, who was instrumental to this study and died tragically in late 2013. His dedication to development, to his family and the community at large was an inspiration for the entire time I knew him.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 1  
Declaration ............................................................................................................................. 2  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... 3  
Glossary ................................................................................................................................. 6  
Map of Malawi ....................................................................................................................... 7  
Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 8  
  Field Methodology .............................................................................................................. 21  
Thesis Structure .................................................................................................................... 28  
PART ONE: ACADEMIC AND GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT .................................................... 33  
Chapter One: NGO Presence within Development Literature .......................................... 34  
  Limitations of Project Centric Development Literature ..................................................... 35  
  Development and Modernity as Depoliticising Social Change .......................................... 39  
  The Utility of Actor-network Theory for Examining Village Negotiations and NGO Presence .... 42  
  The Intra-village Concerns of Development Brokers ......................................................... 47  
  The Northern Focus within Literature on NGOs ............................................................... 50  
  Studying NGO Presence in Malawi ................................................................................... 53  
  Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 58  
Chapter Two: A Panopticon of Development in Vsawa ....................................................... 60  
  Vsawa – A Site of Change .................................................................................................. 60  
  NGOs in Vsawa – Providers and Symbols of Development ................................................. 68  
  An Overview of Vsawan Development Discourse .............................................................. 76  
  Conclusions ........................................................................................................................ 78  
PART TWO: NGOS AS MACRO-ACTANTS IN VSAWAN DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE ....... 80  
Chapter Three: The Utility of ANT for Analysing Social Change – Mbwezi’s Influence on Vsawan Resource Sharing .............................................................................................................. 81  
  Food and Resource Sharing in Malawi .............................................................................. 82  
  NGO Presence as Enabling Human Agency .................................................................... 89  
  NGOs as Mediating Vsawan Consumption and Changing the Morality of Patronage ........ 94  
  NGOs as Gatherings of Actors, Objects and Discourses ................................................... 98  
  Conceptualising Mbwezi’s Influence through Actor-Network Theory .............................. 101  
  Conclusions ........................................................................................................................ 102  
Chapter Four: Education, Modernity and Social Hierarchy – NGOs’ Impact on the Meaning and Purpose of Education ........................................................................................................ 105
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Poor State of Education in Malawi and Vsawa</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO Presence’s Influence on Narratives of Modernity and Education</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Being Educated’: a Negotiated Social Status</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiated Educational Discourses and the Meaning of Modernity</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Hierarchy in Vsawan Educational Negotiations</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO Presence and Intra-village Negotiations over Girls’ Education</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor-network Theory and NGOs’ Influence on Educational Claims and Modernity</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART THREE: TACTICS IN THE DISJUNCTURE BETWEEN VSAWANS AND NGOS</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five: Vsawan Headmen and the Chiefly Dyad – NGO Presence as Enabling an Elite’s Tactical Agency while diminishing their Strategic Position</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chieftainty, NGOs and Malawian Development</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headmen’s Tactical Response to NGO Presence</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vsawan Headmen as Tactically but Not Strategically Responsive to NGO Presence</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition, Development Provisioning and the Shifting Nature of Chieftaincy</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six: Socially Isolated NGO Staff in Vsawa – How Elite Development Actors Recreate Dominant Development Narratives</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Distinction between ‘Developer’ and ‘Villager’ in Malawi</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO Staff as Creating, and Constrained by, Narratives about NGO Presence</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO Staff’s Isolation as a Mediator in Vsawan Discussions</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Resilience of the Developer/Villager Binary in Vsawa</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seven: ‘Volunteer’ as a Social Category – How Myriad Vsawans Negotiated Social Change through the Treatment of Volunteers</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Treatment of Volunteers in Malawi and Vsawa</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development and Modernity in Volunteers’ Demonstrations of Their Value</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vsawans’ Treatment of Volunteers as a Discussion about Modernity</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headmen’s Treatment of Volunteers and Their Own Social Position</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Conclusions and Reflections</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answers to Specific Research Questions:</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns and Contributions</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference List</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Glossary

Aphipa/mphipa  Typically translated in ‘black’. Essentially meant black Africa, *aphipa* was the plural, *mphipa* the singular

Azungu/mzungu  Typically translated in ‘white’. Essentially meant of European descent, *azungu* was the plural, *mzungu* the singular

Chalo chazungu  A phrase meaning ‘the life of the whites’, but literally translated would have meant ‘the world of whites’

ChurchCare  A Malawian NGO that provided seeds to people who had been widowed or orphaned by HIV

Dandaula Palibe  A phrase meaning ‘no worries’ that meant to have a person’s material needs fulfilled

Green Earth  A conservation based NGO that built fuel-efficient cook-stoves and advocated for conservation based bylaws

Jenda  A phonetic spelling of gender, used to signify acting in accordance with perceived western gender norms

Jumpi  A village south of central Vsawa, under the guidance of volunteer Village Headman Nachoka but officially ruled by Village Headman Mwalimu

Kulutilizya Msambiska  A British funded CBO that ran a youth centre, educational projects and a medical centre in Revori, *Kulutilizya Msambiska* translates into ‘Continuing Education’

Kamolongo  A village in central Vsawa, under the guidance of Group Village Headman Chipeso

Mbwezi  A large British funded NGO that ran health, education, conservation and micro-finance programs. *Mbwezi* translates into friendship.

Mututu  A village in central Vsawa, under the guidance of Group Village Headman Chipeso

Pungwe  A village south of central Vsawa, under the guidance of Village Headman Mwalimu

Revori  A village fifteen kilometres north of central Vsawa, under the guidance of Village Headman Jerimani

Usiku  A village in central Vsawa, under the guidance of Group Village Headman Chipeso

Vsawa  A collection of fishing and farming villages in Northern Malawi
Map of Malawi

Maps of Malawi sourced from maps.opensource.com and emapsworld.com respectively.
Introduction

Vsawa is a collection of lakeside villages that are cut off from the rest of Malawi by a mountain range. In July of 2012 I was reclining next to Vsawa’s soccer pitch looking up into these mountains. My poor fitness meant that I was recovering on the interchange bench for the Mututu Stars, the village soccer team I was playing for at the time. The other three men on the bench were significantly fitter than I was, and also better footballers. However, as it was 4pm, and they would begin fishing in a few hours, they were conserving their energy. Two of these men were mocking my asthmatic gasps when Lebani, the third fisherman, pointed up at the mountains and said, “Look, its Mbwezi’s truck.” Mbwezi was the largest NGO in Vsawa and it owned two white 4WDs. I exhaled heavily as I sat up and asked him how he knew. I couldn’t see anything, let alone a vehicle that I would be able to identify. Lebani shrugged; he could see something moving along the mountain road and, seeing as Mbwezi owned just about all the vehicles that entered Vsawa, it was probably one of Mbwezi’s cars. Half an hour later (I was still exhausted) the car that Lebani had seen became more obviously visible. It was not one of Mbwezi’s 4WDs and neither the fishermen nor I knew who it belonged to. They speculated that it was most likely owned by another NGO, although they noted that it could also belong to the government, the electricity company or a white visitor. None of the fishermen suggested that another Vsawan could own a car.

Lebani was not a beneficiary of any of Mbwezi’s projects yet, as my thesis will show, his life was affected by the mere presence of the NGO. He conceptualised Mbwezi’s car as bringing development from an incalculably wealthy outside world. This encouraged Lebani to pay his son’s secondary school fees, despite his own lack of formal education, and his need for someone else to assist him with his fishing. A relative of Lebani’s was hired by Vsawa’s hospital. This man claimed that he was now like an NGO employee – a statement that he used when declining to share his newfound wealth with Lebani’s wife. Lebani also considered the grandeur of Mbwezi’s 4WDs when he scrutinised the smaller development projects that his Village Headman based his legitimacy upon. Through guiding Lebani’s understandings of the outside world, and through its usage in his daily conversation, Mbwezi’s presence had a significant influence on Lebani’s life – perhaps greater than its influence on the lives of the widows it provided seeds. Yet, development studies literature frequently focuses on an NGO’s projects, such as their distribution of seeds, while ignoring other aspects of villagers’ experiences of an NGO’s presence.
Development actors, in this case NGOs, tend to dominate the orientation of studies that focus on their interactions with rural communities. While nominal attention is paid to the category; ‘the local’, development studies approaches do not lend themselves easily to orientating their attention from local perspectives. Instead, ‘the local’, or ‘the community’, is operationalised in the context of how it responds to an NGO. Intra-community utilisations of NGOs are analysed in accordance with the goals of the organisation studied. They are typically conceptualised as development ‘goods’, like women’s empowerment, or ‘bads’, such as elite capture.

Many studies of NGOs focus entirely on the impact of the projects that these NGOs provide. In doing so, they ignore how a community is influenced by other aspects of an NGO’s presence. These aspects include, but are not limited to, the social lives of the NGO’s staff, the wealth and resources it brings to the village, and the way that an NGO links its presence to development by painting insignia on its offices and vehicles.¹ Further, most ethnographic accounts of NGOs are embedded within the organisation, rather than among its beneficiaries. This limits these studies understanding of the variable conditions under which differently positioned individuals experience changes in their community. It also limits explorations of the way a development intervention’s presence is both captured by, and guides changes to a village’s regimes of power, intra-community expectations and social relationships.

It is my goal, therefore, to examine the changes that occur in a rural community in conjunction with the presence of external development interventions, without attributing these changes solely to the developers. This task requires a conscious shift from the exploration of relational dynamics within an NGO (or between NGO workers and community members) to relationships among villagers. It also necessitates a methodological device for exploring how NGOs influence intra-community interactions, obligations and entitlements.

To this end, I provide a case study of a collection of Tumbuka fishing and farming villages adjacent to Lake Malawi, which I have called Vsawa.² I explore how people in these villages utilised the presence of various NGOs to conceptualise and negotiate social change. Doing so places these villagers at the centre of analysis and orients the analytic gaze to one taken from their perspective, exploring how ‘locals’ viewed and used NGOs, and how NGO presence

¹ Other academic works, such as Crewe and Harrison’s (1998) Whose Development? and Englund’s (2006) Prisoners of Freedom, observe that these aspects of an NGO’s presence are responsible for changes to a community, but they do not focus on unpacking them.
² A pseudonym used to protect the identities of the people who have informed this study.
affected their views of and interactions with their peers. This orientation revealed the aspects of an NGO’s presence that villagers invoked in everyday discussion, that manifested in gossip, and that were taken into account during intra-household and intra-community negotiations. Villagers occasionally referred to the impacts of an NGO’s project. However, equally salient to them were physical resources, like one NGO’s internet connection, and the behaviours of those associated with an NGO, including staff and volunteers. In most intra-village debates the defining aspect of the NGOs’ presence was the differing ways that each NGO symbolised development. This guided speculation over how villagers could obtain this development and how people’s lives would change if they became developed.

The villagers studied had varied prior experiences and best interests. These influenced community-wide understandings of the NGOs, local negotiations relating to them and, therefore, the impact of NGO presence on various situations. However, NGOs were not a blank slate on which Vsawans could impart any meaning. Instead, each NGO, through aspects of its presence, including the acts of its staff, its resources and its projects, influenced the manner in which villagers discussed development, modernity and social change. Through this, NGOs guided intra-community negotiations.

I therefore conceptualise NGOs as macro-actants in order to explore how they mediate the intra-village relationships and negotiations upon which I focus my study. In the tradition of actor-network theory (ANT), NGOs are analysed as non-human bodies that encapsulate human actors (like their employees), non-human objects (ranging from their offices to the smartphones their staff use), and discourses (for example, Malawian ideas about the role of western donors in development). NGOs were one macro-actant in a network that generated emergent properties, which continuously constructed and reconstructed Vsawans’ social understandings and intra-village relationships. This network included other actants that related to the economy, geography and history of the region – physical objects, like fishing

---

3 While a core goal of this thesis is to unpack ‘the local’, the term ‘local’ will still frequently be used interchangeably with ‘Vsawan’ for stylistic purposes.

4 Chapter one will provide a theoretic discussion of modernity, focusing on its perceived homogeneity and inevitability in rural communities. It will note that these are both false and pervasive understandings and unpack the notion of ‘folk modernities’ (see Ferguson 1999).

5 An actor-network is a network of actors and actants, for example objects, discourses and text that continuously construct and reconstruct meaning and therefore enable all purposive actions (see Latour 2005; Callon and Law 1995). They are explored in detail in both this chapter and the next.

6 An actant is a non-human body (again typically an object, text or discourse) that influences the outcomes of an actor-network in the same way as a human actor. Some actor-network theorists use the terms actor and actant interchangeably but for simplicity’s sake this thesis will refer to humans as actors and non-humans as actants. A macro-actant is an actant comprised of other actors and actants, which has effects that cannot be reduced to the combined impacts of these actors and actants.
nets, petrol and cars, and local and national beliefs about development. The network also contained actors – specifically the NGO staff and the Vsawans whose relationships were mediated by the NGO. Through using the NGOs in order to change their intra-village social positions, these actors re-created realities, guiding Vsawan understandings (and therefore the impact) of the NGOs and of development more generally.

In addition to the agency of human actors within any actor-network, ANT understands each actant to have agency\(^7\) in at least one of four ways (Sayes 2014). These are: actants as a condition for human agency, where an actant manifests stable representations of an understanding or discourse; actants as mediators, where an actant’s presence, utility or history influences relationships among actors, and between actors and objects; actants as members of moral and political associations, where the significance of human acts are modified by their relationship with an actant; and actants as gatherings of actors from differing temporal and spatial orders, where an actant assembles actors, texts and objects from various times and places. In order to explicate the way that an NGO, as a macro-actant in an actor-network, was utilised within, and simultaneously mediated, Vsawan social negotiations, I will now detail two incidents from early in my fieldwork. Providing a brief actor-network analysis of these events simultaneously foreshadows how this thesis both builds upon, and departs from, previous development studies literature and also provides initial details about Vsawa and the NGOs that operated there.

**Actor-network theory as a tool for analysing villagers’ uses of NGOs**

About two months after I arrived in Vsawa, villagers’ daily utilisations of the presence of NGOs started to become apparent to me. These utilisations were most obvious in relationships with a clear power asymmetry, where NGOs were often used to communicate an influential Vsawan’s responsibilities and entitlements, without overtly acknowledging their elite status. To this end, *Mbwezi*\(^8\) was invoked when poorer villagers requested assistance from Jumbo, a local oligarch who had previously been employed by the NGO. Similarly, villagers used receiving HIV tests from several NGOs in order to communicate their loyalty to Chiefy, a respected Vsawan community leader.

---

\(^7\) ANT’s understanding of agency is merely the ability to make a difference. It does not necessitate intentionality, subjectivity and free will. Actants have agency by affecting the output of material-semiotic network, containing humans, objects and concepts. In this context, studied nonhuman actants include animals, natural phenomena, tools and technical artifacts, material structures, economic goods, texts and discourses (See Law 2009).

\(^8\) At the request of several senior staff all the NGOs in this thesis have been given pseudonyms. *Mbwezi* and the other NGOs are introduced in more detail in chapter three
Jumbo was the son of the Village Headman of Cheweni, one of the eighteen villages that made up central Vsawa. He had worked for Mbwezi in 2007, where he had been in charge of distributing the NGO’s seeds to poorer villagers and taught classes about HIV in its hall. Jumbo was already wealthy when he took on this role and Mbwezi paid him handsomely, making him rich by local standards. Jumbo was generous with his salary; he would often buy food for poorer Vsawans and, as the son of a headman, he had significant influence in the village. His association with the NGO therefore increased his own and Mbwezi’s popularity.

Despite this, Omar, Mbwezi’s manager, fired Jumbo in 2011 for stealing money and two large stereo speakers. As far as Omar was concerned, this was the end of their relationship. However, Vsawans continued to associate Jumbo with Mbwezi. Villagers told me that they were not angry at Jumbo because they believed that his theft from the NGO would have almost no negative impact on their own lives. Simultaneously, Vsawans claimed that they felt that, through participating in the NGO’s projects, they had enabled Jumbo’s wealth and that he therefore owed them assistance. In this context they praised Jumbo, both to use him as an exemplar of proper patronage practices and to make claims on his resources.

Vsawans would give exaggerated praise to the work Jumbo had done for Mbwezi. I was once told that:

In the time of Jumbo [When Jumbo worked at Mbwezi] there were schools built everywhere and desks put in them, but now there is nothing [in that the NGO does not provide as many resources].

This story was factually inaccurate; Mbwezi provided more resources to the community now than it had in the past and it had never built schools. This narrative was then linked to a broader praising of Jumbo’s patronage:

When Jumbo was at Mbwezi everyone used to get things; now they don’t. Jumbo helped people; he gave away things.

---

9 Village Headman is the lowest rank of chief in Malawi, which has four strata of chieftaincy. The top national ranking is Senior Chief, followed by Traditional Authority, which is the chief for a large area. The day-to-day running of villages is done by Group Village Headmen, who control between two and ten villages – typically a few hundred people altogether – and Village Headmen, who control a village that is often made up of less than 100 villagers. All the chiefs in Vsawa were either village headmen or group village headmen. Chapter six details how the presence of the NGOs has changed the role of a headman.

10 While Vsawans often considered Vsawa a village, it was actually a collection of villages, with ten clumped together in one central area and others spread across about 20 kilometers of lakeside. Its geography is explained in more detail in chapter three.
I interpreted this statement, made in front of rich Vsawans, to be a way for villagers to compare their parsimony with the previous generosity of Jumbo. Through this, the NGO enabled poor Vsawans to subtly question wealthy villagers’ failure to assist them.

Jumbo’s prior relationship with *Mbwezi* also mediated his interactions with Vsawans, giving him additional responsibilities that most rich villagers did not have. For example, he would be invited to every wedding in the area and would be expected to be particularly generous if the NGO staff did not attend. Jumbo had opened a pub with the money that he had stolen from *Mbwezi*. Villagers referred to this as *Mbwezi*’s pub and Jumbo played loud music there on the stereo speakers, which he had also stolen. At one stage Jumbo held a ‘50-50 party’ at his bar. At this event he sold half price alcohol and in exchange the patrons paid an exorbitant entry fee. Early into the party villagers started climbing over the bar walls and pushing down its gate. They claimed that Jumbo would want them to be invited to his party, as he had assisted them when working at the NGO. Jumbo tried to make people leave, beating those who were less hierarchically important than him with a bamboo pole and pleading with elder villagers. People claimed that he must be drunk; they were allowed to stay, as they were friends with *Mbwezi*, a relationship that they had manufactured through their association with Jumbo.

Vsawan’s interactions with Jumbo demonstrated two of the four ways in which NGOs, as macro-actants, have agency. *Mbwezi*, and Jumbo’s prior relationship with it, enabled actors’ agency by serving as a placeholder for correct patronage practices. Vsawans created and agreed to an imagined history, which exaggerated Jumbo and *Mbwezi*’s past generosity. Their overt veneration of this past provided them with a way to indict wealthy villagers without violating the community’s public unity.

Additionally, the NGO mediated Jumbo’s relationship with Vsawans. *Mbwezi*, and Jumbo’s past employment with it, enabled Vsawans to make claims on him that they could not make on other members of the village elite. These special claims invoked the understanding that Jumbo had previously been a generous provider, the knowledge that he had become rich while stealing from the NGO, and the belief that his actions had been enabled by Vsawans’

---

11 In northern Malawi a wedding consists of many hours of the bride and groom dancing while their guests threw small denomination bills on them. Wealthy community members and their patrons are expected to do the same but with larger denominations and can often spend several thousand kwacha (10,000MK is about $30US) in the process.

12 This is observed by Booth, et al. (2006), who explored the Malawians’ aversion to public conflict, and authors including Swidler and Watkins (2007), who have explained the obligations between a wealthy Malawian and the poor in their community.
participation in Mbwezi’s projects. These discourses could not be separated from Mbwezi, with the NGO moulding and intertwining them. Mbwezi combined these narratives with acts such as the NGO staff’s failure to attend weddings and imbued meaning to locations like ‘Mbwezi’s pub’. This exaggerated Jumbo’s perceived debt to the community.

The presence of NGOs could be used to praise, as well as to indict, oligarchs. Villagers from Pungwe\(^\text{13}\) did this when they used various NGOs’ HIV tests to demonstrate their approval of Chiefy. Chiefy was the wealthiest man in Pungwe. He owned a store that sold groceries and fishing supplies, as well as a motorboat that he employed people to fish from. He had a good relationship with the village’s headman and would ensure that people who bought at his store or borrowed money from him participated in the NGO and government projects that this headman encouraged.

Once, while sitting at Chiefy’s store, he told me that he had been tested for HIV three times over the last month. I nodded and was about to speak, trying to figure out how to say in chiTumbuka that, while getting tested was important, he had probably been excessive. He then continued that he did not believe in AIDS, stating:

> White people say that HIV arrived in 1980 and we were there then and we are still here.

I asked him why he had been tested if he felt this way and he explained:

> I was first tested when I was seriously ill with malaria; I went to the hospital and wasn’t responding to treatment, so they tested me. Then Mbwezi came with a mobile testing clinic. The chief called everyone to be tested and it is important for development [the provision of other projects by the NGOs] and for the chief for the NGO to see that everyone comes when the chief calls [Vsawans believe that NGOs are more likely to assist villagers where the chief forces people to be involved in development projects].\(^{14}\) Then Gitemwa [the son of a friend of Chiefy’s, Gitemwa was volunteering at ChurchCare (another NGO)] came and I knew that Gitemwa was trying to get a job at the hospital, so I let him test me as well.

These tests are not particularly invasive, using a pinprick, rather than a full blood test. However, the rate of participation in HIV tests in Malawi, and in Vsawa specifically, is

---

\(^{13}\) A village that I lived in for a month, about three kilometers to the south of central Vsawa.

\(^{14}\) See chapter six of this thesis and Chinsinga (2006) for details of the complex and unequitable relationship between village headmen and NGOs.
exceptionally low. In Pungwe, on one of the days Chiefy was tested, more than a third of the village complied. Several villagers told me that they utilised the project to demonstrate their loyalty to either Chiefy or to the Village Headman. The tests themselves were less important than a collection of relationships and values that could be reaffirmed or questioned through participation or abstention.

The NGOs, as macro-actants, had gathered actors and actants, including Chiefy, the headman and the HIV testing kits. They enabled these actors and actants to give meaning to each other’s actions. In particular, these NGOs allowed Chiefy to make HIV testing a symbol of loyalty to him or to the headman. Yet, simultaneously, the assemblage that the NGOs created guided Chiefy’s association of the tests with white foreigners, who he believed lied about the dangers or existence of HIV.

Conceptualising NGOs as macro-actants enables an examination of how they impacted upon the lives of Jumbo, Chiefy and other Vsawans, while maintaining the focus of the study on intra-community negotiations and interactions. In this manner, the combination of an analytic orientation that centres up relationships between villagers and an actor-network approach to the presence of NGOs guides a study of intra-village utilisations of these NGOs. These utilisations and relationships have rarely been foregrounded in development literature.

**This thesis’ place within development studies literature**

In analysing Vsawan utilisations of NGOs I draw upon, and attempt to contribute to, a rich history of ethnographic inquiry into NGOs and into development more generally. I now recount this academic history, comparing it to my brief analysis of Jumbo and Chiefy, in order to highlight the ways in which my thesis both departs from and expands upon project-oriented studies of NGOs and actor-network approaches to development.

Early literature on NGOs was primarily written by academics with strong connections to the organisations about which they were writing (Nauta 2006). Because of this, studies of NGOs frequently oriented the academic gaze from the developers’ perspective. Such literature typically focused on the efficacy of an NGO’s projects and placed the NGO or its staff at the centre of analysis.

Literature that is aimed at commenting on a development project, including those provisioned by NGOs, typically ignores the broader influence of the developer’s presence or conflates it with the effects of that project. This body of work analyses the impact of development

---

15 See Matovu and Makumbi (2007) for details on Malawians’ resistance to HIV testing.
projects in terms of concrete problems and tenable solutions (Li 2007). For example, when this literature considers the privileged position of development staff in a rural community, it primarily does so in the context of formalised meetings with beneficiaries (Mosse 1994). The purpose of this analysis is to debate how and whether these meetings can be made more equitable (Blaikie 2006; Rose 2003). Similarly, some studies in this tradition observe changes to the power dynamics within a community, but only when these changes are attributable to a development project (Cleaver 1999). For instance, studies debate whether unpaid labour elevates women’s status by teaching them skills or, instead, marginalises them further by increasing their work burden (Mayoux 1998).

Literature that examines NGOs’ efficacy would therefore be enhanced by a holistic view of an NGO’s presence – a focus of my thesis. For example, a paper on the effectiveness of HIV testing in Pungwe would present generally positive results, due to the high number of people who were tested. Depending upon the nature of the study, it may note the importance of having the headman condone the project. However, without unpacking how the presence of these NGOs was conceptualised and utilised, it would be difficult to understand people’s primary motivations for being tested and, therefore, the project’s impact would be overstated. It would be impossible to explain, for example, why these tests were taken by people who did not believe in HIV and were unlikely to seek treatment after testing positive. My work therefore, contributes to the technical literature by adding to a longstanding tradition of exploring what ‘the social’ is and how development recipients conceptualise external interventions. The World Bank aims to incorporate ‘the social’ into its development outcomes (Li 2007; Vajja and White 2008). In this context, ethnographic contributions that unpack the locally embedded meanings of ‘the social’ are critical. This thesis contributes to how we think about policy formation and the consequences of policy implementation. It does so by providing an account of what policy implementation means in the experiences of Vsawans.

Works that focus on analysing how development takes place, but avoid making recommendations to improve it, are often referred to as the anthropology of development (Grillo 1997). This body of literature typically focuses on the lived worlds of developers and beneficiaries. It seeks to problematise the underlying assumptions of development and the

---

relationship between development and modernity (Ferguson 1999; Bulloch 2013). Ethnographies in an anthropology of development tradition examine how national and local histories, politics and personal relationships shape life within an NGO and, through that, the NGO’s impact on a community (Fechter 2012; Lewis and Mosse 2006). However, these ethnographies are inevitably centred upon the NGO, which brings with it a narrative of development and modernity that villagers react to. The analytic gaze is therefore either oriented from the perspective of an (typically friendly) outsider who is observing the organisation or from that of an NGO worker. Some ethnographies in this tradition explore the relationship between NGOs and donors (Shrestha 2004); some recount communication among NGO staff (Roth 2012); and some unpack interactions between staff and villagers (Englund 2006). This body of literature would be complimented by a similar academic approach that shifts the NGO away from the centre of analysis. It is to this end that I use actor-network theory in order to explore how NGOs influence relationships between villagers and to detail the modernities that developers and communities co-create.

Actor-network and actor-oriented approaches to development are associated with the anthropology of development due to their focus on ‘how’, rather than ‘if’, development works (Grillo and Stirrat 1997; Li 2007). Actor theory calls for an ethnographic understanding of the ‘social life’ of development projects, focusing on the lived experiences of those involved in these interventions (Long 1990). It explores the actions that are perceived by their performers, or these performers’ interlocutors, to constitute development and the potentialities that these actions embed.

Actor-network approaches acknowledge the role of actants as well as actors in constructing development discourses and in guiding the lived experiences that are associated with development. These actants enable or constrain villagers and developers. Through doing so, they co- and re-construct local meanings of development (Mosse 2005). Due to their focus on developers and their interactions with beneficiaries, many development ethnographies that use actor-network approaches explore actants that include policy documents, staff wages and the expectations of donors. These actants are salient when studying intra-village interactions.

17 Very frequently this is the perspective of an expat fieldworker or a consultant
18 An actor theory definition of development that this thesis utilises is “a set of actions of various types which define themselves as constituting development in one way or another (whether in the ranks of the developers or developees)” (Olivier de Sardan 2005:2).
19 Due to the role of a few key theorists in bringing actor-network theory to development studies, it is often utilised in a manner that mirrors these theorists, rather than in the manner that follows Latour’s (1988) original intentions.
However, they can be simultaneously analysed as part of a larger macro-actant. In the context of my thesis, this macro-actant is the NGO, which cannot be reduced to the discrete influences of its constitutive actants. For example, Vsawan utilisation of Jumbo’s positions as a former NGO employee, village oligarch and owner of ‘Mbwezi’s pub’ could not be divorced from each other. They also could not be separated from Vsawan understandings of the responsibilities of NGOs to the community or from the vehicles that Mbwezi owned. These actants were instead convolved into this macro-actant, constructing Vsawan understandings of the NGO and having their own meaning modified as Vsawans used NGOs to change their social positions.

An actor-oriented ethnography that examines the impact of an NGO on intra-village social organisation is Hilhorst’s (2003) The Real World of NGOs. Hilhorst explores the internal workings of a Philippine NGO. She details the interplay between lived experiences, organisational practices and development discourses in order to determine how these influence social relationships in the office and the village. In chapter four of her book, Hilhorst details how an NGO’s literacy project inverts local statuses through having young villagers teach older women to read. She claims that the younger women are socially elevated through being able to take on the title of volunteer. However, the older women without a formal education, who are hierarchically superior in village life, have their status diminished by the label ‘no-read, no-write women’. Hilhorst’s focus on the role of development in ordering the community creates room for the exploration of the converse; a study of how interactions between villagers influence concepts of development and modernity, as well as how these villagers utilise NGOs to both discuss the re-ordering of their community and negotiate their place within it. For example, Hilhorst observes that the term ‘no-read, no-write women’ diminishes these women through defining them as people who lacked something, namely literacy. Her work is therefore complemented by my study, which foregrounds the role of elite community members, like Chiefy and Jumbo, in giving local significance to the labels that NGOs provide, and explores the role of Jumbo’s literacy (and Chiefy’s lack of formal education) in influencing village meanings of development and, through this, utilisation of the NGOs.

20 The concept of a macro-actant, an actant that cannot be reduced to the actors within it, is unpacked more thoroughly in the next chapter.
21 Hilhorst (2003:7) defines an NGO as: “Any organisation that presents themselves as or is understood in a community as one [an NGO].” She therefore conceptualises ‘NGO’ as a claim-bearing label that interacts with various villagers’ interpretations and social claims, privileging some understandings and problematising others; an understanding that I follow.
Vsawa and the Rationale behind my specific research questions

I performed eleven months of ethnography exploring Vsawan utilisations of NGO presence. Vsawa is a collection of fishing and farming villages adjacent to Lake Malawi, populated primarily by Tumbuka, a northern Malawian ethnic group. It is a sprawling maze of huts with grass roofs, small cassava farms and dirt paths. The area is nominally divided into villages. However, in the more crowded central Vsawa, two houses that were a few metres apart would not necessarily be in the same village. The area was insular, stable and safe; the arrival of any stranger in Vsawa was quickly noted, almost no one locked their doors when they left their homes and women appeared to be comfortable travelling by themselves at night. Communal activities were a core aspect of Vsawan life. Almost everyone went to church on Sundays (or Saturdays for the Seventh Day Adventists), most villages had a soccer team, and a wedding or funeral could paralyse the community for days.

Vsawans spent most of their time conversing while fishing, farming or preparing food. By global standards the area was exceptionally poor. Most villagers’ cash income was much less than $1US per day; they would typically own two or three sets of clothes; and the daily diet of well-off Vsawans comprised of a morning snack and then two meals of nsima (a porridge made out of cassava) with a relish of cassava leaves, tomato or, ideally, fish. Almost no Vsawans owned cars and a bicycle was a luxury that denoted significant wealth.

The area had historically been underdeveloped by Malawi’s government. However, it was rapidly mechanising due to improvements to the road that connected central Vsawa to Mzuzu. Over the previous five years parts of Vsawa had received electricity. Conversations with villagers implied to me that they perceived these changes to have increased the area’s wealth but to have brought with them growing economic inequality and a threat to village values. They used the presence of three NGOs and one British-funded CBO to discuss this societal alteration. These NGOs both signified the relationship between social change, modernity and development, and mediated what these meant to Vsawans of myriad social positions.

---

22 Northern Malawi’s largest city and trading centre.

23 Kulutiliza Msambiska, the CBO in question, was included in the study as it was in the process of becoming an NGO, having applied to the Malawian government for NGO status. Due to being funded and partially staffed by white British expats, it operated much more like a small international NGO than a local CBO. This organisation fulfilled the definition of NGOs provided by Hilhorst (2003) on the previous page. The community understood Kulutiliza Msambiska as an NGO, they interacted with it and referred to it as such and the staff took on and utilised this label.
In Vsawa NGO presence was primarily used to justify increasing and entrenched inequality and the social elevation of those who could claim to be modern. This came about through a combination of shifts in the social and economic lives of Vsawans; the symbols and actions of the NGOs; Malawian and Vsawan development narratives; and negotiations between unequally positioned villagers. Vsawans created and utilised myriad understandings of NGO presence. However, some narratives obtained prominence in conjunction with the presence and actions of the NGOs. These included the understanding that development was provisioned by actors from outside the village (chapter two); that development involved the accumulation of individual wealth (chapter three); and that it was guided by an ‘educated’ or ‘modern’ minority (chapter four). These narratives were combined with and reinforced by a long-standing Malawian belief in the potential incompatibility between village culture and modern development (Ribohn 2002), as well as Vsawans’ perceptions that their community was rapidly changing. In response to these beliefs and the presence of NGOs, Vsawans renegotiated intra-village obligations, entitlements and social standings.

Specific Vsawans’ social roles made them more likely to interact with NGOs. These included village headmen (chapter five), NGO employees (chapter six) and volunteers (chapter seven). These Vsawans used various tactics to manage others’ perceptions of their relationship with the NGO, and received new advantages and liabilities as villagers interpreted this association. However, the NGOs and the societal changes that they were understood to signify elevated the social positions of a few villagers at the expense of others, regardless of the tactics these Vsawans used. Further, those who were structurally positioned to interact with the NGOs utilised, and therefore reinforced, the disjuncture Vsawans perceived between village culture and modern development.

The combination of the perceived incompatibility between village life and modern development, Vsawa’s inequitable social negotiations, and the symbols and objects the NGOs emitted generated contradictory discourses about social change. Those whose privilege in the community was justified by tradition (to differing extents the elderly, headmen and men) would link threatening aspects of NGO presence to the perceived disjuncture between modernity and village life, warning against changes to Vsawa’s hierarchical structure. Conversely, an emerging modern elite (those who were well educated, had made money in business or volunteered with an NGO) argued that the opportunities NGOs provided, and that NGO presence signified, demonstrated the necessity of their modern skillsets and their capitalist outlook for bringing development. Both of these utilisations occurred
simultaneously. This mediated and slowed the dissipation of the entrenched elite’s privilege, while accelerating many aspects of modernising social change.

In this context, I will answer the following research questions about Vsawa, using an ethnographic methodology in the actor-network ontology. In doing so, I demonstrate the advantages of placing villagers at the centre of this study, orienting the academic gaze outward onto their peers and conceptualising NGOs as macro-actants that mediate Vsawans’ relationships and influence their understandings:

- What approaches and theories can be used to examine an NGO’s influence on village life, while maintaining a focus on rural people’s interactions and agency? What would such a study look like in practice?
- In what ways does NGO presence in Vsawa influence discussions over the relationship between development, modernity and social change? How does this changing narrative interact with Vsawan negotiations over intra-village obligations and entitlements?
- How do Vsawans with differing social roles interact with NGOs in ways that elevate or diminish their social standing vis-à-vis other villagers? How do these interactions re-create or alter Vsawans’ understandings of NGO presence?

This study’s geographic focus serves as parameter to the scope of its claims but not necessarily to its potential contribution. My findings are contextualised by the relationship between Malawians, NGOs and donors, and by Malawian understandings of development. This thesis deals with NGOs that spent significant time in a rural community of abject poverty, where both donor dependence and hierarchical power relations were the norm. This does not mean that it cannot contribute more generally to the literature on and understandings of the relationship between NGOs and the communities in which they operate. Nor does it mean that the research’s focus on the aspects of an NGO’s presence that are not encapsulated by its projects would not be valid in other circumstances.

Field Methodology
The fieldwork for this research project comprised eleven months of ethnography, triangulated by individual and group interviews. The choice of ethnographic fieldwork was informed by

---

24 Smith (2008:189) observed something similar about Plan Kenya’s regional office in a village in which he stayed: the NGO “stayed for long periods and involved themselves in every aspect of … [local] life: their intrusiveness, and apparently great resources, was widely seen as simultaneously promising and dangerous”.
the nature of my research questions, which were open-ended, flexible and liable to change (Flick 2009). The work was entirely qualitative and reflects my biases and the imprecise nature of ethnography. In line with actor-network theorists, I acknowledge that my own presence mediated the networks I was studying and was co-constructed by them (Latour 1996). I examined, interpreted and therefore influenced a series of interactions, relationships and mindsets that demonstrated the local conceptualisation, co-creation and subversion of NGO presence. I attempted to mitigate the impact of my presence on these networks through learning chiTumbuka and immersing myself inVsawan culture.

I conducted research in the Vsawa region of northern Malawi between March 2012 and February 2013, as well as on a return trip in December 2014. Contact was initially made with a village resident, who had been my translator in a previous research project. His family facilitated meetings with headmen, NGO staff and senior members of the community. I generated social networks independent of these actors (or at least as independent as possible in the context of rural villages) through residing in the houses of various local families and attending church services, sporting competitions and other village social activities. Field notes were taken nightly, focusing on the events of the day and how these related to or deviated from the expectations of my study.

I attempted to immerse myself in the social life of the village and the myriad individual lives that it contained. I participated in mundane activities in order to try and understand the experiences of villagers, and their interactions with the NGOs and with each other. Participant observation is particularly useful for exploring meaning from diverse points of view within a community, especially the views of people who are silenced during interviews by a lack of free time or by stigma (Agar 1980). I interacted with unmarried women, the destitute and the marginalised, which gave my research scope and depth that I would have been unable to achieve using other methods. Further, and particularly salient to my study, participant observation of the ‘targets’ or ‘beneficiaries’ of development is crucial to understanding how development actually takes place (Watts 2001). These people’s decision making, their economic behaviours and their subjectivities are shaped by factors that they

---

25 I lived with a collection of families while in Vsawa. These included the McKorongs, headed by a volunteer at Mbwewi who was attempting to obtain full-time employment but was hampered by his educational status and obligations to the village; the Kamangas, a health worker and his wife, who, despite having a similar educational and professional status to NGO workers, were unburdened by local expectations of development employees and remained integrated in village life; and the Chumyas, a chief, his wife and their grandchildren.
take for granted and that, therefore, are rarely verbalised in even the least formal of interviews.

The structure of the observations and the link to my specific research questions followed Flick’s (1998) three aspects of ethnography. It began with descriptive observation – where actors were observed to grasp the complexity of the field, build relationships and network. This was followed by focused observation, where my attention narrowed to specific processes and problems. I concluded with selective observation – used to create thickness through examples and variation on these examples, triangulate data and push back against key informants. My descriptive observation period was spent building connections in the community through social activities. These included fishing, meetings with headmen and casual conversations that built up my linguistic skills. I explored local social networks and power structures and asked preliminary questions regarding Vsawan understandings of development and of the NGOs.

Throughout the focused period I utilised the relationships I formed to explore how the presence of various NGOs affected local social networks, discourses and power structures. It was during this time that key themes emerged; for example, the NGOs’ role in determining what made an individual educated. The community generated specific questions and answers through their interactions and their responses to my interviews.

My selective observation focused on ‘pushing back’ against the interpretations that I had received. I challenged the influential Vsawans that I had built relationships with and attempted to use purposive and group interviews to reach those that I had not (see Silverman 2010 for information on standard uses of purposive interviews and focus groups). Many of my key informants’ social position meant that they were afforded a significant degree of deference by other villagers. I leveraged the goodwill that I had accumulated in order to challenge their normative depictions of community life. It is unlikely, without the relationships I formed, that I would have received the same degree of honesty and perspicacity from these respondents. This was particularly apparent among traditional elites, many of whom eventually confided to me that they felt unsure as to their place within a social landscape that appeared to them to be rapidly changing.

Specific techniques were used to explore NGO presence. These included examining who within the village used an NGO’s resources and who frequented spaces associated with that NGO. In many villages NGOs were the sole owners of commodities like electricity and
internet connectivity. Who accessed these and how the community negotiated their usage was indicative of the creation, negotiation and maintenance of dominant understandings of that NGO’s presence. NGO presence was also studied through listening to gossip and storytelling, which are primary mediums for the generation and diffusion of information in rural Malawi (Booth et al. 2006). Listening to household and community conversations showed the ways in which the official meanings of an NGO’s logos, assets and staff were speculated upon, and how local narratives for each of these were created. Understanding the community’s social dynamics allowed me to observe the arguments and rumours that create and explain an NGO’s presence. It also enabled me to explore how these dynamics interacted with various Vsawans’ experience of the NGO and their own best interests.

Vsawa was selected due to my contacts within the region and because the traditional authorities allowed me to study there. The area was rural but diverse, with a variety of livelihoods relying on both the land and the lake and an emerging group of teachers, hospital staff and NGO workers negotiating their social position across various villages. The remoteness of Vsawa meant that many of its oligarchs resided in the community and that its social networks were relatively contained.

The ethnography took place primarily in six villages in the Vsawa region. These were selected due to the diversity of their development stages and the differing relationships between each village’s headman and the NGOs. The villages had differing levels of wealth and of exposure to western ideas and people. Villagers attempted to interact with and co-create NGO presence in differing ways, relating to locally embedded concerns and power structures. Over the more than 300 days I spent in these villages I lived with four families, including a Village Headman, a hospital worker and a smallholder farmer who spoke no English. I attended church services weekly and went to three weddings and well over ten funerals. I observed maguli (traditional dance), political rallies and traditional judgements, and I attempted all major forms of fishing and farming.

I triangulated my observations with 90 semi-structured interviews (with respondents both from the NGOs and villages) and 38 focus groups. The interviews added depth to the participant observation. They allowed me to compare my own analysis to the understandings of key informants and others within the community. They also gave Vsawans more control

26 These are detailed in chapter two on pages 62 to 63.
27 Barr and Fafchamps (2006) claim that NGO presence in villages occurs in non-random ways, with their settlement relating to transport, population education levels and income – factors that differed among the villages selected for the present study.
over the data generated than my field notes did. Interviews were used periodically to evaluate the accuracy of my observations and to direct the overall inquiry towards the areas that respondents considered important to them. These interviews also allowed me to bring up controversial topics with individuals and to gain the specifics of distinct lives within a community that often presented itself as homogenous. For example, asking people individually and privately about their personal inter-household food distribution revealed infrequent sharing, and resentment toward those who were consistent food recipients. The same question asked publically to a group of Vsawans would receive the affirmation that “everyone shares everything”.

Focus groups were used both to diversify the data gained and to confirm commonalities in community opinion (Silverman 2010). This technique generated consensus views on the meanings of terms like ‘education’ and ‘development’, words loaded with symbolic capital. Focus groups further reduced the role that my own biases could play in the fieldwork. They therefore complemented my interpretations of village interactions with the understandings of a diverse group of community members. While the participant observation and myriad informal interviews were conducted in chiTumbuka, a translator was used sparingly for these other methods. This protected against my knowledge of the language serving as a limiting factor in the answers that respondents gave. However, in some cases it may have reduced the openness or honesty of interviewees (see Levy and Hollan 1998).

**Challenges and opportunities of field research**

The key challenges involved in undertaking this research related to my position as a white, privileged male in an exceptionally poor rural community. While no researcher can make themselves ‘invisible’, as (at times) the only white person in the area, I was often conspicuous. I partially mitigated this through living with families, observing the local dress code and avoiding carrying trappings of my comparative wealth. Nevertheless, my whiteness was apparent to villagers. This whiteness and the privileges it entailed inevitably influenced the data that I constructed with my informants. I attempted to mitigate this privilege and to be reflexive about its influence on my study.

I entered the field with a collection of biases based on my previous academic and personal involvement with NGOs and Malawi.28 I had a romanticised view of rural life, generated through town-based informants’ stories of their homes and NGO reports that praised unified

---

28 LeCompte (1987) refers to this as “bias in biography”.

communities as a panacea for development. I also had significant previous experience with NGO workers but little exposure to smallholder farmers. This initially made my interactions with NGO staff freer than those with other Vsawans. I was aware of these biases during my analysis and attempted to address them by absconding from the company of NGO workers whenever villagers commented on the time that I was spending with NGO staff.

Most people in Vsawa initially believed I was involved with one of the NGOs. This led to the type of information ‘management’ that foreigners are typically exposed to in sub-Saharan Africa. When I arrived in the village both NGO staff and villagers were either guarded in my presence or primarily provided me with project information. It took time to persuade informants to tell me what people ‘did’ in Vsawa, rather than what they ‘should do’; idealised information that Epprecht (2006, when discussing sexual decision making) claims is normally given to a westerner or a researcher.

Since this research focuses on the effects of NGO presence, it would be remiss not to speculate as to my impact on the community I studied and on the data I produced. I almost certainly influenced the social and familial lives of the people that I lived with and the Vsawans who chose to associate closely with me. They took on liability for my faux pas and (hopefully) gained credit for an approachable white presence within the village. Acknowledging this made me more aware of my own impact on my data.

Ethnographic subjects behave differently in response to constant observation. For instance, it is likely that, when I first arrived, Vsawans acted particularly harmoniously in front of me and presented community members with whom I was believed to have a close relationship in an uncomplicatedly favourable light. This ‘ethnographic presence’ is often viewed as a contaminant that must be mitigated to obtain valid results. This is done by either documenting the effects of observation or spending enough time in the community that respondents behave ‘normally’ (Agar 1980). While both of these strategies were used, my presence was also appropriated by actors in their own meaning making. In line with Monahan and Fisher’s (2010) description of the ethnographer-subject relationship, they co-constructed my observations, rather than acting out ‘natural’ life in front of an uninvolved researcher.

As a young man, many of my closest informants (and friends) in the village were male. These connections were formed during countless trips to watch or play football, regular visits to the pub after fishermen had experienced a very good over very poor catch and the myriad opportunities for lounging and gossiping that underemployment provided young Malawian
men. The ease with which I bonded with twenty to thirty year old men is likely both a strength and weakness of this study. The frustration that young, male Tumbuka felt (especially those who were educated) permeates this text. For instance, I feel much more confident discussing these males’ fear that development will challenge gendered hierarchies without providing new economic opportunities to young Malawians than I do making equivalent claims about the worries and aspirations of Malawian women. I may however have over-attributed meaning to the masculine (primarily sex-based) gossip that I was constantly surrounded with. Further, my association with these men may have coloured my relationships with others in the village.

Over time I came to be more accepted by the majority of Vsawans. This was likely caused in part by my weekly church attendances and my willingness to chat with just about anyone about the differences between life in Malawi and Australia, as well as to assist with the reading of English language texts. These texts were commonly government document and newspapers.

A core manner in which I differentiated myself from other westerners was by learning the local language and producing a hackneyed chiTumbuka-English dictionary. The Tumbuka people had a longstanding embitterment with the Malawian government over the dominance of the chiChewa language and many fear the eventual eradication of chiTumbuka (Lora-Kayambazinthu 2003). In this context I developed a brief phonetic dictionary (of at most a few thousand words) that I provided to Tumbuka who frequently interacted with white people, ranging from the local truck driver to several village headmen. I also left a copy at a Vsawan secondary school. While I doubt that this dictionary was much use, my commitment to mastering chiTumbuka, and my insistence (after the first 3 months) that all my observations took place within it, gave the community some sense of ownership over my research. They would regularly direct me to “write this in your [my] book” if they saw something as a quintessential part of Tumbuka life. The additional closeness that I developed with many villagers due to my use of their native tongue hopefully compensates for any data I have missed through insisting on speaking chiTumbuka.

The other major challenge of this fieldwork was the fear that my research could misrepresent Vsawans or extract their knowledge in a manner that could be harmful to them. I mitigated this risk by returning to Vsawa late in my thesis and going through my data with key

29 The most spoken language in Malawi and at various times the only official language.
informants. I also justify this risk by arguing that this thesis adds to a body of literature that addresses a frequent silencing of southern actors by exploring their utilisation of northern incursions. It highlights the agency\textsuperscript{30} of various villagers who, according to Gupta and Ferguson (1997), are often depicted as passive recipients of development. I also used my western privilege to mitigate some of the disadvantages of ‘studying up’. Specifically the problems relating to access to NGOs, which have so far limited NGO ethnographies (Markowitz 2001). The research assists in the creation of critiques that can be used or expanded upon by NGOs, southern actors and researchers.

All the locations and names of organisations have been changed in this thesis. However, core details crucial to the analysis remain the same and it is likely that someone familiar with the area and the NGOs would be able to determine the location of this study. These changes were requested by senior employees of one NGO and should serve to prevent unfair and poorly thought out scrutiny by potential donors and volunteers who ‘Google’ these NGOs. As I am aware that several NGO employees plan to read this thesis, more effort has gone into obfuscating the identities of individuals, be they headmen, employees or recipients. These people’s names, familial status and often the exact details of events and locations have been changed.

**Thesis Structure**

The remainder of this thesis is divided into eight chapters and three parts. The following two chapters introduce Vsawa and the key theoretical concepts that underpin my study. The next two chapters detail how village-wide development discourses are contested, challenged and restabilised through the presence of NGOs. The final three chapters explore how NGO presence allowed those with formal development roles to renegotiate their social standing vis-à-vis other Vsawans.

**PART ONE: ACADEMIC AND GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT**

This section contextualises the thesis within the development literature. It then introduces Vsawa and the NGOs that operate there.

*Chapter One: NGO Presence Within Development Literature*

\textsuperscript{30} In line with Wilson’s (2009) critique of the term agency, a core theme of this thesis will be to explore how this agency interacts with power differentials, opportunities for collective action and seemingly coercive economic changes. Later chapters (most directly part three) will differentiate between an individual’s tactical and strategic agency.
This chapter explores the academic traditions that my thesis utilises and to which it contributes. It demonstrates that development studies literature often presents social change as a direct result of development interventions. In contrast, actor-network approaches to development acknowledge the multiple causes of any social change. When combined with an overt focus on intra-village interactions, actor-network theory can therefore be used to examine the impacts of an NGO’s presence in a study that maintains an emphasis on villagers’ actors and agency. This chapter also briefly explores NGO literature (as a subset of development studies literature), showing that it frequently reduces rural actors to mere project beneficiaries; a failure that my focus on NGO presence will address. The chapter concludes with a literary overview of development in Malawi, as exploring Malawian development narratives is central to my thesis.

Chapter Two: A Panopticon of Development in Vsawa

This chapter describes Vsawa and introduces the NGOs that operate there. It details the region’s geography, elucidating how a road over a previously impenetrable mountain range has drastically decreased Vsawa’s isolation. This road, along with the installation of powerlines, mobile phone reception and the mechanisation of traditional fishing practices, meant that Vsawans perceived their community to be changing rapidly. The chapter then describes the four NGOs that operate in Vsawa. It shows that, while each of these organisations ran development projects, these projects were not the only way in which the NGOs had an impact on villagers’ lives. Instead, these organisations guided narratives of development, which were used to conceptualise social change and mediated negotiations within intra-village hierarchies.

PART TWO: NGOS AS MACRO-ACTANTS IN VSAWAN DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

Part Two demonstrates the utility of actor-network theory for exploring the influence of NGOs on social change, without depicting these organisations as the primary cause of that change. It also details how villagers utilise the presence of development interventions to create and scrutinise local understandings of development, modernity and social change. This is achieved by examining the impact of NGOs upon Vsawan narratives of development and modernity, while parsing these impacts into an actor-network framework.

Chapter Three: The Utility of ANT for Analysing Social Change – Mbwezi’s Influence on Vsawan Resource Sharing
This chapter explores how *Mbwezi*’s (the largest and most popular NGO in Vsawa) presence was used by Vsawans to renegotiate their resource sharing responsibilities. It claims that the actions of this NGO, and the symbols that it generated, guided an already occurring change to the social meaning of sharing resources. The chapter parses *Mbwezi*’s influence on Vsawan food sharing obligations into the four ways that Sayes (2014) demonstrates macro-actants as having agency. However, it foregrounds the actions and intentions of myriad Vsawans in this process. It therefore demonstrates how conceptualising NGOs as macro-actants enables an exploration of the effects of NGO presence, without attributing social changes primarily to these NGOs’ projects.

**Chapter Four: Education, Modernity and Social Hierarchy – The Impact of NGOs on the Meaning and Purpose of Education**

Chapter four argues that NGOs influenced Vsawan discussions over the meaning and purpose of being educated. The presence of NGOs and the actions of their staff encouraged Vsawans to see education as primarily useful for interacting with the modern world. Some Vsawans used associating with NGOs to show that they were educated. ‘Being educated’ was therefore a negotiated social position. A minority of Vsawans were educated and they were rewarded by their peers for their ability to interact with modernity. However, the majority of villagers understood themselves to be not educated and, therefore, not modern. Vsawan claims to be educated incorporated intra-community power structures and Malawian cultural values. This meant that negotiations over who was educated enabled the controlled elevation of an emerging elite, preventing the upheaval of village hierarchies.

**PART THREE: TACTICS IN THE DISJUNCTURE BETWEEN VSAWANS AND NGOS**

This section explores Village Headmen, NGO employees and volunteers – three types of actors that are often conceptualised as development brokers. The permanent presence of NGOs in a village often made it impossible for a Village Headman to position themselves as a screen between their villagers and the NGO. The institutional structure of NGOs discouraged most NGO staff from interacting socially with Vsawans. Villagers who volunteered with NGOs were therefore the primary conduit between these NGOs and the community. However, villagers’ treatment of volunteers incorporated the volunteers’ efficacy, Vsawans’ concerns about encroaching modernity and Village Headmen’s machinations. In this manner, volunteers, NGO staff and headmen guided Vsawan narratives
that explained NGO presence, yet were constrained by development discourses, Malawian values and intra-community hierarchies.

Chapter Five: Vsawan Headmen and the Chiefly Dyad – NGO Presence as Enabling an Elite’s Tactical Agency While diminishing its Strategic Position

Chapter five argues that Vsawan Village Headmen could sometimes use NGOs tactically to enhance their authority. However, the ongoing presence of NGOs in their village diminished a headman’s strategic position. Headmen maintain their legitimacy through a dyad of development provisioning and traditional rule. NGOs link development to modernity and present themselves as more powerful developers than the headman could hope to be. In this context, the chapter details the tactics three headmen used to control their villagers’ understandings of their relationship with NGOs. It shows that these headmen were constrained by dominant narratives of chieftaincy. They could not reshape the meaning of their role in response to social change.

Chapter Six: Socially Isolated NGO Staff in Vsawa – How Elite Development Actors Recreate Dominant Development Narratives

Chapter six uses the social isolation of NGO staff to explore how development’s elite are encouraged to re-create dominant development narratives. It shows that the institutional structure of NGOs encouraged employees who had moved to Vsawa to remain cloistered and resulted in villagers who the NGOs had hired leaving their village social networks. This process was both predicated upon and reinforced a Malawian belief in the intractable difference between ‘developers’ and ‘villagers’. This same narrative was re-created and utilised by privileged Vsawans. Some local elites presented themselves as able to interact with NGO workers (unlike the ‘ignorant’ majority) as a way to justify their enhanced social status. Men used development workers’ perceived sexual proclivities to argue against increased educational opportunities for women. In this manner, a dominant development narrative was reinforced, re-created and utilised by Vsawa’s powerful.

Chapter Seven: ‘Volunteer’ as a Social Category – How Myriad Vsawans Negotiated Social Change through the Treatment of Volunteers

This chapter examines how some villagers used volunteering to elevate their social status and how their peers negotiated volunteers’ social claims. After noting that many volunteers were ridiculed by villagers, this chapter explores three volunteers’ successful social tactics. It
shows that they were praised when they persuaded other Vsawans that they could guide the development NGOs provided, while mitigating the challenges their presence signified to village norms and hierarchies. Village headmen also guided their villagers’ veneration or vilification of volunteers in accordance with their own best interests. This chapter therefore argues that relationships between villagers, headmen and volunteers utilised Vsawan understandings of modernity and development, while reconstructing these understandings to incorporate intra-village norms and power relations.

**Overall Conclusions and Reflections**

The final chapter crystallises the social changes that were affected by Vsawan’s utilisation of the presence of NGOs. It argues that NGO presence enables and accentuates a collection of actor- and *actant*-guided social changes, buttressing these in a manner that continued Vsawan sociality. It foregrounds how the previous chapters have answered the research questions. It will first explicate the importance of actor-network theory and a focus on intra-village interactions for examining the social changes that NGOs influenced but did not wholly cause. Then chapter will then reiterate the role of NGOs in encouraging Vsawans to perceive a modernity that was encroaching upon their village, bringing with it helpful development and threatening social change - a process which often reduced intra-village obligations but increased the entitlements of ‘modern villagers’. Finally it will recounting how specifically positioned individuals interacted with NGOs in ways which altered their social positions vis-à-vis other Vsawans, with these individuals both constrained by, yet re-creating, dominant understandings of NGO presence. The chapter will conclude by claiming that the thesis has contributed to development literature, through detailing how NGOs mediate and contextualise social changes that other ethnographies do not often foreground. It will also claim that the thesis has highlighted the fact that many aspects of an NGO’s presence are not encapsulated by a focus on their projects.
PART ONE: ACADEMIC AND GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

In this first section of my thesis I set the scene for an investigation of how NGO presence influences, but does not wholly determine, changes to Vsawans’ social lives. To do so, I first detail how my study utilises and contributes to the development studies literature. I demonstrate that most development literature orients its gaze either upon or from within a development institution and that these studies depict development interventions as the primary cause of the social changes that the researcher observes. I then argue that development studies already has the tools to examine the limited causal role that NGOs play in intra-village social change. I elucidate the potential of actor-oriented analysis to shift its focus from the project interface onto intra-village interactions. I then detail actor-network theory as a way to conceptualize NGOs as a macro-actant in a network that generates purposive action, and explain how actor-oriented literature on development brokerage would be expanded upon by foregrounding brokers’ intra-village relationships. In the second chapter of this section I detail Vsawa and the NGOs that work there. I depict the area as a site of change, with increased marketisation and population growth that affects villagers’ social and economic lives. I then introduce the four NGOs that operate there, describing the projects they perform, as well as how they are most frequently conceptualised by villagers and their other influences on the lived experiences of Vsawans. Finally, I discuss Vsawa’s dominant development narrative, where development is provided by external developers and brings with it, but is conceptually separated from, potential threats to village norms and values. This section therefore justifies a study that orients its gaze upon Vsawans’ intra-village interactions and conceptualises NGOs as macro-actants, which are implicated within, but do not solely cause, social change.
Chapter One: NGO Presence within Development Literature

Development literature focuses too exclusively upon development interventions and often reduces these interventions’ encompassing communities to interlocutors for their projects. This occurs through these studies’ orientation. They are almost inevitably either written from inside a development organisation or focus on an organisation’s interactions with a community (rather than interactions inside that community). They therefore present development organisations and their projects as causing social change in a rural environment, quieting the role of unequally positioned villagers and intra-community negotiations in this process. In this chapter I use selected development studies literature to demonstrate this claim. I then introduce actor-network theory, highlighting its depiction of causality as emerging through networks of actors and non-human actants. I argue that this enables an exploration of how development interventions influence intra-village interactions, while focusing primarily on villagers’ actions and agency. Further, I briefly show that development brokerage literature foregrounds brokers’ relationships with development interventions, rather than with villagers, and that the literature on NGOs is particularly inwardly focused. I conclude by detailing Malawi’s dominant development narrative, its poverty and Malawians’ problematic conflation of modernity and NGO-driven development.

This chapter comprises a scoped review of six bodies of literature. The first of these is a general engagement with development studies academia. It shows that both individual studies of development and dominant development studies paradigms focus on the actions of developers. In this context, communities are explored through (and for) their reactions to development interventions and, in particular, to developers’ projects. The second section of this chapter examines the linkages between social change, development and modernity. It demonstrates that, when social change occurs in conjunction with a development intervention, this change is too often interpreted as a result of a development project or of externally provisioned modernity. The third section of this chapter explores actor and actor-network approaches to development. I highlight that actor-oriented ethnographies focus upon the relationships between individuals’ interactions and structures of power. I then claim that actor-network theory provides the conceptual tools with which to focus on intra-village interactions while exploring the effects of a developer’s presence. In the fourth section I
highlight that focusing on intra-village interactions enables a foregrounding of the role of local development narratives and power structures in guiding development brokers’ actions—a process which in turn reinforces these narratives and structures. The final two sections of this chapter explore literature on NGOs and on Malawi. They demonstrate that the focus on developers is exacerbated in the literature on NGOs and highlight the importance of development interventions to Malawian understandings of social change. Through these six sections, this chapter lays a framework for exploring the impacts of an NGO’s presence, while maintaining a focus on intra-village interactions. It also provides the necessary background for my ethnography of a Malawian village, which explores how NGOs are influencing, but not determining, social change.

Limitations of Project Centric Development Literature
As I claimed in the introduction to this thesis, development literature too often places the developer at the centre of analysis. This takes place both in individual studies and at a broad theoretic level. In order to substantiate my argument, I will briefly demonstrate that even the best development studies literature almost inevitably orients its focus either upon or from inside a development institution. I will then articulate how post-development and participatory theories present development interventions as the causal agent in rural social change. This will allow later sections of this chapter to argue that development interventions, like the presence of NGOs, do not wholly cause any specific social change.

Huge swathes of literature studies development interventions. While some of this literature is problematically unreflective, academics including Crewe and Harrison (1998) and Englund (2006) critically examine how communities change in response to the presence of developers. However, their work, and many other studies (see Cooke and Kothari 2001; Weisgrau 1997), either orient their analytic gaze from inside the development intervention (out onto the community) or focus on the relationship between the developers and the village. For example, authors including Goetz (2002) and Bawa (2013) explore development workers’ relationships with villagers or the challenges of a specific development project. These studies focus on the developers as actors and conceptualise the community as reacting to them. In doing so, they quieten the myriad intra-village interactions that determine how villagers interact with developers, yet are influenced by the developer’s presence.

Ethnographic research has often exacerbated development studies’ emphasis on developers. Nauta (2006:150) calls for ‘embedded tales’ of development. These would recount the
dynamic process that developers are involved in by reintroducing the historical, political and socio-economic dimensions of each intervention. However, this call has been inhibited by the cross-population of development’s academic and practitioner communities (Hilhorst 2003); developers’ resistance to study by outsiders (Markowitz 2001); similarities in the lived experiences of ethnographers and development fieldworkers (McKinnon 2011); and funding and language constraints. These factors mean that ‘embedded tales’ are almost inevitably embedded in the development organisation, rather than in the encompassing community. Examples of these embedded ethnographies include Mosse’s (2005) seminal work, *Cultivating Development*, as well as the plethora of academic texts that detail the lived experiences of development workers (Lewis 2004; Verma 2011). These studies are often critical of development and perspicacious as to how development intervention impacts upon a community. However, the ubiquity of ethnographies that focus upon external development actors inadvertently reinforces the analytic primacy placed upon external interventions in development theory.

Most development theory presents development as the primary cause of change within a community. Modernisation theory has been roundly criticised for its ethnocentricity (Cristobal 1989; Scott 1995). Post-development theorists, led by Escobar (1996) and Ferguson (1994), aimed to problematise a development narrative that they saw as monolithic and top down (Bending and Rosedo 2006; Grillo 1997). They conceptualised development as a regime constructed by the west and imposed on the peoples of the developing world (Bending & Rosendo 2006). However, their work has since been criticised for removing nuance from the agency of the underdeveloped and dichotomising southern actors as either active resisters or passive victims of development interventions. For example, Escobar (1996:44) in (Grillo 1997) claims that:

> Development was – and continues for the most part to be – a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, which treated peoples and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of progress.

His statement leaves development, as an external intervention, at the centre of analysis. Southern actors are explored through their reactions to development, with little work analysing how they mould or incorporate it in their interactions with each other (Bending and Rosendo 2006).
Similarly, participatory approaches to development initially appear to orient their gaze into a community. However, when studying the uptake of various development projects by a village, many studies focus upon these projects, or the communities’ interactions with them, rather than on intra-village concerns. Not only does this cement, rather than problematise, the development agenda, it also often obfuscates intra-community struggles and the manner in which development projects are captured by local elites (Cornwall 2003; Mohan and Stokke 2000; Platteau and Abraham 2002).

In this context, development theories, and the ethnographies they contain, far too frequently orient their gaze upon developers or formalised development processes. Regardless of whether these works criticise or venerate these actors and concepts, the pervasiveness of literature in this tradition impedes the analysis of local actors and the changing social landscapes they negotiate. Instead, it encourages seeing development in terms of ‘projects’ that bring social change.

**Over-attributeing impact to development projects**
The ‘development project’ is the primary way that interactions involving developers and beneficiaries are conceptualised and analysed. As I will demonstrate, this conceptualisation is predicated upon, and reinforces, the analytic primacy of developers in studies of social change. In this context, literature either ignores the other effects of a developer’s presence or wrongly attributes these effects to their development projects.

The ‘project’ has become the discursively and practically privileged form of development intervention (Olivier de Sardan 2005:179; Sampson 1996). It represents the culmination of various articulations, (typically strategies and plans) resulting in a series of interactions between developers and beneficiaries (Olivier de Sardan 2005; Sampson 1996:121). These exchanges bring actors of various statuses, both internal and external to the community, into contact with each other, potentially changing the social positions and livelihoods of all concerned (Long 2001; Rew 1997). Project-based literature relies on circumscribed development identities and relationships and pays little attention to local histories and social structures (Salemink 2006).

Project-oriented literature often analyses development’s impacts in terms of its ability to solve tangible problems (Li 2007). In this paradigm, villagers’ agency is conceptualised as their acceptance, resistance or alteration of a project (Jackson 1997b:237). These individuals are therefore primarily analysed as beneficiaries of the project, and its influence on their lives
is studied in terms of the project’s efficacy, rather than changes in their intra-community social positions and to local discourses. Similarly, these works frequently mention the unclear distinction between a project and the social life of the staff and volunteers who work on it (Goetz 1997; Lebrun 1998). For instance, Shrestha (2006:200) observes the pressure on fieldworkers to model appropriate behaviour when socialising with beneficiaries. However, she does not explore how these fieldworkers’ demeanour alters or reinforces village-level understandings of development – an effect of the developer’s presence that is not fully encapsulated by exploring their projects.

Changes that occur in conjunction with a developer’s presence are therefore over-attributed to their development projects. This typically takes place through a failure to explore other factors that co-determine development’s impacts. For example, Englund (2006:81) described volunteers with one NGO receiving “symbols of their special position, such as gleaming white T-shirts” and claims that:

> By flaunting certificates and official letters in their house ... volunteers participated in displays of power that used such documents for resources, for status distinctions.

His statement does not address the role of intra-village actors and histories in negotiating the locally accepted value of these volunteers’ artefacts. He also does not unpack how the 4WD in which the NGO staff came to the village influenced these intra-village negotiations. Further, on occasion, development interventions can guide intra-community discourse in ways that are only tangentially related to their projects. For example, consider Shrestha’s (2006) observation (supported by others including Aveling 2011; Jackson 1997a; McKinnon 2011) that fieldworkers’ demeanour often links decorum to development. Villagers utilise and scrutinise these links when they negotiate who among them is ‘developed’. However, it is a stretch to attribute the results of these negotiations solely to the developer’s project.

Long (2001:32) and Rossi (2006) have noted that development projects are wrongly conceptualised as a discrete set of interactions between intervening parties and recipient groups. They claim that this view isolates the intervention from the continuous flow of social life and the ongoing relations that evolve between various social actors. Villagers respond not only to development incursions but to their perceptions of their peers and to a backdrop of

---

31 In this literature review I highlight several excellent ethnographies that do not overtly explore intra-village interactions. This is not to cast doubts on their conclusions, but merely to show that an alternative focus will lead to differing understandings of causality.

32 Chapter four explores similar negotiations over how associating with an NGO made a person ‘educated’ in the region that I studied.
uncertainty and rapid social change that is often more significant to them than the effects of any individual project (Long 2000; Olivier de Sardan 2005). Current ways of analysing development isolate non-project-related aspects of a community’s social life from the influence of development interventions. However, these development incursions are one of many factors that guide social change.Attributing changes solely to development projects therefore silences the agency of local actors and naturalises the specific changes that take place, presenting them as by-products of ‘development’.

**Development and Modernity as Depoliticising Social Change**

Social changes that take place inside a specific village are frequently homogenised as development. These are often conflated with modernity, which is naturalised as an inevitable consequence of development or is presented as being brought into the community by the developer. There is, therefore, little work that unpacks the process through which a specific development intervention is conceptualised within a village, detailing the localised modernities that are co-created by the developer and the community.

Literature often depicts villagers as associating external interventions with monolithic concepts of development and modernity. Authors such as Crewe and Harrison (1998) and Swidler and Watkins (2009) talk about farmers who participate in projects because they considered themselves ‘modern minded’ or because they ‘believed in development’. Crewe and Harrison (1998) observed that self-identification with a development project, and through this with modernity, was highly valued among the people they studied. However, these authors do not address the community-embedded negotiations, symbols and histories that associate some development interventions with some aspects of modernity and other interventions with differing aspects, and which also determine which of these associations villagers will value.

Similarly, modernity and commoditisation have often been tied to increased inequality (Geschiere 1995). Ethnographies depict a link between the consumption of western commodities (for example, ‘European clothing’ and houses with tin roofs) and African notions of modernity (Chappatte 2014). Development practitioners and project beneficiaries typically treat both inequitable wealth distribution and the veneration of material goods as

---

33 It is important to differentiate modernity from ‘modernisation’, which, while not covered thoroughly in this thesis, will be understood as a collection of technical and institutional measures aimed at widespread societal change deliberately undertaken by a nation or elite grouping based neo-evolutionary theoretical narratives (Arce and Long 2000).
inevitable by-products of becoming modern (Kandiyoti 2000; Pigg 1992). Authors including Hansen (1999:346) note that these commodities are interpreted through local concerns, some maintaining their significance and others gaining new meaning through a community’s experiences and understandings of the modern.

This conflation of modernity, commodification and development is often depicted (by both villagers and academics) as problematising gerontocratic authority and generating witchcraft accusations. Some academics understand youths to use modernity to reject traditional social stratifications and the wisdom of their elders (Auslander 1993; Masquelier 1993; Schmoll 1993). Wealthy young (typically male) villagers attribute their success to their education and to their comparative modern-mindedness. They blame the slow progress of others on traditional culture (Abbink 2005; Vasconcelos 2010). In some development literature these youths have emerged as a new elite - capable of taking advantage of a development project or of a different western presence in their village (Bierschenk et al. 2002; Swidler and Watkins 2009).

Tensions relating to modernity often play out through witchcraft accusations (Englund 1996a; Geschiere 1995). Academics depict witchcraft rumours as ways to negotiate the increasing difference between those who are able to access the structures and opportunities associated with modernity and the rest of their community (Apter 1993; Arce and Long 2000b:13; Auslander 1993; Bastian 1993; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Masquelier 1993). Smith (2008) observes the interplay between development, modernity and witchcraft. He claims that development is sometimes attributed to witchcraft and on other occasions utilised to refute accusations of bewitching. His work encourages the possibility that a developer’s presence can be utilised when villagers link development, modernity and individual consumption.34

The dichotomy posited between modernity and village life often diminishes the latter. Modernity is typically defined in contrasted to an imaginary ‘traditional’ that is either vilified or venerated (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Latour 1991). This implicitly leads to the belief that village situations, life-worlds and modes of social organisation are not appropriate for the modern world, and that modernity (and the development interventions which provide it) will improve the welfare of rural people (Long 2001:34). This understanding fails to take into account the multiple, heterogeneous modernities that exist in any rural environment (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993).

34 However, the developer is part of this negotiation, rather than an external agent that brings modernity. This will be briefly explored in chapter three on pages 101-102.
Modernity and social change as locally negotiated
There are other understandings of modernity and social change that are more useful for exploring the influence of development interventions on rural environments. These conceptualisations depict modernity as co-created by villagers in response to stimuli that are both internal and external to their community. For example, Ferguson (1999) describes the (inevitably false) dichotomy that southern actors perceive between ‘the traditional’ and ‘the modern’ as ‘folk modernity’ (see also Pigg 1992, 1997). Arce and Long (2000a:2) depict modernity as a homeostatic cluster of perceived ‘here-and-now’ materialities and cultural styles, often differentiated against an idealised past. They argue that any specific modernity is a self-organising, transformative assemblage of social and discursive practices that need not be consistent nor coherent. Further, the concept’s ambiguity enables diverse actors, groups and bodies of knowledge to utilise ‘modernity’, as a label, which they use to alter and evaluate everyday life (Arce and Long 2000b).

Crucial to these narratives is a focus on the agency of southern actors and the negotiated nature of modernity and social change. Many authors (for example Pigg 1997; Swidler and Watkins 2009) have elaborated the advantages of being perceived to be modern. They then claim that associating with an NGO is a way to be understood as such (see Hilhorst 2001; Smith 2008; Swidler and Watkins 2009). However, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1993:xxiii) argue:

The presence of modernizing objects and actors will often be less about giving voice to shared concerns and more about opening up fields of argument, questioning the definition of values, forming alliances, and mobilizing oppositions.

In this context, both social changes associated with being modern and the relationship between development and modernity is negotiated. Development interventions therefore open up space for villagers to discuss and create social change, rather than independently altering a village.

Social change is similarly simplified in development literature and is often tied to modernity as economic advancement. Authors including Englund (1999), Guyer (1992) and Shiraishi (2006) have observed renegotiations of local sociality and unpacked the perceived economic and cultural changes that modernity is thought to cause. They call for an analysis of shifting values within a community and of the variable and multifaceted conditions under which social change occurs. Berry (1993) argues that exercises of power, discourses relating to
intra-community obligations and social relationships are mutually constitutive of change in rural environments. He stresses the importance of exploring the role of agency in structural changes, where local actors accommodate, resist and guide alterations. I argue that external developers are actors who influence these changes, yet their presence is simultaneously a condition under which this change is occurring.

A fuller understanding of how change occurs in a rural environment, in conjunction with the presence of development interventions, therefore requires a conscious reorientation of focus and different analytic tools. Rather than embedding ethnographies in the development organisation and focusing on the relationship between developers and the community, my primary concern is the intra-village relationships and social changes that are influenced, but not entirely caused, by a developer’s presence. In this context, development projects are conceptualised as a mediator, rather than the primary causal agent in intra-village social change. This enables a deeper scrutiny of the relationship between modern development, intra-community power dynamics and changes that occur within any specific village. I will now demonstrate how actor-network theory, with its incorporation of non-human *actants* and its emphasis on multiple, partial causalities, enables such a study.

**The Utility of Actor-network Theory for Examining Village Negotiations and NGO Presence**

Actor and actor-network theories have a significant legacy in development studies. They are typically situated in the anthropology of development, exploring the goals and assumptions that developers take for granted (Bulloch 2009). These approaches emphasise the ‘how’, rather than the ‘why’, of development interactions, making them appropriate for exploring intra-village negotiations. After introducing actor-oriented approaches to development, I will explain how actor-network theory attributes agency to non-human *actants*, and how it presents causality as emerging from networks of actors and *actants*. These aspects of actor-network theory enable analysis of the influences of a developer’s presence, while maintaining an analytic focus on the actions and agency of villagers.

Actor and actor-network theories emerged as a middle ground between ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ understandings of social change (Long 2001:66; Mosse 2005). To consciously move away from the normative focuses that characterise other development approaches, actor theory

---

35 Actor-network theory in development studies is heavily linked to the work of David Mosse; he (and therefore the development studies literature) draws a stronger link between actor theory and actor-network theory than do most other fields of study.
explores how actors’ interact with each other and with structures. It argues that these interactions determine the effects of a development project (Long 2012). Actor theory aims to elucidate the interlocking relationships, actor interests and communal practices that interpenetrate social, symbolic and geographic spaces (Long 2001; Mosse and Lewis 2006b; Olivier de Sardan 2005). It focuses on contests and compromises, and emphasises actors’ agency when interacting with external incursions (Olivier de Sardan 2005). The use of actor theory in development studies was initially criticised for emphasising transactional actor strategies at the expense of the contexts that guide and limit actors’ agency (Long 1990). However, it has been revived and reshaped in response to the perceived homogeneity and unidirectionality in post-development and in participatory approaches to development (Lewis and Mosse 2006).

Actor-oriented approaches are social constructivist but context specific, focusing on the co-production and reproduction of society through action (Long 2001). They attempt to marry the analytic goals of academics concerned with testing general structural models and of those interested in depicting the ways in which people adapt their livelihoods and understandings to social change (Long 1990). By focusing on how actors give meaning to their experiences, these approaches seek to explain structurally situated, yet individually differing, responses to the non-familiar (Olivier de Sardan 2005). This body of work argues that social structures and contextual power differences are both consciously and unconsciously appropriated into agents through their socialisation and through their deliberate actions (Long 2000; Rossi 2006:29-30).

Actor theorists claim that structures both constrain and enable behaviour and that these are reproduced and legitimised through the performances they embolden (Mosse and Lewis 2006b). These structures range from everyday practices to larger institutional frameworks and communication networks (Long 2001). Social actors do not merely fulfil structural categories; instead, they actively process information and utilise their networks and social resources when responding to change (Long 2000, 2001). Actors have diverse motivations and perspectives, and they interact with multiple discourses and concerns when deciding which actions to take. Their decisions often relate more to their social position vis-à-vis others within their community than their relationship with any development intervention (Kaler and Watkins 2001; Rossi 2006).
Actor-oriented development ethnographies include Hilhorst’s (2003) *The Real World of NGOs* and the works in *Development Brokers and Translators: the Ethnography of Aid and Agencies* (Mosse and Lewis 2006a). These ethnographies problematise the unidirectional causality of other development approaches and their epistemic separation of development agents and beneficiaries (see Long 2001:34; Long and Long 1992; Olivier de Sardan 2005:102-103). They emphasise the diverse characteristics that are both common to, and different between, various parties involved in a development intervention (Mosse 2004; Olivier de Sardan 2005). However, Olivier de Sardan (2005:13) argues that the use of actor theory in development studies has evolved into a hermeneutically closed loop, due to the limited number of observable interactions at a development interface. Further, these ethnographies all focus on interactions within a development organisation, or between those with some obvious connection to the intervention (the ‘developers’ and ‘beneficiaries’ that they problematise). They, therefore, only tangentially explore the intra-community interactions that are not directly connected to a developer.

**NGOs as macro-actants with partial agency**

In this context, development theorists (particularly Mosse and his contemporaries) have incorporated non-human *actants* into their analysis of development interventions. Latour (1991), rather broadly, defines an *actant* as ‘all things which exist’. The term is narrowed down by Callon (1999) and Law (2002) as a way to differentiate humans, who are actors, from non-human *actants*, which can also influence the outcome of interactions. *Actants* that other studies have explored include animals (Callon 1986 explores scallops), texts (Latour’s (1988a) original use of the term relates to scientific documents), vehicles (airplanes: Law and Callon 1992) and discourses. As explained in my introduction (and as I will further unpack in chapter three), an *actant* has agency if it influences a network of actors and *actants* from which purposive actions emerge. Sayes (2014) describes four ways this can take place: *actants* as a condition for human agency; *actants* as mediators of interactions; *actants* as members of moral and political associations; and *actants* as gatherings of actors from differing temporal and spatial locations.

Mosse (2005) incorporates *actants* into his ethnography of a Department of Foreign Affairs and Development (DFID) project in India. He examines policy documents, the personal wealth of those involved in the project and the region’s political landscape, in a study of how a development project is generated and how development actors present their acts as policy. I use the same analytic framework to explore how the presence of NGOs influences local
social interactions. In order to do so, I conceptualise an NGO as a macro-actant. It is a collection of actors and actants, each of which influence interactions but into which the total impact of the NGO cannot be discretely divided.\(^{36}\) An NGO is therefore more than just an organisation that incorporates actors and actants. It simultaneously collects and mediates interactions in a manner that makes it an actant itself and, through doing so, can be considered a macro-actant.

Actor-network analysis argues that actions emerge from networks of causative interaction. These networks combine the perspectives of multiple actors with acts of composition that translate these actors’ individual understandings and the material concepts they utilise into coherent representations (Mosse 2005). Actor-network theory emphasises that actions take place through networks that the incorporated actors and actants are continuously constructing and altering (Latour 1996; Law 2009). Purposive action therefore occurs as actors and actants are convolved into a heterogeneous series of negotiations and representations (Callon and Law 1995; Latour 1991; Lewis and Mosse 2006). Emergent effects and intentionalities are generated by interactions within these networks, rather than by the discrete actions of the actors observed (Sayes 2014). In this context, actor-network theory dissipates the cause of any event into myriad actors and actants. Rather than attributing causality to a single actor, actant or macro-actant, actor-network theory acknowledges that myriad bodies make a difference to any interaction.

I will therefore draw heavily on actor and actor-network approaches to development. I adopt the emphasis of these theories on the interactions and representations that determine ‘how’, rather than ‘why’, change occurs. I also utilise actor-network theory’s acknowledgement that actants (in my case the macro-actant of an NGO) have agency, but that this agency is partial, influencing, rather than causing, specific interactions and long-term social change. This allows for a study of the actions of differently situated actors in a rural community. Through doing so, I attempt to move rural residents, rather than interveners, to the centre of my analysis, without discounting the role of development interventions in influencing social change. I also draw upon actor-oriented ethnographies’ frequent focus on a community’s hidden transcripts. I then show how a focus on intra-village interactions affects the study of

\(^{36}\) Latour (1993) argues that non-humans that can be divided into actors and actants should be analysed as such. I am claiming here that this is not the case for NGOs, as not all of the properties of an NGO would be accounted for in this manner.
development brokers – actors who exist in the disjuncture between the NGO and village that are the frequent focus of actor-oriented development literature.

**Hidden transcripts in actor-oriented development literature**

Explorations of ‘hidden transcripts’ are not unique to actor and actor-network oriented studies. However, as actor-oriented works focus on interactions within their structural context, they frequently utilise this concept. Exploring the relationship between hidden and public transcripts allows an actor or actor-network based study to examine the way an interaction communicates about (and within) social structure.

Actor and actor-network studies commonly differentiate between the public and hidden transcripts of an intervention (Mosse 2004:645). A hidden transcript is the actions, gestures or words that confirm or contradict a public understanding. These are performed by subordinate actors when there are no members of the dominant group present, or by the dominant when they are away from the marginalised (Scott 1985, 1990). It is also the obfuscated meanings of gestures, acts and stories that take place in public displays of cohesive action. Hidden transcripts allow for public shows of unity while communicating the opinions of the disempowered, for whom overt defiance would be imprudent (Scott 1985). In contrast, public transcripts (the visible discourse of a community) constrain both the empowered and disenfranchised. Concessions to the latter are subsumed into a discourse that justifies the former’s rule (Scott 1985).

Crucial elements of the interplay between public and hidden transcripts are gossip, rumour and storytelling. These acts allow anonymity when communicating anxieties about change or critiques of the powerful (Scott 1990; White 2000). Gossip maintains social boundaries, evaluates relationships and reasserts norms. It limits membership of a social group and pressures those who might otherwise leave this group to conform to communal expectations (Abrahams 1970; Hannerz 1967). It is also a self-interested technique for each actor who creates or repeats a story for their own ends (Bott 1957; Paine 1967; Szwed 1966). Rumour allows an individual to anonymously influence understandings of ambiguous situations and social contradictions (White 2000). A rumour does not necessarily relate to the object of speculation, which may instead serve as a placeholder for concerns about changing social realities and positions.\(^{37}\) Storytelling, folklore and oral traditions have long allowed for the obfuscated negotiation of communal tensions. Folk stories and songs change to incorporate

---

\(^{37}\) For example, White (2000) explores how rumors of vampirism were used by Kenyans to make sense of colonial resource extraction.
new situations, interrogating and negotiating these from marginalised peoples’ points of view (Unnithan and Srivastava 1997:169; White 2000).

Occidentalism is linked to all these communicative techniques. It is the stylised images of the west (in this case, those associated with the presence of a development intervention) that are utilised to question or affirm local values and norms (Carrier 1995). These communicative techniques serve as mechanism for debating events when a community’s public transcript does not adequately adapt to changes to local life (White 2000).

Scott (1990:44) shows that a hierarchical order requires continuous maintenance and adjustment to remain intact. This adjustment takes place through hidden transcripts and then seeps slowly into public discourse. Actor theorists have linked this notion to development, exploring how an individual’s experience of a development project is linked to their class, gender and race (and, in the case of this thesis, local social position), and how changes to a person’s social standing are negotiated through hidden transcripts (Bending and Rosendo 2006; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Desai 2006). This is particularly prominent when villagers evaluate the people who operate in the disjuncture between a development intervention and its encompassing community.

**The Intra-village Concerns of Development Brokers**

Development brokers are often the focus of actor-oriented ethnographies. They are the social actors within a local arena who serve as intermediaries between the intended recipients of a project and the development institution (Bierschenk et al. 2002). Their ability to guide development projects and utilise a developer’s resources in order to obtain financial and social capital for themselves is thoroughly explored in the development studies literature (Bierschenk et al. 2002:4). While doing so, brokers negotiate and stabilise coherent representations of their communities for the developer and of the developer for their community (Bierschenk et al. 2002:168; Lewis and Mosse 2006; Mamdani 1996). Due to the literature’s focus on development organisations or these organisations’ interactions with a village, brokers are often presented as having a significant degree of power or free agency. This is because the intra-community constraints on their actions, in the form of development narratives and local power structures, are often mentioned in actor-oriented ethnographies but are rarely foregrounded. Further, literature often emphasises the immediate material rewards brokers receive from NGOs, however Mosse (2005:9) observes that:
Brokers deal in people and not only for profit in the narrow sense of immediate reward, but also in the maintenance of...social realities and in shaping their own social identities.

Intra-village interactions and understandings are often more salient to these social realities and identities than the brokers’ relationship with the NGOs are and there is little work that foregrounds the intra-village social rewards or condemnation that brokers receive.

Literature describes three types of people who commonly take on brokerage roles (Bierschenk et al. 2002; Olivier de Sardan 2005). These are development agents, local brokers and traditional mediators. These three groups nearly analogous to the NGO staff, volunteers and headmen that I explore in chapters five through seven.

Traditional mediators are villagers with a formal hierarchal status that places them as an intermediary between a community and an intervention (Olivier de Sardan 2005:178). There is significant literature that examines the threats and opportunities that development provides a traditional ruler (Chinsinga 2006; Gluckman et al. 1949; Kuper 1970). However, this literature rarely differentiates between various strata of traditional mediators.38 Further, it often presumes that a chief will be able to manipulate a developer, but does not unpack the relationship between chiefly rule and discourses that present external interventions as convolving development and modernity.

Development agents are the rurally residing employees of a development organisation. They are officially the spokespeople of an NGO. This task supposedly necessitates mediating between the technical-scientific paradigm that their employer operates within and villagers’ languages and discourses (Aveling 2011; Crewe 1997; Jackson 1997b; Olivier de Sardan 2005). Development literature often mentions that development agents must negotiate a palatable understanding of their organisation within the village and generate an attractive depiction of that community for their urban or international managers (Olivier de Sardan 2005; Rossi 2006). However, this literature often fails to acknowledge that the former is less important in environments of extreme dependence or where understandings of development are predicated upon a dichotomy between ‘developers’ and ‘beneficiaries’.

Local brokers are the rural educational elites who have been disenfranchised through economic stagnation (Bierschenk et al. 2002). By the standards of their peers they are literate,

38 Problematically, it often assumes that lower ranked chiefs have the same ability to interact with developers as higher ranked traditional authorities, (for details see chapter five)
educated and modern, but are either insufficiently so for urban employment or have been unlucky when seeking it (Englund 2006; Peters et al. 2008). Local brokers temporarily receive recognition through volunteering with a development intervention (Swidler and Watkins 2009). They are presented as using their brokerage positions to further an identity that ties them to development and modernity and to channel development resources in a manner that improves their local social standing (Bierschenk et al. 2002; Kaler and Watkins 2001). However, there is a dearth of work explaining how intra-village negotiations co-create the modernity with which brokers attempt to associate themselves and therefore determine whether villagers will reward brokers for their acts.

Actor-oriented studies of development brokers typically focus on a broker’s relationship with a developer. This literature sometimes explores how brokers are able to shape the meaning of development or challenge local hierarchies (Aveling 2011; Buur and Kyed 2006). However, through focusing on relationships between brokers and development interventions, intra-community concerns and pressures that constrain the brokers are typically underplayed. This creates space for my study’s exploration of the intra-village social lives of development brokers. Through performing such a study, I bring not only these actors, but also their rural interlocutors, to the centre of analysis. In doing so, I foreground that acts of brokerage take place within local hierarchies and power structures. Brokers obtain social capital in the disjunction between these structures and national development narratives and bodies. They are therefore frequently incentivised to embolden these structures and reinforce these narratives. This ties brokerage to the processes of co-constructing modernities and development narratives that I have discussed earlier. Development interventions influence these narratives, but they also incorporate the actions of and interactions between myriad villagers, few of whom are development brokers. They therefore both influence, and are guided by, intra-village hierarchies and local and national development narratives.

Through detailing a developer’s presence (as a macro-actant), I therefore explore development related social change, while keeping rural villagers at centre of my analysis. There are many types of developer and many locations that development interventions occur. The remainder of this literature review will explain why I focus on NGOs and on rural Malawi, while providing relevant background information about each.
The Northern Focus within Literature on NGOs
My critique of development literature is particularly pertinent to studies of NGOs. The overlap between practitioners and academics is even stronger in this subfield than in other areas of development studies (Hilhorst 2003). Much NGO research is therefore unreflectively positive and (more importantly for this thesis) focuses upon the NGO’s goals at the expense of analysing the actions of and interactions between community members. In this context, I will provide a brief history of the academic literature on NGOs: highlighting its initially problematic nature; exploring why this literature gradually became more critical; and demonstrating that actor-oriented ethnographies have opened up space for the analysis of intra-village interactions in the context of NGO presence. In doing so, I demonstrate the utility of using NGOs for my study of rural social change and of my study as a contribution to the literature on NGOs.

The history of research on NGOs is tied to their rapid proliferation. Due to changes in the South and North (for instance, structural adjustments, northern interest in communitarianism and the winding down of the Cold War), the number of NGOs increased drastically during the 1980s and 1990s, as did the number of researchers interested in their existence (Tvedt 1994; Fisher 1997; Mercer 2002; Mitlin et al. 2007). Despite little evidence, NGOs were normatively depicted as having significant comparative advantages over governments. These advantages included: participation from beneficiaries; flexibility; cost effectiveness; and the desire to work with and listen to rural communities (Flower 1988; Miraftab 1997; Zaidi 1999). These claims were exacerbated in an African context, where western practitioners, NGO academics and donors perceived corrupt governments and contrasted these with supposedly honest, efficient and democratic, NGOs (Morfit 2011).

Similarly to NGO practice, NGO research claims to more effectively incorporate the voices of development ‘recipients’. Some excellent insights have arisen from this literature. Scott-Villiers (2011) explores how rural elites’ voices are incorporated, challenged and marginalised in meetings between NGO staff and beneficiaries, part of a strong body of literature on the contested spaces of participatory development that has grown through NGO centred analysis (see also Hodgson 2002). At a project efficacy level, NGO based research

39 Indicative of the scattered nature of this research is the absence of a coherent definition of NGOs. Mitlin (2007) believes the term has no analytic or even descriptive value. Other authors including Clarke (1998), Eade (2000), Mitlin, et al. (2007) and White and Eicher (1999) acknowledge the lack of common topology, however, they claim that definitions of the term typically imply a non-profit structure and a concern for the welfare of the poor. Actor-oriented works often sidestep this issue by understanding NGOs as a claim bearing label and exploring organisations that adopt or accept this title.
has enabled a greater understanding of how the gaps in culture, power, resources and perspectives, between developers and beneficiaries can be mitigated through techniques that incorporate mediation and co-adaptation (Brown and Ashman 1996). However, continuing my critique of the development literature more generally, these works focus almost exclusively on relationships between NGOs and the community, with little consideration of the intra-community relationships and concerns which guide villagers’ interactions with NGOs.

In the 1990s academic approval, among other factors, encouraged the increased channelling of development funds through NGOs (Miraftab 1997; Moore and Stewart 2000; Zaidi 1999). This process in turn encouraged more NGO-related study. While internal debates over NGOs’ upward accountability and their effectiveness in reaching the poor flourished, the NGO and academic community was incentivised to avoid publicly criticising NGOs due to their dependence on donor funding (Mitlin et al. 2007; Pearce 2000). The few academic critiques of NGOs before the mid-1990s related to the unequal relations of power between donors, northern organisations and their southern counterparts. Among the most significant of these was Flower’s (1991) accusation that a new ‘scramble for Africa’ was taking place, with NGOs rushing to be involved in profitable development activities. This claim, and rare others like it, passed into the development studies literature without being seriously addressed (Mitlin et al. 2007).

However, in the late 1990s both the role of NGOs and their treatment in development academia changed. Latin American NGOs became increasingly political during this time (Alvarez 1999). However, in much of sub-Saharan Africa NGOs steadily shifted from an alternative form of development to a welfare provider (Cannon 2000; Commins 2000; Mitlin et al. 2007; Pearce 2000). This process significantly depoliticised the role of NGOs in development (Zaidi 1999). It also created a new NGO managerial class at the expense of activist (and academic) staff (Lofredo 2000). An increase in academic scrutiny coincided with these changes.

Through the late 1990s and early to mid-2000s, a substantial body of literature criticised NGOs at the conceptual and operational level. Technical literature highlighted the rapid rollout of projects without a strong evidence base (White and Eicher 1999). Critics initially called for more community participation in development projects. However, over time they began to question what participatory methods entail, warning of elite capture in projects that
were ostensibly participatory (Kothari 2001; Mosse 1994; Platteau and Abraham 2002; White and Eicher 1999). At an abstract level, NGOs were criticised for reducing government accountability by providing essential services and tolerating the corruption of local elites. In this context, Fisher (1997) described NGOs as the newest attachment to Ferguson’s (1994) ‘antipolitics machine’.

While NGOs are diverse, there are some structural commonalities to NGO-driven development. Chief among these is the problematic relationship between NGOs and governments. The NGOs are often dependent on (and reinforce) the governments that they present themselves as an alternative to (Manji and O’Coill 2002). Similarly, common to NGOs is a focus on project sustainability, typically demonstrated through financial self-sufficiency (Swidler and Watkins 2009; Watkins et al. 2012), and on community-driven development projects, which are particularly susceptible to elite capture (Platteau and Gaspart 2003). These traits shape NGO-driven development and are increasingly criticised in the relevant literature.

Much of the recent critical literature on NGOs is ethnographic and actor-oriented. This is particularly common among works that describe participatory approaches to development or that attempt to explain communities’ reluctance to participate in development projects. These ethnographic works explore how pressures and opportunities shape the actions of NGOs, their staff and the villagers who associate with them (Englund 2006; Hilhorst 2001; Shrestha 2004). Factors explored in NGO ethnographies include: the lack of intra-office democracy; intergenerational tension caused by the greater involvement of youths in projects than that of their elders; and the co-dependence and tensions between local elites and NGO staff (Hilhorst 2003; Hodgson 2002; Nauta 2006). However, these works still utilise the rural society within which they take place primarily as an interlocutor for the NGO project which they are analysing.

Ethnographies of NGOs typically attribute causality primarily to the NGO’s project and explore changes that are salient to this project. For example, Hodgson’s (2002) work on NGOs in Tanzania argues that the ability of youths to interact with NGO employees caused tensions with their elders. She then explains the difficulties this generated for the indigenous advocacy project that she studied. I will expand upon studies in this vein (though not specifically on Hodgson (2002) work) through my focus on intra-village interactions and my analysis of NGO presence. Using an actor-network framework to explore her experiences
would involve considering existing intra-generational conflicts, which the NGO’s presence may have catalysed, as well as unpacking how this presence both acted as a signifier in, and simultaneously mediated, the negotiations that these tensions generated. Further, I analyse the intra-village effects of these interactions (for example, how this conflict could affect decision making within a household), rather than focusing on their impacts on the efficacy of the NGO’s project.

In doing so, I utilise and contribute to the existing actor-oriented literature on NGOs. I take this body of work’s emphasis on interaction, and on the relationship between individuals’ agency and the structures that shape NGO driven development. I add to these by conceptualising the NGOs as macro-actants and by exploring intra-village social changes that are not relevant to their projects’ outcomes. This thesis therefore responds to Cleaver’s (1999:599) claim (on participatory approaches to development) that:

We need to understand the non-project nature of people’s lives, the complex livelihood inter-linkages that make an impact in one area be felt in others and the potential for unintended consequences arising from an intervention or act,

and Rosenthal’s (2012:420) desire for:

A new reading of the role of NGOs in which the limitations of development work and the work of NGOs are understood within their local context, not only in the context of a broader cultural critique.

I explore the local context of NGOs’ presence in order to interrogate how these NGOs influence social change, but maintain my focus on the non-project nature of rural Malawians’ lives.

**Studying NGO Presence in Malawi**

Malawi is dependent on external developers and its citizens are apprehensive over the relationship between development and modernity. This makes it an appropriate country to study how villagers utilise and conceptualise NGO presence when they negotiate their intra-community social standing. The nation is among the world’s poorest, least urbanised and most donor dependent. Malawians have paradoxical understandings of development. Many of them crave development, which they believe will come with a western-oriented modernity; however, they fear that such a modernity might be incompatible with their traditions. This modernity is often associated with NGOs, which are prolific in Malawi due to its stability,
small size and the agrarian nature of its poverty. In this final section of my literature review I unpack Malawi’s poverty, its narratives of modernity and the role of NGOs in the nation’s development. I do so in order to further justify Malawi as a location for my study and to provide the necessary background for an ethnographic account of a Malawian village.

Malawi is one of the world’s most food insecure countries, with nearly half of all Malawians stretched to meet their basic food needs (Devereux 1997; Ntata 2010). It also has one of the world’s lowest scores on the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Program 2011). Smallholder farmers comprise 80% of the Malawian population and they are disproportionately affected by poverty (UKAID 2008; Devereux 1999b:6). According to Kalipeni and Ghosh (2007), Malawi’s HIV/AIDS infection rate is 15% (although other estimates have placed it higher). However, the work hours lost to the disease in rural communities disproportionately come from the economically active and from professionals (Government of the Republic of Malawi 2002; Mtika 2001; Swidler 2006). The nation’s population of over 16 million is increasing at 2.2% per year and urbanisation is not growing at the same rate. This means that Malawi’s already inadequately sized farms are decreasing in area. In 2005 per capita land holdings sat at 0.23 hectares (ha), with 0.4ha per capita being the estimated minimum required for a smallholder farming family (Kalipeni 1996; USAID 2005; Young 2005).

These indicators of poverty reflect structural problems in Malawi’s economy. The nation relies on fertilizer and seed subsidies to farm maize. However, in 2010 these subsidies consumed 5.5% of Malawi’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Chirwa et al. 2011; Harrigan 2003). Its primary export is tobacco, which necessitates forest clearing and is sold to a politicised international market (International Monetary Fund 2005; Hazarika and Alwang 2003). Economic activity in Malawi is further hampered by poor infrastructure, with unsafe roads connecting producers to urban-based (and ideally international) consumers, and an inadequate education system that produces few skilled workers (Chimombo 2009b). Poverty increases Malawi’s dependence on the international community and ties the nation’s development to external donors.

**Malawian traditions, development and modernity**

Malawians conceptualise development as the external provisioning of resources to a rural community. This has been a consistent aspect of the nation’s political discourse (Msukwa and

---

40 Food and Agriculture Association of the United Nations Estimate 2013.

41 A problem exacerbated by economic protectionism in the region and Malawi’s lack of sea borders.
Taylor 2011). Hastings Banda, who was Malawi’s dictatorial first president between 1966 and 1994, channelled development funds, through chiefs, into villages. He linked his own legitimacy, that of the chieftaincy and a narrative of development as small-scale, externally funded community projects (Chiweza 2007; Kishindo 2003). Malawi’s first democratic president, Bakili Muluzi (1994-2004), maintained this emphasis on community development. He organised payment for villagers who partook in infrastructural food-for-work schemes, which still form a significant part of the nation’s welfare system (Msukwa and Taylor 2011). This development narrative has been cemented by the actions of NGOs and of international donors. In other countries, development donors may be urban based professionals or elites who are working internationally (Kleist 2011). However in Malawi (and Zambia, see Bornstein 2005) these urban success have responsibilities to their families but not for the community’s development (Anders 2002; Rohregger 2006). This is instead almost the exclusive purview of the national government and international donors (Msukwa and Taylor 2011; Wroe 2012). International bodies have sent resources directly to rural communities as Malawi grows poorer, with aid contributing much more to the nation’s economy than either exports or foreign direct investment (African Development Bank Group 2013; Morfit 2011).

The pan-Malawian translation for development is chitukuko, a Chewa word meaning ‘change for the better’ (Kishindo 2000:7; Msukwa and Taylor 2011:62). Development assistance is conceptually packaged as ‘projects’, where an NGO, government or private benefactor provides resources to a rural village (Kishindo 2003:380; Msukwa and Taylor 2011:62-67; Vajja and White 2008:1157). Communities rarely reject the development that they receive but are neither wholly satisfied with these projects nor with the processes through which they obtain them (Booth et al. 2006:12; Msukwa and Taylor 2011). While Malawians are usually cautiously happy to receive any chitukuko, they are uncomfortable with modernity, which they tie to development and posit as incompatible with their traditions.

Malawians conceive of a homogenous, western-centric modernity that is the antithesis of traditional (rural) Malawian life. They inexplicably link this modernity to the development that external interventions provide and that western values supposedly bring (Ribohn 2002). Modernity is associated with changes as diverse as increased English language use, free primary education and decreasing economic opportunities (Anders 2002; Chingsinga 2002; Englund 2006; Lwanda 2002; Moto 2001). An aspect of this modernity that Malawians find particularly contentious is the prioritising of a person’s private (or nuclear familial) consumption over their communal responsibilities (Anders 2002; Englund 1996b; Ribohn
Tensions are exemplified through the phrase ‘La Fanta’, which translates into ‘something with which to buy Fanta’ and is used to describe money obtained through cleverness, crime or prostitution (Moto 2001:238-239). This phrase invokes the symbolism of the individualistic consumption (as Fanta comes in a one person bottle) of an expensive and needless, yet pleasurable, western commodity. It both celebrates a person’s increased wealth and condemns their newfound selfishness.

Malawians conceptually juxtapose this occidentalist folk modernity against a timeless, rurally embedded culture. Many villagers believe that such a culture is incompatible with what they see as modernity and development, or at least the modernity and development offered to them by the west. Some Malawians use this belief to challenge the modernity that they perceive as encroaching upon village life. They argue that it is responsible for perceived sexual immorality, the onset and spread of HIV, increased parsimony by the wealthy and a loss of respect by individuals for their families (Mtika 2001; Peters 2002; Ribohn 2002). These people instead venerate a collection of hierarchies and obligations that they naturalise as ‘tradition’.

‘Traditional’ Malawian life is understood to be centred on fulfilling one’s obligations to family, kin and village. However, this is primarily achieved through respecting gendered and gerontocratic hierarchies (Ribohn 2002). There are strict gender and age roles within a Malawian nuclear family, with kin frequently ‘disowned’ for not meeting these standards (Place and Otsuka 2001; Takane 2007; Thangata 2007). Further obligations, including sending home remittances, funeral attendance, food sharing and performing *ganyu* labour, apply between a Malawian and their other relatives (Englund 1999; Rohregger 2006).

Malawians also have significant responsibilities towards non-family members of their community. These relate to appropriate standards of behaviour and to the intra-communal sharing of resources. For example, Malawians claim a long history of communal food consumption, where families would cook meals individually but eat together (Chinsinga 2004). A village would also contain numerous vertical resource sharing networks, where the wealthy act as patrons for the poor (Booth et al. 2006; Swidler and Watkins 2007:149-152; Taiwo 2012). While these obligations appear to provide insurance to the marginalised, they

---

42 Piecework typically given by wealthy community members to their poorer relatives as a form of welfare or to outsiders at a poor price.
43 Supposedly ensuring that the poor were catered for.
are also intimately linked to age and gender norms that advantage older community members and most men (Kerr 2005a; Kishindo 2004; Ribohn 2002).

Malawians romanticise their traditional life, creating an idealised past that they contrast with a problematic present (Englund 1999). However, a villager’s interactions with their family and community have always involved negotiations and conflict. These negotiations incorporate a person’s intra-village and intra-household social position and through such negotiations the powerful have frequently wielded undue influence over the poor (Kerr 2005a, b). Malawi’s traditional realm is therefore more normative than actual, a national myth that exists in comparison to an equally manufactured conflation of development and modernity, which NGOs are perceived to embody.

A brief profile of NGOs in Malawi

NGOs are particularly prolific in Malawi and Malawians understand them to bring development from the modern, external word. The association between NGOs, the west and donors was initially sparked by Dr Banda’s restrictions on what he understood to be the seditious nature of NGOs. Bakili Muluzi then actively courted international NGOs as a way to differentiate himself from Banda (Kayambazinthu and Moyo 2002). Further, due to Malawi’s poverty, it has few locally formed NGOs and, thanks to the government’s actual or perceived corruption, donors rely heavily on NGOs to deliver their projects (Morfit 2011).

NGOs are often the most well-resourced organisations in a Malawian village and are the village’s most efficient provider of development (Msukwa and Taylor 2011). Authors including Swidler (2006) have explained the disparity of wealth between almost all rural Malawians and even the most poorly funded international NGO. For example, Englund (2006:83) claimed that a Malawian public school teacher who obtained employment with the NGO ‘National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE)’ would experience a tenfold increase in salary.

Problematically, NGOs and their staff often challenge village norms (either directly or directly). NGOs compete with Village Headmen and Village Development Councils (VDCs) to provision development in rural areas (Chinsinga 2005). Similarly, while NGO employees sometimes cooperate with village leaders, others openly condescend rural citizens, even people with traditional leadership roles (Englund 2006; Rosenthal 2012; Swidler and Watkins 2009; Tawfik and Watkins 2007).
In this context, the presence of NGOs both signifies a challenge to village norms and can embolden changes to intra-community statuses. Traditional elites have long resisted sharing power and Malawian communities are rigidly hierarchical (Booth et al. 2006; Msukwa and Taylor 2011). However, a collection of local, ‘modern’ elites, including teachers, small businesspeople and unemployed high school graduates, are more able than traditional leaders to position themselves as conduits between the NGO and their community (Englund 2006; Peters et al. 2008; Swidler 2009a). Further, the symbols of affluence that NGOs present are juxtaposed against an increasingly unsustainable ‘traditional’ life (Anders 2002; Ribohn 2002). This encourages rural Malawians to begin questioning a ‘traditional’, which they see as incompatible with the modernity that they associate with NGOs. Swidler and Watkins (2009:1183) observed that Malawi NGOs:

Influence not only those who directly become beneficiaries or employees, but also those whose imaginations the NGOs beguile.

I therefore use Malawi to situate my study of the influence of NGOs on intra-village social change. I chart how discussions about NGOs play out within a specific village to explore how and why some Malawians are beguiled by NGOs, while others are apprehensive about their presence. I also explore how these narratives affect, and are utilised by, individuals as they negotiate their interactions with each other and how specific social positions change or are created in response to an NGO’s presence. In doing so, I utilise and contribute to the ethnographic literature on NGOs and expand upon understandings of Malawian social life and the nation’s development more generally.

**Conclusion**

I have demonstrated that development studies literature too frequently focuses upon development interventions, rather than the communities within which these take place. I have argued that this literature often presents developers as actors and villagers as reacting to them. It therefore depicts developers as causing social change and, through doing so, it quietens the interactions of villagers in this process and removes causality (and therefore, agency) from them. Actor-oriented approaches to development focus on the interactions and structures that determine the outcome of a development intervention. While these approaches place more emphasis on how interactions shape development projects, they still primarily focus upon how a development intervention, through interactions between developers and beneficiaries, changes a community.
I aim to study how development interventions influence social change, while leaving rural villagers at the centre of my analysis. To this end, I have detailed how actor-network theory allows for an understanding that *actants* (in this case the macro-*actant* NGOs) have agency, in that they influence interactions. However, this agency is only partial, with a network of actors and *actants* determining the outcome of any interaction. I have demonstrated that, when combined an overt exploration of how intra-village factors guide development brokers, conceptualising a development intervention as a macro-*actant* would enable a study that explored the intra-village social changes that occurred in conjunction with, but were not wholly caused by, this intervention.

The chapter concluded by detailing the existing literature on Malawi and on NGOs. This was used to justify why I selected this form of development intervention and this location, as well as how my research contributes to the literature on both. I argued that my work adds to literature on NGOs by exploring the impacts of their presence that are either ignored or misattributed in studies of their projects. Malawi’s poverty, its conflation of modernity and development and its reliance on NGOs were explained. This highlighted the appropriateness of Malawi for my study and provided the necessary background for an ethnographic exploration of a Malawian village.

This chapter has therefore demonstrated how a study of NGO presence in a Malawian village contributes to the literature on Malawi, NGOs and development more generally. I have argued that, by conceptualising an NGO as a macro-*actant*, it is possible to explore the impact of that NGO’s presence on rural social life, while keeping the community at the centre of analysis. I will do this for the remainder of my thesis, exploring how Vsawan social life changed in conjunction with the presence of four NGOs: *Mbwezi, Kulutilizya Msambiska*, Green Earth and ChurchCare.
Chapter Two: A Panopticon of Development in Vsawa

In this chapter I describe Vsawa and the NGOs therein. I do so in order to provide context to the core themes of my thesis: that the presence of NGOs influences, but does not determine, Vsawan narratives of development and modernity; and that NGOs were utilised within and impacted upon negotiations over changes to Vsawan social positions and obligations. This chapter is therefore brief and almost entirely descriptive. It foreshadows several of my key observations; for instance, the role of unequally important Vsawans in guiding narratives relating to NGO presence, as well as the impact of NGO-related social changes upon many Vsawan lives. However, it does not unpack these in detail.

I begin this chapter by describing and mapping Vsawa. I then recount how recent economic and social changes have affected village livelihoods and how these changes are conceptualised by villagers. Following on from this, I introduce the NGOs that operate in Vsawa. I list the projects that they attempt and then highlight that how each NGO influences, and is conceptualised within the village, is not fully encapsulated through exploring these projects. Finally, I recount Vsawans’ dominant understandings of development and of social change. I foreground that villagers’ aspirations for development interacted with their fear of changes to local values and hierarchies. Through doing so, I use this chapter to set the scene for a study of how NGO presence influences, but does not determine, villagers’ negotiations over and understandings of social change.

Vsawa – A Site of Change

Vsawans consistently told me their lives had recently began rapidly changing. These perceived changes guided their interpretations of the NGOs and of development, and influenced the intra-community negotiations that this thesis will focus upon. For this reason, I now provide a brief background to Vsawa, focusing on the six villages where I spent most of my time, and exploring how Vsawans conceptualised these villages as sites of change. I detail a collection of economic and social shifts that were affecting intra-community relations and that Vsawans saw as indicative of their increased links with the outside world. This will allow the remainder of the chapter to focus upon the relationship that Vsawans perceived between the presence of NGOs and social change, and to describe the village’s primary development narrative.
Vsawa’s history and geography

Vsawa is a collection of fishing and farming villages along the northern part of Lake Malawi. The region’s population is under 20,000, however, it is growing rapidly due to in-migration from more remote villages. Vsawa’s exact area is difficult to define; it comprises less than 50 lakeside and inland villages. The innermost ten of these are considered ‘Vsawa Proper’, an area that could comfortably be walked within an hour. However, people along a 20-kilometre stretch of the Malawian lakeside consider themselves Vsawans. Respondents referred to this area as ‘the village of Vsawa’, and it took a full day to travel on foot.

Vsawa is almost entirely populated by the Tumbuka ethnic group, although there is a small Tonga (a central Malawian ethnic group) population in the south. There are just over a million Tumbuka people worldwide and they are spread primarily along northern Malawi and north-east Zambia. In the late 1800s and early 1900s the Tumbuka were subjugated by the Ngoni, a warlike east African people (Vail and White 1989). However, upon the arrival of Scottish missionaries shortly after this, the Ngoni sent their Tumbuka serfs’ children, rather than their own, to missionary run schools (Kayambazinthu 1998). This led to the rapid codification of a chiTumbuka language. This in turn, combined with Tumbuka-Ngoni intermarriage, led to the Tumbuka becoming the dominant ethnic group of northern Malawi (Kishindo 1995).

The Tumbuka received a missionary education superior to many other Malawian ethnic groups.44 Further, Nyasaland’s (the colonial British name for what is now Malawi) colonial government failed to develop the nation’s north. This meant that the Tumbuka would typically travel either inter-regionally or internationally to find skilled work and then send remittances home (Kerr 2005a). At the end of Malawi’s colonial period the Tumbuka were grossly over-represented in the nation’s civil service. Malawi’s dictatorial first president, Dr Hastings Banda, responded to and exacerbated anti-Tumbuka sentiment in the country. He introduced laws that banned Tumbuka school teachers from working outside northern Malawi and introduced a chiChewa (the language of the Chewa, who are Malawi’s largest ethnic group) competency test for civil service positions. This resulted in many Tumbuka losing their jobs and having to return to their villages (Vail and White 1989). Dr Banda, and most of Malawi’s democratic presidents, have been criticised for failing to develop the nation’s north (Posner 2004). This was part of the reason that Vsawa had remained comparatively isolated.

44 The Tumbuka were missionised by the Scottish missionaries, who encouraged literacy in a way that the Dutch who missionised the Chewa did not (see Posner 2004:536).
for so long and why its elder generation were knowledgeable of, yet apprehensive about, the outside world.

During my ethnography I lived in six Vsawan villages and travelled between them regularly. These villages were: Jumpi and Pungwe – four kilometres south of central Vsawa; Kamolongo, Usiku and Mututu – villages in Vsawa Proper; and Revori – fifteen kilometres north of central Vsawa. Jumpi and Pungwe were previously one village. Jumpi had seceded in the early 2000s, as its population had grown quickly and its inhabitants claim they were ignored by the Village Headman (VH)\(^{45}\) of Pungwe. Further, the people of Jumpi are Tonga

---

\[^{45}\text{Malawian chieftaincy structures will be more thoroughly explored in chapter six; however, a Traditional Authority (TA) is the highest form of local chief, with approximately ten Group Village Headmen (GVH) below}\]
and the people of Pungwe are Tumbuka. Both speak a mutually intelligible combination of chiTonga (the Tongan language) and chiTumbuka, and the relationship between these two villages is now amicable.

Village Headman Mwalimu was technically the headman of Pungwe and Jumpi, meaning that he interacted with the government and NGOs on behalf of both villages. However, the people of Jumpi had recognised VH Nachoka as their headmen since secession. He settled villagers’ disputes and sat on Vsawa’s chiefs’ council (a collection of chiefs who come together to make decisions about the area), but he was not recognised by the government. This form of voluntary headmanship is common in Malawi and was accepted by VH Mwalimu.

Kamolongo, Usiku and Mututu are three villages in Vsawa Proper with differing Village Headmen but the same Group Village Headman (GVH). These villages had received limited electricity in the year prior to my research being undertaken, and housed a hospital, and a primary and a secondary school. Mbwezi’s office (the largest structure owned by an NGO, with an attached hall and library) was in Mututu. A flatbed truck that travelled between Vsawa and Mzuzu (Northern Malawi’s largest city) left daily from Kamolongo, making it the economic centre of the region. It was also where two NGO staff named James and Harriet shared a house with electricity, meaning that NGO employees would often congregate there. GVH Chipeso ruled the area. He was only 32 years old, which was exceptionally young for any headman, especially for a Group Village Headman.46

Revori was quite remote and therefore had its own school and medical centre. It was half a day’s walk from the nearest powerlines and relied primarily on electricity from personal solar panels, which only a few of its richest villagers owned. Revori could not be reached by road and its economy was dominated by a tourist lodge. This serviced wealthy foreigners who could afford to travel there by private boat, as well as particularly dedicated backpackers. Out of the village of approximately 200 people, about 20 were employed by this lodge, with the rest primarily engaged in fishing or farming. This made Frank, the azungu lodge owner, at least as important to Revori as VH Jerimani, the Village Headman.

Vsawans in all these villages consistently described a bygone era, which they saw as relatively unchanging. This era was romanticised as a time when people ate communally and

---

46 Because Group Village Headmen are typically in charge of between two and ten village headmen, they are almost always at least 50 years of age.
when everyone respected their Village Headmen and their parents. During this time, the area was supposedly self-sufficient in terms of fishing and cassava production. Further, price controls and currency regulation ensured that people were well-fed and clothed. Economic regulation and a narrative where Malawians were wealthy (compared to other Africans) due to their ability to feed and clothe themselves were core to Hasting Banda’s political legitimacy and many Malawians report longing for a similar pre-democratic past (Ribohn 2002). Tumbuka Vsawans had been oppressed by Banda and they spoke less favourably about dictatorial rule than other Malawians (significantly more than half of the Vsawans I spoke to claimed to value democracy), but still spoke wistfully about this unchanging past.

Vsawa had been less directly affected by 1990s economic liberalisation than other parts of Malawi. The most controversial forms of Malawian post-democratic liberalisation have been the privatisation of the nation’s single desk wheat board, which ensured stable wheat sale prices and food costs (Devereux 2002); as well as the implementation, scaling back and reprovisioning of extensive seed and fertiliser subsidies for wheat farmers (Harrigan 2003). While many Tumbuka grow and buy some maize, their primary crop of consumption is cassava, diminishing the impact of these policies. Long term government neglect has also made the region comparatively self-sufficient and, unlike tobacco and wheat farmers in other parts of the country, Vsawa’s crops are not produced for international markets (which in the case of tobacco are diminishing, see Hazarika and Alwang 2003) meaning that rising transport costs, due to currency devaluation, are less impactful on them. Vsawan Tumbuka therefore did not report a sharp distinction between the dictatorial and democratic periods, but rather a slow worsening of their conditions of living, (which appeared to be caused, at least in part but in migration from other, poorer parts of Malawi and the over-fishing and smaller farms caused by population growth) and with this a weakening of the local social fabric.

However, almost all Vsawans claimed that the region was now rapidly changing. My informants expressed a combination of apprehension and excitement over this process. They typically claimed that Vsawa had begun growing, or ‘developing’, quickly in 2004 when a local oligarch named Chezazie had brought a flatbed truck that enabled reliable transport between the region and Mzuzu. Despite being less than 200 kilometres from Mzuzu Vsawa was very isolated before this truck begun operating. Trade or travel outside the region typically involved multiple day foot journeys, which obviously hampered the sale of fish and agricultural commodities. There is only one road connecting Mzuzu and Vsawa, this cannot be travelled when it rains, as it does almost daily between December and March. During the
dry season travelling this road in Chezazie’s truck would rarely take less than five hours. Vsawans could also reach Nkhata Bay, Malawi’s busiest tourist area, by boat. This journey typically required the use of a commercial boat, which travelled there and back twice a week, taking between six and eighteen hours each way.

Vsawa had long been neglected by the Malawian state, however the purchase of Chezazie’s truck coincided with the election of a particularly shrewd local MP. His patronage, in the form of infrastructure, was the main way Vsawans reported government influence in their lives. For example, not long after Chezazie’s truck began operating Vsawa Proper received limited electricity from ESCOM, the nation’s power company, while the MP was on the national electricity committee. Initially, a few poles connected the houses of rich and politically influential Vsawans to Malawi’s power grid. However, this has now expanded to about one in ten houses in Vsawa Proper (although it has not reached anyone in the outlying villages). Vidacom, a pan-African telephone company, built a petrol-powered reception satellite in Vsawa in 2009, another decision which the MP had supposedly lobbied for. This meant that the majority of the area had some, although infrequent, phone reception. Villagers responded to this by importing cheap mobile phones from Tanzania and China. Vsawans, even those from villages like Revori with no electricity or phone coverage, claimed that access to Mzuzu’s market and technological advances like electricity had improved their lives. They pointed to the growing number of tin roofs on houses and to the many villagers (approximately 10-20%) who owned mobile phones as evidence of Vsawa’s increased wealth.

**Economic and social change within Vsawa**

Vsawan society was responding to a collection of changes. These changes incorporated Vsawans’ newfound access to Mzuzu’s markets. Further, my interactions with villagers implied to me that they conceptualised many other social alterations as being the direct result of their increased interaction with the outside world. Vsawans had previously found resources either through leaving the village or by extracting these from the land or the lake. Young Vsawan men would travel to a Malawian city, Tanzania or South Africa and send money back to their wives and parents. People who had become successful outside Vsawa (ideally obtaining work as domestic servants or miners in South Africa) would finally assist many villagers. However, Vsawans claimed that remittance income was diminishing due to

---

47 Information provided to me by the head of one of the NGOs
48 Authors, including Bulloch (2009), who study rural environments all over the developing world note that tin roofs are often a signifier of development-related affluence.
Malawi’s economic stagnation; movements against labour migration in recipient countries; and successful Malawians’ reluctance to provide for their increasingly dependent rural relatives.

Simultaneously, Vsawans explained that climate change, erosion and population growth had decreased the amount of food that an average farm produced. Villagers primarily grew cassava, a drought resistance root crop that is the staple of almost every Vsawan meal. Only the largest farms sold their cassava and their owners reinvested this money in the local cash economy through hiring *ganyu* (paid local labour). Almost every Vsawan family had their own small farm and the vast majority of villagers rationed out the cassava that they produced over the course of the year. They would occasionally exchange some of this with their neighbours as a form of gift-giving or mutual insurance. Many farms, particularly those near streams and therefore outside Vsawa Proper, grew small amounts of vegetables, often tomato and cabbage, for sale in the village. However, vegetables trucked in from Mzuzu could be sold for less than the price that growers from outer Vsawa asked for. This decreased costs for Vsawans with access to cash, but it threatened the agricultural livelihoods of farmers who sold their own produce. It also reduced the availability of vegetables for marginalised villagers who relied on gifts from family and friends.

While remittances and farm incomes were often smaller than in the past, marketisation had drastically increased the economic importance of Vsawan fish. Population growth had contributed to overfishing, leading to poor yields for those who fished near the lakeshore. A small number of Vsawan oligarchs (about one per village) had been able to buy motorboats. They used these to open up new, more distant sections of Lake Malawi for profitable fishing. This was done by placing multiple canoes on the back of motor boat. These canoes were then taken to a remote part of the lake where the fishermen dropped a large net called a *makwao* into the water. This was dragged by both the canoe fishermen and the motorboat crew until it was pulled up and the fishing catch stored on the boat. This form of fishing required petrol for motorboats and paraffin to put in lamps that attract the fish, both of which had to be bought from outside Vsawa. Fish were therefore transported to Mzuzu, where they attracted

---

49 Vsawans were keenly interested in climate change, as many government and NGOs programs attributed droughts to this. However, they conceptualised climate change as primarily caused by their own acts, in particular local deforestation and by logging in the Congo.
50 Chapter three focuses on the situations in which Vsawans either shared food with family and friends or declined to do so.
five to ten times the price they would earn in the village. This enabled a fishing crew to obtain more petrol and paraffin for their next journey.

There had been economic winners and losers out of Vsawa’s changing relationship with the outside world. The village’s supposed increased wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few oligarchs (again about one per village), who had the capital to exploit the increased marketisation of daily life. There was almost no differentiation between these oligarchs’ operations; almost all of them owned a small store that sold essentials like soap, cooking oil and sugar, and that extended credit to a network of regular buyers, who would refer to the oligarch as aculuaculu, a ‘big man’ or patron. Most oligarchs also owned a motorboat, a fishing net and a bar, the largest of which contained a fridge, pool table or television.

Some fishermen who were skilful and lucky also became wealthy. This was due to the high price that urban consumers were prepared to pay for their wares. However, those who fished on an oligarchs’ boat were paid a percentage of this person’s profits, which was determined after accounting for the cost of petrol and paraffin. This meant that many fishermen who were less skilled or less lucky would regularly return home from a fishing trip with little or nothing to show for it. Informants told me that this was almost unheard of in the past, when everyone fished from their own canoes.

Similarly growing in wealth was a small group of petty traders. These people bought fish in the village and then travelled via Chezazie’s flatbed truck to Mzuzu to resell them. They would return to Vsawa with vegetables and commodities like mobile phone credit, which they would then sell at a mark-up. This activity required good financial instincts, excellent numeracy and physical and social mobility. It was, therefore, done primarily by young men who had been to school.51

For the vast majority of Vsawans, changes to their lives were as much observational as economic. These people saw others travel to the market in Mzuzu, but rarely went themselves. They congregated outside the home of an oligarch with electric lights when socialising after dinner, but would sleep in a house without electricity. They may have a mobile phone, but could not afford phone credit.52 Most Vsawans knew a fisherman who had

---

51 The relationship between going to school and obtaining the relevant skills for this task is unpacked in chapter five. Women did not lack these skills but often feared for their safety when travelling to Mzuzu, or their husbands and partners argued that this activity was unsafe for them, as they may either be raped or have an affair while in Mzuzu.

52 Malawi has some of the world’s lowest mobile phone usage affordability. While mobile phones are very cheap, phone credit is not. For many rural Malawians a single phone call can cost a day’s cash income.
become cash rich and a young man whose talent for Mzuzu’s markets had allowed him to put an iron sheet roof on his house. However, when I asked more forensically about informants’ financial positions, almost no one, including the young man and the fisherman, had any emergency savings. Further, villagers found that their own food stocks were slowly diminishing and that they were increasingly in need of cash.

Similarly, while some young men had found wealth, there was more of a perceived than actual generational shift in the economy. In most families, increased land scarcity had resulted in multiple generations living in the same home. Often the children in their mid-twenties were the wealthiest members of the household in terms of disposable income and would be the most influential in intra-household discussion. However, they were not nominally the household head and did not own the land that was the family’s primary form of subsistence. Older men would grudgingly defer to their sons’ decision-making. They told me that they did so out of practicality. However, their answers often involved observations about how the village was changing, or Vsawans increasingly need for financial literacy or English proficiency. This implied to me that they believed that the youths were more able than their elders to interact with the conflation of modernity, marketisation and development that they conceptualised electricity and trade with Mzuzu as bringing to the village. Most Vsawans were exceptionally interested in these changes, even if their own material livelihood had not been altered drastically. In this context, the presence of NGOs both foregrounded societal change to villagers and influenced the relationship that they perceived between development and the external world.

NGOs in Vsawa – Providers and Symbols of Development
I will now introduce each of the NGOs in Vsawa. I will detail the development projects they undertook and will briefly recount the dominant Vsawan understandings of each NGO’s presence. In doing so, I provide information about the NGOs that is salient for the remainder of my thesis and for Vsawa’s primary development narrative (explored later in this chapter). I also foreground that understandings of these NGOs reflected not only the projects they provisioned and the symbols of development they emitted, but also Malawian development narratives and Vsawans’ intra-village relationships. Further, I highlight that the effects of each NGO’s presence were not limited to those of its projects and that these effects were both filtered through, and influenced, intra-community relationships and expectations.

Mbwezi (meaning ‘friendship’ in chiTumbuka)

Mbwezi’s projects were the largest NGO intervention in Vsawa and villagers invoked Mbwezi more than any other NGO when they were discussing development. Mbwezi employed 20 full-time staff in Vsawa and another ten people in a head office in Mzuzu. The NGO was funded by international donors and grant provisioning bodies. It was founded in 2002 after a series of consultations between Brigid Bartel, Mbwezi’s mzungu\(^{54}\) founder, and local traditional leaders. The NGO’s first project was the building of a community hall, which was requested by villagers at a public meeting. In 2007 the NGO built a library that it connected to this hall. Mbwezi maintained a community garden and initially only ran projects in this garden and at its hall. It was staffed by Jumbo (see introduction) and azungu volunteer project managers with little development experience and inadequate local language skills.

In 2007 Mbwezi hired a Botswana project manager and in 2009 a (mphipa\(^{55}\)) South African program director. The program director worked in Mzuzu, sourcing funding for the NGO. The project manager resided in Vsawa and expanded the scope and number of the projects that the NGO performed. Mbwezi staff began to travel to outer villages to provide services, including distributing seeds and running HIV awareness training. Tensions arose between the project manager and azungu volunteers over the pace of the organisation’s expansion (with the project manager wanting to do more work in the community). As a result, Mbwezi now has sporadic azungu volunteers and rarely more than one at a time.

Mbwezi ran projects in the fields of agriculture, forestry, health, education, and microfinance. Some of these projects involved the provisioning of resources to individual Vsawans (for example, free seeds or saplings). Resource targeting was undertaken by the NGO or by a Village Headman. Mbwezi’s most popular project involved giving out interest free micro-loans of up to $100US. Due to the rapid devaluation of the Malawi Kwacha (MK), loan recipients ended up paying back, in real terms, vastly less than they had borrowed.\(^{56}\) These loans were only available in the villages closest to Mbwezi’s office and people who lived in more remote parts of Vsawa would often complain about this.

Other Mbwezi projects, including their forestry initiative, required significant voluntary labour. This was marshalled either through individual volunteers or through pressure from the

---

\(^{54}\) White or European – azungu is its plural.

\(^{55}\) Black or African – aphipa is its plural.

\(^{56}\) The Kwacha was unpegged from the American Dollar in May 2013; during the next six months it lost more than half its value. This meant that a person who received a $100US loan in April only needed to pay back the Kwacha equivalent of $40US by October. For the remainder of this thesis I will translate MK to USD at 300 to 1, which was close to what it was for most of my time within the village.
headmen. People told me that they attempted to use volunteering as a way to ‘be kind’ to Mbwezi, a strategy to obtain future micro-loans from the NGO. However, the desire to receive these loans and a positive evaluation of most of Mbwezi’s projects was not the only reason people interacted with the NGO. It was also not the most important aspect of many Vsawan’s interpretations of Mbwezi’s presence.

More significant to most Vsawans than Mbwezi’s projects were the resources that it brought to the village, as well as the conflation of wealth, modernity and development that its presence signified. As the majority of Mbwezi’s staff were not local, they rarely had plots of land to farm and instead bought food from Vsawan merchants. Mbwezi’s employees were poorly connected to the community. This was because of the strenuous workload that the NGO gave them and a pan-Malawian belief that villagers had little in common with development professionals. Storeowners and food sellers knew this and they admitted to me that they charged them more than they would other villagers for the same products. Selling to Mbwezi’s staff was, therefore, both exceptionally profitable and signified an ability to interact with the outsiders who brought development to Vsawa. The NGO employees would befriend people (almost always educated youths) and would ask these people to shop on their behalf. A small number of these Vsawans were then employed by Mbwezi as nightwatchmen, builders or gardeners.

Further, Mbwezi had access to many resources that almost no one else in the community had. Before the village received electricity the NGO had the largest solar panels and the only internet connection in the area. Mbwezi also owned several motorbikes and two 4WDs. These vehicles signified to Vsawans their own vast economic distance from Mbwezi and from what they conceptualised as the developed world more generally. I saw villagers use becoming more like Mbwezi or its staff as a measurement of wealth. They discussed people becoming more like Mbwezi through the ownership of a mobile phone, then a tin roof and, finally, owning a car (a status reached by one person, in late 2012, among the 20,000 Vsawans).

Mbwezi emitted symbols that conflated its wealth with modernity and development. The internal walls of the NGO’s hall were covered in illustrations of two-parent, two-child azungu families and of basic hygiene and literacy-based concepts written in English. One of the external walls was dominated by a large graffiti-text sign that read “To the people of Vsawa ... development”. Mbwezi’s library had everyday items such as fish and tomatoes painted on

---

57 How and why this took place is the focus of chapter six.
its partitions with the English spelling in large black letters underneath. When the NGO staff (some of whom were from Vsawa, the majority of whom were not) were sitting in this building there would be five or six computers running, along with an equivalent number of smartphones, two or three of which would be playing loud Zambian or Nigerian pop music. Staff would speak in English when other Vsawans were present and their public interactions were considerably more gender-mixed than those of most villagers.

These symbols and resources influenced the lives of many Vsawans who were not beneficiaries of Mbwezi’s projects. The NGO and its staff modelled extreme wealth through the items it owned. It linked this wealth to development, and to the world outside the village, through its pictures of azungu and its English language signage. Through the NGO staff’s comparatively profligate spending, they significantly enhanced the wealth of select merchants and of the small number of youths whom they befriended. They also made it easier for other merchants and youths to link their wealth to development and to modernity.

A core aspect of Mbwezi’s presence was, therefore, the way that it advertently or inadvertently encouraged Vsawans who were not beneficiaries of its projects to see development as brought from the outside world and linked to affluence. The visibility of Mbwezi reinforced a narrative where social change and development were tied to, and came from, the world outside the village, often entering via the road from Mzuzu.

**ChurchCare**

ChurchCare received much of its development funding from inside Vsawa. However, it had less local social significance than Mbwezi. Further, as a comparatively small organisation, Vsawan understandings of ChurchCare’s presence disproportionally reflected the relationships of the villagers associated with it. Village narratives relating to the NGO also gave primacy to a small group of Canadian donors as development providers. This reflected Malawian expectations, intra-village power dynamics and the acts and symbols that the NGO emitted.

ChurchCare provided free grain to widows and orphans. It also ran training programs for volunteers to learn about home-based AIDS care. Vsawans who attended training sessions received large per diems[^58] and travel allowances. The NGO is tied to the Central African Presbyterian (CCAP) church, the largest church in Malawi, which has a strong congregation.

---

[^58]: Allowances paid by a development organisation for each day a person attends training. While supposedly paid as acknowledgement that a person is unable to work that day, allowances from many development bodies in Africa are very generous. See chapter seven of this thesis, as well as Swidler (2006) and Smith (2004).
in Vsawa. Its funds come from this church’s collection plate, as well as from a Canadian church-based NGO. My informants believed that ChurchCare’s Canadian donors were more financially significant to the NGO than they actually were, often telling me that these donors were almost solely financially responsible for ChurchCare. This was partially because the donors had donated a white 4WD with their logo on it, which delivered the NGO’s maize. It drove from house to house, dropping the bags of maize to the front door. This looked to many Vsawans as though the 4WD was providing personal gifts from the donors to local widows and orphans.

People’s attribution of ChurchCare’s projects to the Canadian donors also reflected Malawi’s development narrative and the best interests of Vsawa’s elite. Vsawans expected that NGO-driven development would be paid for by people from outside their village and they interpreted the 4WD with the Canadian donors’ logo on it as evidence of this. Further, the NGO’s only full time employee in Vsawa was a woman named Roxanne. For Vsawan men it therefore made sense to depict the Canadian donors as catalysing the NGO’s acts, which allowed them to avoid venerating this woman.

Women utilised Roxanne as a model of the advantages that a small family size and a good education could provide a Vsawan woman. She had two children and was one of a very small number of female Vsawans who had completed school. I saw Women use her as evidence that NGOs were more likely to hire them than their husbands, as these organisations were ‘looking for gender’, a local idiom for most NGOs’ preference for hiring and supporting women. Vsawan women would claim that employment with an NGO could be achieved in line with traditional culture, due to the link between ChurchCare and Malawian Christianity. This interpretation encouraged the sending of women to school and these women having few children. However, many men would argue that Roxanne was not successful. They would say she was poor and merely looked wealthy because she spent money on herself, rather than on her family. They would tell their wives that ChurchCare’s international donors were responsible for development and that Roxanne merely ‘gave out food’, a simpler task without the prestigious label of ‘developer’.

In this manner, ChurchCare’s presence influenced communal debates about the relationship between development and women’s employment, as well as intra-household debates about resource distribution and family size. However, Vsawan understandings of the NGO’s

59 See chapter six, pages 175-177.
presence (and the symbols associated with the NGO) integrated nationwide development narratives (the belief that external donors typically paid for development) and intra-community power dynamics (men’s typically superior positions in village hierarchies). This was the case with Vsawan understandings of all the NGOs, which altered, but were simultaneously understood through, local discourses and bargaining positions.

**Green Earth**

Green Earth was an internationally founded NGO with a conservation program that Vsawans hated and a well-liked cook-stove building project. It was British funded and ran operations throughout Malawi. It had over 2,000 employees, but only two in Vsawa, both *aphipa*. This NGO’s influence was more heavily tied to its projects than that of other NGOs. However, this influence was still guided through intra-community relationships and contributed to local development narratives. Green Earth, therefore, had effects other than merely its project outcomes.

Many Vsawans told me that they disliked Green Earth because of a conservation program it began in 2007. The NGO had persuaded Vsawa’s Traditional Authority (TA – its most senior chief), as well as its Member of Parliament (MP), to quadrant off a hilly area south of Vsawa Proper. They made it illegal to cut down trees in the area as a way to combat deforestation. The place that Green Earth had selected was being cultivated by residents of Jumpi, who were subsequently removed from their farms. People in Jumpi were still not allowed back on this land by 2014 and embitterment about this project, both in Jumpi and Vsawa as a whole, was strong.

Green Earth also ran a popular project that built fuel efficient cook-stoves. Volunteers made stoves out of mud bricks in the shape of a British fireplace, which was designed to capture heat that would be lost in traditional cooking methods (this technique supposedly reduces an area’s firewood consumption). Green Earth paid its volunteers for each stove they built and put into a Vsawan’s house, and informants told me that these stoves looked quite modern. This meant that even villagers who did not necessarily believe that the stoves were useful would still have one in their homes. The headman of each village would choose a person to volunteer with Green Earth. Headmen I knew typically selected someone whom they wanted to reward or repay a debt to, as this form of volunteering was rightly perceived to provide easy money. These volunteers were therefore often popular members of the community and Green Earth’s popularity rose as it was associated with them and was seen to assist them financially.
Further, both of Green Earth’s Vsawan staff were well liked. These two people, a man named Chinelo and a woman named Azichi, who were born in Vsawa, were generous in sharing their wealth and had not been employed by the NGO when it began its conservation program. Green Earth paid them well and this was another way in which it was slowly improving its image. When villagers referred to Green Earth as “Chinelo’s tree planting” or “the people that help Chinelo” they typically appeared to be appraising the NGO positively, depicting it as a small organisation that paid volunteers to build cook-stoves and as donors who assisted Chinelo in financially supporting his mother, wife and four sisters.

Green Earth’s image was linked heavily to the projects it performed. However, the direct effects of these projects were not Green Earth’s only impact on Vsawan life. Its influence was mediated through Village Headmen’s choice of volunteer and through Chinelo and Azichi’s popularity. Further, Green Earth depicted to Vsawans both the advantages and challenges of externally provisioned development. Vsawans’ local hierarchies and traditions were ignored when Green Earth prevented Jumpi’s residents from farming. However, the NGO also provided resources, in the form of cook-stoves and money, which came from the outside world. This external provisioning was crucial to Vsawans’ narratives about development.

**Kulutilizya Msambiska (meaning ‘continuous learning’ in chiTumbuka)**

*Kulutilizya Msambiska* provided health and educational services to the Revori area of Northern Vsawa. Katherine, the NGO’s *azungu* founder and manager, wanted her organisation to be financially self-sufficient in the long run. She therefore insisted that *Kulutilizya Msambiska* charge villagers for the services it provided. This contradicted the village’s development narrative, according to which an NGO’s role was to provide services without charging any fee. The NGO’s failure to conform to Malawian development narratives, combined with personal relationships among villagers, and between Vsawans and the organisation’s staff, meant that it was often slandered. Through this slander, I interpreted Vsawans to be elucidating and utiliseing understandings of development and their expectations of NGOs.

*Kulutilizya Msambiska* employed eight Malawian full-time staff and a regular stream of *azungu* volunteers. Katherine lived in Frank’s travel lodge, as did these *azungu* volunteers. *Kulutilizya Msambiska* worked primarily out of a community centre, which it had built in 2010 with funding from its UK-based parent charity. The centre contained a library, two classrooms used for tutoring and youth group, and a ‘power room’ where solar panels provided the cheapest electricity (used to charge mobile phones) available in Revori.
Kulutilizya Msambiska’s health work focused on a pesticide-free community garden and on sending international volunteers to the village’s medical centre. It sold eggs and vegetables from this garden at a lower price than local producers charged for the same products.

When I discussed development with them, Vsawans typically mentioned electricity, healthcare and cheap monetised commodities. However when these were provided by Kulutilizya Msambiska, my informants told me that they were not development. I interpreted villagers’ questioning of whether Kulutilizya Msambiska brought, and signified development, as a way to reject a narrative where Vsawa was financially responsible for its own development and because of personal embitterment between Katherine and senior members of their community.

Upon founding Kulutilizya Msambiska, Katherine had invited the Village Headman of Revori and nearby villages to serve as an advisory council. However, she had fired these headmen when she found out that they were paying themselves travel allowances out of the NGO’s funds. Further, due to the lack of other employment in Revori, some villagers volunteered at Kulutilizya Msambiska. They often believed that the NGO would eventually pay or hire them and they became angry when this did not happen.

Discussion over Kulutilizya Msambiska therefore allowed Vsawans to communicate their intra-village loyalties and to scrutinise development more generally. By stating that this NGO did not assist Vsawans, villagers demonstrated their loyalty to the headmen that Katherine had fired. Doing so also privileged interpretations of development that gave special responsibilities to those with access to the external world. Vsawans’ gossip implied to me that they believed that Kulutilizya Msambiska’s donors, rather than villagers, should be financially responsible for developing Vsawa. Through conversations that discussed why the donors had failed to support Revori, or whether Katherine was stealing from these donors, Vsawans communicated and negotiated local development narratives.

These four NGOs therefore influenced perceived and actual changes to Vsawan social life. The NGOs’ projects and, more importantly their presence, had a tangible impact on the lives of villagers. In many cases the projects’ impacts were mediated through local relationships (for instance, a headman selecting a friend to volunteer with Ripple to reward this friend for their loyalty). Further, the NGOs, Mbwezi and Ripple in particular, had significant non-project resources, like staff salaries, that influenced other Vsawans’ wealth and livelihoods. This often assisted youths and merchants, who were becoming wealthier already. Most
significantly, each NGO contributed to, and was conceptualised through, Vsawan development narratives and intra-community concerns. This process furthered the understanding that the village was changing, with the outside world inevitably encroaching and forcing myriad opportunities and threats onto Vsawans.

**An Overview of Vsawan Development Discourse**

When interviewed, Vsawans described development both as the ‘projects’ brought into the village by outsiders and as increased access to modern commodities. Villagers appeared to conceptualise a specific relationship between development and social change; they feared changes to their hierarchies, which they associated with some projects and commodities, but refused to consider these problems to be caused by development. This allowed Vsawans to affirm their desire for what they understood to be development, while questioning social changes commonly associated with it. I recount this development narrative because the relationship between development and social change was implicitly scrutinised in the negotiations that NGO presence influenced and in the intra-village status changes that the NGOs enabled.

Like many Malawians, Vsawans seemed to understand development in terms of ‘projects’. The term ‘project’ was used to describe everything from agricultural inputs organised by NGOs to the coming of electricity, from improvements to schools and to road works. These included “Chezazie’s truck project” and “ESCOM’s [the electricity provider] lighting project”. Each NGO was depicted both as a project and as a collection of projects; for instance, Green Earth was referred to as “Green Earth’s project” and “Green Earth’s stove project”. Common to all these projects was the understanding that they were owned by someone from outside Vsawa and that they involved modernising technologies or techniques.

Vsawans told me that they had little control over a project’s owner, who was inevitably far from the village, but that they typically had some recompense with its local representatives. For instance, villagers had no role in determining which roads ESCOM supplied with power poles. However, through a combination of threats and bribes, ESCOM’s two local employees could be persuaded to connect a house on the right street (one of the three largest dirt roads in Vsawa Proper) to the electricity grid. Similarly, donors funded NGOs and determined which projects an NGO would perform. However, a good relationship with an NGO employee or a headman may enable a Vsawan to participate in more popular, or more profitable, NGO

---

60 See Msukwa and Taylor (2011) for more details on how Malawians understand development as ‘projects’.
projects (like Mbwezi’s micro-credit scheme). While the external developers held ultimate power over their projects, Vsawans and the projects’ local brokers held responsibilities that reflected norms for each type of externally provisioned development. For this reason it made sense to Vsawans for ESCOM to charge households for its electricity project, but many villagers found it inconceivable that Kulutilizya Msambiska’s donors would want them to pay for development.

Vsawans also described access to modern commodities as development. These often came through projects, and villagers were sceptical about any project that did not provide increased access to a modern good. For example, they would explain that tree planting organised by Mbwezi was not development because “we [they] have trees in Vsawa already”. Vsawans also regarded their increased non-project related access to modern commodities to be development. They often spoke about tin roofs, mobile phones and packaged, processed foods in this manner. Most Vsawans’ limited ownership of some of these goods encouraged them to see the broader influx of commodities, many of which they had no personal access to, to be development. Poor villagers would explain to me that “Vsawa is developing” because they had a mobile phone, because a fisherman who they lived near had put a tin roof on his house and because a youth that they knew, who had travelled to Mzuzu to sell fish, could afford to eat at a restaurant.

Connected to development, but conceptually segregated from it, was a collection of changes to Vsawan values and hierarchies. Vsawans would often refer to these as ‘problems’ and on some occasions would directly link them to a commodity. For example, some villagers claimed that mobile phone access had increased promiscuity among youths, as text messaging had made elicit rendezvous easier to organise. Similarly, many villagers reported that television encouraged young men to spend money on themselves, rather than giving it to their parents, because this was how people on TV acted. Men occasionally claimed that Roxanne’s employment encouraged women to be proud61 and not to listen to their husbands. However, most Vsawans were adamant that development itself had not caused these problems.

An older Vsawan man, who had just finished complaining about his son’s failure to share his money, explained to me that:

---

61 Kagitemwa – a word that Vsawans translated into ‘proud’ but which only had negative connotations, similar to arrogant.
Development doesn’t cause problems, because it is for the future.

This man and his peers, who we were sitting with, went on to express their anger at deforestation, promiscuity, overfishing and increasing income inequality. However, they differentiated these problems from development. For example, the first man claimed that the illicit sexual rendezvous he believed mobile phone use had enabled were:

A problem of electricity, not a problem of development.

He said this despite having previously described access to electricity as a form of development. I interpreted this man, along with most Vsawans, to be conceptually linking development to changes in their material circumstances and alterations to local values and hierarchies. However, simultaneously, they appeared to have figuratively segregated development from these social changes when they found them to be problematic.

Vsawa’s dominant development narrative therefore meant that development was almost inherently good. Development was the increased access to modern commodities that Vsawans desired and the ‘projects’ that external developers undertook to provide them with these. Development did not cause problems, which were instead associated with the specific commodities or development organisation that had brought them. Through this narrative, Vsawans alluded to their fear that external modernity would bring drastic changes to their values and hierarchies, yet affirmed a communal desire for the increased access and opportunities that they described as development. The remainder of this thesis deals with Vsawans’ negotiations over these social changes and villagers’ aspirations relating to development. It explores how NGOs influenced what development meant, who could claim to be developed and how these negotiations changed Vsawans’ obligations to each other.

**Conclusions**

In this chapter and the one preceding it I have set the scene for a study of how the presence of NGOs influenced social change in Vsawa. The previous chapter argued for an analytic focus on intra-village interactions and an actor-network understanding of NGOs as macro-actants, a form of limited causal agents. This chapter has introduced Vsawa, a village that perceived itself to be negotiating drastic social changes, and four NGOs that were influencing societal alteration.

I first described Vsawa and, in particular, the six villages where I spent most of my time. I detailed economic and material changes that Vsawans understood to be affecting their lives
and to be caused by increased interactions with the outside world. I then described the four NGOs that ran projects in Vsawa. These NGOs influenced village life in ways that were not encapsulated by their projects and Vsawan understandings of the NGOs both altered and incorporated intra-community power dynamics and development narratives. To conclude, I recounted what I understood to be dominant Vsawan understandings of the relationship between development, modernity and social change. Vsawans seemed to conceptualise increased access to modern commodities to be development and they see this development as primarily provided to the village by those outside it. They also understand these modern incursions as bringing problematic social changes but differentiate these changes from development itself, which they perceive to be inherently good. Through this narrative Vsawans affirmed their desire for development, while arguing that changes to their intra-community values and hierarchies need not be an aspect of this development.

The remainder of this thesis builds upon my description of Vsawan life. It is divided into two parts. In the first, I show how Vsawans negotiated changes to discourses that surrounded their personal resource consumption and the meaning of education. This section explores how the changes to Vsawans’ material life (from the first section of this chapter) are connected to the narrative of development and modernity introduced at the end of this chapter. This section also builds upon my observation that Vsawan understandings of the NGOs influenced village development narratives, but were affected by these narratives and by intra-community power dynamics. The final section of my thesis details three groups of actors who exist in the disjuncture between villagers and NGO management: Village Headmen, NGO staff and NGO volunteers. These unequally influential Vsawans were crucial to villagers’ understandings of the NGOs. I show how Vsawans’ treatment of these individuals reflected their desire for development and their fears about social change. This generated intra-village narratives of modernity and development that were influenced, but not proscribed by, the presence of NGOs. As this thesis describes social change in Vsawa, I have provided this chapter as a background. It, like the remainder of my thesis, is oriented toward Vsawans’ intra-village interactions and negotiations, understanding NGO presence as one factor that influenced and, on occasion, catalysed social change.
PART TWO: NGOS AS MACRO-ACTANTS IN VSAWAN DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

In this section I detail how intra-village discourses were influenced by the presence of NGOs. In chapter three I argue that Mbwezi’s presence was implicated in Vsawan negotiations over resource-sharing norms. I claim that the NGO was used as a placeholder when villagers wanted to discuss the increased inequality that they associated with ‘chalo chazungu’ or ‘the life of whites’. However, I also argue that Mbwezi mediated these discussions. It added to the local moral legitimacy of inequality by enabling villagers to symbolically link individual consumption to development. Further, I show that, through gathering unequally powerful actors and discourses, Mbwezi allowed some Vsawans to increase their claims on others’ resources. In chapter four I argue that NGO presence encouraged Vsawans to conceptualise education as primarily useful for interacting with a supposedly modern world, which they saw as outside, and encroaching upon, the village. I also show that some Vsawans were able to use interacting with an NGO as evidence that they are educated, but that villagers scrutinised the educational claims of women and poorer men. Through negotiations over who was educated, Vsawans elucidated their desire for a specific modernity; one that brought increased development, but did not cause drastic changes to communal norms and hierarchies. Both of these chapters, therefore, show that the Vsawans’ utilisations of the NGOs reflected villagers’ understanding of the outside world, the actions and symbols that NGOs emitted, and intra-village power dynamics. They also explore how villagers negotiated the shifting relationship between the community’s gerontocratic leaders and an emerging elite, who were perceived to have mastered a conflation of marketisation, education, modernity and development.

This section therefore focuses primarily upon answering my first two research questions. In these two chapters I argue that NGO presence encouraged Vsawans to see modernity, development and social change as inexplicably and problematically linked. The actions of the NGO staff and the symbols that NGOs emitted depicted development as being brought into the village from a modernity that existed outside it. These same actions and symbols, when combined with economic changes within Vsawa, other images of the western world, and the best interests of myriad villagers, encouraged Vsawans to link modernity to a collection of challenges to the norms and hierarchies that they had naturalised as their culture. In this context, NGO presence mediated Vsawan negotiations over changes to their intra-village obligations and entitlements. It justified a general decrease in resource sharing while assisting an (often already privileged) minority who could depict themselves as being able to thrive as modernity seemingly infiltrated Vsawa. These chapters also show how an actor-network ethnography that conceptualises NGOs as macro-actants, enables a study of the NGOs’ influence on intra-village discourse, while keeping villagers, rather than NGOs, at the centre of analysis. To this end, these chapters explicitly utilise Sayes’s (2014) depiction of macro-actants as having a limited agency, where their presence is interpreted through, yet guides changes to, Vsawan social networks and narratives.
Chapter Three: The Utility of ANT for Analysing Social Change – Mbwezi’s Influence on Vsawan Resource Sharing

In this chapter I argue that a combination of monetisation, individuation and development interventions changed the social meaning of sharing food and accumulating personal wealth in Vsawa. In making this claim I both build upon and disagree with authors including Polanyi (1968), Devereux (1999a) and Ponte (2000), who state that as the market economy penetrates rural Africa in individuates production and consumption, commoditising resources and disembedding them from their social context. Like Englund (1999) and Berry (1993), I reject this teleological view of social change, where the ‘input’ of monetisation produces the ‘output’ of reduced resource sharing. I instead consider the role of various villagers, NGO staff and Mbwezi, as a macro-actant, in influencing the interactions, narratives and relationships through which villagers negotiated changes to their resource sharing obligations and entitlements. I conclude that these factors encouraged Vsawans to link individual consumption to westernisation and to development. However, I show that this changes the social resonance of sharing or refusing to share resources, rather than necessarily causing a reduction in food sharing. Through doing so, I demonstrate that, by conceptualising NGOs as macro-actants, it is possible to explore development interventions, while ensuring that the actions and agency of ‘local people’ maintains analytic primacy.

Mbwezi, as a macro-actant, influenced but did not proscribe changes to resource sharing in Vsawa. Both how these changes took place and the utility of actor-network theory for exploring the role of development interventions in social change will be demonstrated in this chapter. It will examine Mbwezi’s presence in the context of the four ways in which Sayes (2014) claims that macro-actants have agency. He states that they enable human agency; mediate interactions; serve as members of moral associations; and gather actors, texts and discourses. Vsawa had a public transcript of equitable resource redistribution, however, almost all villagers were covertly reducing the amount of food they shared. Vsawans

---

62 Chapter two detailed actor-network theory in more detail. Particularly salient for this chapter is that an actant or macro-actant is an object, text, discourse or material structure that is part of a network through which all purposive action is framed and emerges. Sayes (2014) claims that these actants have agency in that have “the ability to make a difference” to the acts that emerge from an actor-network. Sayes (2014) describes four ways this takes place (a list he does not claim is exhaustive). These are detailed chapter two and in the second paragraph of this chapter.

63 Due to its prominence in Vsawan discourse and its imposing physical structures, this chapter will focus exclusively on Mbwezi. The other NGOs will be reintroduced in chapter five.
therefore used Mbwezi as placeholder for the outside world when they negotiated changes to their intra-village obligations and entitlements. The NGO enabled their agency, while maintaining Vsawa’s public transcript. Further, Mbwezi both mediated interactions and altered moral associations through linking individual consumption to development and through presenting its donors as grand patrons for the community. Finally, Mbwezi gathered actors, objects, discourses and texts in a manner that enhanced one fisherman’s access to his networks’ food, while enabling additional claims on a specific fisherwoman’s savings.

Through detailing these interactions, which took place in the context of Mbwezi’s presence, but were not wholly caused by it, this chapter examines changes to the short- and long-term meaning of resource sharing in Vsawa. It highlights the agency of villagers without discounting the role of NGO presence.

**Food and Resource Sharing in Malawi**

To begin this chapter I describe how resource sharing takes place in rural Malawi. I note that it typically transpires through gifts from the rich to the poor and through relatively equitable sharing amongst poorer Malawians. I show that this resource sharing is tied to village social life and that villagers perceive it to be decreasing. I then note that some academics attribute this reduced sharing to marketisation and inequality. My ethnography critiques this position by exploring the intra-village interactions that empower some Vsawans to make claims on others’ resources, while weakening many other intra-community resource-sharing obligations.

Rural Malawians share resources horizontally (between their peers) and vertically (from patrons to clients). The items most commonly shared amongst peers are uncooked staple foods, typically maize in Malawi’s south or cassava in the nation’s north (Devereux 1997). Patrons who live in the same village as their clients will be asked for small amounts of money (100-500MK, $0.5-2 US) when a household cannot afford essential items like soap, as well as assistance with large irregular expenditures like school fees (Swidler and Watkins 2007). Since urban Malawians are typically much wealthier than villagers, they serve as patrons to their families and communities by sending home money or gifts like shoes and clothing (Anders 2002; Rohregger 2006).

Resource sharing is embedded within a Malawian village’s social life. Alongside sharing food and money, a villager will be expected to participate in communal activities, such as consistently attending church, going to weddings and funerals, and both thoughtfully giving
and graciously receiving gifts (Msukwa and Taylor 2011; Mtika 2000). Food sharing typically takes place through village sub-networks. These are made up of households with familial ties, which are geographically close and have similar levels of wealth to each other (Mtika 2000). Membership of any network is fluid and the expectations on members negotiated, with gossip and praise constantly communicating the acceptability of a network member’s actions (Booth et al. 2006; Mtika 2001). Intra-network scrutiny takes into account the frequency of a person’s resource sharing, their general behaviour and also intra-network inequalities that allow a network’s more powerful members to be less generous than its poorest (Peters 2002).

Similarly, the wealthy members of a Malawian village are expected to assist that village’s poor. This assistance is structured by local and national understandings of patron-clientism (Gilman 2002; Shawa 2012). Patrons are expected to give to their clients in accordance with that person’s needs and their own wealth. In return, a client should publically praise their patron and perform free labour for them (Swidler and Watkins 2007). Reflecting the inequality inherent in this relationship, a patron who does not fulfil their client’s expectations is likely to be praised less enthusiastically or, at worst, gossiped about. However, a client who slights their patron will quickly lose their support (Booth et al. 2006).

Both Malawian villagers and the academics who study them report decreased intra-village resource sharing since the nation’s democratisation (Chirwa 2002; Devereux 1999b; Mtika 2000). Malawians previously shared food under an *mphala* system, where each household would cook a meal and the village would eat it communally (Chinsinga 2004). Over time most villages moved towards extended families eating together. This shift was often catalysed by village wide or regional food shortages (Vaughan 1987). Most Malawians’ food consumption is now based around individual households or small collections of geographically close households across which multiple people are related (Chinsinga 2004). Malawians report significant, but diminishing, reciprocal sharing outside of this consumption unit (Mtika 2000). They also state that their patrons, both within the village and external to it, are less generous in their gifting than in the past and expect more praise and labour from their

64 For instance: marital fidelity, church attendance and sociability.
65 However, in some extreme cases patrons, especially intra-village patrons, are subject to witchcraft accusations. See Swidler and Watkins (2007).
66 *A Mphala* is a communal area with a grass roof held up by wooden poles. Malawians gather in the *Mphala* socially to avoid the heat and use it for events like traditional judgments. In the past when whole villages ate together regularly they would do so at their *Mphala*.
67 This system was not purely communitarian and how much food each family provided would be scrutinised. However, Malawians venerate it for ensuring that orphans and the destitute were fed.
clients (Booth et al. 2006). These statements are supported by Devereux’s (1999b) comprehensive study of informal food transfers in Malawi. He claims that, while resource transferring networks respond effectively to food crisis, Malawians’ regular sharing of food had diminished dramatically.

Devereux (1999b:1) attributes this reduced resource sharing to increased marketisation and inequality. He writes that:

Informal transfers, either between rich and poor or among the poor themselves appear to be declining over time, partly as a general consequence of commercialization and partially because deepening poverty means the economic basis for redistribution is contracting.

His position is supported by authors like Ponte (2000) who argues that the commoditisation of rural life extracts resources from their social context. Agrarian change is therefore often presented as an inevitable consequence of development; based upon an assumption that, as a society moves from an agrarian to a market economy, a parallel shift occurs from communal to familial resource sharing (Berry 1993; Kandiyoti 2000). However, in Malawi the production and consumption of resources had been commoditised to some extent long before food sharing moved from communities to households. For example, both thangata and ganyu are forms of individuated labour that have existed since British rule. Further, many Malawians have grown small plots of tobacco or vegetables to sell in regional markets since pre-colonial times (Englund 1996a; Kerr 2005a). This means that current changes to a village’s patterns of resource sharing cannot be solely attributed to newfound market access.

While life in most Malawian villages has become increasing commercialised, this does not adequately explain how resource sharing has changed within any specific village or the variation in changes across myriad villages. Berry (1993) and Guyer (1988) claim that this can only be understood by examining village-embedded actors, power relations and

---

68 Mtika (2000) make similar comments to Devereaux (1999) about the role of poverty, and particularly its relationship with Malawi’s aid epidemic, in stretching Malawian food-sharing networks past their breaking point.

69 Likely to have originally been unpaid labor for a headman but under the colonial system, individualised labor for the right to remain on a white landowner’s property, see Kandawire (1977).

70 Farm labor paid in money or food. Importantly, individually negotiated and paid rather than in work-party form. See Whiteside (2000) and Kerr (2005b) for more details.

71 Two factors that have contributed to this are the introduction of Free Primary Education (explored in the next chapter), which has enabled more children to go to school, but has forced their families to find money for school uniforms and books, and the fertiliser subsidy scheme, which can provide great wealth to the monetised poor but not to slightly poorer un-monetised community members see Chirwa, Matitia, et al. (2011) for more details on the fertiliser subsidies.
discourses. This is done by considering (for example) why many Malawian villagers equate reduced resource sharing with democracy and the western world – where they believe that everyone has enough to eat but does not care for their family or community (Ribohn 2002). This belief contextualises the intra-village discussions through which any specific patron renegotiates their responsibilities to their clients, and it is on these discussions that Berry (1993) calls for a focus.

I argue that non-human actants and macro-actants are likely to influence (though not wholly cause) these negotiations, through which the intra-village meaning of sharing or declining to share food is discussed, changed or affirmed. In Malawi this is especially true of actants and macro-actants associated with the western world and with development interventions. Mbwezi, the largest NGO in Vsawa, was one such macro-actant. Vsawans of myriad social positions therefore invoked and utilised Mbwezi when they negotiated changes to the social significance of intra-village resource sharing.

**Reduced resource sharing in Vsawa’s hidden transcripts**

I will now briefly detail how Vsawans shared resources, to provide context to the influence of Mbwezi’s presence on their resource-sharing practices. Vsawans maintained a public transcript of continuous, unobligated gifting. However, this transcript hid deep intra-community dissatisfaction. Most villagers privately claimed that their peers shared less than in the past and that their patrons increasingly did not assist them. Vsawans quietly blamed this decreased sharing on growing inequality and perceived western influence. This influence was believed to have enabled some (typically wealthier) Vsawans to aspire to live chalo chazungu or ‘the life of the whites’.

Vsawans publically praised the generosity of their peers and patrons as part of a public transcript of continuous sharing. When asked in focus group meetings they claimed that most food sharing took place spontaneously and that when people asked their peers for assistance they were never refused. This public transcript was assisted by Vsawans’ distaste for open confrontation,72 which limited the ways in which a villager could deny a peer’s request and discouraged people from responding with overt anger if they were denied. However, long-term observation and private conversations implied that Vsawa’s resource sharing was highly structured and that most villagers believed it was diminishing.

---

72 Booth, et al. (2006) claim that this is a Malawi-wide social trait.
The vast majority of food sharing occurred through sub-village peer networks that were largely horizontal and reciprocal. Vsawans told me that they shared food with people who were about as wealthy as they were, who lived near them and to whom they were related. An act of food sharing would most commonly be initiated by a woman whose household was short of a staple food (typically maize-flour, cassava or salt). She would either find a peer to request this food from or send a female child to do so. Alternatively, a Vsawan woman whose family was short of a small but monetised commodity (like tomatoes or cooking oil) would pointedly mention that her house was ‘missing’ this item in front of a peer. This peer would then be expected to buy this for her. While Vsawan women would often respond favourably to these appeals, there were a small number of accepted excuses to turn down someone’s request for assistance. Villagers would claim they had no food in the house or that they needed all of their money for a socially acceptable event like a wedding or church service. Informants told me that these excuses were interpreted by the asker and the people around them as a polite refutation of the request, rather than as factually accurate.

While there was rarely any public confrontation over food sharing, women spent a lot of time evaluating their peers’ commitment to reciprocity. I commonly heard small groups of women gossip about specific peers’ parsimony. These women would recount that, upon realising they did not have enough food in their house, they had requested assistance from a friend who they had recently helped. However, this friend had then lied about having nothing to share. Depending upon the listeners’ relationship with the woman telling the story and with the women the story was about, these listeners would either slander the absent villager or defend her. I interpreted this process to highlight that, despite Vsawa’s public narrative of equitable horizontal food sharing, refusal was actually quite frequent. It also foregrounded the role of rumour, gossip and intra-community popularity in negotiating this disjuncture and determining a person’s food access.

73 The daily sharing of staple foods is almost exclusively done by women. Men gift food to each other more lavishly, but more infrequently, providing items like fish from a particularly good catch or complementary clumps of meat from an animal slaughtered for commercial purposes.
74 Authors including Chinsinga (2004), Devereux (1997), Devereux, et al. (2006), Englund (1999), and Swidler and Watkins (2007) examine the circumstances under which a Malawian can refute resource claims from their peers or access another person’s resources.
75 Inevitably a tiny amount, as most Vsawans were cash-poor; tomatoes, for example, are sold at three for 50MK ($0.15US).
76 This often took place while skinning cassava. As the staple food of the region and a root vegetable with an inedible skin, Vsawan women spent significant amounts of time socialising in small groups while performing this activity.
Similarly, Vsawans would publicly praise the generosity of their intra-community patrons. Their patron-client relationships appeared to be characterised by an unequitable mutual dependence, with villagers performing free labour for their patrons by (for example) building mud-bricks for them. During church services Vsawans would publically thank God for wealthy locals who had assisted them. They would also crowd around these people’s latest purchases (often music players or TVs) complementing them loudly. This process seemed to raise local patrons’ status and to insulate them from criticism by other villagers whom they had not assisted. However, in private Vsawans would complain that their patrons had become selfish, greedy or had ‘forgotten them’ and would laugh at their impractical and expensive purchases. Simultaneously, patrons appeared constricted when publicly turning down their clients’ requests. They would often have to claim to be poor to do so, or claim to have too many other expenses. Villagers would subtly juxtapose these excuses against their patrons’ televisions and other symbols of their access when they told jokes about these patrons to their peers.

**Reduced sharing as a result of westernisation (chalo chazungu)**

When asked privately, most villagers would claim that people shared less than in the past. They attributed this reduced sharing to *chalo chazungu*, which translates into ‘the life of the whites’. *Chalo chazungu* referred to a convolving of individual consumption, marketisation and westernisation. Villagers told me that this was unstoppably expanding in Vsawa and they had mixed feelings about it. Most Vsawans associated *chalo chazungu* with increased material wealth but also with expanding inequality.

This inequality was intimately tied to access to the market and the world outside the village that *chalo chazungu* signified. An increasing number of poorer Vsawans interacted with the formal economy, mainly through fishing. Some of these people were slowly growing wealthier, while their peers struggled with monetary devaluation and worsening soil quality. Similarly, newfound (albeit limited) access to Malawi’s banking system and regular transport to Mzuzu’s market meant that wealthy Vsawans had new investment opportunities, which appeared to be more appealing than solidifying their ‘wealth in people’ by assisting their clients.

---

77 The construction of the road to Mzuzu (see chapter two) meant that Vsawan fishermen could now sell their fish to urban Malawians for vastly more than their rural peers would pay for them. This road also allowed for the importation of vegetables that were much cheaper than Vsawans could sell them for. For more information on devaluation see chapter two.

78 A term taken from Guyer and Belinga (1995).
A poor Vsawan woman with little access to the market explained to me that:

Selling rather than giving things away has improved the standard of living. However, it has led to people relying on each other less and being on their own. Now when you need help you have to pay.

And a wealthy storeowner claimed:

In Vsawa people always wanted something for free if the person selling it was their relative. But in Vsawa we are all related, so how would anyone make any money?

These two statements tied marketisation to reduced resource sharing and increased inequality. I interpreted the storeowner’s comment as a vindication of this marketisation, where he was now able to make money due to the reduced demands of his kin. However, the poor woman’s observation challenged this, as demonstrated by her warning that “when you need help you have to pay”.

The ‘standard of living’ to which the woman referred existed in comparison to an imagined western world, where people lived *chalo chazungu*. This world was a source of fascination as well as apprehension for her and for most Vsawans. Villagers’ understandings of *chalo chazungu* were based upon America reality shows,79 Hollywood action films with *chiChewa* subtitles, and the recollections of those villagers who had worked as domestic servants in South Africa. These sources confirmed the importance of individual wealth to western life, implying that a person who owned more possessions80 was closer to living *chalo chazungu*. Vsawans described these people as ‘*dandaula palibe*’, which translates as ‘worry free’. Through doing so, they contrasted the daily struggles of Vsawan life with the perceived ease of living in the west.

Many wealthy Vsawans told me that they aspired to live *chalo chazungu*. Their poorer peers sometimes considered this a noble ambition and on other occasions accepted its inevitability. Both rich and poor Vsawans privately claimed that *chalo chazungu* discouraged intra-community sharing and were apprehensive about the impacts of marketisation on the community. I was informed by an older Vsawan man that:

---

79 The area’s ‘cinema’ – a hall with an overhead projector – would occasionally show these during the half-time break of the English Premier League soccer.

80 For example, life was better if a person owned multiple plastic cups (most households only had one plastic cup for drinking water, which would be held on top of the houses urn), then better again if they owned cushioned chairs, then again if their house had an iron roof rather than thatching, and again if they owned a cooker or a stereo.
People used to live a village life that valued relations. Now people adopt a western life that you should just focus on your [nuclear] family.

I therefore understood him, along with almost all Vsawans, to conceptualise *chalo chazungu* as a move towards prioritising yourself and your family over the community. They therefore utilised the concept to discuss alterations to their resource-sharing practices, which their public transcript prevented them from acknowledging openly. In this context, the presence of an NGO, as a clear manifestation of *chalo chazungu*, enabled Vsawan discussions over the meaning of differing forms of resource consumption.

**NGO Presence as Enabling Human Agency**

Having introduced resource-sharing patterns in Vsawa and Malawi more generally, I use the remainder of this chapter to explore how Vsawans utilised, and were influenced by *Mbwezi*’s presence as they negotiated their intra-village obligations and entitlements. Structured around Sayes’s (2014) understanding of the agency of *macro-actants*, I first detail how Vsawans used the NGO as a placeholder for westernised consumption; then how, through linking this consumption to development, *Mbwezi*’s presence mediated Vsawan interactions and influenced the moral resonance of individual consumption; finally, I examine how *Mbwezi* gathered unequally powerful actors and discourses. Through doing so, I explore why *Mbwezi*’s presence enabled some Vsawans to increase their access to others’ resources, while primarily guiding and accelerating a reduction in resource sharing.

I interpreted Vsawans to be utilising *Mbwezi* to covertly renegotiate their resource sharing. As the most obvious symbol of *chalo chazungu* within their community, Vsawans used the NGO as a placeholder when discussing reduced resource redistribution (which they would not debate overtly). This was done in multiple ways by various social groupings with alternate, and even conflicting, agendas. Through allowing Vsawans to renegotiate their relationships with their peers and patrons, *Mbwezi*’s presence enabled their agency, affecting how social change occurred in Vsawa.

Villagers widely agreed that *Mbwezi* and its staff exemplified *chalo chazungu*. The NGO was paid for by *azungu* and its *mzungu* founder and donors visited regularly. Its buildings had electricity, an internet connection, a tin roof and enough cups that no one had to share one. It also owned two 4WDs, a motorboat and three motorcycles, which ensured that the staff

---

81 In context, there were one or two other trucks that left the village daily to Mzuzu and one person in Vsawa bought themselves a private car late in 2012. His name was Gunzan and he is detailed in the next few pages.
rarely had to travel by foot. Linking these objects explicitly to *chalo chazungu*, the NGO’s walls were covered with photographs of *azungu* who were either donors or past volunteers.

Through observing *Mbwezi*’s staff, villagers appeared to confirm many of their preconceived notions about *chalo chazungu*. These NGO employees demonstrated the extreme wealth that *chalo chazungu* was believed to entail. Most of them had moved to the region and had brought houses without farms, meaning that they would eat at restaurants regularly. They often worked late into the night in their homes. This necessitated that they rented houses with electricity and that they were able to take laptops belonging to the NGO there. The presence of *Mbwezi*’s staff therefore foregrounded to Vsawans the wealth that individual consumption could supposedly bring to a person and their family.

However, *Mbwezi*’s staff also signified to Vsawans the potential dangers of *chalo chazungu*. Most of these employees were not from the region.⁸² They therefore did not have extended families that they could publicly share their wealth with. This led some Vsawans to state that NGO employees did not participate in this kind of gifting. Similarly, a male and a female staff member (both unmarried) shared a house due to the difficulty of finding a place to rent that had electricity. Many villagers claimed that they were having an affair, which was enabled by the NGO and the laissez-faire morality of *chalo chazungu*.

Vsawans also treated the NGO as a patron to the community and as a conduit for *azungu* patronage. This most clearly manifested when *Mbwezi* brought donors to Vsawa. *Mbwezi*’s *azungu* volunteers⁸³ once arrived with group of Taiwanese university students who had donated funds and textbooks to the NGO. These students, along with the *Mbwezi*’s staff and *azungu* volunteers, were ferried in the NGO’s 4WDs to Pungwe,⁸⁴ a village just outside central Vsawa. VH Mwalimu, the village’s headman, organised his villagers to entertain these people through traditional dancing, drama and poetry readings. These activities lavishly praised the NGO. For example, a high school student read a poem called ‘getting to know *Mbwezi*’ which detailed all the things the NGO had brought to Vsawa. During these festivities VH Mwalimu, the Taiwanese, the *azungu* and the *Mbwezi* staff lounged on plastic chairs, while the rest of the community sat on the ground. After the entertainment VH Mwalimu spoke. He implored the Taiwanese to help him build a school and pointed out the need for iron sheets and planks of wood. He also thanked *Mbwezi* for their continued

---

⁸² The lives of the NGO staff are focused upon in chapter six.
⁸³ As mentioned in chapter three, *Mbwezi* occasionally had one or two *azungu* volunteers working with it.
⁸⁴ VH Mwalimu and Pungwe were introduced last chapter. This headman’s relationship with *Mbwezi* is the focus of chapter five.
patronage. The NGO’s donors were always treated as patrons when they arrived in Vsawa. Through this, villagers seemingly came to understand the NGO as a patron, and extra-communal patronage as an aspect of chalo chazungu. This enabled them to utilise Mbwezi in covert negotiations about correct patronage practices.

**Vsawan utilisations of Mbwezi in their public discourses**

Vsawans used *Mbwezi’s* presence as a placeholder when they negotiated individual acts of resource sharing and changes to communal norms. It appeared that villagers who wished to deny others access to their resources would liken themselves to the NGO or its staff, foregrounding their individual wealth and their reduced need for peers. Other Vsawans would invoke *Mbwezi* to temper the general reduction of resource sharing, or to communicate specific demands to their patrons. The former would be done by questioning the morality of the NGO’s staff and the latter through conspicuously praising the patronage of *Mbwezi* donors.

Increased inequality meant that the wealthier members of previously horizontal networks had enhanced bargaining power within these networks. *Mbwezi’s* presence was used to communicate about this wealth and the newfound influence it provided to some Vsawans. For example, Blessings, a villager who had opened a primary school, had increasingly infrequent need for his peers. When Blessings heard his friends complaining that his wife had not shared food with them, he told these friends that:

> Most people in Vsawa are just living a simple life … but men like me and the NGO staff members, we live like azungu, everything is now money.

Through making this statement he seemed to be subtly communicating his decreased need for his peers, who were living a ‘simple life’. He utilised his similarity to NGO staff as a polite yet pointed excuse for his wife’s failure to share his family’s food.

Similarly, Vsawan patrons’ increasingly overt wealth was making it harder for them to claim to be poor when denying assistance to their clients. Some patrons instead likened themselves to *Mbwezi*, which supposedly helped the community through its consumption. For example, Gunzan, one of the richest men in Vsawa, told villagers that his presence and his patronage were similar to that of an NGO. He used this discourse to justify buying the first private car in the village, claiming:

---

85 Gunzan was the older brother of Gitemwa (whose story is detailed in chapter seven) and the son of VH Nachoka (who is introduced in chapter five).
If a person buys a car then the village knows it can use it to go to hospital or to things, just as when an NGO comes it will do a thing for the village.

Members of these men’s social network seemingly accepted statements like this. Their conversations utilised NGOs as a placeholder for the increasing economic difference and marketisation within the community. Some people were like NGO staff, and had jobs; a few were like NGOs, and they may even own cars; but most people were living a simple life and they had increasingly little to offer the former two groups. This negotiation communicated changes that could not have been discussed without violating the community’s public transcript of equitable sharing.

Other Vsawans utilised Mbwezi to communicate their demands to the powerful. Scornful rumours that the NGO staff did not share resources with their families would be repeated in front of the wealthier villagers. This appeared to communicate to these villagers that their (unacknowledged) wealth may reduce, but did not remove, their obligations to their peers. Villagers would describe the NGO staff as ‘living like azungu’, but with distain. They would point out that no one went to azungu funerals, as a veiled warning to their wealthier peers about the dangers of isolating themselves from the community.

The marginalised also praised Mbwezi’s patronage in order to request specific concessions from their patrons. A rich Vsawan who claimed to fell this pressure was Nauru. He looked after several orphans, providing them with food, shelter, and security in exchange for intra-village acclaim and for these orphans’ services in his bar and their milking of his cows. Nauru said that he felt that he was being compared unkindly with Mbwezi when people praised the NGO’s payment to its piecemeal workers and when they commended the unconditional generosity that it showed to orphans. He believed that Vsawans praised Mbwezi’s labourers’ wages to challenge the free work he extracted from his orphans. He also felt that the depth of Mbwezi’s generosity was conspicuously complemented in order to slight his refusal to pay for these children’s schooling. These combined processes allowed orphans and their supporters to subtly pressure Nauru for allowances and school fees, which they could not do overtly.

---

86 Msukwa and Taylor (2011) argue that the belief that many people will attend your funeral is essential to most Malawians’ understanding of the good life.
87 His actions were in line with Malawian norms for non-familial adoption, See Chirwa (2002) for information on Malawian adoption practices.
88 Mbwezi ran several projects that gave food or school fees to orphans.
Mbwezi’s role in Vsawa’s hidden transcripts

Vsawans appeared to utilise Mbwezi’s presence to covertly negotiate changes to their resource sharing. This took place in ways that mirror Scott’s (1985) findings about the relationship between hidden and public transcripts. Scott (1990:44) claims that hierarchical and societal orders require constant maintenance and adjustment to continue. In this case, one of the adjustments in question was increasing intra-village inequality.\(^9\) This was negotiated through the acceptance of living *chalo chazungu* as a valid reason to deny claims from increasingly poor peers and clients. Scott (1985) and Giddens (1984) also observe that public transcripts contain concessions to the marginalised and that the continuation or denial of praise is utilised to negotiate these concessions. In this context, I argue that poor Vsawans praised the NGO as a patron, while slandering its staff for not sharing resources. Through doing so, they expressed their desire for continued patronage and stressed the importance of ongoing sharing, albeit in a diminished capacity, to Vsawan society.

This understanding of Mbwezi served as occidentalism\(^90\) within Vsawa’s public transcript. It was a stylised image of the west created to scrutinise and negotiate local social change. Some occidentalisms posit the community as exemplar in opposition to a vilified western modernity (Gewertz and Errington 1995). Others are used to discretely argue for changes to social values, when doing so overtly would be inappropriate (Creighton 1995). I interpreted Vsawans to utilise Mbwezi in both of these manners. Those with newfound wealth could not openly argue that this wealth weakened their intra-community obligations. Therefore, they linked their consumption to the NGO staff (and through this to the west) in order to subtly imply that they, like the NGO staff, had little need to share with villagers. Conversely, poorer villagers vilified the NGO staff’s *azungu*-inspired selfishness as a way to communicate the importance of sharing as a Vsawan norm.

In this manner Mbwezi, as macro-actant, seemed to enable Vsawan discussions over the social changes that villagers associated with increased inequality and marketisation. Through this, the social significance of declining to share resources changed – the failure of wealthy individuals to share, because they were like an NGO or its staff, was acknowledged as different from other reasons for not assisting a peer. However, Mbwezi was not merely an

---

\(^9\) As the remainder of this chapter will show, other factors including understandings of the relationship between westernisation and development and Mbwezi’s actions, also influenced changing sharing norms.

\(^90\) See Carrier (1995) for a definition of occidentalism or chapter one of this thesis.
intermediary\textsuperscript{91} in Vsawan social negotiations. Unlike most occidentalism, it did not just carry meanings that villagers had given to it. Rather, the actions of the NGO and its staff mediated these discussions and changed the moral texture of local resource-sharing norms.

**NGOs as Mediating Vsawan Consumption and Changing the Morality of Patronage**

*Mbwezi* and the actions of its staff linked *chalo chazungu* to development. It also depicted the NGO as a more significant patron than wealthy locals. This changed the moral and social resonance of individual resource consumption in Vsawa. *Mbwezi*’s presence encouraged villagers to trust that increased inequality was correlated with development and to believe that they should be assisted by rich international patrons, rather than by wealthy locals. I now claim to show that, through invoking *Mbwezi* to make once-off resource denials, Vsawans made long-term changes to their resource-sharing norms; with the NGO’s presence mediating the negotiations it was invoked in and changing the moral resonance of denying assistance to a peer or client.

Vsawans understood *Mbwezi* as condoning its staff and other villagers living *chalo chazungu*. They saw ‘*Mbwezi* Day’, the NGO’s annual party, as evidence that its staff’s seemingly decadent lifestyles were linked to development. At this event (and on many similar occasions, for example, Christmas) *Mbwezi*’s employees ate goat and drank Fanta, an expensive commodity consumed out of a single serve bottle, which Malawians associate with individualism.\textsuperscript{92} The party took place next to the hall on which *Mbwezi*’s staff had painted a mural that read “to the people of Vsawa … development”. The NGO staff explained to the Vsawan women, who they paid to serve food at ‘*Mbwezi* Day’, that the event was their *azungu* employers’ way of rewarding them for bringing development to Vsawa. Villagers would frequently comment on *Mbwezi*’s parties and on ‘*Mbwezi* Day’ in particular. They told me that these events were evidence that the *azungu* who ran the NGO were proud of their staff (and of their excessive consumption) and wanted to link personal consumption to development.

\textsuperscript{91}Callon (1991) stresses the distinction between intermediaries and mediators: while an intermediary merely does what anything in its place would do, a mediator gives meaning and changes purposive action, ensuring a change that would not have occurred without the mediator.

\textsuperscript{92}This may seem like a trite observation, however, Fanta is expensive, not shared and foreign, which makes it a useful allegory through which Malawians conceptualise the west. This is not only my analysis; as Moto (2001) has written elsewhere about the symbolic relationship between Fanta, western life and individualistic consumption in Malawi.
Similarly, the *Mbwezi* staff held meetings with villagers to discuss the ‘development’ that they planned to bring to Vsawa. They provided individual bottles of Fanta and single-serve packets of biscuits to those who attended these meetings. The staff told people that these were gift from *Mbwezi* to those members of the village who were serious about development. A packet of biscuits cost two to three times as much as a day’s worth of vegetables and cassava, a bottle of Fanta even more. These gifts appeared to imply to Vsawans that being involved in development entitled a person to consume resources individually and that individuation correlated with development.

Simultaneously, the NGO foregrounded the dramatic difference in wealth between its donors and local patrons. When these *azungu* donors arrived in Vsawa they would stay in the house that the NGO had built for its manager, which was the only building in the village with a tiled roof. They would be driven in a 4WD to events where their generosity to the community would be praised. At these events (including the one VH Mwalimu organised for the Taiwanese students) local patrons would receive no special treatment. These wealthy members of the community, who at other times assisted poorer Vsawans, would be expected to sit on the ground amongst these villagers. However, the international donors, headmen and NGO staff sat on chairs. While the headman praised these donors for providing specific gifts to the community, local patrons would sit and listen and receive no acknowledgment for their long-term assistance. This situation seemed to encourage both wealthy Vsawans and other villagers to increasingly understand patronage as the moral responsibility of rich outsiders.

Through linking development to *chalo chazungu*, *Mbwezi* mediated Vsawan narratives about social change. Many discussions between villagers would allude to the diminished financial equality within the community. However, they would focus on the advantages that Vsawans associated with development and with the NGO’s presence. GVH Chipeso explained:

> Before *Mbwezi* came my people were just staying by the lake, now some of them are there, but some of them are working with *Mbwezi*. They go to work and they make money and they know what life is.

---

93 I estimated that food for a day, when cooked as part of a large household, would cost around 50MK ($0.15 US) per person, a packet of biscuits 120-200 MK ($0.4-0.7 US) and a Fanta 180MK ($0.6 US).
94 Other than the Taiwanese mentioned earlier in the chapter, all of *Mbwezi’s* donors were British or American.
95 These patrons would normally be given special treatment at community events. For example, they would likely be given a chair to sit down on at a wedding.
96 The Group Village Headman of Mwalimu, introduced in chapter two.
The term “just staying”, was a Tumbuka idiom to describe a range of fishing and farming practices that produced little cash income and were unlikely to lead to a person changing their life. A person who was “just staying” by the lake was typically a subsistence fishermen or a net repairer. GVH Chipeso differentiated their acts from the few who were “working with Mbwezi”, a descriptor he used for anyone with waged employment, including hospital workers and petty traders. The NGO’s linking of development and personal consumption therefore appeared to encourage him to valorise increased economic inequality. He did this by proclaiming that those with jobs “know what life is”. When these employed villagers were asked by their peers for assistance they were empowered by GVH Chipeso to refuse to provide it. I interpreted this refusal to accelerate a growing change in Vsawan resource sharing, where those who “know what life is” were becoming less responsible for their peers who were “just staying”. In this way, the wealthier members of a relatively horizontal resource-sharing network had their increasingly individualistic resource consumption justified.

Similarly, Vsawans’ understanding that the NGO was a patron for the entire community reduced the significance of intra-village patronage. I once asked GVH Chipeso why azungu donors gave money to Vsawa and he explained:

They [the donors] are so rich, they just live a life of giving. When you have no worries (dandaula palibe) you can live that life.

The “life of giving” to which he referred was markedly different to the mutual intra-dependence of Vsawan patrons and clients. It was predicated upon a different moral standard, where a person was only obliged to assist others once they had no worries themselves (a status Vsawans believed applied to many azungu but to no one in the village). In this context, Nauru’s wife told women who came to ask her for vegetables that:

It is not the African way to support the whole community … that is the job of the government or of NGOs.

She sent these women away, denying them resources that a wealthy patron would often provide to poorer villagers.

Many people, both within Vsawa and around Africa, consider the support by a village’s wealthy of its poor to be “the African way”. Authors such as Booth, et al. (2006) and Smith (2003) argue that increased extra-communal wealth is changing this, encouraging
expectations of patronage on wealthy peers outside the community and on external development organisations. However, as I have shown, their claim is incomplete without an understanding of how this expectation is contextualised and created within the village. I contend that in Vsawa the diminishing role of local patrons can only be fully comprehended in the context of the visibility of Mbwezi and the way it was utilised in individual interactions.

Mbwezi’s presence as mediating once-off requests for assistance and long-term expectations of patronage
Shiraishi (2006) argues that individual interactions in a rural society take place in the context of, yet influence, long-term social relationships. Authors including him and Englund (1999) caution against drawing a linear relationship between increased marketisation and the individuation of wealth without looking at specific intra-village interactions and relationships. In this context Mbwezi’s presence influenced Vsawa’s long-term sharing norms, through guiding short-term social interactions. For example, when villagers evaluated their changing relationships with employed peers they considered the way that Mbwezi appeared to link employment, individual consumption and development. Similarly, the understanding that Mbwezi and its azungu donors were patrons enabled Nauru’s wife to turn down a request for vegetables from her family’s clients in a once-off interaction. Through doing so, she diminished long-held patronage norms, as rich villagers’ responsibilities to the poor were reduced when they were compared to a global elite, who had “no worries”.

Sayes’s (2014) framework for understanding the agency of macro-actants therefore complements Englund’s (1999) and Shiraishi’s (2006) focus on interactions and relationships in guiding reduced intra-community resource sharing. I conceptualised Mbwezi as demonstrating agency through mediating villagers’ interactions and influencing Vsawan moral associations. Villagers seemingly believed that the NGO wanted them to consume their own resources.97 This emboldened those who used claims that they were living like the NGO staff as a way to deny assistance to their peers. Simultaneously, the presence of Mbwezi affected Vsawan morality, with the moral way for Vsawans to interact with the NGO influencing the moral way for them to interact with each other. By treating the NGO (and its donors) as a higher patron than wealthy Vsawans, villagers transferred moral responsibility from their local patrons to these donors. Short-term interactions involving Vsawans, their local patrons and azungu donors, therefore influenced a long-term shift in the moral

97 Loosely affirmed when it gave bottles of Fanta for doing development.
responsibility for assisting the community. This responsibility began to fall on developers outside the village, be they NGOs or the government. I therefore saw Mbwezi’s presence as influencing the discussions and interactions through which Vsawans negotiated, altered and affirmed their communal resource-sharing norms. Instead of a universal, market-driven reduction in resource sharing as commoditisation removed resources from their social context, the social significance of sharing wealth in Vsawa was changing. Mbwezi’s presence influenced these changes, frequently, but not always, resulting in reduced intra-community redistribution.

**NGOs as Gatherings of Actors, Objects and Discourses**

The effect of Mbwezi’s presence on any Vsawan’s life was mediated through their (inevitably unequal) personal relationships, as well as through local social norms. On rare occasions this appeared to either enable some Vsawans to increase their access to others’ wealth or generated additional resource-sharing obligations for an individual. Ester and Richard were two Vsawans who were members of the same shore-fishing network. Mbwezi’s presence emboldened claims on Ester’s savings by her peers, while it enabled Richard to obtain additional fish from this network. By exploring why this took place, I demonstrate how the advantages of the powerful in a social network are often maintained as that network changes. I then conclude by combining this analysis with the prior sections of this chapter to demonstrate the utility of actor-network theory for responding to Berry’s (1993) and Guyer’s (1988) call for ethnography that details the ‘how’, rather than a monolithic ‘why’, of agrarian change.98

Ester was an aging widow with five children who were entirely dependent upon her. Because of this she was very poor, even by the standards of the widowed Vsawans who were her peers. She was part of a shore-fishing network, which was a loose collection of some of the poorest people in the village. They would sit on the beach for several hours and pull in a large fishing net called a chilepa-kwaguza in exchange for dividing half the fish that the net caught.99 This activity provided varying returns. Sometimes a fisherman would receive one or two fish of up to 20 centimetres, however, more often than this they would obtain one to ten

---

98 Further linking this body of literature to actor-network theory is Latour’s (1988b) call for an increased role of description (the what) and a reduction of explanation (the why) in social science as a way to lived foreground experiences that are silenced through grand theory.

99 The other half was kept by the net and boat owner.
fingerlings of four or five centimetres. When the catch was divided men received more and larger fish than women. The senior males within this network took fish from those who they felt had not worked hard. Ester was weak for a Vsawan woman and as such she often received very few fish.

Ester would also do piecework whenever it was available. She would cut grass or carry firewood for hours for as little as 100MK ($0.30US). At one stage she was part of an Mbwezi work party, made up of about ten women and two men, all middle aged, that spent a week cutting down grass and clearing land for a firebreak. After this, the NGO gave them 6,000MK ($18US). Ester’s peers claimed that she was “getting something for free” from Mbwezi, due to the comparatively generous salary that it was paying her. This, they argued, should be shared with everyone who considered themselves a client of the NGO, as their international patron would want all Vsawans to be helped. Ester that me that, as a single woman without a stable income, she was heavily dependent on her peers and I saw her acquiesce to their requests, giving away most of her money.

Ester was also a frequent recipient of seeds from Mbwezi’s widow’s program. Her peers similarly interpreted this as her receiving gifts from their patron and would use it to demand resources from her. For example, when asking Ester for maize flour, Jane, one of her friends, mentioned that she had recently seen Ester receive assistance from Mbwezi, despite flour not being one of the things she had been given. When Ester responded that she had no flour Jane sighed and looked sceptical. Ester injured her back later in the year, making it impossible for her to work. Jane told their mutual friends that Ester had refused to share with her, even after she had been helped by Mbwezi. I saw this statement used by these people to justify denying food to Ester, who said she both been greedy and ignored the wishes of their NGO patron.

In contrast Richard, a HIV positive fisherman in his seventies, presented himself as assisting Mbwezi in order to gain special treatment from the shore-fishing network that both he and Ester were part of. Richard’s HIV status and age made him a worse fisherperson than Ester. However, he wore a hat and shirt with the Mbwezi logo on it every day. He told his peers

---

100 Large fish could be sold in the village either for consumption or resale in Mzuzu for approximately 150 MK (0.5 US); the fingerlings would go for as little as 5 MK (0.015 US). Similarly, a large fish, when eaten as relish with nsima (the Malawian staple carbohydrate), could feed a family for a few days, while three or four small fish would be needed per meal.

101 Mbwezi ran a program that gave seeds to widows and to the parents of orphans. Ester was both.

102 Both of these items were easy to obtain. The shirt was given to anyone who agreed to be tested for HIV and the hats had been distributed at various meetings and community functions.
that Mbwezi had made him a community educator, although he was actually just a HIV testing recipient.

When Richard’s frail body left him unable to continue pulling in the chilepa-kwaguzu he would ‘educate’ the people near him. He would say that Mbwezi had told him to inform them that HIV was spread through sexual contact and could be mitigated through regular Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) use. When he arrived late at fishing, he would say it was because he was teaching people about HIV. Richard was not punished for his poor labour. He would be given an adult male’s share every time he fished, even though, when tasks were divided by gender, he would do the less physically demanding ‘female’ work. I asked the network’s senior males (many of whom went to church with Richard) why this was the case. They told me that because Richard helped Mbwezi they gave him fish as a way to please their NGO patron.

**Intra-community inequality and the use of Mbwezi to access others’ resources**

I conceptualised both Richard and Ester’s food entitlements to be influenced by the understanding that Mbwezi was a patron to Vsawa. Richard was able to claim concessions from his shore-fishing network, while Ester was disadvantaged by her interactions with the NGO. This was because of how their varied associations with Mbwezi interacted with local values, statuses and relationships. These values and relationships allowed Richard, who was privileged compared to Ester, to respond more effectively to social change. Smith-Hefner (2009) observes that gossip and rumour have a greater impact on a woman’s social position than a man’s. Ribohn (2002) argues that Malawians see women as having no aptitude for interacting with the world outside the village. More generally, Platteau and Abraham (2002) claim that the consequences of failing to fulfil a network’s expectations are more severe for its poorest members. Using these statements to analyse Richard and Ester’s interactions with Mbwezi highlights the additional difficulties that the marginalised face as resource-sharing norms change.

I conceptualised Richard to be advantaged by age and gender hierarchies (he was old and male). This made his claim to assist Mbwezi through teaching people about HIV more plausible. Further, the influential male shore-fishers with whom he attended church were predisposed to believe him. Conversely, Ester appeared to be disadvantaged by the manner in which Vsawan’s understanding of the NGO as a patron interacted with her social position as

---

103 Bakare-Yusuf (2004) makes a similar claim about other parts of Africa.
a widow and with her dependence on her social network. In line with the claims of Smith-Hefner (2009) and Platteau and Abraham (2002), Ester’s dependence and gender enabled her peers to use weaker excuses to demand her resources, or to deny her assistance, than they would with a wealthier (although still poor) Vswan. Simultaneously, Ester’s gender and marital status encouraged villagers to conceive of the NGO as helping her. Richard could more easily persuade his peers that he instead assisted Mbwezi. In this manner Malawian’s belief that women had less to offer the outside world seemed to enable male capture of a new prestigious position in local society.

Mbwezi was therefore a macro-actant that gathered actors, actants and discourses across spatial and temporal boundaries to influence Ester and Richard’s resource access. Ester and Richard’s actions and those of their peers were connected to objects, like T-shirts with Mbwezi’s logo, and intra-community discourses, including those that encouraged the veneration of older men but not of widows. Changes to Ester and Richard’s intra-community entitlements emerged from this gathering, but could not be reduced to the discrete influences of the actors and actants within it. For instance the meaning of an Mbwezi t-shirt was contextualised by its wearer, but also embodied the actions of the NGO’s donors and of those headmen who, through praise, confirmed the NGO’s status as a patron for the community. These changes reflected existing intra-community power dynamics and could therefore not be entirely attributed to Mbwezi’s presence. However, they would not have happened in the same manner had the NGO not assembled these actors, objects and discourses.

**Conceptualising Mbwezi’s Influence through Actor-Network Theory**

Authors including Berry (1993) and Guyer (1988) argue that village level social change takes place under multifaceted conditions. These conditions include exercises of power, discourses relating to intra-community obligations, and personal and communal social relationships. They claim that exploring these relationships, acts, and discourses elucidate the interdependency of agency and structural constraint in any given village. I have used this chapter to claim that their aims can be more completely realised by adding actants and macro-actants to this exploration. I conceptualised the macro-actant of Mbwezi as influencing the relationships, actors and discourses studied. Mbwezi’s presence affected the relationship between people: it encouraged seeing employment as evidence that a person “knew what life is”, while the unemployed were “just staying”; it simultaneously diminished
the status of local patrons, yet allowed them to reduce their resource-sharing; and it enabled Vsawans to deny resources to their peers while maintaining their equitable public discourse.

Giving agency to the NGO in this manner does not diminish the agency of Vsawans. Instead this approach explores changes that take place in conjunction with the NGO’s presence. Mbwezi was only one macro-actant in a network of actors and actants that produced changes to the social meaning of resource sharing in Vsawa, often encouraging individual consumption. The ‘input’ of an NGO did not cause the ‘output’ of changed and reduced resource sharing;104 rather, as Latour (2004:226) states:

There might exist many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence: things might authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid and so on.

Mbwezi’s influence on Vsawan social change is best understood through considering these ‘shades of causality’. Changes to Vsawan resource-sharing practices adapted to multi-faceted conditions that included the intervention of external developers. Analysing the NGO as a macro-actant therefore allows for a study that encapsulates these developers’ impact, without removing analytic primacy from the actions, interactions and understandings of the Vsawans who form the centre of this ethnography.

Conclusions
In this chapter I claimed that Mbwezi’s presence influenced changing patterns of resource sharing in Vsawa. Despite a public transcript of generous intra-community assistance, villagers were sharing less food with their peers and receiving less money from their patrons than they had in the past. They blamed these changes on chalo chazungu: a convolving of marketisation, individual consumption and inequality, which they claimed to believe typified western life. In this context, Vsawans used Mbwezi and its staff as signifiers for the dangers and advantages of chalo chazungu, while they covertly negotiated requests on their resources and scrutinised their intra-community sharing norms. The way I interpreted the NGO as linking development to chalo chazungu, and as serving as a grand patron for the community, can be seen to mediate these negotiations. It encouraged Vsawans to see paid employment and the individual consumption of resources as moral. It also shifted the responsibility for caring for the community’s poor from wealthy villagers to international elites. How the NGO affected any individual Vsawan’s life was determined by this person’s actions, relationships

104 To paraphrase Englund (1999:140).
and status. For this reason, the understanding that Mbwezi was a patron enabled Richard (an older man) to claim additional fish from his shore-fishing network, while Ester (a widow in the same network) experienced increased demands on her savings.

I argued that, rather than monetisation entirely dis-embedding resources from their social context, Mbwezi’s presence altered the social significance of sharing or declining to share wealth. How changes to this social context affected various Vsawans was guided by local actors, discourses, actants, and macro-actants, including Mbwezi. Through conceptualising the NGO in this manner, I detailed how this external developer influenced the reduction of food sharing in Vsawa, without diminishing the agency of the villagers who primarily enacted this change.

The chapter has therefore contributed to the literature in two ways. It has complemented works that call for an increased focus on the local circumstances that filter structural changes through rural communities (Berry 1993; Englund 1999; Guyer 1988). It has done this by drawing upon literature that examines hidden negotiations (Carrier 1995; Scott 1990), how short-term interactions affect long-term relationships (Shiraishi 2006), and the maintenance of power relations during social change (Platteau and Abraham 2002). The chapter has also expanded upon actor-network theory’s use in development studies. It has shown how conceptualising a development intervention as a macro-actant enables a study of this intervention’s impact, while keeping the rural residents at the centre of analysis (Latour 1988a, 2005; Mosse 2005; Sayes 2014).

This chapter has worked towards answering my first two research questions. It has explicitly shown the utility of actor-network theory for exploring the effects of an NGO’s presence on village life, while foregrounding how meaning is generated through villagers’ interactions and negotiations. It has also explored how NGO presence seemingly encouraged Vsawans to associate development with increased individual consumption. Through this, they negotiated their already diminishing food-sharing obligations. However, this conflation of development, wealth and modernity also increased the entitlements of those like Blessings and Gunzan who had obtained wealth through Mzuzu’s market or through local market liberalisation. NGO presence signified to Vsawans the growing importance of these people as the community’s contact with the external world increased. As the next chapter will argue, Vsawans were likely to consider them to be educated, even if they had little schooling. They and other educated, wealthy or modern Vsawans increased their social standing vis-à-vis traditional
leaders as NGO presence encouraged villagers to perceive a changing relationship between Vsawa, which they saw as non-modern, and a modern, external world.
Chapter Four: Education, Modernity and Social Hierarchy – NGOs’ Impact on the Meaning and Purpose of Education

In this chapter I argue that NGO presence encouraged villagers to both conceptualise and value education primarily as a tool for interacting with a (folk) modernity, which they saw as encroaching upon, but not yet quite having arrived in Vsawa. Further, I argue that this enabled a modern and monetised elite to increase their influence by claiming the social status of ‘being educated’. Therefore, in a similar vein to the last chapter, I use this one to elucidate how NGO presence interacts with already occurring social change. It argues that NGOs influence the negotiations and narratives through which change occurs, guiding, rather than removing, villagers’ agency. Building upon the previous chapter, I highlight that Vsawans utilise and conceptualise each NGO differently, incorporating their own best interests, as well as the actions and symbols that various NGOs emit, in their understandings of education. Further, through detailing how education’s value is negotiated within a community, I demonstrate that these negotiations may exacerbate, rather than diminish, inequality, a contrarian contribution to the literature on education in rural Africa.

In order to demonstrate my argument, this chapter details how I interpreted Vsawans to conceptualise and utilise education. It will begin by highlighting the low quality of schooling in Vsawa. It will then demonstrate that NGOs encouraged villagers to see education as useful for extracting wealth from the outside world and for interacting with the modern incursions that the NGOs’ presence signified. This guided villagers’ conceptualisation of modernity as existing outside, and encroaching upon, Vsawa. It also enabled villagers to use their association with NGOs in their claims to be educated. Following this, the chapter demonstrates that marginalised Vsawans (primarily women and poor men) were disadvantaged in intra-community negotiations over who could claim to be educated. Their marginalisation was exacerbated by the fact that they were culturally and financially ill-equipped to associate themselves with NGOs. An exception to this was Kulutilizya Msambiska, whose staff placed a special emphasis on interacting with women and the poor. However, powerful Vsawans questioned this NGO’s ability to provide education. These

---

105 As detailed in chapter two, this thesis focuses on a locally constructed ‘folk modernity’ (see Ferguson 1999). As this chapter will further explore, Vsawans conceptualised modernity as a homeostatic cluster of objects, acts and traits that they saw as existing outside the village and entering the village through macro-actants like NGOs and the road.
negotiations therefore reinforced the link that villagers perceived between education and wealth, and foregrounded the potential tension between modernity and Vsawan values. Through exploring the process in which Vsawans determined who was educated and why education was important, this ethnography will show that NGOs, as macro-actants, influenced narratives of development and modernity. They also guided the community’s negotiations over social change, slowly shifting power from the village elders to ‘the educated’ – part of an emerging modern and, almost exclusively, male elite.

The Poor State of Education in Malawi and Vsawa
I will first explain the inadequacies of schooling in Vsawa and Malawi more generally. This will enable the remainder of this chapter to argue that Vsawans saw education as a way to interact with the changes to economic and social life that NGO presence signified (irrespective of schooling’s inability to teach skills useful to most Vsawans’ daily life). It will also unpack how Vsawans seemingly negotiated who was educated in an environment where going to school was not necessarily synonymous with receiving an education.

Malawi’s education system has three tiers, all of which end in terminal exams. There are eight years of primary school, referred to as ‘Standard One’ to ‘Standard Eight’. Then two years of junior secondary school, called ‘Form One’ and ‘Form Two’. Successful completion of exams at the end of Form Two provides a child with a Malawi Junior School Certificate (MJSC). Some students continue their schooling for another two years (‘Form Three’ and ‘Form Four’) and they complete a Malawi School Certificate (MSC) (Chimombo 2009b). While the primary system is free for all Malawians, fewer than 5% of those who begin school receive an MSC (Chimombo 2005).

Malawi has provided its citizens free primary education since 1994 (Rose 2002). However, it does not have the qualified teachers and infrastructure necessary to ensure the quality of this education. Malawi’s colonial and then dictatorial education system aimed to create a small elite capable of administering the country. This system therefore included classes on Latin and English Language Shakespeare and takes up a disproportionate amount of Malawi’s educational funding (Chirwa and Naidoo 2014). In contrast, the inadequacy of most Malawian schools meant that in 200310% of Standard Three students were unable to write

---

106 I use the terms ‘child’, ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ in this chapter to describe Malawian students of any age, some significantly older than 18 due to a convention in the literature that often focuses on ‘girls’ education.
107 Malawi’s education system is under-funded due to extreme poverty, rather than a lack of political will. In fact 25% of recurrent funds and 5% of GDP goes into funding education.
their own names and more than half of them could not identify all the letters of the alphabet (Kadzamira and Rose 2003:511). Further, Malawi’s primary curriculum is very broad, as it aims to prepare students for a secondary education that few of them will receive (Chimombo 2009b).

Malawi’s secondary school system supposedly selects students on merit; however, this selection inadvertently discriminates against the rural and the poor. Students sit exams at the end of the final term of primary school. These exams determine whether they are offered a place at secondary school and in which schools they will be offered places (Kamwendo 2010). About 80% of Malawians either drop out in their primary years or are not selected for any secondary school (MacJessie-Mbewe 2004). Of the students who continue their education, the top few go to one of the handful of National Schools, the next best to one of Malawi’s 150 District Boarding-Schools (DBS), and the poorest (though still a minority) go to one of the nation’s 627 Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) (Chimombo 2009a). Primary schools in rural areas are poorly staffed, poorly resourced and more crowded than those in Malawi’s cities. This, combined with the household and farm duties that poor children perform, means that only the richest rural Malawians are offered a place at either a National School or a DBS (Chimombo 2009b).

Rural villagers are therefore more likely to obtain a secondary education from a CDSS. These schools are built by a village (or more commonly a collection of villages), with the government paying teachers’ wages but providing almost no other support (Kayuni 2010). CDSSs typically provide an exceptionally poor education and only 7% of CDSS teachers have any form of qualification (Chimombo 2005; Kayuni 2010:99). Running parallel to Malawi’s public system is an unregulated private secondary schooling sector. These schools service elite students, as well as those who have finished primary school and wish to continue their education but are not selected for their local CDSS (Chimombo 2009a).

Both private and public secondary schools charge fees and school attendance generates additional costs like uniforms and notebooks. Kadzamira and Rose (2003:506) estimate that a poor Malawian family spends about 6% of their total income on each child’s school-related expenses. This is before the inclusion of fees and the costs of losing a potential

---

108 Including subjects ranging from global geography to bible studies.
109 Whose children are either sent to the city or privately tutored in primary school.
110 Malawian schools are legally not allowed to require that students wear a uniform, however, many do, especially in rural areas.
worker for the household. Students attempt to justify these expenses to their families by arguing that a secondary education is increasingly necessary for a person’s economic advancement as Malawi becomes more modern (Kadzamira and Rose 2003; Rose 2005).

**Economic costs and social benefits of secondary education in Vsawa**

In Vsawa educational costs were compounded by the lack of jobs that required secondary schooling and by villagers’ scepticism over local schools’ ability to provide an adequate education. Vsawa contained several CDSSs with yearly fees of 6000MK (about $40US) and a private school that cost 9000MK (about $60US) a year. Some students claimed that the reason they went to the private school was because it provided a slightly superior education when compared to a CDSS. However, many others had either failed at their village’s CDSS and were therefore expelled, or had not performed well enough at a primary level to be selected for the government system. No one from this private school had ever gone to university and less than 10% of its students completed their MSC.

While the Government of Malawi provided significant funding to selective schools in other areas, Vsawan CDSSs were poorly financed and provided little education. The largest CDSS in the region had one of the worst MSC pass rates in the country. A student observed that:

> The person who teaches Form Four hasn’t finished Form Four himself.

A graduate of the same school stated:

> In Vsawa you can get a MSC [complete secondary school] and learn no English or you can finish Form One and know English; its luck.

I interpreted their statements to demonstrate the lack of faith held even by those who had invested heavily in Vsawan schools. They showed that the schools were taught by unqualified people and that attending school would not necessarily result in a person speaking English, which Vsawans saw as crucial to being educated.

Completing secondary school in Vsawa was unlikely to make a person wealthier. There were very few jobs in the region that required schooling. These jobs were: NGO positions, around twenty of which would have required an MSC; five jobs at the local hospital which necessitated a tertiary education (and were not filled by locals); another twenty at the same

---

111 Or in some women’s cases the opportunity to marry them off and no longer be economically responsible for them.
hospital, where a MJSC would have been preferable, and a collection of teachers (under 50), most of whom had less than a MSC. Villagers who did not go to school would have time to farm or fish. Boys whose fathers were fishermen could help them sort fish and earn most of an adult’s income by the age of 12. For them (and to a lesser extent most Vsawans), choosing to go to school was therefore an expensive decision.

Despite these apparent disincentives, many Vsawans invested heavily in either their own or their children’s schooling. Parents would go without soap or paraffin to send their children to secondary schools which they were not confident would teach these children to read. School-aged Vsawans would forgo (comparatively) easy money fishing or performing *ganyu* to conspicuously browse dictionaries or to do basic arithmetic in the dirt with their fingers. Informants said that these acts were a way for children to demonstrate that they were serious about education, which they hoped would inspire their parents or patrons to pay their school fees. These Vsawans were not responding to the conventionally accepted advantages of going to school – literacy, numeracy and a predictable increase in wealth. Rather, I argue that villagers who invested in schooling responded to, and co-created, a locally embedded value for education; where this education would enable them to interact with *azungu*, employers and development structures; aspects of a modernity which they saw as existing outside, and was encroaching upon, the village.

**NGO Presence’s Influence on Narratives of Modernity and Education**

Having highlighted the seeming lack of incentives for Vsawans to go to secondary school, I will now detail the intra-village interactions which I claim gave education value. Vsawans negotiated a local narrative where education’s primary purpose was to assist when interacting with the outside world, as modernity was simultaneously seen to be infiltrating Vsawa and to offer great wealth to those who lived outside their home village. Vsawans appear to see education as assisting a villager in either seeking employment or guiding the development that was occurring in Vsawa. By highlighting the role of NGOs in these negotiations I demonstrate that they, as macro-*actants*, foregrounded a relationship between modernity, education, affluence and development. This encouraged villagers to invest in education and

---

112 Activities that involved reading and sorting medicine or weighing babies.
113 For lamps, the source of lighting for the large section of the community, which lacked electricity.
114 Authors including Tarabini (2010) argue that these are typical justifications of education in rural Africa.
115 The ‘folk’ understanding of modernity mentioned in the introduction.
enhanced the social standing of the educated and the newly wealthy, who were emerging as a modern elite.

Vsawans seemingly saw the purpose of education to be the ability to interact with the world outside the village. Vsawa’s school system taught classes on agriculture and chiTumbuka, but when I asked villagers why going to school was important no one mentioned these. They would instead talk about the possibility that school would provide them with the verbal English skills to talk to azungu or Indian businessmen in the city. Alternatively, they mentioned English literacy and mathematics, which they hoped would enable them to find work in an office environment. An older Vsawan told me that:

If you just stay in the village then Form Two [receiving a MJSC] and Form Four [receiving an MSC] are equal, because the education has not assisted you.

This statement seemed to reflect some Vsawans’ belief that education had no purpose in village life. This man and many other Vsawans instead saw education primarily as a tool for interacting with the modern world, ideally through finding urban employment.

In this context, educated Vsawans would travel to Mzuzu to look for work. They typically performed odd jobs and casual labour for urban businesses. These people reported spending more money on transport and living in the city than they were able to earn while there. However, they hoped that this would change if they found a permanent job. When these educated villagers could no longer afford to live in Mzuzu (some after a few days and some after several months) they would return to Vsawa, where many of them would save money to try the same trip again. A villager with an MJSC who had taken many expensive journeys to the city explained to me that:

I have education; it is no good for me to work as a farmer. But jobs here are few, maybe I can get work there [in Mzuzu] as a carpenter.

His explanation expressed the hope that his education would lead to wealth. It also demonstrated the belief that the purpose of education (despite Vsawan’s schools agricultural classes) was to interact with the external, modern world.

Other schooled Vsawans would search for urban work without leaving the village. They would go to Mbwezi’s library, which had a relatively up-to-date collection of newspapers. They would scour these papers and write letters in response to advertisements by NGOs and

116 Permanent labour is often poorly paid but comes with meals and accommodation at the worksite.
government bodies. Many of these people would also volunteer with an NGO, stating to me that they both wanted to improve their resume and hoped to be hired by that organisation (see chapter seven). These activities rarely paid off and most educated Vsawans did not find long-term employment outside the village. Instead, they used their education to claim privileges in Vsawa.

**Vsawans’ favourable treatment of the educated**

Vsawan families invested heavily in their educated members in the hope that they would find work outside the village or assist their kin as Vsawa changed. For example, villagers would often send money to their educated relatives who were living in Mzuzu and looking for work. Educated villagers would claim that they were too busy practicing their reading or writing job applications to fish or farm and would be offered food by their peers. A fisherman in Jumpi explained to me that:

Gitemwa [a chief’s son who is a major case study in chapter seven] has been to school. He has finished Form Four and worked at the hospital [volunteered with ChurchCare], so he cannot work as a fisherman.

The sentiment that it would be a waste for an educated person to perform manual work appeared to be held by many Vsawans, both schooled and unschooled. This fisherman was poorer than Gitemwa’s family, yet he provided Gitemwa with food. In doing so, he reinforced a narrative in which Gitemwa provided value to the village through his potential to either find work in the modern, external world, or to assist the village as modernity arrived.

While many villagers described obtaining urban employment to be the ideal use of an education, they also saw an increasing local role for educated people, who could interact with external wealth and opportunity as it entered Vsawa. This role did not relate to the agricultural knowledge or chiTumbuka literacy that these villagers had learnt in school. Rather, Vsawans described their community as rapidly changing and felt that educated villagers would thrive in this environment. In this context, the educated were treated as experts on development and their opinions held additional credence in intra-village discussions about the future of Vsawa. A student told me that:

In the old times everyone listened to the elders but now they don’t respect them and that’s why people go to school. People respect those who went to school now, because

---

117 Other Vsawans who did not contribute food to their family and community would be treated harshly (see previous chapter). Also see Devereux (1999) and Chisinga (2004) for normative Malawian social network rules.
of everything you need to buy [a reference to the increased need most Vsawans felt for commodities and the belief that the educated could obtain these commodities and help others to do so].

This student appeared to be observing a shift in influence from Vsawa’s gerontocratic leaders to a modern elite made up of the educated and wealthy. His statement linked education explicitly to wealth (everything you need to buy) and to change (in the old times). He implied that being educated allowed a person to navigate the latter and obtain the former. The presence of NGOs, due to their affluence, their obvious modernity and the symbols of education that they appropriated, emboldened this understanding of the purpose of education and of its significance to Vsawan social hierarchies.

**How NGOs encouraged Vsawans to become educated**

I conceptualised the NGOs as reinforcing the link that Vsawans saw between education and the modern world. Their presence depicted the latter as both providing wealth outside the village and as encroaching upon Vsawa. The small number of villagers employed by the NGOs had all been to school and their wealth therefore served as an exemplar of the advantages education could provide. They and other NGO staff further cemented the link between education and employment by telling villagers that going to school had led to them being hired. Mbwezi’s staff admitted to discriminating in favour of villagers who they believed to be educated. They allowed these people to type letters and résumés on the NGO’s computers. These Vsawans would use this opportunity to apply for clerical jobs or scholarships to continue their schooling. Their applications were always written in English and addressed to a person or organisation outside Vsawa. This seemingly cemented the link between education, opportunity and an aptitude for manoeuvring the external, modern world.

Simultaneously, Vsawans depicted the NGOs’ growing presence as a symbol of the modernity that was penetrating village life. Every time an NGO bought a new vehicle, built an extra building or employed another staff member, this action highlighted the potential rewards of modernity, but also its inevitability. Vsawan gossip linked this comparatively gratuitous wealth to the way that NGO staff favoured villagers who had been to school. This encouraged them to revere their educated peers (as demonstrated by giving them food), both in the hope they would bring wealth to the village and in the belief that they would grow increasingly necessary as Vsawa changed.

---

118 All except one had their MSCs, one only had a MJSC.
NGO presence therefore appeared to guide Vsawan thinking about the meaning of education. The actions of NGO employees implied that education’s purpose was to bring affluence through interacting with the world outside the village. An educated person could either leave their community to make money (like the non-Vsawan NGO staff had), or could utilise the new objects (like computers) and opportunities (the rare chance of employment) that were entering Vsawa, maximising their own wealth and guiding development. Through persuading Vsawans that investing in education would allow them to interact with modernity (and through framing what modernity entailed), the presence of NGO staff guided villagers’ claims to be educated.

‘Being Educated’: a Negotiated Social Status
There were multiple ways a Vsawan could claim to be educated. As I will argue, these claims were typically predicated upon demonstrating an ability to interact with a rarefied, external modern world. They therefore frequently involved associating with NGOs. I posit that, when claiming the social status of ‘being educated’, Vsawans both utilised local discourses of modernity and development and co-constructed a narrative where modernity primarily existed outside the village and could only be navigated by an educated elite.

Being an educated Vsawan did not necessarily mean having an MSC. Rather, being educated was a negotiated social position and a claim bearing label. The term *mnthu wasambira*, (which literally translated into person of education) was used to describe a minority of Vsawans, while all other villagers were *mbule*, or uneducated. Being *mnthu wasambira* came with special rewards and expectations, like having your community’s support while you looked for work and having your opinions on development and the external world respected. Obtaining this label typically involved some schooling. However, it did not always necessitate an MSC. Rather, education appeared to be, at least in part, a symbol of prestige that was incorporated into Vsawans’ system of values. Claims to be educated were therefore negotiated through this system, incorporating, but not proscribed by, years in school. Being educated empowered a Vsawan within the village, by reflecting the perception that they could interact with the world outside it.

Instead of completing secondary school, some Vsawans highlighted their ability to interact with the modern world as a way to prove that they were educated. This was made easier by the low quality of Vsawa’s schools, which encouraged villagers to entertain claims to be educated that did not rely on going to school. Often a person would demonstrate their
education through a combination of schooling and any other trait that highlighted their modern skillset. For example, those who either had an MJSC or had only completed primary school but had waged employment (a tiny minority) would use this to claim that they were more educated than someone with an MSC. Patrick, a local male nurse who had failed his MSC twice, told me, “I am educated because I have this job”. He compared himself to the vast majority of Vsawans with MSCs, who he believed were less educated than he was because they were unemployed.

Similarly, speaking English or being seen reading English could be used to claim educational equivalence to someone with a MSC. As both learning to speak English and finishing a Vsawan school were “luck”, many reported that the former was a stronger evidence of education than the latter. Nauru, a rich Vsawan (whose patronage was explored in the previous chapter), demonstrated this when justifying his decision not to send his children to secondary school. He said to another wealthy villager:

If they can speak chazungu [English] by Standard Eight, then they are more educated than you and why would they want to learn it again till Form Four?

I interpreted him to be claiming that gaining the ability to speak English was one of the primary purposes of education and that this made speaking it a better barometer of educational status than years in school. This attitude both entrenched and was predicated upon the belief that the main reason to become educated was to interact with the modern world; a belief that was intimately tied to NGO presence.

**Vsawans’ use of NGOs when claiming to be educated**

Specific Vsawans either emulated or interacted with the NGO staff as part of their claims to be educated. Their acts were seemingly predicated upon (and reinforced) a belief that these NGOs signified the availability of new commodities and experiences that had the potential to be both valuable and threatening to Vsawans.

Vsawans who had formed personal relationships with NGO staff appeared to utilise these as evidence of their education. For example, a villager who was one of the Mbwezi project manager’s few friends claimed educational status by telling his peers that he went to this man’s house to “Discuss development and read political newspapers”. When doing so, he and people like him would highlight their educational credentials, typically literacy, or English

---

119 All English exams were written rather than oral. They were inconsistently marked. This made it possible that a person would pass school but would be unable to speak English, or vice-versa.
proficiency. They would imply that these skills enabled their relationship with the NGO staff and gave them special access to the benefits of modernity. Others who lacked these relationships would emulate NGO workers as part of their claims to be educated, often through consuming products that few Vsawans had access to. A high school student explained to me that he ate with a knife and fork because that was how the NGO employees ate and a nurse kept coffee in his home, claiming (inaccurately) that NGO staff drank coffee while other Vsawans drank tea.

The NGOs and their staff encouraged Villagers to interpret the ability to interact with NGOs as evidence that a person could navigate the outside world. NGO employees claimed that they could only be friends with educated people. They told their few Vsawan friends that their relationship was built upon a mutual passion for development and comprehension of the western world. They would often conspicuously converse in English in front of other Vsawans. The NGOs also appeared to link their presence to education through the English nutritional information and other English words on their walls and through their staff’s bibliographic and technological literacy. In this context, Vsawans reported that interacting with an NGO was strong evidence that a person was educated.

NGO presence therefore incentivised Vsawans to invest in schooling and provided some unschooled Vsawans with alternative ways to claim to be educated. This took place in the context of the absence of local employment that required schooling and the inadequacy of Vsawa’s school system. The NGOs modelled a conflation of education, development and modernity. By demonstrating the rewards that mastery of this conflation could provide, they encouraged many Vsawans to go to secondary school and those who could not to support the educated. NGO presence simultaneously provided a medium other than formal schooling for negotiating a person’s educational status. In this manner, NGOs’ association with modernity influenced Vsawan discussions over the purpose of education, encouraging villagers to see it as increasingly important. It also affected how a person could claim to be educated, assisting those who used their navigation of the modern world (typically evidenced by interacting with NGOs), rather than just their schooling, in their educational claims.

They would often use the term *chalo chazungu* to describe this, which is explored in much greater detail in the previous chapter.
**Negotiated Educational Discourses and the Meaning of Modernity**

Through analysing the impacts of NGO presence on Vsawa’s educational narrative I build upon literature that argues that the value of education is negotiated. I claim to add to this literature by explaining how I interpreted these negotiations to take place, incorporating macro-actants into a discussion that has primarily detailed the outcomes, rather than the processes, through which education gains value. I also foreground the relationship between local meanings of education and of modernity; showing that, as specific individuals and macro-actants come to be associated with education, they inadvertently present themselves as beacons of modernity. These people and macro-actants therefore necessarily depict their encompassing community as non-modern.

Several authors (Bartlett 2007; Levinson 1996; Skinner and Holland 1996; Vavrus 2002) observe that education’s value is locally ascribed. However, they rarely explain in detail the negotiations through which this takes place, or how these negotiations respond to social change. When arguing that the value of education is locally determined, Bartlett (2007) notes that upper class Brazilians utilise schooling for the social networks it provides. However, Brazil’s lower classes see the same educational system as primarily useful for learning comportment. Bartlett (2007) claims, therefore, that education’s value is not intrinsic but, rather, is generated, as teachers, students and communities interpret its significance in their own lives. Similarly, Levinson (1996:218) argues that, when investment in schooling ceases to make economic sense (in terms of the ability to enter a skilled job market), going to school still provides cultural capital. He claims that this is because both the schooled and unschooled respect the value of being educated. Neither of these authors have adequately described the processes through which education’s value is negotiated within a community, nor how the cultural capital of education interacts with intra-village social change. Their findings are therefore complimented by detailing the interactions through which a village negotiates the meaning and value of being educated.

In Vsawa I interpreted the presence of NGOs, as macro-actants, to mediate intra-village negotiations over the meaning and purpose of education. Education’s value was covertly negotiated when some villagers claimed that it was only useful if one left Vsawa and when others listened attentively to their schooled peers’ opinions on the region’s development. The cultural capital of being educated was reinforced (and made fungible to economic capital) every time a Vsawan gave food to an educated villager who refused to farm, especially after
that villager had returned from a failed attempt to find employment in Mzuzu. The visibility of the NGO staff’s wealth and prestige encouraged Vsawans to do this. It cemented the cultural capital of education by serving as an exemplar of the riches that being educated could provide. This dulled any scrutiny of education’s value, which was generated by schooled Vsawans’ consistent failure to find work outside the village.

Further, the NGOs’ expansion (for instance, their growing collection of buildings and vehicles) seemingly encouraged Vsawans to see a folk modernity as encroaching upon their village. This, combined with the NGO staff’s discrimination in favour of the educated, implied to villagers that educated Vsawans may be better equipped than village elders to maximise the community’s oncoming opportunities. I understood this to be demonstrated when the student claimed that, “in the old times everyone listened to the elders but ... people respect those who went to school now”. In this context, the NGOs’ presence encouraged Vsawans to see education as a set of skills required to meet the challenges of modernity, either by gaining employment in the modern world or leading the village as change took place. Through doing so, the NGOs unconsciously guided village understandings of what it meant to be modern.

NGO presence and the way it influenced local negotiations over the value of education appeared to guide Vsawan discourses of modernity. It discouraged villagers from viewing modernity in terms of here-and-now materialities and cultural styles, in contrast to an imagined past.121 Rather, the NGOs’ presence implied that modernity was current but external to Vsawa; a collection of now-but-not-quite-here-yet traits and experiences. There were a small but increasing number of modern entities, like NGOs, in the village. This encouraged Vsawans to view the rest of their village, and themselves, as not modern. Most villagers could not interact with an NGO (typically feeling intimidated by the staff or buildings) and they felt that they were therefore neither modern nor educated. However, Vsawans believed that the minority who were educated could influence NGOs and the world outside the village. This further encouraged them to distinguish between the educated and the uneducated based upon their ability to interact with NGOs and with the seemingly modern, external, world and therefore gave increasing significance to being educated.

121 See the definition of modernity provided by Arce and Long (2001a) and introduced in chapter two of this thesis, page 41.
‘Being educated’ as ‘being modern’ and being elite

I saw Vsawan narratives that linked education with modernity as being further entrenched when villagers used NGO presence to claim to be educated. Authors such as Pigg (1996), Rival (1996) and Vavrus (2002) note that the ‘educated person’ is a culturally created category and that claims to be educated are evaluated from inside culture. Levinson and Holland (1996:24) state that the existence of an ‘educated person’ simultaneously creates an ‘uneducable person’. The latter group often comprises the majority of a community; the former is given special privileges (like access to loans) and presumed to have a superior character (often perceived as more intelligent or, in the case of women, more moral). This distinction appeared obvious in Vsawa, with the difference between the anthu wasambira (plural) and mbule. The former often received financial assistance from the latter (despite typically being wealthier) and their opinions were given additional respect, especially when discussing development. Vsawans’ linking of education and modernity meant that being accepted to be mnthu wasambira reflected more than just the time a person spent in school. In this context, NGOs could be used by people to demonstrate that they were modern and therefore educated, creating an educated modern elite and an uneducated majority.

Pigg (1997) notes that the educated/uneeducated dichotomy is often conceptualised as a modern/traditional divide. She (1997:267) states that:

> People see themselves increasingly in terms of who is a modern type of person and who is more traditional ... who can exploit opportunities far from home and who is stuck with his or her lot in the village ... development both creates and requires a new type of person. Someone who understands and can manoeuvre in the world beyond. This kind of person is often spoken of as an ‘educated person’.

I understood NGO presence to encourage a similar belief in Vsawa. NGOs’ combination of English language signage, vehicles and computers signified to villagers that most Vsawans, and Vsawa itself, was not modern. This enabled a minority of villagers to demonstrate their education by showing that they were different to their peers. Reading the newspaper, speaking to NGO staff, or even drinking coffee rather than tea, could be presented as evidence that a person was similar to a development worker. It followed from there that this person was in some way modern and therefore that they (and not their peers) were an ‘educated person’.

---

122 See authors including Vavrus (2002), Kishindo (2003:381) and Shaw (1996) for examples of the privileges provided to the educated.
Those who could associate with the NGOs did not necessarily have the most schooling. Vsawan claims to be educated were therefore less clear than if they had been based solely on years of formal education. NGO presence influenced the meaning of certain actions and enabled specific forms of consumption to serve as educational claims. Importantly, because emulating NGO staff typically involved utilising commodities that few Vsawans had access to claiming to be educated was easier for the wealthy. The presence of NGOs therefore allowed a more negotiated understanding of who was educated, however, these negotiations often favoured the already powerful.

Social Hierarchy in Vsawan Educational Negotiations
To demonstrate the unequitable nature of Vsawan’s educational claims I describe how marginalisation and privilege influenced intra-household and intra-community negotiations over who had access to the rewards of being educated. I claim that the privileged had superior access to the signifiers of education (including the ability to interact with most NGOs) and their claims to be educated faced less scrutiny than equally strong claims from marginalised Vsawans. This dynamic was most visible when observing the difficulties female villagers had in attempting to present themselves to be educated. I now recount these difficulties and provide a case study showing that Vsawans accepted (men) reading at Mbwezi as evidence of education. However, they appeared to conflate their broader dissatisfaction with Kulutilizya Msambiska with their knowledge that only women read in this NGO’s library. Vsawans therefore did not accept reading at this library as an educational signifier. I use these circumstances to conclude that NGOs contributed to negotiations over education and modernity. These negotiations entrenched inequality while shifting power from traditional elders to the educated, who were emerging as modern elite. Further, though this process Vsawans co- and re-constructed understandings of each NGO and expressed their fears and desires relating to modernity.

Marginalised Vsawans were disadvantaged in intra-village educational negotiations. This appeared to be because they typically lacked the resources to obtain commodities that would demonstrate their education (either in terms of money for school fees or items like mobile phones); because Malawians expected that all educated people were wealthy and male; and

---

123 The poverty of Vsawa’s schools interacted with the presence of NGOs in Vsawans’ claims to be educated. Rival (1996) writes that people demonstrate their modernity by entering a school (a site of modernity) and imitating teachers (modern subjects). However, in Vsawa the modernity of the schools and the teachers was uncertain. Going to school may not teach a person to speak English and many teachers had not finished school themselves.
because social network dynamics resulted in additional scrutiny upon disadvantaged Vsawans’ educational claims.

Marginalised villagers, particularly women, rarely had the resources to claim to be educated. Poor households often only sent one child to secondary school. In homes where a child had performed well enough to be selected for a CDSS, this person would typically continue their education. However, in many poor families children told me they subtly competed to be selected by their parents for secondary schooling. Girls were disadvantaged in such selections by the manner in which Vsawan households acquired and utilised resources. They could help in the home if they were not at school; they would cease to be an economic burden when they married, which encouraged their parents and older relatives to find a husband for them; and they would add to the household’s dependency burden if they were impregnated by an unemployed high school student.

Vsawans described education as leading to wealth. This made them more sympathetic when wealthy people claimed educational status, especially those whose wealth was generated by interacting with Mzuzu’s modern market. (For example, the increasingly wealthy store owners and fish sellers explored in the last two chapters). In contrast, Vsawan and Malawian norms encouraged villagers to conceptualise women and poor people as uneducated.

Many poor Vsawan families told me that they sent their child who was most serious about education to secondary school. Chinelo, a fifteen-year-old Vsawan boy who had failed to be selected for a CDSS, would perform his seriousness about education through conspicuously reading books or practicing maths problems in the dirt outside his home. He would often be in front of his house ‘studying’ in the late morning when his mother came home from collecting firewood. He would then exclaim loudly to a nearby peer, “No, I cannot go fishing today, as I am practicing for school”, in order to show his scholastic determination to his mother. Chinelo had a thirteen-year-old sister who was in a similar position. She would demonstrate her dedication to education by loudly reading a *Peppa the Pig* book to younger girls. However, Chinelo’s mother and other villagers told me that Chinelo’s sister and other girls who did similar things were neglecting their domestic duties and wasting their families’ time.

---

124 However, boys from families that fished were also less likely to go to school than the majority of Vsawans and these households often did not send any of their children to secondary education.
Unequal power dynamics further mediated villagers’ claims to be educated. Most Vsawans wanted to maintain good relations with their wealthier peers. This meant that privileged villagers had to do less to show that they were educated. I saw Vsawans comment favourably when wealthy villagers read the newspaper or spoke English, even if the person in question had little schooling. Traditional leaders rarely read the newspapers and these wealthy villagers were typically part of the commercial elite, who had bought a newspaper on a trip to the market in Mzuzu, as none were sold in Vsawa. In contrast, villagers admitted that they did not want to give financial support to a poor but well-schooled peer. They would therefore laugh when a poor person spoke English or attempted to discuss development. Through doing so, villagers were rejecting the schooled Vsawan’s claim to be educated and the entitlements this entailed. Poor but schooled Vsawans’ fragile intra-network positions meant that they appeared to have little recourse when this happened. These interactions compounded the financial and cultural difficulties that the poor had in claiming educational status, while further conflating being educated with obtaining wealth through the market.

These same educational inequalities played out in Vsawans’ intra-household negotiations. Men would often state that they were more educated than their wives. This occurred even when both partners had the same number of years of school, or if the wife had been to school for longer. These men would then use being educated to justify reading newspapers (that were passed around by men after their wealthy buyer had finished with them or were taken from an NGO’s library) while their wives did farm work. Their actions were both enabled by, and reinforced, their control over the household’s finances. Men justified this control by arguing that they were educated (because they read newspapers) but that women “didn’t have the mind” to understand money. In making this claim, Vsawan men seemingly convolved their superior resource access (the newspapers they either bought or borrowed off another man or from an NGO); cultural norms that discouraged seeing women as educated; and men’s privileged intra-household position. This enabled these men, as advantaged parties in this negotiation, to make stronger claims to be educated than their individual years of schooling would necessarily support.

**Marginalisation as impeding access to the NGOs that signified educated**

NGOs enabled educational claims from both privileged and marginalised Vsawans. However, socially advantaged villagers had more time and resources to invest in associating with the NGOs. Further, the relationship between *Kulutilizya Msambiska*, education and modernity

---

125 See Platteau and Abraham (2002) for more details on social network dynamics.
faced scrutiny that the other organisations did not, which I interpreted to be because women and poor Vsawans attempted to use this NGO to demonstrate their education. I explore these differences to demonstrate the role of the powerful in limiting marginalised Vsawans’ claims to be educated and to show how Vsawans used NGO presence to communicate their aspirations and fears relating to modernity.

Wealthier male Vsawans were more likely than women to have the resources to interact with NGO staff or to emulate them. Men had less domestic responsibilities than their wives, which meant that they had the free time to loiter at NGOs’ offices or, ideally, to befriend their staff. Further, men’s control over their household’s resources enabled them to purchase items which they associated with NGOs, such as coffee or cutlery. Obtaining these items was more difficult for women. Single women were typically poorer than men and married women could rarely use their household’s wealth to make discretionary purchases.

Similarly, many Vsawan men had the confidence to interact publically with NGO employees. However, Malawian norms dictated that women should not communicate with outsiders. This was both because of men’s prominence in the social sphere and due to a fear that non-local men would encourage women to participate in immoral (sexual) behaviours, which were acceptable in the modern world.126 Vsawan women told me they would not socialise with male NGO staff because they feared that people would spread rumours that they were having an affair with this rich interloper. Vsawan men did not have the same concerns about interacting with female NGO employees. The presence of most NGOs in Vsawa therefore could be seen to increase the advantages that being male and wealthy provided when claiming to be educated. This further empowered a minority who could prove their education and modernity by associating themselves with the NGOs.

Why reading at Kulutilizya Msambiska did not make a person educated
Powerful Vsawans did not go to Kulutilizya Msambiska and the NGO did not provide free resources to the community in the manner villagers which conceptualised as modern development. The combination of these factors seemingly meant that reading at Kulutilizya Msambiska could not be used by Vsawans to show that they were educated. Differences between Kulutilizya Msambiska and other NGOs enabled women and the poor to associate themselves with this organisation. Kulutilizya Msambiska’s female mzungu manager preferred the company of Vsawan women to men. She told me that many male Vsawans did

126 See Ribohn (2002) and Booth, et al. (2006) for more details on women’s traditional roles.
not respect her authority, drank too much and were sexually forward. The NGO also frequently housed *azungu* volunteers, mostly female, who made similar claims. In return, Vsawan men described these *azungu* women as arrogant and dismissive of Tumbuka culture. Further, wealthy Vsawans and traditional leaders felt that this NGO’s *aphipa* staff did not respect their high intra-community status.

*Kulutilizya Msambiska*’s volunteers befriended Vsawan women and encouraged them to read in the NGO’s library. The NGO’s employees went to significant efforts to make their projects child friendly. For example, *Kulutilizya Msambiska* had many toys and picture books and female staff played with local children if their mothers arrived at the NGO’s centre. This encouraged Vsawan women to go to *Kulutilizya Msambiska*. In this context, many more women than men read at this NGO’s library and wealthy men were particularly unlikely to go there. This should have improved women and poor people’s claims to be educated. However, it instead correlated with Vsawan men arguing that *Kulutilizya Msambiska*, unlike other NGOs, did not provide education and, rather, was a threatening modern incursion.

This distinction between villagers’ conceptualisations of *Kulutilizya Msambiska* and *Mbwezi* is best illustrated by looking at the difference between how Vsawan men discussed these NGOs’ libraries. Both *Mbwezi* and *Kulutilizya Msambiska* had large sit down libraries. These were very similar; each had thousands of books, as well as hundreds of newspapers and magazines. The majority of Vsawans agreed that going to *Mbwezi*’s library was a sign that a person was educated. I was told that:

> A person who goes to *Mbwezi* library is educated because they are living differently to everyone who is just staying.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, ‘just staying’ is a piece of chiTumbuka idiom that means a person is not progressing their life. I witnessed this term being increasingly used by Vsawans to differentiate between those who could interact with the modern world and who were not able to, and instead were ‘just staying’ in the village. This statement therefore showed that reading at *Mbwezi*’s library was a valued action that made a person different to the majority of villagers. (It also further conflated being educated with being equipped to interact with the world outside Vsawa).
Very few women went to *Mbwezi’s* library. Its presence therefore almost exclusively assisted men in proving their educational claims. However, men argued that reading at *Kulutilizya Msambiska’s* library, an activity performed primarily by women, did not demonstrate that a person was educated. Vsawan men told me that:

People don’t go there to learn; they are just reading and if they can’t read they are just staying.

In contrast to their opinion of *Mbwezi*, these men’s statement implied that reading at *Kulutilizya Msambiska’s* library did not make a person educated. They appeared to utilise the similarity between ‘just reading’ and ‘just staying’, to imply that reading at this library would not help a person’s life to progress. In doing so, they can be interpreted as rejecting the educational claims of the women who read there.

This claim was almost inevitably followed by additional criticisms of *Kulutilizya Msambiska*. These criticisms would be focused on the fact that, in an attempt to obtain financial self-sufficiency, (see chapter two) *Kulutilizya Msambiska* sold eggs rather than giving them away and expected small payments from Vsawans who charged their mobile phones there. Similarly, the NGO did not have any projects that involved redistributing wealth obtained from international donors (for example, programs that gave out like free seeds, or interest-free cash loans), as *Kulutilizya Msambiska’s* mzungu manager did not believe that these were sustainable. The NGO was frequently compared to *Mbwezi* and ChurchCare, who provided large scale free projects, which Vsawans conceptualised as modern development. I was told:

Brigid [*Mbwezi’s* manager] is a good person; she gives loans and gives out seeds for free, where Katherine [*Kulutilizya Msambiska’s manager*] receives for free from azungu and then sells and keeps the money.

And:

We [Vsawans] want an NGO that is for us, not one that takes [things from us, by asking for payment] ... *Kulutilizya Msambiska* does less than nothing’.

These complaints implied that *Kulutilizya Msambiska* did not assist the community in drawing wealth from the modern world; the modernity that Vsawans hoped NGOs would provide. This, combined with the fact that wealthy men felt unwelcome there, could be

---

127 This was because the prestige associated with this building meant that women were unwilling to take small children there and that reading at *Mbwezi* would therefore clash with their child rearing duties.
understood to discourage villagers from conceptualising this NGO as providing the education that would make a person’s life different to those who were ‘just staying’. Instead, Kulutilizya Msambiska embodied the aspects of modernity that Vsawan men feared; an elevation of literate women and a loss of respect for the traditional status of elderly and wealthy men. This was correlated with them refusing to accept reading at Kulutilizya Msambiska as a sign of education.

Differences in the treatment of Mbwezi and Kulutilizya Msambiska can be seen as evidence that men and the wealthy were significantly more able than women to utilise NGO presence in claims to be educated. They were more likely to have the resources and the confidence to interact with, or act like, the NGO staff and Vsawan morality discouraged women from interacting with the world outside the village. Further, on the rare occasion where an NGO actively sought out women, associating with it ceased to signify education. The observation that men who read at Mbwezi’s library were “living differently”, but women who went to Kulutilizya Msambiska were “just reading”, or “just staying”, seemingly highlighted the ability of the powerful to judge the validity of marginalised people’s claims to be educated. It also reiterated that Vsawan understandings of various NGOs and their relationships with modernity incorporated intra-community power dynamics and villagers’ apprehensions about the aspects of the modern world that challenged the patriarchal norms of this village society.

**NGO Presence and Intra-village Negotiations over Girls’ Education**

There is already significant work available on the negotiated nature of individuals’ claims to be educated. This work often studies communities which do not have confidence in their school system. By analysing Vsawans’ utilisation of NGOs in similar negotiations, I have argued that the manner in which education is conceptualised and valued may impede marginalised people’s educational status. This finding has implications for works that explore the lower educational involvement of girls or which argue that education increases equity in a rural environment. Further, I claim that Vsawans conceptualised and covertly discussed multiple impending modernities through scrutinising their peers’ claims to be educated. Exploring this process through an actor-network framework elucidates how development interventions influenced intra-community negotiations over the changing meaning and purpose of education.
What constitutes an educated person is negotiated through local hierarchies (Rockwell 1996). The ease with which male villagers associated with NGOs can be seen as evidence that the powerful typically have superior access to the local symbols of education. Further, Vsawan men were able to reject the link between reading at Kulutilizya Msambiska and being educated. This may demonstrate that, when a supposed signifier of education is not valued by the dominant group, it has limited use for raising the social standing of the marginalised. Similarly, men were able to use NGO presence to claim to be more educated the few highly schooled Vsawan women. This implies that, even when a marginalised person would appear to an outsider to be more educated than an empowered one, local negotiations and machinations may enable the latter to depict themselves as more educated than the former.

These findings interact with literature that examines girls’ educational disadvantage. In Malawi girls are more likely to enrol in free primary school than boys but significantly less likely to complete their MSC (Chisamya et al. 2012; Swainson 2000). This has been attributed to an intra-household demand for feminised care work and gender relations in the school and household that impede female learning. Studies of girls’ schooling in other African countries produce similar results; high enrolment in free education but a significant decline in participation once a price is attached to school attendance (Stambach 1998; Vavrus 2002). These studies attribute high dropout rates among girls to a reluctance to educate them (that is embedded in “African” cultures), combined with intra-household economic reasons, like the demand for women’s domestic labour or a fear that these girls will be impregnated (Osita-Oleribe 2007).

The argument that NGO presence more readily assisted men’s educational claims compliments these studies. A son was often able to claim the cultural capital of education after two years of secondary school if he read at Mbwezi’s library. However, for a daughter to obtain the same cultural capital she would often have to go to secondary school for four years, and even this many not be recognised by her future husband. This seemingly incentivises investing in a son’s education in Vsawa and likely in other parts of Africa. This inequity interacts with cultural norms but cannot be reduced to them. A man would usually be able to present himself as educated after a reasonable amount of schooling, which reinforces the perceived wisdom of sending male children to school. A daughter who receives little praise for her schooling, and may not be acknowledged as educated after her marriage, is less
incentivised to try at school and is unlikely to have their intra-household work burned
decreased. Her poor results may then reinforce the belief that schooling is wasted on girls. More broadly, the difficulties marginalised Vsawans faced in claiming to be educated provides a caveat to literature on the relationship between education and inequality. DiMaggio (1982) claims that the cultural capital of being educated is among the forms of social elevation most available to the poor. However, authors including Levinson and Holland (1996) argue that schooling reduces inequality amongst the schooled but creates a distinction between the schooled and unschooled. In Vsawa, the distinction between the educated and uneducated appeared to obfuscate other distinctions, rather than necessarily creating new inequalities. The superior treatment of wealthier, typically male, Vsawans was accepted as respect for the educated. This was a palatable public transcript. It masked a hidden transcript through which Vsawans negotiated increased intra-community inequality and the threats and opportunities they perceived to be encroaching.

**Actor-network Theory and NGOs’ Influence on Educational Claims and Modernity**

The ease with which wealthy Vsawans could claim to be educated influenced local understandings of modernity. Privileged individuals’ ability to associate themselves with an NGO reinforced the Vsawan belief that NGOs (and therefore the outside world) provided great wealth but required a rare skillset to interact with. Villagers came to associate already privileged Vsawans socialising with or acting like NGO staff with a venerated potential modernity. In this modernity Vsawa became increasingly materially developed but local norms and hierarchies were only slightly changed. This, Vsawans seemed to believe, could occur through a controlled increase in educated villagers’ influence vis-à-vis gerontocratic elites. Conversely, local women’s attempts to claim to be educated by reading at *Kulutilizya Msambiska* signified a threatening incursion by the modern world. The actions of the *mzungu* manager and *azungu* volunteers were interpreted as a challenge to the values and hierarchies that Vsawans naturalise as their culture. Compounding this, *Kulutilizya Msambiska* provided few of the material benefits that Vsawans hoped social change would entail.

---

128 Problematically, these findings encourage caution with projects that offer education to women but not to men. The negotiated nature of ‘being educated’ as a social position means that powerful members of a community may reject the educational value of a project if it challenges their social standing, as the presence of *Kulutilizya Msambiska* did.

129 The relationship between Vsawa’s public and hidden transcripts was explored in detail in the previous chapter.
In this manner the presence of NGOs highlighted multiple potential modernities that Vsawans believed were quickly arriving. How villagers negotiated who was educated appeared to respond to these modernities and expressed their hopes and fears relating to them. Vsawans listened to and respected an emerging elite, who they believed could bring wealth or development from the outside world because they were ‘educated’. These people would guide the NGOs, and modernity more generally, as it infiltrated Vsawa; negotiating and mitigating changes to village social life. Vsawans questioned claims to be educated by the poor and from women who read at Kulutilizya Msambiska. This simultaneously reflected their scepticism as to whether these people were educated and communicated a rejection of the potential modernity that Kulutilizya Msambiska was associated with; a modernity which came with significant changes to Vsawan society and morality, but did not make the community richer. In this manner, Vsawans utilised, and were influenced by, NGO presence when determining who was educated; with understandings of education intimately tied to notions of modernity that the NGOs embodied and guided.

To situate NGO presence in a study of village-level educational negotiations, I now briefly return to actor-network parlance. In this language, I claim that the presence of NGOs enabled Vsawans’ agency by serving as a signifier of the advantages of education. NGO staff demonstrated that being educated could assist a person in obtaining wealth outside their home village. The expansion of the NGOs in Vsawa highlighted that the village needed educated individuals to interact with modernity as it arrived. This enabled villagers to associate with these NGOs as a way to prove that they were educated and to claim cultural capital by going to school, even though this rarely led to employment.

Through foregrounding some advantages of education and not others, NGO presence mediated Vsawan educational discourses. In an environment where there were few other reliable symbols of education NGOs were disproportionately important to local educational narratives. For example, their emphasis on speaking English and development as (respectively) a signifier of and purpose for education discouraged Vsawans from arguing that advanced agricultural techniques or chiTumbuka literacy were signs or purposes of educational investment. This seemingly reinforced the notion that education’s primary use was interacting with the external, either by finding employment in the modern world or assisting the village as this world arrived.

130 See chapters one, two and three.
NGOs were therefore involved in *moral associations*; the way a Vsawan interacted with an NGO influenced whether they were understood to be educated, determining the moral way for other Vsawans to interact with this individual. Due to factors such as the NGOs’ ownership of computers and the poverty of the schooling system, those who associated with the NGOs were considered modern. How Vsawans treated these people therefore elucidated their aspirations and concerns about modernity. Their actions both reflected and accelerated a controlled (and partial) transfer of power from the village elders to a new elite; those who were believed to have the aptitude to interact with the modern world, while protecting the hierarchies and values that Vsawans consider moral.

However, Vsawan utilisation of the NGOs also reflected the *actors, texts and discourses gathered* within them. The elevation of the educated appeared to be at least in part a reflection of these individuals’ high social standing and their deliberate depiction of themselves as educated; as well as Malawian discourses where education enabled a person to interact with the outside world; and the way that the NGOs’ computers and English signage reinforced this discourse. Similarly, Vsawans’ rejection of any association between *Kulutilizya Msambiska* and education emerged from a gathering of women’s poor intra-household bargaining position; Malawian norms about the role of women; the *mzungu* manager’s treatment of Vsawan men; and villagers’ anger at *Kulutilizya Msambiska*’s failure to give them their donors’ wealth. I have claimed that none of these factors was the pure cause of Vsawan’s scepticism of *Kulutilizya Msambiska* as an educational signifier, nor of their utilisation of any of the other NGOs. Rather, in an actor-network parlance Vsawan negotiations about who could claim to be educated and what being educated entailed reflected the actions and interests of myriad villagers who were responded to, utilised and were influenced by, NGO presence.

**Conclusions**

In this chapter I explored the influence of NGO presence on Vsawan understandings of education and modernity. In the context of poor schools and a saturated job market, NGOs appeared to highlight the potential advantages of investing in education and assisted specific villagers in claiming to be educated. These observations were used to argue that NGOs, as macro-*actants*, encouraged villagers to conceptualise education as the ability to interact with a seemingly external and modern world. Through doing so, NGOs necessarily implied that Vsawa and the vast majority of its inhabitants were not modern.
The chapter then argued that intra-community power dynamics made claiming to be educated easier for the powerful. The presence of NGOs, with the exception of Kulutilizya Msambiska, exacerbated the difficulties that the marginalised faced when claiming to be educated. In turn, Vsawans conflated Kulutilizya Msambiska’s association with marginalised villagers with its failure to provide what they considered to be modern development. Influential villagers could therefore reject this NGO’s status as a signifier of modernity, education and development. Through this process Vsawans appeared to use discussions about education to entrench existing inequalities, as they advocated for the aspects of modernity which could provide great potential rewards without challenging local values and hierarchies.

I have used this chapter to detail Vsawans’ conflation of education, development and modernity and to comment more broadly on the negotiated nature of education. The latter task builds upon a body of literature that argues that the meaning of education (Bartlett 2007) and who can claim to be educated (Levinson and Holland 1996) are locally determined. I expanded upon this by detailing the role of macro-actants (as compared to just actors) in the intra-community negotiations that determined what being educated meant and showed how these negotiations responded to social change. I also argued that various marginalisations inhibit a person’s claim to be educated. This means that negotiated educational claims can enhance, rather than reduce, intra-household and intra-community inequities.

Like its predecessor, this chapter has directly addressed my first two research questions. The final section briefly explicated the utility of actor-network theory for exploring NGO presence’s influence during Vsawans’ negotiations over the meaning of education and their education related social acts. It focused more heavily on how I interpreted NGO presence as affecting Vsawan understandings of development, modernity and social change. NGO presence encouraged a narrative where education’s primary purpose was to interact with a modernity that existed outside the village. This narrative posited the outside world as modern and developed, necessarily making Vsawa un-modern and under-developed. The increasing presence of NGOs in Vsawa signified the encroachment of this modern world, which had the potential to develop the village but may also challenge Vsawan values. In this context, those who could interact with the world outside Vsawa obtained increasing entitlements. In the last chapter this referred to merchants who interacted with Mzuzu’s markets, in this chapter those who could persuade their peers that they were educated. (Due to the way educational claimed were created these people were often but not always one and the same). These emerging modern elites were becoming more important as NGO presence encouraged villagers to see
development as coming into their village and as providing new threats and opportunities. This elite was deeply embedded in the village that they were considered to be able to guide. However, there were specific social roles that encouraged some Vsawans to position themselves as conduits between the community and NGOs and these positions are the focus of the final sections of my thesis.
PART THREE: TACTICS IN THE DISJUNCTURE BETWEEN VSAWANS AND NGOS

In this section I detail the lived experiences of the social actors who served as intermediaries between those who designed the NGOs’ projects (donors and urban managers) and the Vsawan populace. These actors – Village Headmen (chapter five), NGO staff (chapter six) and volunteers (chapter seven) – are often conceptualised as ‘brokers’ in the development literature. They are understood to obtain financial and social rewards through maintaining a screen between development organisations and beneficiaries and through generating stable representatives of each for the other. In Vsawa, Village Headmen could temporarily enhance their authority through fabricating a special relationship with an NGO: a few NGO staff obtained esteem through dividing their employer’s wealth among their Vsawan peers; and several volunteers were praised or financially rewarded when villagers perceived them to have moulded the development that NGOs provided in a manner which accommodated local norms and hierarchies. However, I contend that the long-term presence of NGOs in Vsawa made it impossible for headmen to fully control their villagers’ interactions with, or understandings of, NGOs. These NGOs’ institutional structures discouraged most of their employees from maintaining meaningful bonds with Vsawans. Furthermore, I argue that any specific volunteer’s ability to obtain social capital inside their village was determined as much by other Vsawans’ attempts to negotiate social change and the machinations of their headman as it was by their volunteering. This section, therefore, attempts to explore the intra-community relationships and realities that guide and constrain a development broker’s acts. It foregrounds that agency in the disjuncture between an NGO and community is often tactical, rather than strategic; determined by structures and narratives that make the social capital gained through brokerage unstable, and that encourage brokers to reproduce dominant development narratives and power structures.

Therefore, I use this section primarily to answer my final research question. I claim that those with specific roles that placed them between the community and the NGO (headmen, NGO staff and volunteers) were able to utilise the presence of NGOs in order to elevate their intra-community social standing. They did this by showing other villagers that they could guide the conflation of social change, development and modernity that NGOs embodied and signified. The actions of these people were crucial to the Vsawans’ understandings of NGO presence. The way that NGOs were utilised in intra-village discussions can therefore be interpreted, at least in part, as a reflection of these individuals’ tactical agency. However, I also argue that each social role interacted with development narratives and intra-community expectations, which constrained the individuals who fulfilled them. Headmen, NGO staff and volunteers all had different reasons to exaggerate the difficulties that most Vsawans expected to experience when interacting with NGOs. They, therefore, enhanced the difference between ‘traditional’ Vsawan life and the modern, developed, world that villagers perceived to exist outside Vsawa.
Chapter Five: Vsawan Headmen and the Chiefly Dyad – NGO Presence as Enabling an Elite’s Tactical Agency while diminishing their Strategic Position

In this chapter I argue that NGOs enhance the tactical agency of village headmen, while reducing their strategic agency. NGOs provide headmen with opportunities to temporarily improve their intra-village legitimacy. However, the presence of NGOs both diminished the primacy of headmen as a conduit between the village and the outside world, and challenged the symbiosis that headmen presented between development and traditional rule. In making these claims I provide a caveat to authors like Kleist (2011), who argue that chiefs can influence their constituents' understandings of chieftaincy and tradition; as well as authors like Chinsinga (2006) and Schou (2007), who depict chiefs as development brokers, who guide the projects of external developers while these developers remain distant from the villages their projects take place within. I show that the former claim does not hold for Village Headmen, the lowest rank of Malawian chief, who lack the gravitas to significantly influence narratives of chieftaincy and that headmen cannot serve as effective ‘brokers’ when NGOs maintain a long-term presence in their community. Through making these claims I explore how headmen and NGOs generated contradictory discourses that placed modernity in opposition to tradition; traditional rule as dyadic with development and development as being provided by external, modern developers. In doing so, I comment more generally on how shifts in discourse can enable the tactical agency of an unadaptable local elite, while excluding them from long-term negotiations about structural change.

In order to elucidate how NGO presence has influenced Vsawan chieftaincies, this chapter will first detail the headmen’s role in Malawian society. It will claim that headmen use their position as the primary conduit between their village and the outside world in order to negotiate their legitimacy. In doing so, they necessarily link development to traditional rule. This chapter then details how the presence of NGOs alters this situation by opening up

131 The chapter will use a definition of authority provided by Kyed and Buur (2007), where it is a hierarchical relationship that requires its legitimacy to be recognised by both ruler and ruled. It will view legitimacy as an open process in which various actors use co-existing, complementary and competing sources in order to stake the claim that they represent others.

132 There is significant debate as to how democratic chieftaincies are (See Mamdani (1996) and Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) for strong arguments from both sides). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to resolve this debate; however, the term constituent is used to highlight the downward accountability of Vsawan headmen.
opportunities for all villagers to interact with developers and by unambiguously associating this development with modernity. The chapter recounts how three Village Headmen – VH Mwalimu, VH Jerimani and VH Nachoka – responded to the threats and opportunities generated by NGO presence. It argues that VH Mwalimu presented himself as having a privileged relationship with *Mbwezi*. This elevated his social standing until villagers realised how little influence he actually had over the NGO. VH Jerimani attempted to distance himself from *Kulutilizya Msambiska*, which led to his villagers seeing him as impotent after a dispute between them and the NGO staff. These headmen’s struggles are compared to the case of VH Nachoka, whose village of Jumpi was far enough away from central Vsawa that no NGO maintained a permanent presence there. Unlike the other headmen, VH Nachoka therefore appeared able to control his villagers’ understandings of his relationship with the NGOs. This made his authority resilient to a poorly planned Green Earth project. Through analysing the commonalities and differences between their tactics, I will highlight the poor negotiating position of headmen vis-à-vis NGOs and will claim that NGO presence encouraged Vsawans to scrutinise the relationship between development, modernity and traditional rule.

**Chieftaincy, NGOs and Malawian Development**

I will now detail the structures of Malawian chieftaincy before focusing on how these manifest in Vsawa. I highlight that Village Headmen are the lowest rank of chief, but that they are the only chief that most villagers interact with. This positions them at the interface between their constituents and both external developers and Malawian tradition. In this section I show that headmen negotiate their intra-community authority through an intertwining of development provisioning and a veneration of tradition, as well as through maintaining their position as the sole conduit between their village and the outside world. Doing so will allow the remainder of this chapter to explore how Vsawan Village Headmen responded to the presence of NGOs. This presence problematised their primacy at the interface between the village and the outside world and aligned development with modernity, rather than within the traditional realm.

Malawi has six strata of paid chiefs and a voluntary lowest rank. At the top are three Paramount Chiefs and twenty-four Senior Chiefs (SCs), who serve primarily as advisors to the government and perform ceremonial roles (Chinsinga 2006). They¹³³ almost always live

¹³³ Despite the gendered names of chieftaincy positions (headman for example), women were able to be chiefs, there were, however, very few female Village Headmen (Peters 1997).
in a city, are typically from wealthy backgrounds and often do not have strong connections with their villages. All Senior Chiefs are also Traditional Authorities (TAs), the highest level of administrative chief for any region of Malawi. There are 121 TAs in Malawi, with every rural Malawian nominally living under one (Chinsinga 2006). The TAs’ roles are primarily symbolic or structural. They also often reside in urban areas and travel to the villages that they oversee for important events, like crowning chiefs of a lower rank, attending political rallies and introducing NGOs to their village (Chiweza 2007). The discussions that determine whether an NGO is allowed to operate in an area usually take place between the area’s urban-based TA and the (also urban-based) NGO project manager (Chiweza 2007; Tambulasi 2009). van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and van Dijk (1999:8) claim that the vast majority of literature on the relationship between traditional leaders, developers and governments focuses on these higher status chiefs (and their equivalents in other parts of Africa).\footnote{\textbf{134} Beneath the TA is the sub-chief – another form of administrative chief that did not exist in Vsawa.}

However, the day-to-day running of a village is performed by Group Village Headmen (GVHs), Village Headmen (VHs) and volunteer Village Headmen (vVHs).\footnote{\textbf{135} Not an official position but taken on when villages split apart, as Jumpi split off from Pungwe (see both chapter three and later in this chapter). Volunteer Village Headmen would be referred to as Village Headmen by their villagers.} There are about 20,000 paid Village Headmen in Malawi (Chinsinga 2006). Each one is in charge of a village which typically comprises between 80 and 500 houses (Dionne 2009). They are paid 1,000MK ($3US) a month to perform tasks that include: organising development projects, facilitating interactions between external developers and their village, mediating disputes, and leading spiritual rituals (van Donge and Pherani 1999). Some smaller villages, or new villages that have recently split-off from larger populations,\footnote{\textbf{136} However, they are still officially under the rule of their previous VH.} have a volunteer Village Headman instead of a Village Headman. This person performs the same role as a VH but is not recognised by the government. They are, therefore, not paid and face more challenges than a VH would in persuading external developers and NGO employees to listen to them. All VHs and vVHs serve under a Group Village Headman. This person is the VH of one village and oversees three to five other headmen, meaning they may control over 1,000 households. These GVHs settle disputes between headmen and listen to villagers’ complaints about them – a task for which they are paid 5,000MK ($14US) a month. GVHs, VHs, and vVHs (collectively ‘headmen’) are the only chiefs with whom the vast majority of rural Malawians meaningfully interact (Eggen 2011). Their permanent residence in the village...
means that their authority (rather than that of SCs and TAs) is affected by the presence of NGOs.

The authority of a headman in Malawi has always been negotiated. While Village Headman is a hereditary title, a large portion of any Malawian village will have enough ‘royal blood’ to be its headman. Intra-village discussions therefore determine succession and tenure (Chiweza 2007). Historic records show that pre-colonial chiefs were frequently replaced by their constituents (Green 2011). The colonial government of Nyasaland (now Malawi) codified the chieftaincy system. It damaged the relationship between headmen and their subjects by turning them into little more than tax collectors. Colonialists would remove headmen who lost the ability to control their subjects or who (more importantly) angered the government or white landowners (Baker 1975). Dr Banda attempted to restore legitimacy to the institution by providing headmen with the power to make legally enforceable traditional judgments and through ceremonially aligning himself with them (Chiweza 2007). In the modern era villagers can refuse to comply with a headman’s orders as a way to pressure him to resign and a TA or SC can formally dethrone a VH or GVH. When determining whether to praise or vilify their headman, villagers consider the headman’s general behaviour (for example their sexual fidelity), as well as their ability to interact with external development providers and their knowledge of the community’s traditions.

For most of Malawi’s history headmen have connected villagers to the outside world through two parallel chains (Eggen 2011). One of these chains provides access to the Malawian state and, therefore, to its development apparatus (Schou 2007). This chain begins with an area’s Village Development Committee (a committee that is almost always comprised solely of the village’s headman), then links to the Area Development Committee (a committee made up of the community’s development literate elite and an elected councilor with little power), then the region’s Member of Parliament (MP) and then the President (Dionne 2009). This chain is reminiscent of many depictions of African chiefs as development brokers (see Kulper 1970; Mamdani 1996). The headman is positioned in the disjuncture between a distant government and villagers. This enables a headman to siphon-off government resources and to reinforce

---

137 Since the vVHs do not hold a formal position, they are much harder for the more senior chiefs to remove but easier for their villagers to pressure into resigning.

138 A village’s Village Development Committee is nominally a form of village level self-governance, however these committees are not transparently formed and poorly maintained. The Area Development Committee usually comprises an elected councilor and the community’s development literate and unapproachable elite (see Peters et al. 2008:67). However, indicative of the inadequacy of these local structures (and the Malawian Parliament and chieftaincy’s attempts to undermine them), councilors were first elected in 2000, with their terms expiring in 2005, yet no new election took place for councilor positions until 2014.
their legitimacy by using development to favour their intra-village allies (Scharf, Banda et al. 2002). This aspect of a headman’s role has increased since democratisation due to the decentralisation of Malawian governance (Magomero 2009).

However, there is more to being a village headman than just overseeing development. An equivalent chain connects a rural Malawian, through the chieftaincy, to their traditional and spiritual heritage. This chain also begins with the Village Headman, then connects up through the GVH, to the TA and, if applicable, the SC (Chinsinga 2006). The traditional that this chain embodies is understood to be unchanging and hierarchical and to exist in opposition to a modernity that is associated with the urban and the western world (Chiweza 2007; Ribohn 2002).

A Village Headman’s role marries development to the traditional. Each headman decides how much emphasis to place on each of their role as development provider and traditional ruler when negotiating their intra-village legitimacy. They consider their personal attributes and their constituents’ demands when doing so. However, headmen’s roles are necessarily dyadic. Their legitimacy is created through (and simultaneously maintains) a symbiosis between development and tradition as they link their community to the outside world (Swidler 2009b). As such, no headman is able to maintain their authority solely through provisioning development or purely through embodying tradition. NGO projects may, therefore, enable a headman to enhance the development of their village, but can do so at the expense of development’s relationship with traditional rule.

**The changing role of headmen in Vsawa**

Headmen in Vsawa had various roles that linked their legitimacy to tradition, development and the intertwining of the two. I argue that the presence of NGOs therefore challenged headmen’s positions as the sole conduit that connected villagers to the outside world, as well as the dyad of development and traditional rule that they based their legitimacy upon.

As traditional rulers, Vsawan headmen were expected to judge conflicts in their community. Intra-village quarrels were typically catalysed either by disputes about the border between two villagers’ farms or by accusations of sexual impropriety. However, informants claimed that these conflicts were inevitably the outcome of simmering tensions between families (or within a family) over a much longer period. Villagers, therefore, described a headman as a

---

139 While I agree with authors like van Dijk and Rouveroy van Niewall (1999) that this ‘traditional’ is likely to be a product of the colonial and dictatorial state, it is both institutionally backed and almost universally believed in by rural Malawians.
good judge if they took these factors into account and provided a judgement that resolve visible conflict while restoring unity within their village.\textsuperscript{140} Vsawan headmen also performed tasks of spiritual significance. These included eulogising at funerals, storytelling and leading rituals.\textsuperscript{141} The traditional realm evoked in these activities was usually juxtaposed against a modernity associated with \textit{azungu} or with the outside world.\textsuperscript{142} However, Vsawans rarely outwardly observed any contraction between venerating this ‘traditional’ and expecting their headmen to provision development, which they believed should be primarily funded by modern, \textit{azungu} developers.

The development activities that I observed typically began with a headman calling together their villagers. These villagers would then perform labour for infrastructure, commonly building roads, schools or toilets; receive resources, such as mosquito nets or seeds; or participate in training or information sessions on topics, which ranged from democracy to sexual health. Sometimes headmen would organise development activities of their own accord. For example, a few headmen would marshal groups of villagers to maintain local roads or persuade a literate member of their community to run English language classes in their village. Informants claimed that attendance at these activities often served as a plebiscite on the headman who organised them, with villagers considering the headman’s ability to provide development and their traditional judgement when deciding whether to attend. However, more commonly external developers would direct a headman to oversee projects that they had initiated. For instance, a headman would be told to organise villagers for a government run food-for-work scheme\textsuperscript{143} or to persuade their constituents to attend an NGO-facilitated AIDS information day.

Vsawan headmen complained to me that they were under significant pressure from both their villagers and TA to increase the amount of development work in their community. Development was often at the forefront of Vsawans’ minds.\textsuperscript{144} The TA heard this at the regular meetings that he held with the NGO staff and the area’s MP. He responded by dethroning several headmen who he did not consider were doing enough to develop the

\textsuperscript{140} Van Donge (1999) confirms that this is the case in other parts of Malawi.
\textsuperscript{141} See Masuka and Taylor (2011) for more details on Malawian funeral practices.
\textsuperscript{142} I once saw a mother take her crying child away from a funeral so that she wouldn’t interrupt the eulogy. The headman paused his speech to comment: “the \textit{azungu} brought democracy so that child could chose to leave funerals by crying”.
\textsuperscript{143} A government run scheme where villagers are paid to build infrastructure, commonly either toilet blocks or roads.
\textsuperscript{144} This was at least in part because inner Vsawa had gained electricity over the few years preceding my study and a renovation to the road had enabled more villagers to visit the region’s capital (see chapter three).
region. These headmen were stood down because they “did not do development, but were involved in *bwekabweka*”\(^\text{145}\) or because they were “small in mind”, connoting that they lacked the education and worldliness supposedly needed to provision development. The TA dethroned several headmen who villagers described as good judges and spiritual leaders. Through this process, I understood him to be changing the nature of chieftaincy; he was slowly shifting this institution (which both he and the headmen were part of), reducing the significance of the traditional and the spiritual, while emphasising the importance of development provisioning. In this context, NGOs provided Vsawa headmen with opportunities to satisfy the desire for development of their villagers and the TA. However, NGO presence also altered the relationship between development and the traditional rule.

**Headman and the presence of NGOs in Vsawa**

Headmen told me that prior to the permanent presence of NGOs in Vsawa they had been the sole conduit between villagers and developers. They recalled that during this time NGO or government employees would seek permission from a TA or SC to do development work in their region. They would then send staff there, who would stay with the GVH, a VH or in a house that the headman organised. Headmen explained that since they would be present for almost all interactions between villagers and external developers, they maintained their position of primacy in local development and could, therefore, link this development to their traditional rule. Their claim to have a superior influence in the past was seemingly supported by many Vsawans, who told me that they personally and the village as a whole, respected headmen less than in the past. It is also supported by Chiweza (2007) claim that Hastings Banda place significant emphasis on Headmen as development practitioners and Kishindo’s (2003) observation that any rural Malawian development work needs a headman to be on board for a project to be successful.

However, headmen opined that when *Mbwezi* and *Kulutilizya Msambiska* built offices in Vsawa (and ChurchCare and Green Earth employed permanent staff there) they lost control over villagers’ interactions with development interventions. All four organisations obtained permission to work in Vsawa from the TA, rather than from a specific headman. Most of the NGOs would have likely respected a request from a headman to not run a project in their village. However, making such a request would have angered people who saw that project run in the villages adjacent to their own. Similarly, a council of headmen advised *Mbwezi* on

\(^{145}\) This translated as ‘going from place to place’ and had implications of corruption and sexual impropriety.
which development activities to carry out. Yet, as most of the NGO’s finances were tied to specific projects by their donors, this committee was rarely more than a rubber stamp.

In this context, headmen became a (not the) conduit between NGOs and villagers. NGOs would frequently ask headmen to call their village together to perform labour for development projects or to attend meetings. They would also request that headmen select their most educated constituents for training sessions146 or that they advise the NGO staff on which of their villagers a project should provide with seeds or food. The latter activities appeared to provide headmen opportunities to present themselves as guiding external resources into the village or to reward their intra-village allies. They could also publicly associate themselves with an NGO’s wealth through, for instance, riding in its 4WD.

However, if a headman was either unwilling or unable to be involved in a project, the NGO staff could almost always circumvent them. As they lived in the village, NGO employees had enough connections to assemble people for a meeting or to find Vsawans to assist them with labour. For instance I saw NGO staff ask previous volunteers or Vsawans who they knew personally to attend their projects and to find others to be involved as well. Further, as the NGOs had the TA’s permission to operate in the region, it would be difficult for a VH or GVH to stop them from doing so.

Other aspects of the NGOs’ presence made headmen appear subservient to development professionals or seemed to challenge the link between development and traditional rule. NGO staff would not invite headmen to their social events147 and would not take their hats off in front of them, which was the proper way to greet a chief. When a headman was at the same public gathering as senior NGO employees, donors or azungu volunteers the junior NGO staff would serve these individuals before the headman. Were there a limited number of chairs at an event or were some chairs better than others (for example larger or wooden rather than plastic), preference over the headman would be given to the azungu and NGO employees. The development that NGOs brought to Vsawa was much grander than anything a headmen could organise and appeared overtly modern. This included both the NGO’s projects (for instance a library with a solar-powered computer) and their staff’s personal commodities (phones and motorcycles).

146 As chapter seven details, being trained often came with a per-diem and travel allowance and could therefore be very profitable.
147 Things like Mbwezi Day (chapter three).
Other symbols associated with the NGOs also made the development that they provided difficult to link to the traditional. Messages from the NGOs to the community would inevitably be written in English (a language Vsawans reported associating with modernity and with life outside the village), which few headmen spoke. This meant that, even if the NGO intended the headman to deliver this message to their villagers, it would have to be translated by an English-speaking school graduate. *Mbwezi* had a painting on the wall of its hall showing what a ‘developed’ Vsawa would look like. In this painting women fished out of canoes and men cooked *nsima*. This inversion of traditionally gendered roles could be seen to imply that the development NGOs provided would challenge, rather than compliment, Vsawan tradition.

In this context, NGO projects offered headmen new opportunities to respond to their villagers’ increased demands for development. However, the presence of NGOs in Vsawa challenged headmen’s primacy as conduits for the villages’ interactions with the outside world. Further, the inequitable relationship between headmen and NGO staff, combined with the way NGOs connected development to modernity, problematised the chiefly dyad of development and the traditional rule.

**Headmen’s Tactical Response to NGO Presence**

Having shown the opportunities and dangers that NGO presence represented to Vsawan headmen, I now examine how VH Nachoka, VH Mwalimu and VH Jerimani attempted to utilise various NGOs to solidify their own legitimacy. I will argue that NGO presence offered them new tactics, but that these tactics added to the long-term challenges that NGOs posed to the headmen’s legitimacy, as these headmen were unable to guide the structures that gave meaning to chieftaincy while society changed around them.

**Why VH Mwalimu fabricated a special relationship with Mbwezi**

VH Mwalimu of Pungwe attempted to present himself as having a superior relationship with *Mbwezi* than other headmen did. His talent for organising development projects encouraged him to do so, as did his poor knowledge of the Pungwe’s traditions. VH Mwalimu initially gained popularity through this tactic; however, he was eventually hampered by his lack of influence over the NGO staff, which villagers came to equate with an inability to protect them from other external threats, such as government officials.

---

148 This idea has been a core theme of this thesis and the following two sentences are by no means an exhaustive list.

149 Malawi’s stable food, a solid clump of either maize or cassava, which is cooked almost exclusively by women.
VH Mwalimu had been crowned the year before I arrived in Vsawa. He had worked as a miner in South Africa until that time, when the previous VH Mwalimu had been dethroned. There had been significant intra-community debate before asking the current VH Mwalimu to return to the country and serve as chief. A substantive minority of the village had supported a different person’s desire to be headman of Pungwe. These people argued that living away from the village would have reduced VH Mwalimu’s knowledge of the area’s rituals, traditions and conflicts. However, slightly more than half of Pungwe’s inhabitants wanted him, they told me that this was because his time in South Africa would have provided him with the skills to develop the village.

VH Mwalimu appeared to primarily used development provisioning, rather than traditional guidance, to solidify his intra-community legitimacy. He still partook in ritual and performed traditional judgements. However, his long-term absence from Vsawa meant that he lacked the knowledge of local history to do these tasks effectively. Instead, VH Mwalimu would call his villagers to perform community development projects more often than other headmen. These villagers renovated their local school, built classrooms and widened the dirt road through Pungwe. VH Mwalimu organised them to build a rock bridge through the river that separated Pungwe from inner Vsawa, which led to the first car ever entering the village.

I understood VH Mwalimu to be trying to convince his villagers that he had a privileged relationship with Mbwezi. He often tied his development activities to the NGO, claiming that it had suggested them or that he had decided to do these ‘developments’ after going to meetings run by the NGO. When Mbwezi gave out seedlings, VH Mwalimu took two and placed them at the entrance to his house. These were the only trees in an area of cleared ground and, despite the hassle of obtaining water, he ensured that they were tended to daily.

VH Mwalimu’s subjects described him as “always busy with development” and “always at Mbwezi”. His special status was exemplified through a rumour that the NGO had bought VH Mwalimu a special writing desk. This desk (which did not exist) had supposedly been provided to him both as a gift for doing development and because he was the most English literate chief in the area. The special relationship that VH Mwalimu appeared to have fabricated with Mbwezi highlighted his strength as a development provider to his villages and

---

150 Village Headmen pass on a name, so the headman of Pungwe will always be VH Mwalimu.
151 This was not a purely democratic system, and crucial to VH Mwalimu’s authority was the support of a small number of oligarchs, including Chiefy, who was introduced in the introduction.
152 This car was Mbwezi’s 4WD; the NGO’s project manager drove to VH Mwalimu’s house, parked nearby and sat with him.
allowed him to claim credit for the NGO’s presence. These villagers therefore invoked other aspects of *Mbwezi*, which no headman could realistically provide to their village (for example, the NGO’s internet access or the laptop computers its staff carried), when telling me about the development that having VH Mwalimu as headman could potentially lead to.

However, VH Mwalimu had no real influence over *Mbwezi*. This meant that when the NGO made unpopular decisions VH Mwalimu’s villagers questioned his legitimacy. In November of 2012 *Mbwezi* decided not to extend its popular micro-finance program (see chapter three) to Pungwe or to the villages around it, saying they were too far from central Vsawa. Headmen, including VH Mwalimu, protested this decision. They told *Mbwezi*’s staff that their constituents would be angry at both them and the NGO; however, the NGO’s staff ignored them. Shortly after this *Mbwezi* decided to build irrigation canals off the river that ran next to Pungwe and several of the other villages to which they had denied micro-finance. As their plan required significant labour, they asked local headmen to organise their villagers to do this work for free. Some headmen refused, justifying their decision by citing *Mbwezi*’s failure to give them loans or the NGO’s reluctance to pay its labourers. Others cautiously accepted the request. They angered villagers, who were forced to provide free labour, but they hoped that the rewards of the project would compensate for this. It seemed that VH Mwalimu had little choice but to accept *Mbwezi*’s request enthusiastically, as he had built his legitimacy on his relationship with the NGO. He marshalled some of his strongest villagers for the project and would regularly attend the site where these people were digging. He would either tell them about the development that their work would bring or speak English to the NGO staff. However, due to the combination of a late rainy season and poor planning, the canals quickly dried up. People from all over the area were angry at having wasted their time; however, VH Mwalimu received special condemnation. A resident of Pungwe remarked:

> We have a history with *Mbwezi* … when we ask for loans *Mbwezi* tells us that we are too far away, but when they want us to cultivate the river they call for the people of Mwalimu; then they just give us shovels and they do not pay us.

The term ‘people of Mwalimu’ had special significance, as villagers almost never refer to their home village by its headman’s name. I interpreted this to mean that because VH Mwalimu had tactically associated himself with *Mbwezi*, his people felt betrayed that he did not have the power to influence the NGO. His utilisation of *Mbwezi*’s presence, therefore,
meant that his legitimacy as a chief was more heavily tied to the popularity of the NGO’s projects than the legitimacy of other Village Headmen.

Furthermore, associating with *Mbwezi* had a significant opportunity cost for VH Mwalimu. Since he was often at the NGO, he did not have time to learn the history of the area and to bond with his constituents. He once went to an *Mbwezi*-run meeting that lasted the entire day and that few headmen attended. Early in the morning a teacher hit a child at Pungwe’s primary school. The child’s irate mother went to VH Mwalimu’s house. After not finding him there, the woman went to the police, who arrested the teacher. That afternoon an official from the Forestry Department came to Pungwe to check that no one was illegally cutting down trees. He also went to VH Mwalimu’s house and, not finding him there, proceeded to investigate the village. Almost every structure in Pungwe was made using illegally chopped wood and large fines were issued.

People told me that they were angry that VH Mwalimu had not been present for either event. He supposedly should have taken money from the teacher, which would go to the child’s mother. Instead, the police issued a much larger fine and kept this for themselves. Similarly, villagers claimed that VH Mwalimu should have organised a bribe for the Forestry Official or chased him away; performing the tasks that they saw to be the traditional roles of a headman. The traditional basis of VH Mwalimu’s legitimacy was, therefore, further eroded and the people of Pungwe increasingly ignored his judgements and calls for participation in community development activities.

VH Mwalimu’s tactical utilisation of *Mbwezi* temporarily enhanced his reputation as a development provider. However, in doing so, he neglected his duties as a traditional ruler and, through attributing the development he organised to the NGO, he enhanced the challenge that NGO presence posed to the dyad of development and tradition. While at times the people of Pungwe reported that VH Mwalimu could potentially provide great development, his legitimacy became tied too closely to vicissitudes of the NGO’s popularity.

**Why VH Jerimani ignored Kulutilizya Msambiska’s presence**

In contrast to VH Mwalimu, VH Jerimani of Revori seemingly derived his legitimacy primarily from the traditional realm. Knowing that he lacked the skillset to guide an NGO’s development, VH Jerimani attempted to present *Kulutilizya Msambiska* as outside his jurisdiction as a headman. However, he could not stop his villagers from interacting with an
NGO that resided in his community and was unable to protect these villagers when they ended up in conflict with the NGO’s staff.

VH Jerimani estimated his age as between eighty and ninety-five and he claimed to have been Revori’s headman since decolonisation. Therefore, he possessed a wealth of knowledge about the village (and Vsawa in general) that assisted him in performing traditional judgements and rituals. He would occasionally call Revorians together for communal development activities; typically asking them to pull weeds out of the one path that connected Revori to the rest of Vsawa or to listen to communal meetings on the dangers of AIDS.¹⁵³ However, VH Jerimani was not very interested in the world outside the village and he only spoke chiTumbuka. These factors made it hard for some NGO and government employees to interact with him and, these professionals claimed that this slowed development in Revori.

VH Jerimani rejected any association with Kulutilizya Msambiska. Inside his home were photographs of him with many azungu who had travelled through Revori, and with Frank,¹⁵⁴ the mzungu who owned the lodge that employed several people from his village. However, he did not have any photos of him with Katherine, Kulutilizya Msambiska’s mzungu manager, or with the organisation’s azungu volunteers. When I asked him why this was, VH Jerimani said:

I have very bad impressions [of Kulutilizya Msambiska]. We are different, azungu and aphipa, and when you try to rule them they are difficult.

This statement, when combined with his photographs, implied that, while VH Jerimani was prepared to rule over Frank’s lodge, he did not want to do the same for Kulutilizya Msambiska.

VH Jerimani did not attempt to remove the NGO from his village. This appeared to be because the TA had given Katherine permission to be there and because Kulutilizya Msambiska appeased his villagers by providing development that he could not (for instance a library and cheap mobile phone charging). However, he did not encourage or assist the NGO. For example, other headmen would often reward those who volunteered for NGOs by giving them resources (typically seeds or fertiliser) or favouring them during traditional meetings.

¹⁵³ These meetings would be run by a woman named Ely who volunteered for Mbwezi and whose volunteering is detailed in chapter seven.
¹⁵⁴ See chapter two for an introduction to Revori, which details Fred’s lodge and its relationship with Kulutilizya Msambiska in more depth.
judgements.\textsuperscript{155} When people who had volunteered at \textit{Kulutilizya Msambiska} attempted to use their volunteering to gain favours from VH Jerimani, he informed them that their relationship with the NGO was none of his concern. Many Revorians reported that VH Jerimani’s apprehension encouraged them to avoid \textit{Kulutilizya Msambiska}. However, a minority still interacted with the NGO. These people stated that the scarcity of other development in Revo persuaded them to temporarily volunteer with \textit{Kulutilizya Msambiska} and about ten of them were eventually employed there.

There was often tension between \textit{Kulutilizya Msambiska}’s staff and the community.\textsuperscript{156} It was therefore unsurprising that when a \textit{nanga}\textsuperscript{157} came to Revori to search for witches he accused an \textit{mphipa Kulutilizya Msambiska} staff member of witchcraft – specifically of having a snake that sucked paraffin out of fishermen’s lamps and, when he returned to his house, vomited this paraffin into a bucket. The staff member was threatened by a mob of villagers who had abducted and beaten others accused of being a witch. The staff member later told me that he had been using his monthly salary to buy paraffin in bulk, which he would store and then covertly sell at a high profit during times of shortage. He knew that Katherine could stop the mob but that she would be angry if she found out what he had been doing. He therefore facetiously told her that he was targeted because people were jealous of him having gainful employment.

The next day Katherine had Frank summon VH Jerimani and several Revorian men who had been involved in the mob. When they arrived at Frank’s lodge she read out a section of the Malawian constitution that criminalised accusing a person of witchcraft. Despite VH Jerimani’s protests, she contacted the police and the MP (neither of whom would have likely accepted a phone call from a mere Village Headman) and had these men taken to jail for a short period.

\textsuperscript{155} Finding in favor of those who helped your village was considered a legitimate way for a headman to act in intra-village court cases.

\textsuperscript{156} This was in part caused by volunteers who became embittered when the NGO did not employ them and by the way the \textit{aphipa} staff grew distant from their peers after being hired by the NGO. It was also caused by myriad other factors, including the juxtaposition between the comparative decadence of lives of the \textit{azungu} who volunteered with the NGO, the poverty of the village and by the way that the organisation refused to pay volunteers or give away resources. See chapter three for more details.

\textsuperscript{157} Similar to a witchdoctor; however, the \textit{nanga} also hunts witches in exchange for financial reward.
VH Jerimani was unable to stop the incarceration of the Revorians. The nature of witchcraft accusations meant that those arrested were popular members of the community. Kulutilizya Msambiska had better connections with the police, the MP and the lodge owner than a headman would have. The NGO therefore both figuratively challenged VH Jerimani’s primacy as a conduit between the village and external developers and diminished his status as a traditional protector. Several months later, a few men who had been arrested at the time recounted these events. They told a captive audience:

The chief was angry at Katherine, so he tried to stop her, but she shouted at him and he was afraid. Now the people are angry and we go to the chief but the chief is quiet, so we go to Katherine but then she shouts … she shouts to Frank [the lodge owner] and to the MP and to the government.

The story highlighted that VH Jerimani had no authority over Kulutilizya Msambiska. The organisation did not need an association with the Village Headman. When Katherine required him to acquiesce to her desires, she could utilise her superior connections to the travel lodge, the TA and the government. At the end of the story a fisherman observed that:

Kulutilizya Msambiska wanted to show us that the old ways were over and that Malawi is developing now.

The fisherman made this statement neither approvingly nor sarcastically. Rather, I interpreted it as an acknowledgement of the incompatibility between what he perceived to be the basis of VH Jerimani’s traditional rule (“the old ways”) and the development that Kulutilizya Msambiska signified.

VH Jerimani had seemingly used the opposite tactic to VH Mwalimu. Instead of presenting himself as having a special relationship with the NGO, VH Jerimani had depicted the organisation as outside his jurisdiction. However, his tactic appeared equally unsustainable. The NGO’s presence in the village meant that, when he refused to serve as a conduit between the NGO and his people, other Revorians interacted with it, hoping to obtain the development that it signified. When the relationship between the NGO staff and villagers soured, VH Jerimani’s inability to control Kulutilizya Msambiska became apparent in a manner that

---

158 See Austen (1993) and Peters (2002) for details on how Malawians come to both accuse others of witchcraft and be accused of witchcraft themselves and through this why witchcraft accusations are often made by the popular on the unpopular.
highlighted the limits to headmen’s authority and encouraged his villagers to doubt development’s compatibility with traditional rule.

**How VH Nachoka positioned himself as a conduit for the projects of absent NGOs**

VH Nachoka of Jumpi persuaded his constituents that he was deceiving Green Earth. In doing so, he reassured these constituents of his utility to them. Jumpi is one of the most remote of Vsawa’s lakeside villages. This meant that, while the NGOs sent project resources there, they did not maintain a permanent presence. This allowed VH Nachoka to serve as the primary conduit between his village and external developers in a way that VH Jerimani and VH Mwalimu could not. Through recounting VH Nachoka’s interactions with Green Earth and comparing these to the struggles of the other headmen studied, I highlight the role of an NGO’s presence, over and above its projects, in problematising headmen’s authority.

VH Nachoka had begun serving as the volunteer Village Headman of Jumpi ten years prior, when his village had split off from Pungwe. The separation of these villages appeared logical; Jumpi was several kilometres south of Pungwe, travel between the two was only possible using a canoe or across a poorly maintained wooden bridge and, most importantly, the people of Jumpi were Tonga where the people of Pungwe were Tumbuka.

Jumpi’s isolation meant that its people appeared to be less affected by the presence of NGOs than other Vsawans. For example, no one from Jumpi was employed by a development organisation; the area’s inaccessibility by road discouraged development staff from visiting; and very few people from the village volunteered with an NGO. Therefore, when NGOs wanted their projects to affect Jumpi, VH Nachoka was able to position himself as the primary conduit between the village and external developers. This seemingly made it easier for him to serve as a development broker than either VH Mwalimu or VH Jerimani. For example, *Mbwezi* occasionally ran HIV awareness training in Jumpi and ChurchCare gave out grain to its widows and orphans. Unlike in other villages, the NGO staff could not use their personal connections (for example volunteers) to circumvent the headman when providing development projects. Furthermore, as they often came by boat or canoe, NGO staff could not bring 4WDs and laptops, symbols of the link between their authority,

---

159 (v) VH Nachoka was a volunteer Village Headman, but like all other volunteer Village Headmen was referred to by his villages, and therefore in this text, as VH rather than vVH.

160 The people of Jumpi were the northernmost family of Tonga and the people of Pungwe the southernmost Tumbuka. Pungwe had previously been a wealthier village under a large and powerful family, but this family had dissipated and as the Tonga population was rapidly growing, they were expanding northwards.
modernity and development. In this manner, VH Nachoka’s relationship with NGOs was different to the other headmen, as the NGOs attempted to perform projects in Jumpi but did not maintain a permanent presence there.

VH Nachoka was a relatively popular headman. Villagers claimed he was a good traditional judge and he was very personable. However, the village’s isolation made it harder for him to stimulate development there, which some of his villagers told me that they found frustrating. Furthermore, being a volunteer Village Headman, rather than a Village Headman, made his tenure less stable and enabled development organisations to ignore him.

In 2009 Green Earth embarked on a forestry program that involved quadrating off large sections of Jumpi for conservation. They obtain permission from Vsawa’s TA to do this and briefly consulted VH Mwalimu (the dethroned predecessor to the headman explored above), who was the official headman of the area. (v) VH Nachoka protested but, as he held no official title, neither Green Earth nor the government listened. Most of Jumpi’s farming land was designated a conservation zone and farmers were ordered to cease growing cassava there. The forestry department was empowered to issue a fine of 500,000MK ($1667US) to anyone who disobeyed this decree. This infuriated villagers and VH Nachoka’s told me:

People are angry with everyone – with Green Earth, with VH Mwalimu, with the government and with me. But VH Mwalimu is finished [dethroned] and they never see the government or Green Earth, so it is just me.

I saw this statement as evidence that Green Earth’s project had damaged VH Nachoka’s authority in a different manner to the effects of NGO presence on VH Mwalimu or VH Jerimani. People were angry at these external developers (Green Earth and the government) and directed their anger at their headman, a conduit for the developers that “they never see”.161 Had VH Nachoka not been popular when this took place he may have been pressured to step down from his headman-ship. However, over time he was able to repair his reputation. I argue that he did so in part by manipulating his villagers’ understandings of other projects provided by the NGOs that did not maintain a permanent presence in his village. These projects included another Green Earth initiative.

---

161 This was the classic pressure a Village Headman experienced when interacting with colonial governments, long before NGOs maintained a permanent presence and has been documented as early as Glucksman (1948) and Kulper (1970). In Malawi specifically headmen in the colonial period were called on to reduce visoso, a shifting cultivation practice, due to the colonialists belief that it harmed the environment (Kerr 2014). Green Earth’s conservation policies can be understood as a continuation of this colonial environmental discourse.
In 2012 Green Earth initiated a project where volunteers built fuel efficient cook-stoves in the homes of any Vsawan who wanted one. The effectiveness of these cook-stoves was initially doubted by villagers all over Vsawa. Women in particular claimed that they reduced the communal aspects of cooking and its skill-based component. However, Green Earth paid its volunteers (who were Vsawans selected by their headmen) to build mud bricks for the stoves and to install them in people’s homes. A volunteer made about 250 MK ($0.70US) for each stove installed, incentivising them to persuade their friends and family to ask for one. Further, Green Earth’s aphipa staff, who lived in central Vsawa, preached about the effectiveness of these stoves when they socialised near their homes.

VH Nachoka desired the financial rewards that came with installing the cook-stoves. However, he told me that he did not want his villagers to believe he was aligned with Green Earth, as many people in Jumpi were still angry that he had not protected them from the NGO’s conservation project. To this end, VH Nachoka selected a volunteer and ordered every house in Jumpi to receive a cook-stove. I heard about his decision while in another village and, confused, went to Jumpi to ask him about it. I could not find VH Nachoka and instead began chatting to the Green Earth volunteer. VH Nachoka appeared, walked up to the two of us and spoke to the volunteer loudly enough that onlookers could overhear:

What are you doing sitting around and playing? There are bricks to make. [Laughter both from the chief and assembled onlookers] I did not select you to just chat. This village has four hundred and two houses and each stove needs twenty, thirty, forty bricks. [More laughter] Of course, we do not use the stoves.

After this, he made an ‘ismatch’ sound that signalled derision in the local vernacular. His wife, who had been listening, asked him how he would know the effectiveness of the stoves, as he never cooked. He laughed and claimed that he knew the stoves were useless because they came from Green Earth, but that he did not care because they provided money to this volunteer and to his village.

The volunteer built almost four hundred cook-stoves in Jumpi and was paid over 88,000MK ($250US, a well-paid Vsawan’s yearly wage) by Green Earth for doing so. Even though VH Nachoka took a significant portion of this money as a tribute, both the volunteer and his extended family were thankful; they praised VH Nachoka publicly, adding to his intra-

162 On my return trip in 2014 many families were cooking using these stoves, which certainly appeared to me to be faster and more fuel efficient than the ‘three brick’ method employed by Vsawa women.
community esteem. In this manner, VH Nachoka was able to extract wealth from Green Earth, while persuading the people of Jumpi that he was manipulating the NGO.

VH Nachoka’s tactics were enabled by the lack of a permanent NGO presence in his village. Had people from Jumpi been employed by Green Earth or had its staff visited regularly, it may have been difficult for VH Nachoka to persuade his villagers that the stoves were useless or that he had deceived the NGO. However, with the NGO sending projects from outside the village, VH Nachoka was able to maintain his position as the primary conduit between Jumpi and external developers. This allowed him to mitigate the acts of the NGOs that might have reduced the legitimacy of his traditional rule.

While VH Nachoka’s tactics were more successful than those of either VH Mwalimu or VH Jerimani, they would not work indefinitely. VH Nachoka was the primary, but not sole, conduit between his community and the outside world. A small number of villagers from Jumpi had found employment in major cities and they kept in contact with their village peers. Further, when people from Jumpi travelled to central Vsawa to sell their fish (about half a day’s journey), they could see the same NGO structures and personal wealth that Vsawans from other villages reported interpreting as linking development to modernity. VH Nachoka could not respond to the structural changes that were placing pressure on Malawi’s chieftaincy. However, the tactics he could use to maintain his intra-village authority were influenced by the lack of NGO presence.

**Vsawan Headmen as Tactically but Not Strategically Responsive to NGO Presence**

Through comparing the experiences of VH Jerimani, VH Mwalimu and VH Nachoka, I have argued that headman-ship, as a social role, offers its bearer tactical but not strategic agency. I have also claimed that the presence of NGOs undermined headmen’s authority. It encouraged Vsawans to scrutinise the linking of development to an unchanging traditional realm, as well as to interact directly with NGOs when their headman provided an unsatisfactory link between the village and the outside world.

Honwana (2005) and Utas (2005) differentiate between tactical and strategic agency. They argue that the former describes a person’s ability to temporarily maximise their individual circumstances, while the latter represents their ability to change the structures that create and give meaning to their social role. The TA’s dethroning of headmen who he did not believe provided development can be seen as an example of strategic agency. As mentioned earlier
(page 135), the TA altered the nature of chieftaincy through these dethronings. He shifted the emphasis of the institution to accommodate Vsawans’ increasing demand for development. However, none of the Village Headmen studied had this control over the meaning of headman-ship. Rather, these headmen maximised their individual circumstances by responding to their villagers’ intersecting desires for development and for traditional leadership.

In this context, the presence of NGOs seemingly opened up new tactical opportunities and liabilities for Village Headmen. VH Mwalimu was able to fabricate a relationship with Mbwezi in order to highlight his skills as a developer and to associate his rule with the development that the NGOs’ presence signified. VH Jerimani used his traditional duties to depict Kulutilizya Msambiska as outside his jurisdiction (for instance not discriminating in favour of its volunteers in judgements), thereby limiting his responsibility for its acts, while accepting the development it provided. These were two extreme examples of the tactical dualism that appears available to all headmen. A VH could associate themselves with an NGO as a way to appear to provide more development. However, through doing so, that headman would take on increased liability for the NGO’s failures, despite gaining no control over the organisation. Alternatively, a headman could disassociate themselves from an NGO and hope that it would still provide the development that their villagers desired. This would initially limit the headman’s liability for the NGO’s acts. However, villagers would be likely to interact with an NGO independently of their VH in an attempt to increase development. This would both highlight to villagers that NGOs were vastly superior development providers when compared to headmen, and could lead to conflicts between NGO staff and Vsawans in which these headmen would be rendered impotent. In this context, the presence, rather than necessarily the projects, of NGOs resulted in headmen losing primacy over the disjuncture between villagers and developers (other than headmen in remote areas, like VH Nachoka). This made the headmen’s agency primarily tactical and resulted in them having a vastly different experience to other chiefs explored in the development literature.

**The declining role of headmen as Vsawa’s development brokers**

Authors studying both Malawi (Chinsinga 2006; Chiweza 2007; Tambulasi 2009) and Africa more generally (Kleist 2011) have observed chiefs becoming increasingly important to development. They attribute this to donors’ desire for consultation as part of development projects and the combination of increased development funding and decentralisation in African countries. As the state has receded in much of rural Africa (including Malawi), local
chiefs have increasingly been able to cement their position as brokers for the growing
development funds that enter their villages. These funds often come with a requirement that a
developer consults with the community (a group of people they rarely know), resulting in
meetings that are inevitably organised and guided by the headman. In this context, authors
categorise chiefs as development brokers. They claim that these chiefs have significant
“room to manoeuvre” (Ray and van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal) or “serve as double
gatekeepers” (von Trotha), gaining prestige by controlling the relationship between a
development project and their community.

My observations of VH Nachoka somewhat depicted this. Projects entered his village from
the outside world and, while he had limited influence, he had significant
control over how his community understood both the NGO and his relationship with it. The hierarchical nature of Malawi’s chieftaincy system meant that after Green Earth obtained
permission from the TA, VH Nachoka could not prevent them from confiscating large tracts
of land within Jumpi. However, as neither this NGO nor any other developer maintained a
permanent presence in his village, he was still the primary development conduit between
Jumpi and the outside world. VH Nachoka therefore found it easier to broker Green Earth’s
next project in a manner which denigrated the NGO, while still bringing wealth to himself
and others in his community.

In contrast, the presence of NGOs in inner Vsawa and Revori meant that VH Mwalimu and
VH Jerimani could not act effectively as development brokers (see Bierschenk et al. 2002). This was because they were unable to control villagers’ links to external developers. When
VH Jerimani did not provide development quickly enough, villagers interacted with the
NGO, showing that he was not an effective gatekeeper. Conversely, VH Mwalimu lost ‘room
to manoeuvre’ when depicting himself as a development practitioner. Because Mbwezi served
as such a clear symbol of development, he was pressured to form a close association with it.
In this way, the presence of NGOs guided the tactics available to headmen. It enabled new
tactical acts, yet problematise their primacy as conduits between developers and the
community. Further, headmen’s tactical responses to NGO presence seemingly reduced their

163 Alternatively as demonstrated by the NGOs in Vsawa seeking permission from the TA, consultations with
‘the community’ often take place at a higher level than the Village Headman.
164 The headman as the local symbol for unpopular but distant developers is the focus of Glucksman (1948).
However, Kuper (1970) points out in his review of Glucksman’s work that the distance between the state and
the village enables significant maneuvering by the headman.
long-term legitimacy by increasing villagers’ scrutiny on the link between development and traditional rule.

Tradition, Development Provisioning and the Shifting Nature of Chieftaincy

Africanist ethnographies (Quinlan 1996; Ray and van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1996; van Rouveroy van Nieuwall 1999) argue that chieftaincy is an institution that is capable of altering itself and of guiding the meaning of ‘tradition’ in response to people’s needs. Authors including Konings (1996) and Buur and Kyed (2006) claim that chieftaincy can serve as a social lubricant between local values and modern development. This may be true of chieftaincy in environments where ‘the traditional’ is relatively fluid and of chiefs who are high up in chieftaincy structures and can, therefore, use their strategic agency to guide the meaning of being a chief. However, Vsawan headmen, as the lowest ranks of chiefs, appeared to have little control over the meaning of the traditional and relied on the linking of development to this unchanging traditional realm. I argue that they, therefore, could not guide intra-community discussions about the shifting relationship between tradition, development and modernity. This encouraged other villagers to negotiate the changing relationships between these concepts, scrutinising the role of traditional rule as Vsawa changed.

Both Chinsinga (2006) and Swidler (2009b) claim that Malawian headmen’s control over the material (development) and the spiritual (tradition) cannot be separated. Instead, a loss of authority in one of these domains leads to villagers questioning a headman’s legitimacy in the other. However, the tactical opportunities that NGO presence provided to headmen in Vsawa were predicated upon them accepting a delinking of tradition from development. For example, VH Mwalimu based his legitimacy upon being more capable than other villagers of guiding Mbwezi’s development. He spoke to the NGO staff in English in order to demonstrate a skillset that few Vsawans villagers had but, in doing so, foregrounded that the development he wished to be associated with came from the external, modern world. VH Jerimani, on the other hand, argued that NGOs were not the concern of headmen. Through this, he implied that the most obvious symbol of development in his village (Kulutilizya Msambiska) existed outside the jurisdiction of the traditional. Simultaneously, the NGOs, as macro-actants, encouraged Vsawans to conceptually tie development to modernity. The

---

165 Buur and Kyed (2006) found this to be the case in Mozambique where, despite a linking of chiefly rule to government, local chiefs still had significant power in determining the meaning of the traditional.

166 Kleist (2011) makes this argument about senior Ghanaian chiefs who return to the country after living in the United States.
NGOs provided development that was much grander than anything a headman could organise their constituents to perform and, unlike previous development providers, the NGOs maintained a permanent presence in the community, making their projects (and their wealth) harder for a headman to link to their traditional rule.

Malawian headmen cannot alter the meaning of ‘the traditional’ in response to the link that NGOs foregrounded between development and modernity. They exist at the bottom of an institutionalised traditional hierarchy. This specific hierarchy maintains its legitimacy through pan-Malawian understandings of ‘the traditional’ as static, monolithic and existing in opposition to the modern (Chiweza 2007; Ribohn 2002), as well as through codified powers that are both justified through the ‘the traditional’ and reinforce it (van Donge and Pherani 1999). Headmen are, therefore, constrained by the incompatibility between the dyad of development and tradition that underwrites their rule; the opposition between this monolithic traditional realm and modernity; and the modern development that NGOs foreground to their villagers.

This incompatibility appeared to encourage Vsawan villagers to scrutinise traditional rule. It was in this environment that a fisherman in VH Jerimani’s village coupled his observation that “Malawi is developing now” with a belief that “the old ways are over”. Scrutiny over the relationship between headmen-ship and development, as well as the presence of NGOs, opened up space for other Vsawans to claim to be developers or to guide development. These Vsawans, for example, people who volunteered with Kulutilizya Msambiska, modelled a discourse where development was associated with azungu and with a modernity that potentially threatened local values and headmen’s place within chiefly hierarchies.167

In this context, NGO presence mediated and catalysed Vsawan negotiations over the relationship between development, tradition and modernity. Many people chose not to interact with Kulutilizya Msambiska because they wanted chiefly guidance in development. Others selected VH Mwalimu to be their headman, hoping that he would be able to interact with external developers, but expecting him to be a poor traditional judge. Both of these groups can be seen to affirm that they saw a role for headmen in guiding development. However, different villages, and individuals within villages, disagreed over what this role

---

167 The treatment of aphipa volunteers and how this was used by Vsawans to negotiate their aspirations and apprehensions about modernity is the focus of chapter seven.
should be, and many Vsawans saw headmen to be less important than NGOs in future development activities.\textsuperscript{168}

Rather than guiding this discussion, headmen appeared hamstrung by it. As actors in this negotiation they could bring development and perform wise judgements to demonstrate their utility, reducing pressure both on their own legitimacy and on the institution of chieftaincy. They could either highlight the potential dangers that NGOs brought (as VH Jerimani and VH Nachoka\textsuperscript{169} did) or demonstrate that a good headman increased efficiency in development (like VH Mwalimu). However, these headmen were too low status to control the structures that gave their role meaning. As these structures were predicated upon the unchanging nature of the traditional, these local elites were sidelined in discussions about the relationship between development, tradition and long-term social change. Therefore, as NGO presence opened up space for the community to negotiate who brought development and what this meant, it encouraged Vsawans to scrutinise tradition and chiefly rule.

**Conclusions**

In Malawi external developers have almost always sent money into a village through its headman. This enables these headmen to control their constituents’ understandings of development and to link development to their traditional rule. However, because the NGOs I studied maintained a permanent presence in Vsawa, they could circumvent headmen who did not assist them and they embodied a grand development that villagers associated with the external and the modern. I argued that headmen responded tactically to this change to their rule. Some headmen aligned themselves closely with an NGO and, through doing so, gained credit for its development; others disassociated the NGOs from their jurisdiction in order to limit their liability for the NGOs’ acts. Both of these tactics ultimately proved unsustainable, with the former encouraging Vsawans to blame their headmen for NGOs’ unpopular decisions and the latter incentivising villagers to interact with NGOs without the interference of their headmen. Further, both of these tactics were predicated upon the understanding that NGOs were powerful development providers. This severed the link between development and tradition that gave legitimacy to a headman’s rule.

\textsuperscript{168} Almost all villagers saw some role for both chieftaincy and the traditional; their negotiations over this and headmen’s tactics within it are explained in chapter seven.

\textsuperscript{169} VH Nachoka wasn’t immune to the changes that NGO presence signified. He was losing his primacy as the conduit between his village and the outside world as villagers found jobs in the city and his villagers had their expectations of development inflated by trips to inner Vsawa, where they both saw a greater level of development than their headman could provide in both the 4WDs the NGOs owned and their development projects.
Through examining this process, I have argued that NGO presence enabled Village Headmen’s tactical agency. However, headmen did not have the strategic agency to change the structures that gave their social role meaning. NGOs foregrounded a linking of modernity and development that was incompatible with the chiefly dyad of development and traditional rule; and of an unchanging traditional realm which was conceptualised in opposition to modernity. In this manner, some headmen, as traditional elites, were able to temporarily enhance their social standing. However, they were too low in the chieftaincy system to change the nature of their authority in response to the development narrative that emanated from the NGOs. This situation speaks more generally to the agency of village-level traditional leaders in the development process. They may enhance their status through their utility in the disjuncture between a development intervention and their community. However, they are unlikely to control the meaning of either development or tradition, reducing their importance in intra-community negotiations about long-term social change.

This chapter has provided two caveats to the literature that depicts an increasing role for chiefs in Africa’s development. It has highlighted that when authors like Kleist (2011) discuss the ability of chiefs to change ‘the traditional’ they are talking about high-level chiefs. Malawian Village Headmen do not have this option and are instead constrained in their response to development by the structures and institutions that comprise ‘traditional rule’. The chapter has also demonstrated that the literature on a headman’s role as a development broker (as examined by Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 1997; Eggen 2011) is predicated upon developers not maintaining a long-term presence in rural villages. It has shown that developers who spend a significant period of time within a village are able to circumvent its headman (for better or worse) and that other villagers are likely to attempt to interact with these developers.

I have used this chapter to begin answering my final research question. It has claimed that the NGOs’ development projects allowed some headmen to temporarily elevate their social standing. However, the long-term presence of NGOs in a community made it impossible for headmen to control their villagers’ interactions with NGOs. This diminished their long-term status, which was intimately tied to their control over villagers’ relationships with and understandings of the outside world. In this manner, headmen were tactically incentivised to reinforce dominant development narratives, where development was provided by powerful external actors that few villagers could interact with. However, these narratives diminished the long-term social role of headmen. The chapter, therefore, highlights the inability of
headmen to serve as brokers for NGO projects. The next two chapters will examine other social roles positioned between the village and NGO – NGO staff and volunteers.
Chapter Six: Socially Isolated NGO Staff in Vsawa – How Elite Development Actors Recreate Dominant Development Narratives

Aphipa\textsuperscript{170} NGO staff in Vsawa were often isolated from intra-village social networks. In this chapter I argue that this was caused by the interplay between the NGOs’ internal dynamics and institutional structures, as well as by pan-Malawian understandings of the relationship between ‘ordinary villagers’ and the nation’s professional ‘development’ class. I also claim that the NGO staff’s isolation allowed some Vsawans to entrench their elite status through interacting with these staff and enabled already empowered villagers to use the slandering of NGO employees in order to reject calls for social change. Building upon the core themes of my thesis, this chapter posits that the NGOs, as macro-actants, assembled discourses, objects and actors in a manner which discouraged NGO staff and villagers from interacting with each other.\textsuperscript{171} Both NGO employees and elite Vsawans were incentivised to reinforce this disconnection through their utilisations of the NGOs’ presence. In making this argument, I highlight the symbiosis between dominant development narratives (in this case the perceived distinction between developers and villagers), local development institutions, and local and national elites. In doing so, I show how those who benefit from development’s status quo constrain the tactics of others who wish to use development institutions in a manner that challenges dominant discourses or questions existing regimes of power, in this case furthering men’s ability to reject the education of women.

The above claims are supported through detailing the personal lives of several NGO employees and the ramifications of their social acts for other Vsawans. These workers are James and Harriet, who were regional migrants employed by Mbwezi and Lamek, Dalila, Tunisha and Abebe, who were Vsawans that Mbwezi had hired. James and Harriet found that the NGO’s organisational structure fulfilled their material needs, while their intra-office socialisation seemingly reinforced the superiority that they felt over villagers, discouraging them from participating in Vsawan social life. Lamek and Dalila found that the same combination of institutional structures and workplace socialisation interacted with their peers’ and co-workers’ belief in the differences between developers and beneficiaries. This

\textsuperscript{170} Black or African (as compared to \textit{azungu}, meaning white or European. This distinction is unpacked in more detail in chapter three). As the vast majority of NGO staff were \textit{aphipa}, and the few \textit{azungu} had dramatically different experiences to them, this chapter will focus exclusively on \textit{aphipa} staff.

\textsuperscript{171} Tying into another core theme of this thesis, this prevented most NGO staff from serving as development brokers.
encouraged Lamek to grow distant from other Vsawans and motivated Dalila to resign from the NGO. The NGO employee’s social lives influenced intra-village negotiations. In the context of James and Harriet’s absence from Vsawan social life, Bhati, their landlord, was able to elevate his local social status by demonstrating his ability to interact with them. Simultaneously, Vsawan men maligned the education of women by comparing Dalila’s failure to advance within the NGO to the promotions received by Tunisha and Abebe, who were less popular in the village than she was. This chapter recounts these vignettes in order to claim that Vsawans’ and NGO employees’ utilizations of NGO presence reinforced, and were re-created through, the social and conceptual separation of developers and beneficiaries. Through doing so, it shows how this separation influenced the daily lives and negotiations of Vsawa’s advantaged and marginalised.

The Distinction between ‘Developer’ and ‘Villager’ in Malawi

I now briefly describe the lives of Vsawan NGO staff. I compare these lives to the intra-village experiences of NGO employees in development literature and highlight that, compared to the majority of Malawians, NGO employees are wealthy and well-educated. I then introduce a collection of NGO staff (some of whom had migrated to Vsawa and some of whom were born there) and detail how their relationships with their employers, co-workers and other villagers seemingly encouraged all parties to see an incompatibility between being an NGO employee and being a Vsawan community member. Through this process, I argue that the NGOs, as macro-actants, embodied and recreated not only the institutional structures that discouraged social interaction between staff and villagers but also the development narratives that reinforced their separation.

There is a significant division in the development literature over the social relationships between NGO employees and the rural communities in which they operate. Authors including Cox (2009) claim that developers are taught through training and project work that they are different from beneficiaries. Others, for example, Shrestha (2006) and Verma (2011), argue that NGO staff generate multiple identities, including one as a ‘personal friend of villagers’, and that these staff try to ‘bracket off’ social differences between themselves and beneficiaries as part of their development practice. Aveling (2011) examines how NGO staff serve as development brokers, mediating the relationship between the organisation that they work for and the community. Jackson (1997) and Mosse (2005:113) detail the way in which
villagers socially reward NGO staff who are seen to guide their employers’ resources into a village. However, Weisgrau (1997:189) warns that:

The disgruntled losers [from NGO employment] are often individuals who attempted to utilise their NGO position in ways that the organisation deemed to be unfair, or dishonest, but which, from their perspective, was consistent with familiar and acceptable norms.

This body of literature often presumes that NGO staff can find financial and social reward both in the village and in their NGO. In Malawi this is not the case, due to the gross disparity of wealth between Malawian villagers and development professionals, and because of a pan-Malawian development narrative, where professionals and villagers were understood to have incompatible social values.

In Malawi a small professional class remains socially and often physically separated from the rural smallholder farmers who make up almost the entire national population (Anders 2002). This class includes those who have inherited privilege and the smartest and luckiest secondary-school graduates, who have travelled to the city and obtained either employment or tertiary education. Malawians (both rural and urban) see a disjuncture between the values of this urban elite, who they understand to be individualistic, western and modern, and the morals of villagers, which are perceived to be communal and to be built upon an ‘unchanging traditional’ (Ribohn 2002). Malawians are also taught, through the actions of their government and the international community, that this professional class, the vast majority of whom work in development, are more important than villagers. While rural Malawians may resent these urban professionals, they have been taught to believe in their necessity for development (Englund 2006). Further, many villagers receive assistance from development professionals and civil service workers, who have extensive patronage networks in their home communities (Anders 2002). Unlike other Malawian professionals, rural NGO staff regularly interact with smallholder farmers. It is therefore instructive to observe why the experiences of these NGO staff reinforce, rather than challenge, Vswawans’ belief in the irreconcilable difference between professional developers and other villagers.

172 This narrative could be observed as early as the 1930s when Vaughan (1987) claimed that educated *aphipa* Malawians were able to sleep in and travel through different parts of Blantyre than laborers.

173 According to Lwanda (2002:163), the World Health Organization (WHO) distinguished between ‘economically essential’ Malawian professionals and the rural majority when determining how to provision HIV treatment in the country. By only giving this treatment to the ‘economically essential’, the WHO reinforced the distinction between the urban elite and rural majority.
There were about forty NGO staff in Vsawa, including both people born in the area and those who had migrated there after being hired by an NGO. These people were exclusively aphipa, with the exception of Kulutilizya Msambiska’s manager and the occasional azungu volunteer at either Kulutilizya Msambiska or Mbwezi. The vast majority of Vsawa’s NGO staff were either fieldworkers or administrative assistants. The more senior NGO employees, like program managers and financiers, worked at the organisations’ main offices in either Mzuzu or Britain. An important exception to this was Omar, Mbwezi’s project manager, who owned a house in Vsawa and split his time between the village and Mzuzu.

Despite often being junior in their organisations, almost all NGO staff in Vsawa were either part of the nation’s professional class or aspired to join it. All NGO employees were paid much more than almost any farmer earned. Mbwezi’s nightwatchmen received slightly smaller salaries than Vsawan schoolteachers (15,000MK or about $40US a month), and the field staff at both Mbwezi and Green Earth were paid about double that (at least 35,000MK or $100US a month, depending on seniority). All the NGO employees who had migrated to the area had some form of tertiary education and the vast majority of Vsawan-born staff had completed their MSC (finished secondary school). In comparison, almost no other Vsawans had gone through tertiary schooling and most had not finished secondary school. Nearly half the NGO staff in Vsawa were female and the wealth and educational differences between them and other Vsawan women was even greater than between NGO employed men and male villagers. This was because Vsawan women did not participate in the more profitable forms of fishing and were less likely than men to have completed school.

The NGO employees were split relatively evenly between Vsawan-born and migrant staff (about twenty of each). However, the migrants typically had higher paying and more prestigious positions. These migrant staff were already part of Malawi’s elite, a status most Vsawan-born employees seemingly aspired to. I temporarily lived with James and Harriet, who had moved from other parts of Malawi to become Mbwezi’s fieldworkers for health and education respectively. I also developed a close connection with Lamek and Dalila, who were born in Vsawa. Lamek was Mbwezi’s boat driver and Dalila the organisation’s agricultural fieldworker. Over the time I was there Harriet and James failed to develop Vsawan social

---

174 Bridget, who is introduced in chapter two of this thesis.
175 Both these organisations brought out volunteers from Britain who stayed for periods ranging between one month and a year. Kulutilizya Msambiska’s azungu volunteers stayed at the travel lodge nearby (see chapter three) and neither they nor the azungu at Mbwezi involved themselves in Vsawan life.
176 However, junior staff earned less than the most skilled fishermen and the oligarchs who owned the villages’ fishing nets, boats and stores. See chapter two for more details on the Vsawan economy.
networks. Lamek grew distant from his peers and, while Dalila maintained her intra-community social standing, she did so at the cost of her job.

The cloistered social life of migrant NGO staff in Vsawa
I interpreted employment at *Mbwezi* as satisfying James and Harriet’s social needs and personal ambitions. This discouraged them from befriending most Vsawans. I recall these NGO employees’ experiences to argue that *Mbwezi* assembled\(^{177}\) actors, objects and discourses in a manner that encouraged migrant NGO staff to remain isolated from other villagers. This reinforced to both NGO employees and Vsawans the differences that they perceived between villagers and development professionals.

Harriet and James depicted themselves as more important than the majority of Vsawans. While I was living with them, our headman called the entire village to come together and build a well. Harriet and James did not attend and when I asked why James explained to me:

Yes, the chief called for community development, but that is for ordinary people.

Harriet concurred by nodding and stating “that is true”.

I pressed James as to what he meant and he said:

Those people have to help with development because they are just fishing or just staying. But I do development as a job, so I am helping all the time. So now I am resting.

James was constantly retaught that being a development professional made him different to ‘ordinary’ Vsawans. This occurred every time he arrived in one of the *Mbwezi* 4WDs at a village where no one else owned a vehicle or when he used the English development terminology that was written on project forms in order to communicate with non-English speaking beneficiaries. He was also reminded of the differences that he perceived between himself and other Vsawans when he saw the same English language development jargon on the walls of *Mbwezi*’s staff room and through conversations with his peers in the office. James recalled to me that he laughed heartily at a co-worker’s attempt to explain the difference between NGO employees and villagers. This co-worker claimed:

\(^{177}\) The term ‘assembled’ here is only agentic in the actor-network sense of the term (see page 14-15 or 97-99 of this thesis). The NGO slid into being at the pleasure of various actors and *actants* including donors, national elites and Malawian development discourse. However, through this chapter ‘assembled’ will refer to the combination of these actors and their influences, which I contend cannot be reduced to each actor’s discrete acts.
People here [Vsawan villagers] are so ignorant, they think the only reason to get tested [for HIV] is for a t-shirt.\textsuperscript{178}

Statements like this, which differentiated the NGO workers from ‘ignorant’ or ‘ordinary’ Vsawans, were a consistent part of conversations amongst NGO employees and an important aspect of how they socialised.

In addition to being shown that they were different from villagers, James and Harriet’s financial circumstances discouraged them from entering Vsawan social networks. Joining these networks had a high cost and a limited utility for people with James and Harriet’s wealth and ambitions. I was told that migrant NGO staff would have had to provide gifts to Vsawans to join their social networks, as well as spending time at communal events like weddings, church services and funerals.\textsuperscript{179} Because they were rich compared to most villagers, James and Harriet would have been expected to provide expensive gifts to their newfound peers and to assist them with school fees and emergency consumption. However, migrant NGO staff had significant financial obligations in their home communities. Both James and Harriet sent large portions of their income to their parents and James was paying the school fees of a younger cousin. They said that they therefore did not want to assist Vsawans financially.

Neither James nor Harriet had any obvious use for the entitlements that a Vsawan social network gave its members. The primary short-term benefit of Vsawan social network membership was emergency assistance with either food or capital. James and Harriet were unlikely to need this help from Vsawans; they had monthly salaries to reliably plan their consumption; access to Mzuzu’s banking system; and peers in their offices who were willing to lend them money and were much wealthier than most villagers. James, Harriet and almost all other migrant NGO staff did not appear to want the long-term benefits from involvement in Vsawan society. This was because they planned to leave the village as their career progressed. This would happen by either being promoted to the head office of the NGO which they were working with, or being hired by an urban development organisation.

\textsuperscript{178} Mbwezi gave out T-shirts to those who agreed to be tested for HIV; when t-shirts were not available participation in tests dropped.

\textsuperscript{179} The unwritten rules of Vsawan social networks are the primary focus of chapter three of this thesis. Further, failure to join these networks would be costly for a Vsawan in terms of their relationship with the headman. This would affect how they were treated in land disputes and their ability to receive subsidised fertiliser. (Takane (2007) explores how a person’s intra-village social standing affects their treatment in land disputes in other parts of Malawi, and Chirwa, et al. (2011) details the relationship between a Malawian’s intra-village social standing and their access to fertiliser coupons). However, migrant NGO staff were unlikely to own land in the village and were ineligible to receive a fertiliser subsidy due to having a waged job.
Seemingly in response to, and compounded with, their social isolation, migrant NGO staff organised intra-office social activities. *Mbwezi’s* project manager would invite all the area’s NGO employees to lunches and dinners at his home, where he would serve meat and bottled beer. The NGOs also organised special events for their staff. These included Christmas parties and on one occasion a soccer game between *Mbwezi’s* employees and those of the Mzuzu branch of Stambic Bank. These activities clashed with Vsawan weddings, funerals, church services and traditional dances, which almost all villagers would be expected to attend. James and Harriet would go to the activities organised by their NGO-employed peers rather than by villagers. They reported feeling more at ease among the company of their co-workers than with the Vsawans, who they considered ‘ordinary’ or ‘ignorant’. As much of the conversing between NGO staff centred upon sharing their anecdotes about how peculiar villagers were, these events reinforced their prejudices. Further, spending time at the project manager’s house or playing soccer against wealthy bank employees enabled James and Harriet to network with people whom they considered their peers and who might assist their career.

In this way *Mbwezi’s* presence reinforced the distinction between developers and beneficiaries to the NGO staff. Its institutional structures, like the staff’s wages and their access to the NGO’s vehicles, dwarfed the resources available through village social networks. Correlated with their lack of need for Vsawan peers, the migrant staff chose to invest their time in their intra-office relationships and their money in their home village; both investments they considered necessary for their long-term prosperity. Through intra-office gossip and parties, the NGO’s internal dynamic both reinforced the staff’s isolation and linked it to their belief that professionals and, in particular, developers were different to Malawian villagers. The migrant NGO staff’s re-creation of the separation between developers and beneficiaries in their daily lives also encouraged them to scrutinise Vsawans hired by an NGO.

**The choice between being a ‘developer’ or a ‘villager’ for Vsawan-born NGO staff**

Vsawans who were hired by an NGO experienced an immediate and dramatic increase in their financial status. They, unlike almost all other villagers, had the opportunity to join Malawi’s professional elite. Having Vsawans join this elite did not demystify professional developers to villagers nor encourage migrant NGO staff to engage socially with the community. Instead, the NGOs’ employment of Vsawans appeared to entrench differences
between professionals and villagers by encouraging those who were hired to choose between presenting themselves as either a developer or a villager. I will now explain the factors that influenced their choices through an examination of the actions of Lamek, who chose to present himself as a developer, and Dalila, who left the NGO and reverted to being a villager.

**Lamek**

Employment at *Mbwezi* was a life changing opportunity for Lamek. He was 26 years old and, despite having completed his MSC, he had been unable to find any work other than farming his family’s plot. His job with *Mbwezi* paid him 20,000MK a month ($60US), which, while low by the standards of NGO work, was significantly more than almost all Vsawans earned. The NGO also provided Lamek with access to other opportunities and services. Like all *Mbwezi* staff, he could use the NGO’s vehicles to go on regular trips to the bank in Mzuzu or could request loans from wealthy senior managers. Lamek’s English quickly improved and he mastered development jargon, which he hoped would lead to promotion within *Mbwezi*.

Lamek, and most Vsawan-born NGO employees, felt pressured to prove their legitimacy as developers to their managers and migrant co-workers. The migrant staff created their own identity through comparing themselves to villagers. They were therefore sceptical of people like Lamek, whose dual status as ‘villager’ and ‘developer’ appeared incompatible to them. Lamek complained that his hygiene and eating habits were often scrutinised by the more senior migrant staff. When Lamek acted in a way that migrant NGO employees did not approve of, like drinking after work with his unemployed friends, they would say that he was still “very much from the village”. In doing so, these migrant staff seemingly implied that he was yet to acquire the sophisticated developer’s identity necessary for promotion.

Many Vsawan-born NGO staff attempted to prove their sophistication to their migrant co-workers and managers. This sophistication appeared to be conceptualised as being culturally similar to educated Malawians (like the migrant NGO staff) or to an imagined western identity. Lamek did this by performing *jenda*. He would occasionally cook for his family, inviting *Mbwezi*’s project manager and other migrant staff members to watch him do so and to then share the meal. Lamek used this activity to show that he was modern and that he acted like a *mzungu* husband rather than a villager. He was praised for his progressiveness within the office; however, he was mocked by his Vsawan peers. By performing *jenda* in response

---

180 A phonetic spelling of ‘gender’ that was used to describe activities where men performed tasks usually done by women (typically domestic work) or where women were invited to perform high prestige activities usually done by men (for example canoe fishing).
to the demands of his co-workers and manager, Lamek enhanced his status as a developer at the expense of his social standing within the community.

Compounding the opportunities and wealth that NGO employment offered was Lamek’s poor treatment by other villagers. After he was hired by Mbwezi, Vsawans began to request that Lamek assist them with food, money and access to the NGO’s resources. Lamek briefly acquiesced to these requests, which I understood to be an attempt to maintain his status as both a villager and a developer. Lamek and his wife would provide food and small amounts of money to Vsawans who asked for it. Further, Lamek’s house was next to Mbwezi’s office and its electricity came through his home, giving him free access to it. Lamek shared this electricity with many Vsawans. His door was always open and a power-board in his home enabled the simultaneous charging of four mobile phones. While people waited for their phones to recharge they would drink the water that Lamek’s wife would bring from the lake and usually eat a free lunch that she had cooked. At night Lamek’s house became a disco or a cinema. He would either borrow Mbwezi’s speakers and play Zambian and Nigerian pop music or use a DVD player to show movies dubbed into chiChewa.

Vsawans did not reward Lamek for his generosity. They claimed that developers and villagers were different from each other and, seeing Lamek as just another villager, they conceptualised him as a mere conduit for Mbwezi’s patronage. I saw Vsawans praise Mbwezi, rather than Lamek, when telling others that they had charged a phone or watched a film at his house. They would refuse to leave his home when he asked them to and would insist that his wife provide them with food. They claimed that, as these resources were provided by Mbwezi, they should be available to the whole community.

Lamek appeared to respond to Vsawans’, and his co-workers’, utilisation of the distinction between developers and villagers by presenting himself as the former. He stopped showing movies at his home and put a padlock on his door to prevent people from entering and charging their phones. He also began to attend fewer villagers’ funerals and weddings, at which the family would ask him to provide a cash donation. Instead, Lamek went to more social events that were organised by other NGO staff and would socialise in the office after work. He simultaneously strengthened his bonds with his co-workers, which could lead to potential promotion, while diminishing his increasingly expensive ties within his community.

---

181 The role of NGO staff and powerful Vsawans in encouraging villagers to conceptualise NGOs as communal patrons is explored in chapter three.
Dalila
In contrast to Lamek, Dalila maintained her social standing in Vsawa but at the cost of her career with *Mbwezi*. Employment at *Mbwezi* offered Dalila less privilege and less chance of promotion than it did to Lamek (and most other Vsawans that NGOs employed). While her salary was impressive (35,000MK a month or about $100US), she had not completed secondary school. This, combined with the fact that she was a woman, severely limited her chance of promotion. Further, Dalila was very popular in Vsawa and she did not want to sever her intra-community ties by leaving to work in Mzuzu.

Dalila’s social activities and living style was scrutinised by the migrant staff and management. This occurred in the same manner as migrant staff scrutinised Lamek’s attempts to portray himself as a ‘developer’. On the occasions that Dalila did not dress up for work, migrant NGO employees would comment that she was dressed like a ‘villager’, rather than in the ‘European style’ appropriate for the office. Migrant NGO staff would also urge her to spend less time with ‘ignorant’ villagers and, in doing so, would criticise many of Dalila’s lifelong friends. Dalila initially attempted to demonstrate to her co-workers that she was both a developer and a villager. She attended NGO staff run social events and worked exceptionally hard in the office. However, she often found that NGO-initiated social events clashed with village weddings, funerals and parties that she, as a villager, was expected to attend.

Dalila continued to invest in her intra-village relationships. She spent much of her free time gossiping with Vsawan women while preparing meals for her family and friends. She was part of the largest Vsawan church choir and she once attended her choir practice, rather than going to *Mbwezi*’s Christmas party. Such socialisation within the village contributed to her high status in Vsawa. However, Dalila and her family were already well known for their patronage and good behaviour. Dalila and her mother were also active in their church and her brother was the captain of a local soccer team. Dalila’s father lived in Tanzania and regularly sent home money and gifts that Dalila and her mother divided among many villagers. Dalila supplemented these payments with a part of her *Mbwezi* salary.

Dalila’s high social standing seemingly insulated her from demands upon the resources that *Mbwezi* had provided her. Due to her investment in village social life and her family’s long-

---

182 Authors including Rao and Kelleher (1997) and Ahmad (2002) observe how difficult it is for female field-staff to be promoted within development organisations. Tiessen (2004) claims that this particularly true in Malawian NGOs.
term patronage, Dalila’s social network was particularly expansive (and much stronger than Lamek’s). People who were not members of this network therefore did not demand that she share Mbwezi’s resources with them. I interpreted this to be because they feared angering Dalila’s allies, who would slander those who offended her. In the same vein as Lamek, Vsawans understood Dalila as a villager rather than a developer. However, unlike Lamek, Dalila’s high intra-community status made her villager identity very useful to her. Despite her best efforts, Dalila found that she, like Lamek, could not be both a developer and villager. She missed many staff social events, including several dinners at Mbwezi’s manager’s house, as she was busy interacting with her intra-village peers. Dalila explained to me that when she applied for a promotion she had not developed a rapport with this manager, who rejected her application. Dalila was never promoted past fieldworker and left the NGO shortly after marrying a Vsawan man. While her career did not progress, Dalila had both earned a significant amount of money and, through adding to her patronage, had enhanced her immediate intra-community status through her time at the NGO.

**NGO Staff as Creating, and Constrained by, Narratives about NGO Presence**

Varied ambitions and resources seemingly encouraged each of the NGO staff studied to interact differently with their co-workers and with villagers. I now argue that the NGO staff responded tactically\(^\text{183}\) to the actors, discourses and objects that the NGO had assembled. Those who could profit from these (for example Lamek) were incentivised to recreate this assemblage. They influenced social structure by entrenching a dominant development discourse, in this case the distinction between villagers and development professionals, i.e. the national elite. Further, I demonstrate that those who benefited from this dominant discourse inadvertently limited the tactical responses of those who wanted to use the NGO in a way that challenged this narrative as they attempted to alter their social position (as Dalila tried to).

I understood Lamek’s decision to reduce his investment in Vsawan sociality to be a tactical response to his intra-village status and to the opportunities offered to him by the presence of Mbwezi. Lamek could find economic security through the wages the NGO paid or through a loan from a bank or co-worker. He also desired the potential career advancement that the

---

\(^{183}\) The previous chapter discussed in more depth the difference between strategic and tactical agency. For the purpose of this section it can be understood as ‘strategic’ agency as being able to influence the structures that give value to your social and tactical agency as having short term goals.
NGO offered. His actions were influenced by the way that migrant staff had responded to their isolation; due to these staff members’ seniority, Lamek was encouraged to invest significant time in his relationship with them and to publicly demonstrate that he was different to ‘ordinary’ Vsawans. In this way, Lamek could only progress in Mbwezi by diminishing his intra-village social position. He appeared to be happy to do so, as his social standing within Vsawa was not unusually high and was further tainted by the demands of those who understood him as a conduit for Mbwezi’s patronage.

I saw Dalila’s actions as guided and constrained by the disjuncture between her attributes and those of the professional elite. This was compounded by how James, Harriet and Lamek had responded to, and therefore co-constructed, the opportunities Mbwezi offered. The combination of her gender and her stalled education made Dalila unlikely to advance within the NGO. Further, as she had invested heavily in her intra-village social networks, alienating these people in order to prove that she was a developer rather than a villager represented a significant sacrifice. The incompatibility that Dalila experienced between being a ‘villager’ and a ‘developer’ reflected a dominant development discourse that was embedded in the NGO. However, it was also caused by other staff members’ response to this discourse. By foregrounding the distinction between themselves and villagers, the more powerful NGO staff had diminished Dalila’s capacity to become a developer while maintaining her position in the village. These actions meant that she could not use the NGO’s presence to challenge the binary distinction between villagers and development professionals.

This analysis therefore demonstrates how a dominant development discourse was re-created by those whose skill sets, attributes and social positions meant that this discourse advantaged them. In doing so, these people (whose goals were aligned with prominent development narratives) limited alternate utilisations of a development macro-actant (the NGO). While Long (1992:23) argues that local actors reshuffle, circumvent and accommodate dominant development discourses, the experiences of the NGO staff in Vsawa highlights that they do so through unequal negotiations. Further, the dominant discourses, and the structures that they normalise, are actants within these discussions. These structures and discourses (that were actants embedded in the macro-actant NGO) encouraged the more powerful actors (senior migrant NGO staff) to scrutinise those who attempted to circumvent the incompatibility between a ‘developer’ and a ‘beneficiary’. In doing so, this discourse was part of a network of actors and actants that reinforced this incompatibility’s significance. By
discouraging the staff from bonding with the community, the NGO encouraged its employees to remain dependent upon their employer and to define themselves in contrast to villagers.\textsuperscript{184}

Dalila’s actions were constricted but not proscribed. She was able to utilise the NGO to obtain temporary wealth and, through spreading her wages within the community, she probably enhanced her already high intra-village social standing. However, the differences between her experiences and Lamek’s show that, while development macro-actants may enable multiple utilisations and embolden varied narratives, these macro-actants are likely to offer greater assistance to those whose actions reinforce dominant discourses.

The lives of these NGO staff also have implications for other studies of development workers. They show the importance of the social and structural conditions of a workplace in determining whether, and how, staff interact socially with beneficiaries. This adds to the literature (Aveling 2011; Cox 2009; Shrestha 2006; Verma 2011), which currently focuses on the role of training and work practices in determining NGO staff’s intra-village socialisation or lack thereof. I have argued that Vsawan NGO staff’s experiences are structured in a manner which meant that in their personal lives they had no need for the ‘multiple identities’ that Shrestha (2006) describes and that intra-office relationships and development narratives instead encouraged them to isolate themselves from ordinary villagers.

These experiences also foreground the convolving of institutional structures, intra-community relationships and national development narratives in determining whether NGO staff will serve as development brokers (see Bierschenk et al. 2002; Aveling 2011). Aveling (2011) explores how NGOs broker the relationship between their employers and village in which they reside and Jackson (1997) details the intra-village rewards NGO staff receive for dividing their own and their employer’s resources amongst villagers. Lamek seemingly had little to gain from brokering his employer’s relationship with Vsawans. The understanding that he was merely a conduit for Mbwezi’s patronage meant that villagers did not reward him for his generosity with his wages and the NGO’s electricity (as compared to the NGO employees explored by Jackson 1997). This was a function of a pan-Malawian understanding that NGOs provided patronage (and they rather than their staff should be praised for it)\textsuperscript{185} but it was also caused by his lack of strong intra-community networks. This was evidenced by Dalila’s ability to use her salary to obtain other Vsawans’ praise. Simultaneously, Lamek

\textsuperscript{184} This discourse also gave primacy to the skills held by those who recreated this discourse (like the ability to speak English) over attributes that might challenge it (for example strong local social connections).

\textsuperscript{185} See Swidler and Watkins (2009).
experienced a greater incentive not to share his (NGO acquired) wealth through intra-village social networks than Dalila did, further discouraging him from acting as a development broker.

This challenges Weisgrau’s (1997:189) claim that the ‘losers’ in the NGO game are local staff who use their positions in ways that their employer deems inappropriate but which are consistent with community norms. Dalila was not a ‘loser’ because she responded to demands from her social network at the expense of her career; nor was Lamek a ‘winner’ because he resisted communal norms and did not serve as a development broker. Rather, both reacted to the opportunities which Mbwezi provided them with. They did so in the context of their personal relationships and dominant development narratives, which it was often in their tactical best interests to reproduce. While Dalila was not able to use both a developer and beneficiary identity, she was able to improve her intra-community social standing through her access to the NGOs resources – in this case her generous salary. However, she received fewer benefits than Lamek and through her actions reaffirmed to other Vsawans the discourse that developers are different from villagers.

**NGO Staff’s Isolation as a Mediator in Vsawan Discussions**

Having argued that structures, actors and discourses assembled by the NGOs encouraged the separation between villagers and NGO employees, I now consider how this separation was utilised within, influenced and was recreated by intra-community negotiations. I claim that Vsawans scrutinised the lives of NGO staff when discussing how development would change their community and how it would influence their relationships with each other. Their conversations were mediated by the distance Harriet and James maintained from Vsawans; Lamek’s (and others like him) decreasing involvement with his peers; and Dalila’s career frustrations and retirement. These discussions therefore involved the perceived distinction between the morals and the skill sets of development practitioners and of rural Malawians. I posit that these perceived differences were utilised in multiple ways when combined with various intra-village circumstances and negotiating positions. They were used by those who could persuade Vsawans that they had the seemingly scarce skills to interact with the NGO staff, in order to elevate their intra-community social standing. They

---

186 Ranging from NGO’s physical offices to the banking system
187 Both the NGO staff and other Vsawans
188 The assumed sophistication of the educated and the distinction between urban and rural ‘values’
189 The notion that Vsawans used NGOs to discuss development is the core argument of chapters three (food sharing) and four (education). Scrutinising the actions of NGO staff was a core aspect of this.
were also invoked by Vsawans who wanted to resist social change by tying the NGO employee’s skill sets to their perceived immorality. I now explore both of these utilisations. I argue that villagers’ conceptualisations of the NGO staff’s social isolation tied the perceived distinction between developers and ordinary villagers to the will of the community’s elite, reinforcing the staff’s isolation as it did so.

**How Staff’s Isolation made socialising with them valuable**

NGO staff’s social isolation was predicated upon their financial superiority to Vsawans and to Malawians’ belief in the intractable difference between developers and beneficiaries. However, as mentioned earlier (chapters three and four), an emerging minority of villagers had a combination of the modern acumen and financial resources to interact with NGO staff. These Vsawans were further advantaged by the lack of interaction between most villagers and NGO employees, which served as evidence of their importance as Vsawa changed. One such Vsawan was Bhati, James and Harriet’s landlord. I argue that he utilised villagers’ belief that they were different to NGO staff to cement his modern, elite, status. Through doing so, he reinforced both this belief and the physical separation between NGO staff and Vsawans.

Bhati was a rich and physically intimidating Vsawan man. He was very sociable, a confident English speaker and used his wealth to buy items that Vsawans associated with the outside world, including an electric cooker and stereo speakers. Bhati had made his fortune by buying one of the first electricity generators in the village. He had used this to set up a ‘cinema’, where he showed English Premier League soccer and the Discovery Channel. Bhati told me that he wanted villagers to perceive him to be an authority on the world outside Vsawa. However, he had never been to school and struggled to persuade villagers that he was educated. To this end, he publically associated himself with James and Harriet as a way to prove his sophistication and differentiate himself from his peers.

Because he owned James and Harriet’s house, Bhati would often go there and eat dinner with them, even if they had not invited him. He would leave the door open upon entering their home, meaning that anyone passing by could see him conversing with the NGO employees. Bhati spoke in a loud combination of chiTumbuka and English, which enabled Vsawans who were either socialising on the street or eating in their homes nearby to hear him. His conversations with James and Harriet were often one-sided, with Bhati complaining to the NGO staff about the difficulty of finding intelligent Vsawans to work in his cinema, or

---

190 See chapter four for a discussion about the relationship between education and knowledge of the world outside Vsawa.
recounting to them some aspect of European life that he had seen on his TV. An underlying premise of these interactions appeared to be Bhati communicating that both he and the NGO staff were different to the majority of Vsawans, who neither understood Europe nor were intelligent enough for gainful employment. After dinner Bhati would go to a Vsawan pub and tell stories to the men inside about where he had been. He would often fabricate details of the dinner to make James and Harriet seem exotic. For instance, Bhati would claim that they rarely spoke chiTumbuka but instead conversed almost exclusively in English, or that they ate nsima\(^{191}\) with a knife and fork, rather than with their hands like most villagers.

I understood this performance as Bhati using his personal relationship with James and Harriet (and their lack of other Vsawan friends) to demonstrate his competence in interacting with the outside world and his importance as this world arrived in Vsawa. By eating with these NGO employees, Bhati proved to Vsawans that he was able to interact with developers. Further, his conversations over dinner and in the pub showed villagers that he could communicate with NGO staff and implied to them that most Vsawans lacked the ability to do so. Conversations with Bhati discouraged villagers from attempting to socialise with Harriet and James. Discussions between James, Harriet and Bhati reminded the NGO workers that they were different to ‘ordinary villagers’. By encouraging both parties to feel uncomfortable initiating contact with the other, Bhati utilised and reinforced the distinction between developers and villagers. This enabled him to cement his status as a modern Vsawan, despite having no schooling.

This opportunity was only available to Bhati due to his wealth and the NGO staff’s failure to socialise with other Vsawans. He obtained his position through having the resources to rent a house to James and Harriet. Villagers seemingly gave greater credence to his claim that he was friends with these NGO employees because of his English language ability and his ownership of goods that they associated with the western world. This friendship was strong evidence that Bhati could interact with the modern world because James and Harriet had so few Vsawan friends. In this way, the dominant Malawian belief in the distinction between ‘developers’ and ordinary villagers was utilised to further enhance the status of Bhati, a member of an intra-village elite. He in turn was incentivised to re-create this belief.

\(^{191}\) A dough-like starch that formed the center of almost every Vsawan meal. A handful of *nsima* was torn from a communal clump, rolled in a person’s hand and then dipped in some form of relish.
**Scrutinising female NGO workers in order to question the importance of women’s education**

The NGOs employed a large number of women. This had the potential to challenge Vsawan social structures by demonstrating the value of women’s education. Education was a scarce resource and many men used being educated to justify their intra-household dominance. Therefore, the NGOs’ employment of women had the potential to upset local patriarchal structures by providing a reason for households to send girls rather than boys to school.

However, the presence of wealthy female NGO staff was open to multiple interpretations and was negotiated within an environment that privileged male voices (Vsawa’s public sphere). Vsawan men claimed that senior female NGO staff had obtained their wealth in a manner which threatened village values. As evidence of this claim, men would point out that Dalila, who was respected in Vsawa, had stopped working for Mbwezi; while other women, who (men claimed) did not respect village morals, had been promoted by the NGOs. I argue that through doing so Vsawan men gave a specific implication to the locally ubiquitous understanding that developers were different to beneficiaries. They protected their educational privilege by arguing that education would make women more like developers, in that educated women would lose respect for village values.

Vsawans appeared to use the presence of NGOs to negotiate potential changes to the status of women. As part of this process, Vsawan women pointed to the perceived wealth of female NGO staff, using them to argue that educating local women would lead to increased wealth for the community and that female education was a necessary component of development.

Vsawan men responded to this by slandering most female NGO staff, with the exception of women like Dalila, who remained embedded in village social life at the expense of her career. Two of the women frequently targeted for abuse were Abebe, Mbwezi’s librarian, and Tunisha, the same NGO’s forestry fieldworker, who was the former wife of GVH Chipeso. While these women were born in Vsawa, they had been educated in private schools in Malawi’s major cities.

Vsawans (both men and women) expected these two to rise rapidly in the NGO. Their lack of village social networks and the quality of their schooling seemingly encouraged villagers to use these women as placeholders when communicating the advantages and disadvantages of women’s education.

---

192 See chapter four for the reasons that men were more able than women to claim to be educated and for why it was a scarce resource.
193 This is elaborated in more detail in chapter two when discussing Juliet.
194 This meant that had few friends in the village and a high chance of promotion, which encouraged them to present themselves primarily as development workers rather than as villagers.
I regularly witnessed Abebe being jeered at by Vsawan men. On one occasion when she was riding in the back of Mbwezi’s 4WD I saw several male villagers shout something at Abebe that I did not understand. Looking furious, she uttered a reply in chiTumbuka that was fast and shrill and that I could not follow. I asked the husband and wife who ran a store nearby what had happened. The husband explained that the men were abusing Abebe because she was a crook. The wife protested that these men were just jealous that Abebe was clever enough to have made all the money that she had. The husband then said:

When a woman goes like this [they raise their eyebrows] we know that she is a crook.

I interpreted this statement as him claiming that Abebe’s wealth was a result of trickery, rather than her schooling or intellect. She therefore should not be emulated by other Vsawan women.

Men also abused Tunisha. She and many other female NGO staff were subject to rumours about her sexual decision-making. Irrespective of the truth of these rumours I interpreted them as communicating social anxiety and maintaining social boundaries (in the manner described by Abrahams (1970) and White (200)). Vsawan men would accuse women of obtaining their job through sleeping with a senior NGO employee or of becoming proud and promiscuous after they had been hired. GVH Chipeso, Tunisha’s ex-husband, told villagers that the NGO had made her obstinate and had encouraged her to have sex with male staff and other non-Vsawans, like doctors and government employees. This story, and others similar to it, formed the basis of abuse that would be hurled at Tunisha by village men and would be repeated publically (and in the presence of NGO staff) in a way that appeared to reiterate the dangers of female employment and education.

Dalila was not abused in this manner. Since she had not finished school and had left her job to raise children, Dalila did not pose a significant threat to Vsawan and Malawian patriarchal norms. Further, her strong network of peers and clients would not have tolerated her being slandered. Dalila’s decision to invest in her relationships within the community, at the expense of those within the NGO, can be seen to have protected her from abuse and meant that vilifying her would not communicate the same rejection of changes to Vsawan

---

195 These rumours were particularly pertinent in a Malawian environment where female virginity is not necessarily venerated and where fidelity is considered unusual (Swidler and Watkins 2007). In this context Whether these, and other sexual liaisons mentioned in this thesis took place or not, is less important than the way rumours that tied sexual promiscuity to the west were used to question a perceived westernisation.

196 Neither was Azichi, the Green Earth employee who was a headman’s daughter. See page 74
sociality. Vsawan men instead compared Dalila favourably to other female NGO staff, stating that she, unlike other female NGO employees, respected herself.

Through abusing most female NGO staff and venerating Dalila, Vsawan men could be interpreted to be communicating the perceived dangers of educating women. Their argument was strengthened by the lack of women who were both successful in the NGO and respected in the village, as well as by Vsawans’ understanding that developer and villager identities were incompatible. This enabled Vsawan men to create an occidentalism, where inappropriately behaviour for women and the education of females were convoluted into a vilified western modernity that the NGOs were perceived to encourage and that their presence was understood to signify. Vsawans (and northern Malawians more generally) avoided public conflict. I argue that in this context they vilified staff who were not part of the community’s social network in order to communicate the unacceptability of certain behaviours without violating their transcript of communal unity. Simultaneously, the abuse that female NGO employees suffered further alienated them and entrenched their co-workers belief that Vsawans, particularly when it came to matters of gender, lacked sophistication.

Vsawans utilised the NGO staff’s isolation in order to discuss potential social changes within their community. *Mbwezi* mediated these discussions by assembling NGO staff, wealth and development discourses in a way that discouraged migrant staff from becoming involved in the community and encouraged Vsawans to leave their social networks after being hired. However, the NGO was only one macro-actant within the network that generated and was used to justify Vsawa’s resistance to female education. Vsawan men were empowered when using NGO presence to reject women’s demands for schooling because of inequalities within these women’s negotiating positions. This allowed men to determine the implications of the supposed differences between developers and villagers.

**The Resilience of the Developer/Villager Binary in Vsawa**

I have argued that Vsawan utilisations of the NGO staff’s social absence were similar to, and built upon, the intra-office dynamics that encouraged NGO employees’ isolation. Powerful Vsawans and most male villagers utilised, guided and reinforced a dominant development discourse, which divided Malawians into ‘developers’ and ‘beneficiaries’. In doing so, they either extended or fortified their social advantage. They also impeded other potential

---

197 A stylised image of the west utilised in order to question or affirm local values and understandings (See Carrier 1995).

198 See Booth, et al. (2006) for more details on this.
utilisations of a development macro-actant (the NGO). Bhati, and Vsawan men more generally, utilised the belief that developers were different to villagers (a belief which emanated from the NGOs’ presence) and encouraged NGO staff to remain distant from the community. Expanding upon the situation found in the NGOs’ offices, these powerful Vsawans used their visibility to dictate the implications of the perceived differences between developers and villagers. They created the seemingly incompatible beliefs that: those who had similar skill sets and interests to NGO staff (Bhati) should be praised; and other Vsawans should be prevented from acquiring the NGO staff’s skills and interests (through for example the education of women) for fear that this would be incompatible with village values. These utilisations impeded women’s seemingly equally valid claim that they should be educated in order that they could develop the same skillset and wealth as NGO workers.

Pigg (1992) claims that the meanings of national and international development narratives are renegotiated in any local context. Vsawan negotiations that utilised the distinction between villagers and development professionals foreground that discussions relating to dominant development narratives are filtered through local power dynamics. Further, the narrative itself is an actant in these negotiations. I claim to have shown this through exploring how the presence and composition of NGOs both encouraged the separation between NGO staff and villagers and encouraged villagers to see their personal lack of association with staff members as indicative of a broader disjuncture between the two. This does not mean that village-embedded structures and macro-actants do not enable multiple discourses. However, these macro-actants often assist entrenched development narratives, rather than understandings that would challenge national development norms.

Further, when a development narrative (in this case the incompatibility between being a developer and a beneficiary) reaches a certain level of ubiquity, debates take place over this narrative’s implications rather than its validity. In line with Platteau and Abraham’s (2002) observations about intra-community discussions, these debates accommodate entrenched village hierarchies and the audibility of the powerful. This narrative is therefore likely be used to reinforce or legitimise existing inequalities. I claim to have demonstrated this by Vsawan men’s use of the understanding that NGO staff were threateningly different to villagers in order to justify impeding women’s educational access. On the other hand, Bhati simultaneously used the same narrative to elevate his social standing, through presenting himself as similar to the NGO employees.
Hilhorst (2001:402) argues that, by dominantly using and enacting a particular discourse, actors turn that discourse into a reality. Comparing Vsawan utilisations and creations of the understanding that developers are different to beneficiaries (both in Mbwezi’s office and in Vsawa) adds to Hilhorst’s (2001) argument. It implies a symbiosis between the actors who are privileged by development, development institutions (like NGOs), and dominant development discourses. NGO staff were encouraged to recreate this discourse in their daily lives and to impede utilisations of the NGOs that countered it. Dominant development discourses’ malleability enhances their resilience. The actions of Bhati and Vsawan men indicate that a discourse is advantaged if it has multiple potential implications, including those which assist local elites. In this manner, actors by themselves did not turn discourses into reality; rather, they did so as part of a network of actors and actants (including NGOs), where both the discourse and actor were reshaped and which guided the potential actions of others.

An examination of Vsawans’ utilisations of NGO staff’s social isolation adds to the development literature more generally. Hilhorst (2003:146) observed Philippine NGO workers who were engaged in creating and interpreting village meanings of their employer. Goetz and Gupta (1996) studied how Indian development fieldworkers helped to constitute the structure of power in a rural environment. Similarly, Olivier de Sardan (2005) writes that development fieldworkers can form profitable bonds with traditional authorities that allow them to serve as development brokers. This chapter has explored why development staff did not form these bonds with Vsawans. It has also detailed the potential results of NGOs discouragement of staff from fulfilling intra-village roles. It has shown how this opens space for villagers to enhance their social status through associating themselves with NGO staff. Furthermore, it has been argued that staff’s social absence simultaneously influences understandings of their employer and regimes of power within the village. It does this by enabling the already privileged to control the local meaning of an NGO’s presence.

**Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have explored why successful NGO staff had little interaction with Vsawan sociality and the implications of this for villagers’ understanding and utilisations of NGO presence. The NGOs’ structural and discursive composition discouraged migrant staff from bonding with villagers. Vsawan-born staff experienced incompatible demands from their co-workers and other villagers, and were forced to choose between ‘villager’ and ‘developer’

199 Like headmen, see chapter five.
identities. Most Vsawans therefore grew distant from their peers after being hired by an NGO and the few Vsawan born staff that remained popular in the village had stifled careers. The absence of successful NGO staff from village social networks appeared to encourage other Vsawans to scrutinise NGO employees when discussing social change and when negotiating their own social standing. Through unequitable discussions that utilised the NGO staff’s social absence, ostensibly modern Vsawans, like Bhati, were able to elevate their intra-village position and Vsawan men impeded women’s educational access.

I have used the disconnect between NGO staff and Vsawans to discuss the symbiosis between dominant development narratives, local development institutions and those who benefit from development. This symbiosis occurred both within the office and the village. Migrant NGO staff and NGO-employed Vsawans were abrogated from any intra-community responsibility by the understanding that they were different to villagers. The NGOs enabled this attitude by removing any need for them to maintain intra-village social networks. In turn the senior migrant staff policed the behaviour of those (like Dalila) who could challenge the incompatibility between being a ‘developer’ and a ‘villager’.

The difference between developers and villagers was also reinforced and utilised by powerful Vsawans. It enabled the seemingly contradictory narratives where Bhati justified his wealth by demonstrating that he could interact with NGO staff and where Vsawan men used their concern that women would emulate NGO employees’ perceived sexual proclivity to deny these women education. This implies that local elites were advantaged in guiding the implications of dominant development narratives, due to their superior audibility in intra-village debates. They could therefore reinforce these narratives and made it more difficult for the marginalised to use this discourse, and the NGOs’ presence more generally, to negotiate their social position.

This chapter has contributed to literature that discusses the reasons that NGO staff do not interact with beneficiaries and the impact of NGO employees on village social life. It has added to the debate between authors, including Cox (2009) and Shrestha (2006), over whether development workers learn through training and professional practice to depict themselves as similar to or different from villagers. It has argued that the social and institutional lives that an NGO provides for its staff are as important in determining their relationships with a rural community as their training and professional practice. The chapter has also built upon Hilhorst (2003) and Goetz and Gupta’s (1996) ethnographies, where NGO
staff affect understandings of their employers and relationships of power within their encompassing village. It has added to Bierschenk, et al. (2002) and Olivier de Sardan’s (2005) works, which claim that NGO employees serve as brokers between their employer and its beneficiaries. It has shown that NGO staff may not fulfill these roles when they are encouraged to socialise primarily with their co-workers. This provides opportunities for villagers who interact with NGO workers to increase their intra-village significance, with the staff still influencing understandings of their employer and relations of power through their absence.

This chapter has demonstrated the relationship between my second and third research questions. Dalila enhanced her intra-community status and Lamek lowered his, through interacting with Mbwezi and its senior staff in a manner that reinforced villagers’ understanding that developers were different to them. Both of these Vsawans initially attempted to retain developer and villager identities, but found their tactical best interests were served by reinforcing, rather than challenging the incompatibility between the two. The disconnection between successful NGO staff and Vsawans influenced intra-village discussions about development, modernity and social change. It reinforced the understanding that development was the domain of external developers, who were fundamentally different to Vsawans and, potentially, threateningly so. This narrative increased the entitlements of Bhati while impeding the educational entitlement of women. However, this discourse was co-constructed through the actions of Bhati and of many Vsawan men, who cemented NGO employees’ belief in the difference between developers and villagers and, through this, limited Lamek and Dalila’s tactical agency. NGO presence therefore gathers unequally influential actors and discourses. Lamek and Dalila, whose social roles placed them between senior NGO staff and villagers guided, yet were constrained by, the actions and understandings of both villagers and staff.

While Dalila spread Mbwezi’s wealth through her social networks by sharing her salary, neither she nor Lamek were classic development brokers. The need to be either a ‘developer’ or ‘villager’ stopped them from serving as conduits between the village and NGOs. This role was instead taken on by those who volunteered with the NGOs, the final Vsawan social position I will explore.
Chapter Seven: ‘Volunteer’ as a Social Category – How Myriad Vsawans Negotiated Social Change through the Treatment of Volunteers

In this chapter I argue that Vsawan volunteers used various tactics to persuade the community that they guided the development that NGOs delivered and signified. I simultaneously claim that, through the praise and ridicule of volunteers, myriad Vsawans renegotiated narratives of modernity and development that affirmed village values. In the previous two chapters I explored why Village Headmen and NGO employees were often poor conduits between an NGO and the community. I build upon this by detailing how and why specific volunteers were able to fulfil this role, brokering the projects and presence of NGOs in Vsawa. I claim that these volunteers were therefore disproportionately important to Vsawan understandings of NGO presence and were incentivised to reinforce villagers’ belief that NGOs brought development as well as potentially threatening forms of social change. I also explore how these volunteers were utilised in other villagers’ (for example, headmen’s) negotiations over changes to intra-village obligations and entitlements and mediated these negotiations through their own agency. This chapter reiterates many of the key themes of my thesis. It posits that NGO presence allowed some Vsawans to alter their social standing, while they guided intra-village understandings of the NGOs and of social change. However, other Vsawans simultaneously communicated their aspirations and fears about an encroaching, NGO-associated, folk modernity in a manner which rarefied the traditional and reinforced existing hierarchies.

This chapter’s ethnography details how volunteers’ tactics, Vsawan concerns about social change and the machinations of traditional leaders determined villagers’ treatment of each volunteer. Many Vsawans would be mocked or ignored by their peers if they attempted to associate themselves with an NGO. However, a few volunteers received gifts and praise for the same acts. Ely, Griffin and Gitemwa were three of the latter. Ely persuaded villagers that her position as HIV peer educator gave her significant influence over Mbwezi; Griffin performed odd jobs for several NGO staff, ensuring that their presence did not challenge...

---

200 Ferguson (1999) refers to these as ‘folk modernities’ – perceptions of a difference between ‘the traditional’ and ‘the modern’ that villagers use to reconstruct their social worlds. See chapter two, page 41 for details on what a folk modernity is and how I have conceptualised modernity in this thesis.
Vsawan hierarchies; and Gitemwa was a volunteer HIV tester with ChurchCare, who convinced his peers that he would soon be hired by the NGO. Complicating villagers’ responses to volunteering, headmen considered their own social position when determining whether to encourage their constituents to praise volunteers. GVH Chipeso persuaded his intra-village allies to become health volunteers and then told villagers to respect these people, while VH Mwalimu ridiculed volunteers with the same project. This chapter therefore examines the importance of volunteers’ tactics, their intra-community social standing and the actions of their headmen in determining changes to their social position. In doing so, it argues that changes to volunteers’ social standings, which the NGOs’ presence enabled, were influenced by myriad Vsawans’ articulations of what they desired, and would accept, as they saw their village changing.

**The Treatment of Volunteers in Malawi and Vsawa**

To provide context to Vsawans’ volunteering, I will briefly explore how other studies have explained rural Malawians’ motivations to volunteer. I will show that some authors, for example Moleni and Gallagher (2007), observe volunteers being rewarded by an NGO or by their peers. Others, such as Swidler and Watkins (2009), have argued that volunteering allows people to demonstrate their modernity to their community or to an external developer. I will then observe that many Vsawans either participated in an NGO’s project (through, for example, becoming ‘peer educators’) or provided free short-term labour to an NGO. However, Vsawan villagers would not refer to these people as volunteers. I claim instead that the label ‘volunteer’ was given to those who tactically foregrounded their association with an NGO as a way to renegotiate their social status.

NGOs in Malawi increasingly utilise rural volunteers to reduce their costs and to fulfil donors’ desires for financial sustainability (Moleni and Gallagher 2007; Patel and Wilson 2004). These volunteers can be loosely divided into three groups:

1) those who are selected by their village or the organisation for a formal role; for instance, peer educators or lead farmers (Lacey and Ilcan 2006; Maes et al. 2010);

2) ‘super participants’, who have no official connection with a project but who form personal bonds with that project’s staff (Jackson 1997b; Peters et al. 2008);

3) marginalised villagers who do not wish to volunteer but are coerced by local leaders (Bray 2000; Rose 2003).
The former two types of volunteer often expect the NGO and their village peers to reward them for their efforts (Moleni and Gallagher 2007). NGOs sometimes provide Malawian volunteers with per-diems and cash grants (Swidler 2006). They also give them items like uniforms, caps and stationary. These items have practical uses and demonstrate the volunteers’ relationship with the NGO (Englund 2006).

Volunteers occasionally administer NGOs’ projects in ways which allow them to act as development brokers. For instance, they sometimes distribute project resources (in Malawi, typically seeds or condoms) and they may have considerable discretion while doing so. They often adapt these projects to reflect attitudes in their village and the chance of being rewarded by wealthy villagers or their peers (Kaler and Watkins 2001; Rodlach 2009). However, the most significant rewards that rural Malawians receive for volunteering are employment or long-term financial assistance from a mzungu who they meet at an NGO (Swidler 2003).

While many Malawians are entranced by the possibility of such a meeting, volunteers know how rarely azungu provide reliable assistance.

Importantly, volunteering enables villagers to demonstrate their difference to their peers. Authors including Crewe and Harrison (1998) claim that volunteers highlight their modernity using symbols, like uniforms, and actions associated with the NGOs (like speaking in technical development language) in order to differentiate themselves from the non-modern majority of their community. Other authors, including Englund (2006) and Swidler and Watkins (2009), argue that rural Africans associate volunteers with the world outside the village and venerate them for it, often offering social or material rewards to volunteers. The literature typically presents everyone who volunteers with the same NGO project as equally affected by it. These works also conceptualise NGOs and volunteers as co-creating the modernity that the volunteers will be associated with.

My ethnographic experiences differ from both of these understandings. Instead, I interpreted Vsawans to understand differing volunteers to foreground differing potential aspects of modernity. For example, a wealthy landowner who became a ‘lead farmer’ would signify the potential of new equipment and seeds to make Vsawa wealthier, whereas a young woman

---

201 This chapter will not explore those who were coerced into volunteering as this typically took place in once-off activities that reflected the tactical decisions of headmen (see chapter five) more than of volunteers.

202 A ‘lead farmer’ was a volunteering position organised by Mbwezi. Lead farmers would be given seeds for crops that Vsawans did not typically plant, like onions, so that they could prove the market viability of these plants to their peers.
running an ‘AIDS action club’ would appear to remind Vsawans of the possible threat of the westernisation of their sexual education. Volunteers with the same project would not necessarily be treated equally, with powerful villagers praised for volunteering and marginalised volunteers told me that they were wasting their families’ time. Further, even the most successful volunteers appeared to be treated as only partially modern – more modern than their peers but not modern when compared to the NGOs or their staff. In this context, Vsawans used the praise and ridicule of volunteers to communicate about modernity. By deciding which volunteers to praise, they determined which actions and social changes would be considered ‘modern’. Vsawans therefore negotiated a narrative of modernity which incorporated local values through their treatment of those who self-identified as ‘volunteers’.

**Volunteering as a Vsawan pastime, ‘volunteer’ as a Vsawan social category**

In Vsawa a person could perform volunteering activities without being understood to be a ‘volunteer’. I saw many Vsawans occasionally volunteered to receive small financial rewards, while I interpreted a minority to use frequent volunteering, and self-identification as a volunteer, to tactically renegotiate their intra-community status. The latter group of villagers were referred to by their peers as ‘volunteers’ but the former were not, which I claim was because Vsawans conceptualised being a volunteer as a social category. Vsawans co-constructed and negotiated narratives of modernity by praising or vilifying those who wished to be considered volunteers. These narratives incorporated, rather than being generated by, the presence of NGOs.

There were myriad formal and informal opportunities for Vsawans to volunteer and around 5% of villagers had done so. The vast majority of Vsawan volunteers were merely people who had been selected for an NGO-run initiative. This type of volunteering often offered material incentives. NGO-administered programs frequently began with paid training. ChurchCare’s home-based care program gave 1500-2000MK ($4-6USD) a day as a stipend,

---

203 ChurchCare and Mbwezi ran ‘AIDS action clubs’, after school programs where older school students would teach younger children about the dangers of AIDS through songs, games and drama. They clubs were quite entertaining and occasionally offered children a free meal.

204 As is explored later in this chapter, this is similar to how the Beti Cameroon celebrate periodic abstinence as the most modern form of contraception, due to the association they see between it and self-discipline. In doing so, they affirm self-discipline as an aspect of Beti modernity (Johnson-Hanks 2002).

205 Headmen and NGO staff nominally selected villagers for these volunteering positions together; however, the NGO rarely knew enough people in the village to have any input other than a desire to fulfill certain quotas. Some headmen would share the volunteering positions around their village, ensuring everyone was selected occasionally, some were disinterested and would send whoever asked to attend and most, but not all, would provide access to the higher paying training sessions as rewards for good behaviour.
including full travel and meal allowance. This program lasted ten days, meaning that participation in it provided almost the equivalent of a teacher’s monthly salary. *Mbwezi* and *Kulutilizya Msambiska* did not pay per-diems but would provide volunteers with travel allowances, Fanta and meat. Many Vsawans attended training, received the per-diem, gift or food and then returned to their homes. These villagers might infrequently run ad hoc information sessions about what they had learnt at the NGO’s training, depending upon their inclination and how busy they and their peers were. Other volunteering positions came with small amounts of resources to distribute through the community, most commonly seeds or condoms. Most Vsawans who took on these roles would quickly divide the resources amongst their peers and then cease to associate with the NGO.

Informal volunteering provided no official payment but occasionally led to great financial rewards. Some Vsawans would befriend NGO staff and perform odd jobs for the organisations, like shopping or gardening. Almost all the gardeners, drivers and nightwatchmen that NGOs employed had volunteered informally before receiving full-time work. However, finding employment in this way was extremely rare and some Vsawans volunteered for many years without being hired. Azungu at these NGOs sometimes bonded with informal volunteers and gave them gifts that ranged from pens and old clothes to expensive items like iPods and mobile phones. A handful of these people had their lives changed dramatically through their contact with generous azungu. One mzungu paid for the tertiary education of a volunteer and his two brothers, who left Vsawa immediately afterwards. However, the vast majority of the rewards that these volunteers received were small and primarily had value due to their association with the world outside the village (for instance, baseball caps that displayed the logo of a British sports team). Many Vsawan youths, primarily men who had just left school, would go to the offices of *Mbwezi* and *Kulutilizya Msambiska* and present themselves as potential volunteers. They would spend a few weeks working in the NGOs’ gardens, cleaning their halls or mending their fences. They would eventually stop coming, presumably after losing interest in performing unpaid menial labour. Both formal and informal volunteering would go uncommented upon in Vsawa and villagers would not necessarily label those who performed these acts a ‘volunteer’.

Instead, Vsawans appeared to describe those who tactically foregrounded their own association with an NGO as a volunteer. Volunteers were people who would schedule weekly

206 The type of activities performed by the ‘super participants’ that Swidler (2003) and Maes, Kohrt, et al. (2008) describe.
or biweekly information sessions in their village after they had attended training; who
diligently went to the NGO to ensure that they had enough condoms to distribute to their
peers; or who spent months or even years performing free manual labour for an organisa-
tion. Most importantly, to be a ‘volunteer’ required a person to refer to themselves as such.
Through doing so, these volunteers implied that they were more able than the majority of
Vsawans to interact with NGOs and, thus, with the external, modern world. Villagers
therefore used their treatment of volunteers to communicate about the changes that they
associated with the NGOs’ presence and negotiate what being a modern Vsawan entailed.

**How Vsawans evaluated ‘Volunteers’**
Vsawans would evaluate a volunteer by ridiculing or praising them. Their scrutiny related to
the changes that villagers understood NGO presence to signify and particularly to those
changes that volunteers foregrounded. For example, volunteers’ baseball caps highlighted the
perceived increased influence of azungu over Vsawa and HIV awareness training reminded
villagers of perceived link between AIDS and western sexual norms. Vsawans praised people
who they believed would assist the community in guiding societal change. However, much
more commonly they mocked those who claimed to be volunteers, believing them to be no
better equipped than the rest of the community to interact with the outside world.207 Vsawans
would laugh at some volunteers, who villagers claimed thought they were ‘the special one’.
Vsawans argued that the NGOs had merely tricked these people into working without being
paid. Villagers would often tell me mockingly that “volunteers try to shoot up”. A phrase
which accused villagers of inappropriately attempting to elevate their social position through
associating with an NGO. I interpreted these two complaints, which were often made
together, convolved Vsawans’ scepticism over volunteers’ claims to have a special skillset
(or be a ‘special one’) with their concern that some people who could interact with the
outside would demand changes to the village social order, by trying to ‘shoot up’.

Vsawans seemed to be particularly cruel to volunteers who could challenge community
morals. Vsawans complained that many volunteers lost respect for village values because the
NGOs encouraged them to live like azungu. They would opine that these people did not
respect their headman, failed to go to church or would not share the travel allowances and

---

207 There was a significant overlap between those who claimed to be volunteers and who presented themselves
as ‘educated Vsawans’. Many unpopular volunteers would be laughed at for attempting to volunteer, despite
being mbule (chapter four). However, being able to claim to be educated was not a prerequisite to volunteer.
Further, many educated Vsawans were wealthy enough that volunteering was not a good use of their time or
they did not need to volunteer to gain praise. In this manner, volunteer was a more specific social role than
being educated and one that required consistent interaction with an NGO.
per-diems that the NGOs had given them. Vsawans who claimed the label ‘volunteer’ would therefore face significant scrutiny and would be slandered if they failed to follow village norms. Some male volunteers, especially those who had a regular contact with azungu, were considered attractive by young Vsawan women. I saw several of these men used the trinkets that azungu had given them when attempting to seduce local women and I frequently heard other Vsawans complain about the practice. Villagers were much harsher with these men than they were with other Vsawans who had been equally promiscuous. Similarly, female volunteers would be abused by their partners and parents if they failed to perform their domestic duties, because they were “just wasting time [by volunteering with the NGO]”. Through this slander and punishment, Vsawan could be seen to be communicating their fear that NGO presence would encourage volunteers, and other Vsawans, to challenge village norms. They used their treatment of those who presented themselves as volunteers to warn that this would not be tolerated.

Vsawans rewarded volunteers who they perceived as having the aptitude to guide social change without challenging local hierarchies. These volunteers would be sought out by headmen or other senior villagers to give their opinions on development, NGOs or on the modern world. The advice they gave ranged from which development projects the village should be involved with to which type of mobile phone a local oligarch should buy. Respected volunteers were typically male and were almost always from privileged families. This implied that praising them did not violate intra-community norms. These respected volunteers would sit in the pub and Vsawans would listen to them intently while they both ridiculed the eccentricities of NGO staff and simultaneously preached about the advantages that development could bring to Vsawa. They would also be offered fish by their peers, who accepted that they were too busy to farm. Through their perceived knowledge of the outside world, their typically high intra-community status and through assisting the village elite, these volunteers appeared to reassure Vsawans that the modernity they offered need not bring an end to traditional hierarchies.

I understood Vsawans praising some volunteers and ridiculing others to be a way to evaluate the claims to the social status of volunteer of those who assisted NGOs. Villagers used this process to discuss changes to their social structures that they associated with NGO presence. Vsawans objected to people using volunteering to drastically alter household and village hierarchies and they convolved this objection with their scepticism towards many of the volunteers’ skillsets. However, they rewarded Vsawans who appeared to understand the
outside world and to be able to assist the community in guiding development without altering local social strata. Volunteering with NGOs therefore increased the social standing of those who were high-status and who could present themselves as guiding the correct type of modernity; one that provided increased wealth to Vsawans without challenging intra-community values and hierarchies.

**Development and Modernity in Volunteers’ Demonstrations of Their Value**
Specific Vsawans were able to elevate their social standing through tactically claiming and utilising the label ‘volunteer’. This took place in the context of the community’s concerns about the relationship between development and social change, which these volunteers actively reinforced. These volunteers included Ely, Griffin and Gitemwa. In this section I argue that each of these people used varied associations with the NGOs to present an image of themselves, and of modernity, that other Vsawans approved of. I also claim that the community evaluated these volunteers’ presentations of a potential modernity; scrutinising their perceived ability to guide the incoming wealth and development that these volunteers associated with NGOs, while addressing the threat they were perceived to pose to Vsawan values and hierarchies. In this context the disjuncture between NGOs and the community meant that these volunteers found it easy to persuade villagers that they were more significant to the work of the NGOs than they actually were.

**Ely**
Ely was a volunteer peer educator who lived in Revori. She was from a wealthy family and was an ambitious, articulate woman. I argue that she used these attributes to extract acclaim from her peers; Ely persuaded villagers that she had a significant role with Mbwezi and that she could be trusted to mitigate the challenges that Vsawans seemingly believed NGOs presented to local values.

**Mbwezi** had a male and female peer educator in almost every Vsawan village. These volunteers attended one week of training a year. Those who were from distant villages, like Revori, would be paid a travel allowance (1000MK per day, $3USD) to attend. After the training concluded volunteers were given a box of 36 condoms to give out to their peers. They were expected to ask Mbwezi for more condoms when these ran out and to organise information sessions in their home villages. The vast majority of peer educators gave the condoms out quickly or kept them for themselves, but did not return to Mbwezi. Most
Vsawans did not know who their local peer educators were, indicating that there was little prestige in this program.

Unlike many peer educators, Ely publicly embraced the position. She ensured that her house was always stocked with condoms and would frequently hold information sessions in Revorii. At these sessions she would demonstrate to village women how to use condoms and warn them about the dangers of intravenous drug use. Almost all the women in her village already knew this information, implying that they attended these meetings because of Ely’s intra-community social standing. Ely’s brother was a soldier and he sent money and gifts through her to many people. Villagers therefore did not want to anger Ely and would listen intently and ask polite questions during her presentations. Ely also presented herself as having a strong connection with Mbwezi. When Mbwezi staff arrived in Revorii she would offer them tea and give them *mandazi*.\(^\text{208}\) When the NGO called meetings Ely persuaded her brother’s clients to attend. The staff would not invite Ely to sit with them, as she was not employed by the NGO, but she would recline on the ground nearby. If the NGO staff were giving out seeds or grain at these events Ely would stand up and physically hand these to beneficiaries. Ely seemingly used the process to claim the label of ‘volunteer’ and to persuade villagers that she guided Mbwezi’s attempts to bring development to Vsawa.

Ely used her status to foreground the potential threat that Mbwezi’s condoms posed to village norms. She then obtained praise from the community for mitigating the threat that she had highlighted. Authors such as Kaler (2004) and Tavory (2009) observe that rural Malawians sometimes associate condoms, especially those provided by an NGO or development agency, with a combination of westernisation and promiscuity. This was not the case with condoms given out by most of Mbwezi’s peer educators, which would be accepted without comment. However, Ely loudly refused to give hers out to those whose sexual decision-making she believed contradicted Vsawan values. She would frequently deny them to women who were unmarried, explaining to me that:

> I give condoms to couples who are going to use them to have sex. Not silly single women who will just let their children make balloons out of them.

Villagers knew that Ely did this and praised her for it. They informed me that when Ely said she did not give condoms to “silly single women who will just let their children make balloons out of them” she was tactfully alluding her refusal to provide them to women who

\(^{208}\) Locally made doughnuts.
were either having pre-marital sex or were engaging in an affair. They claimed that, despite what the NGOs might have planned, Ely was rightfully ensuring that condoms only went to “women with husbands or men with wives”. This discussion did not occur in other villages, presumably because in these villages peer educators had not used their position to foreground this potential incompatibility between Vsawan values and modern development.

Through her actions, Ely can be seen to have persuaded Revorians that she channelled resources into the village while simultaneously mitigating the moral threat that NGOs posed. This process involved catalysing a latent fear that an NGO would challenge village values as it attempted to bring development. Despite being a woman, Ely had a high intra-village status thanks to her brother’s employment and she could therefore use being a volunteer to respond to the changes NGO presence signified, maximising the resources the community received while tempering alterations to village norms.

**Griffin**  
Unlike Ely, Griffin had no formal volunteering position. He instead possessed a talent for interacting with NGO staff. This enabled him to guide their actions in Vsawa, spreading the NGOs’ wealth and ensuring that his Village Headman was seen to be respected by NGO employees. In 2004 Griffin and several other young Vsawans had assisted *Mbwezi’s azungu* founders in building the NGO’s hall and office. Some of these people, including Griffin, maintained their association with *Mbwezi*, volunteering as nightwatchmen or gardeners. Other Vsawans, again primarily men, joined them. As *Mbwezi* grew it employed a few of these people to perform the task they had previously done as volunteers and selected a few others for project roles (see, respectively, Lamek and Dalila’s examples from chapter six). However, there were few jobs available (less than ten). It was therefore not possible to accommodate all the Vsawans who had assisted the NGO (about 50 would have had a reasonable claim). The vast majority of these people eventually ceased to volunteer. Griffin and a few others continued to associate with *Mbwezi*. They found new ways to make themselves useful to the NGO or to its staff.

Griffin began to cook for Omar, *Mbwezi’s* project manager, when he stayed in Vsawa. The two of them enjoyed each other’s company and Omar opened up new opportunities for Griffin. Griffin’s English was impeccable and his understanding of western sensibilities was impressive. Omar therefore asked him to chaperone *Mbwezi’s azungu* staff, volunteers, and donors when they visited Vsawa. Before returning to England, these people would thank Griffin by giving him clothing, money, or gifts. Griffin’s socialisation with *azungu* and senior
NGO staff frequently took place publically. He would proudly display the newest English football jumper or mobile phone that he had received from an international guest. These circumstances linked Griffin’s association with Mbwezi to both his English language skills and to the modern commodity that a mzungu had given him. This seemingly implied to Vsawans that an association with an NGO could be profitable and that Griffin had the skillset to extract this profit.

Griffin also capitalised on the lack of intra-village connections possessed by Omar and many other migrant NGO staff. They would not know who to buy food from or where to obtain luxury items in the village. NGO employees would therefore ask Griffin to buy goods for them. Using the NGO staff’s money, he overpaid for items that ranged from tomatoes to stereo-speakers. Vsawans from whom Griffin bought these things would give him gifts to thank him for his assistance.

He was also rewarded by other villagers for guiding the NGO employees. When Griffin’s household experienced food shortages he rather than his wife would ask neighbours for assistance. He was seldom rejected when he did so. When fertiliser coupons were given out by his headman Griffin always received one, despite being comparatively wealthy and never participating in communal development activities. I asked him why this was the case and he replied that it was because he helped with development. I asked how and he said:

I buy the chief a lumba [five 30 ml plastic sachets of spirits] whenever he is in Nauru [Nauru’s pub] and I help with the azungu and with Mbwezi.

I understood Griffin’s prestige to come from the fact that he simultaneously helped guide Mbwezi and bought the chief alcohol. He demonstrated to villagers that he was able to redirect the resources of NGOs (a sign that he could interact with what Vsawans considered modernity). Yet, he also showed them that he respected communal hierarchies, which he demonstrated through gifting drinks to his headman.

While other Vsawans considered Griffin modern, NGO staff treated him as much less modern than they believed themselves to be. He would be required to serve at staff events, even when

---

209 The fact that Griffin asked his peers for food is worthy of note, as this was typically conceptualised as a woman’s task. See chapter three for more details on Vsawan food sharing.
210 The Malawian government runs an extensive fertiliser subsidy program. Depending upon political and financial concerns between 10 and 50% of households in most villages receive coupons for subsidised fertiliser and seeds. These can either be used to farm maize or illegally sold on for upwards of 20,000MK ($60US). Headmen and village councils select recipients in accordance with various intra-village concerns including behaviour and loyalty to the headman. See Van Donge, Chivala, et al. (2002) for more details.
he had been invited as a guest. He would not be given a fork but was instead expected to eat using his hands.\footnote{This was how most Vsawans ate, but staff members would use forks for rice-based dishes.} He would be told off for asking for money or if his errands did not go to plan. Staff (with the exception of Omar) would condescend Griffin by implying that he did not understand their work. They would speak to him in a combination of chiTumbuka and slow simple English, even though they knew that Griffin spoke English very well. Through this process, Mbwezi’s staff made it clear to Griffin that he was unlikely to ever be permanently employed by the NGO and rejected his claim to be equivalently modern to them.

Despite this, Griffin would venerate Mbwezi when discussing it in the pub. He would happily answer villagers’ questions about the NGO and emphasised his role in ensuring that the organisation followed village norms. Griffin could use Mbwezi to present himself as modern and was able to utilise and respond to some of the villagers’ fears of the challenges that NGOs posed to Vsawan norms and hierarchies. He appeared aware that his image of himself as modern, which he had used Mbwezi’s presence to create, was partial and that it primarily had utility in relation to other villagers. His modern identity therefore responded to local concerns, like the will of his headman and the praise and gifts of his peers, rather than to the discouragement of the NGO staff.

Gitemwa

Like Griffin, Gitemwa used NGO presence to present himself as a modern Vsawan – modern by the standards of the village but not when compared to the NGO staff. He was VH Nachoka’s son (chapter five). He was also the younger brother of Gunzan, the wealthiest man in Jumpi, who owned a store, motorboat and even a car. Gitemwa appeared to use volunteering with ChurchCare and at the local hospital to prove that he could interact with the modern world and therefore, as he was a headman’s son, this world need not challenge the chieftaincy. VH Nachoka publicly claimed that he had selected Gitemwa for this volunteering position because he had completed secondary school. However, it was well known in Jumpi that he had really selected his son in the hope that he would use volunteering to find salaried employment, either with ChurchCare or outside Vsawa. VH Nachoka and Gunzan supported him financially, so that he could concentrate on his volunteering and his job search. They hoped that through this he would provide resources to Jumpi when fishing was difficult and would create a pathway for other villagers to move to the city. Gitemwa’s brother explained to me that:
Gitemwa has Form Four [the completion of secondary school], so he can go [move to a city and work there] and then my child with a Form Three can follow Gitemwa … he will go because he has no work here. When the weather is bad we cannot fish and there is nothing, so Gitemwa will be able to send money back to us.

As a HIV tester, Gitemwa went to people’s homes and asked them if they would let him test them. If they acquiesced, he would prick their finger and placed a drop of blood in the testing kit. This test provided near instant results and after it Gitemwa would ‘counsel’ the recipient, giving them a pre-prepared speech if they were HIV positive and another if they were not. He would then return to the hospital to submit his records and sort blood samples.

About 20 volunteers worked with ChurchCare and the hospital. Since HIV testing was not very enjoyable (because it involved being frequently rejected by those who did not want to be tested), few of these people would spend more than a day or two per month administering tests. Gitemwa was no different. He would only infrequently test people. Further, he was a poor record keeper, because of which Roxanne (the ChurchCare employee) would often become angry and shout at him. In a conversation with me she once remarked that ChurchCare would never hire Gitemwa.

Despite this, Gitemwa would highlight his status as an NGO volunteer and link it to his family’s wealth and chieftaincy. When Gitemwa performed HIV tests, he would introduce himself as the son of VH Nachoka and when I first met him he described himself as “a chief’s son and a volunteer”. ChurchCare gave him a uniform that he would wear on duty and when socialising in Vsawa. It was always clean and ironed\textsuperscript{212} for social events like maguli\textsuperscript{213} and weddings. Other volunteers had similar uniforms. However, Gitemwa gave value to his by ironing it and wearing it on special occasions. Through utilising his uniform in this manner, Gitemwa seemingly claimed to be ChurchCare’s representative and depicted the NGO to be an important body. I saw a poorer volunteer who frequently wore his uniform mocked for not owning any other clean clothes. However, since Gitemwa’s family was rich and well respected, wearing his uniform on social occasions appeared to increase ChurchCare’s intra-community esteem, as well as his own.

\textsuperscript{212} Few households had an iron and using them required charcoal which, while not expensive, was a luxury purchase.

\textsuperscript{213} Traditional dance.
Gitemwa appeared to go to great lengths to convince villagers that he was successful and that his success was caused by ChurchCare. At social events he drank excessively and gifted beers in the same manner as his brother, who was a wealthy patron. At weddings he publicly donated thousands of Kwacha (usually $3-10USD, significantly more than most Vsawans who would give under $1USD). Gitemwa wore his ChurchCare uniform while doing this, tying his gifting to his fabricated wealth and to that of the NGO. Villagers praised him in response. They would tell him that they expected great things of him and to remember them when he was a wealthy NGO employee and lived in a city. The combination of his education, the lavish spending his family’s support enabled and his uniform, allowed Gitemwa to be seen as a current success and a future leader of the community.214

Similar to Ely and Griffin, Gitemwa presented himself as both extracting wealth from the NGO and mitigating the potential threat that NGO presence served to village norms and hierarchies. He could do the latter by giving away what he depicted to be the NGO’s wealth at weddings and by being the son of a headmen as well as a volunteer. His dual status represented a potential modernity where hierarchical chieftaincies, and the modern development that NGOs signified, were seen to be compatible.

Volunteers’ value as based on villagers’ perception of their relationship with an NGO
I understood Ely, Griffin and Gitemwa to all gain esteem through responding to villagers’ NGO-related concerns and aspirations. Their experiences imply that individuals tactically generate value for volunteering positions, over and above any inherent prestige these roles may offer, and that in Vsawa these tactics were possible due to the disjuncture between NGO staff and the vast majority of villagers. I make this argument to expand upon the literature on volunteering, which counterintuitively attributes changes to a volunteer’s intra-village social standing primarily to their relationship with the NGO.215 I have indicated, instead, that changes to a volunteer’s status are because they guide villagers’ understandings of an NGO. Volunteers broker not just NGOs’ development projects but also their presence, obtaining social reward when they persuade villagers that they can navigate the opportunities and dangers that they present an NGO as posing.

214 In this way he understood his potential career as different to Lamek’s (see last chapter) as his high intra-community standing meant that he would not be seen as a mere conduit of the NGO’s patronage.
215 With volunteers either gaining esteem inherently through their volunteering or being praised for guiding an NGO’s project in accordance with the wills of local elites or village norms.
Authors including Akintola (2011) and Ramirez-Valles (2001) claim that volunteering raises an individual’s intra-community social status. Rodlach (2009:428-429) explains that “caregivers [volunteers] exchange time and energy for social capital” and Englund (2006:81) recalls Malawian volunteers receiving “symbols of their special position, such as gleaming white T-shirts”. Vsawans venerated Ely, Griffin and Gitemwa, yet mocked many other volunteers. This indicates that a volunteering position (and the materials that go with it) may not alter a person’s social standing in and of itself. Rather, being identified as a volunteer can be tactically utilised in order to negotiate one’s social position. This was implied when Gitemwa used his uniform, his family’s status and ChurchCare’s wealth to demonstrate his importance. However, another volunteer was ridiculed for wearing the same uniform publically.

Ely, Griffin and Gitemwa were seemingly advantaged by NGO staff’s failure to interact with most Vsawans. Authors such as Bierschenk, et al. (2002), D’Exelle (2009) and Platteau and Abraham (2002) have explored how the separation between NGOs and beneficiaries leads to local elites taking on brokerage roles and either capturing the NGO’s project resources for themselves or redirecting this wealth through their patron client networks. These three Vsawans used the same disjuncture to persuade the community of their importance, without having special access to the NGO’s resources. This was demonstrated by Ely’s handing of Mbwezi’s seeds to villagers when she pretended to be involved in the process through which seeds were divided. Kaler and Watkins (2001) and Angotti (2010) observe that volunteers respond to the needs, mindsets and potential rewards of other community members, altering development projects by omitting some aspects and emphasising others. Ely’s refusal to provide condoms to unmarried women can be seen as an example of this. However, Griffin and Gitemwa were not able to alter development projects. They instead brokered the NGOs’ presence- guiding and controlling the NGOs’ non-project resources and ensuring that actions and symbols omitted by the NGOs were filtered through, and reinforced, local networks and hierarchies. The tactical significance of this brokerage was demonstrated when Griffin and Gitemwa gifted their own resources to others in the community (Griffen through buying the headman alcohol and Gitemwa through donating money at weddings) and then implied that these resources came from the NGO.

Vsawans appeared to fear that the development that NGOs signified would bring with it irreparable changes to local morals and hierarchies. This fear was reiterated to them when volunteers used the trinkets that they had been given by azungu to seduce village women or
when they failed to go to church. However, the same trinkets symbolised the potential wealth development could bring, as did the excessive per-diems and travel allowances that volunteers refused to share. Ely, Griffin and Gitemwa responded to these fears and aspirations, reinforcing dominant development narratives by depicting themselves as rare exceptions to the rule. Ely presented herself as guiding *Mbwezi*’s delivery of seeds, while limiting single women’s access to contraception; Griffin ensured that the NGO staff brought goods off Vsawans and he showed respect to the headman by buying him alcohol with his NGO-associated wealth; and Gitemwa gifted generously at weddings to pretend that ChurchCare had made him rich and, as the son of a headman, his success implied that he could use NGO-related modernity to compliment Vsawan tradition.

Rather than obtaining prestige merely for being part of a project, these three volunteers seemingly utilised varied associations with the NGOs in order to respond to Vsawan understandings of NGO presence. They acted as development brokers in the disjuncture between villagers and NGOs. However, rather than necessarily siphoning off project resources, they presented villagers with a narrative in which they moulded the presence of NGOs to fit with Vsawan life. This response reinforced villagers’ beliefs that the NGOs could provide great wealth but that only a few people had the skillset to guide this wealth into the community and that even fewer would do so without challenging village values. Ely, Griffin and Gitemwa extracted social (and occasionally material) rewards from the community for their actions. Through this process they guided and maintained social realities to shape their own social identities (see Mosse 2005:9). I claimed that Vsawans praised these three volunteers and ignored or slandered others in order to communicate their desire for development and their apprehension over changes to their values and hierarchies. In doing so, villagers attempted to guide social changes that they associated with NGO presence and to generate a Vsawan modernity that affirmed their local values.

**Vsawans’ Treatment of Volunteers as a Discussion about Modernity**

Vsawans did not passively accept the images of the modern world which volunteers presented to them. Rather, through praising some volunteers and slandering others, Vsawans can be interpreted as co-creating local discourses of modernity. In these discourses, for a volunteer to be considered ‘modern’ they were required to guide the wealth associated with development and to temper the threat that a development intervention posed to village values. In contrast, volunteers would not be seen as modern if Vsawans perceived them to be using
volunteering to overtly challenge local norms and hierarchies. Through comparing Vsawan volunteers’ experiences to the existing literature on modernity, I therefore explore the impacts of NGO presence: I argue that what modernity entails, and who can claim to be modern, are negotiated within a community; and that development macro-actants, like NGOs, are utilised as signifiers in this negotiation, rather than necessarily enabling all volunteers to be ‘modern’.

Authors such as Crewe and Harrison (1998), Kaler and Watkins (2001) and Swidler and Watkins (2009) have argued that volunteers present a modern identity which rural villagers inherently value. These authors presume that villagers who are associated with any NGO will be conceptually linked to modernity by the NGO staff and their peers. This modernity is often presented as coming from the outside world, brought into a community by an NGO and its volunteers. In contrast to these presumptions in the literature, I argue that the NGO employees’ abuse of Griffin and Gitemwa implies that these volunteers’ modern identity was constructed and embedded in Vsawa. They were ‘villagers’ when interacting with the NGO staff (or other modern actors and actants, like the azungu donors or the hospital’s blood samples) but could claim to be modern when negotiating with their peers. The modernity that volunteering enabled was therefore generated in relation to other Vsawans and was primarily utilisable when interacting with them. The obligations and entitlements it provided, and the attributes needed to claim it, can be understood as having been determined through intra-village negotiations.

Englund (2000) argues that Malawians understand the modern world to be characterised by opportunities and uncertainties. Ribohn (2002) explains that Malawians attribute a loss of respect by youths for elders, women for men and villagers for headmen with a conflation of modernity and westernisation. Discussing South Africa, Comaroff and Comaroff (1993:xxiii) argue that the presence of modernising objects (in this case NGOs) enables argument, social renegotiation and the questioning of communal norms. Johnson-Hanks (2002) observed that the Cameroonian Beti people considered local values when determining that periodic abstinence is the most modern type of contraception. Through venerating a contraceptive method that requires self-discipline, they entrench this self-discipline as an aspect of Beti modernity.

I conceptualised Vsawan’s treatment of volunteers as affirming a combination of these findings. This treatment shows that NGOs, as macro-actants, enabled argument and social
negotiation. Through this negotiation Vsawans from myriad social positions co-constructed a narrative of modernity that affirmed local values as society changed. Volunteers appeared to use the presence of NGOs to argue that they were growing more valuable as they perceived Vsawa to become more integrated into the modern world. They used aspects of these NGOs, including their projects, gifts from azungu and the wealth of NGO staff, to enhance their intra-village status by highlighting social change and proving their ability to respond to it. Villagers reacted to this by praising volunteers who respected the chieftaincy and who ensured women’s sexual fidelity. In doing so, Vsawans elucidated that modernity need not compromise village values and hierarchies. Simultaneously, villagers ridiculed lower-status volunteers, implying that these people must not have the modern expertise to guide NGOs. This process seemingly affirmed the centrality of respect for village values and hierarchies to local discourses of modernity and to the criterion for being a modern Vsawan.

Through praising some volunteers and ridiculing others, Vsawans could be interpreted as asserting the importance of village norms to their local modernities. This process incorporated the interests, understandings and therefore agency of differently positioned Vsawans. While the treatment of a volunteer reflected the modernities that NGO presence signified, it was also influenced by variously positioned villagers’ personal interests. More powerful individuals, like headmen, therefore had significant influence in these discussions. This constrained the tactics volunteers could use and influenced the locally constructed modernities that emerged through Vsawans’ treatment of these people.

**Headmen’s Treatment of Volunteers and Their Own Social Position**

In this section I detail how volunteers’ attempts to enhance their social status were complicated by their headmen. As explored in chapter five, Village Headmen could tactically influence Vsawan understandings of each NGO’s presence but were often not able to serve as an effective conduit between an NGO and their community. In this context, I argue that GVH Chipeso (chapters two and three) and VH Mwalimu (chapters two and five) considered their personal chiefly legitimacy when guiding their villagers’ treatment of volunteers, who they had selected for a training course run by Mbwezi and ChurchCare. This contributes to my study by indicating that volunteers’ utilisation of NGOs are constrained by the interests of powerful community members (in this case headmen). It therefore implies that local narratives of modernity are influenced by intra-community relationships and structures of power.
Mbwezi and ChurchCare co-ran a course that trained volunteers to provide home-based care to HIV-positive Vsawans. The course had previously been run entirely by ChurchCare and the NGO had paid volunteers a generous per-diem. However, Mbwezi had a firm policy of providing food instead of money to people who attended training but did not live far enough away to qualify for a travel allowance. The NGO staff asked each headman to nominate two or three potential volunteers. They wanted these people to have completed secondary school and for at least one of them to be female. The NGO staff requested that each headman ask their volunteers to come to Mbwezi’s hall every day for the next eight days.

GVH Chipeso
GVH Chipeso claimed to use selecting and praising volunteers in order to encourage development and to cement his intra-village alliances. He suggested two men and a woman who were popular in his village to attend home-based care training. These individuals had completed secondary school and they were supporters of his rule.²¹⁶ He stated that this was how he normally selected volunteers for training, rewarding those who were both his allies and who could bring development to his village. GVH Chipeso informed these people that he would favour them when dividing NGO and government resources among the community (e.g. fertiliser coupons from the government and seeds from NGOs). He was also known to preference those who had previously taken on volunteering roles when he judged intra-village disputes.

According to GVH Chipeso, his selection of volunteers symbolised that:

The chief is saying to you that you will bring development to the community and that you are the future of the community.

Through this statement and his selection and treatment of volunteers, he ascribed value to volunteering and linked it to his authority. He highlighted that volunteers were picked by the headman, which reinforced his own importance as a development actor. He simultaneously chose volunteers in a manner that encouraged other villagers to value the opinions of his intra-community allies.

Problematically for GVH Chipeso, the volunteers that he had selected to go to Mbwezi’s home-based care course refused to continue attending after learning that no per-diem was offered. He responded to their actions through bargaining and threats. He initially banished

²¹⁶ His tenure was very stable but, as chapter five explains, all chieftaincies in Vsawa had some instability.
these people from his village until after the eight days of training had finished. He told them that they would not be selected for fertiliser coupons next year. GVH Chipeso explained:

> It is no small thing for me, because now I have to go to this person [who has refused to attend training] and he is supposed to be learning so he can teach my people. But now he is killing my people [a phrase he used rhetorically to describe these people refusing to attend an important training session]!

After a brief pause he continued, expressing his concern that:

> They must learn that I am a chief and that if their chief asks them to do a thing, it is their job to do it.

GVH Chipeso was able to persuade several of the volunteers to return to training. He then organised a day-long meeting between these volunteers and his community, at which the volunteers could pass on their knowledge. GVH Chipeso encouraged all his villagers to attend this meeting. The volunteers taught everyone in the village\(^\text{217}\) that ‘AIDS is not a death sentence’ and emphasised ‘the value of positive living’ and ‘forms of healthy eating’.

Through this, the volunteers demonstrated that they, unlike the majority of the community, had the special skills to bring development from the outside world. GVH Chipeso sat on a plastic chair next to the various presenters while his villagers sat on the ground. He appeared to have restored value to volunteering\(^\text{218}\) and had temporarily aligned the modern development that NGO presence foregrounded with his headman-ship. GVH Chipeso both believed that these volunteers could assist the community in guiding modernity and used selecting and praising them to maintain his esteem as a headman.

**VH Mwalimu**

In contrast, VH Mwalimu’s legitimacy as a headman was predicated on his constituents’ belief that he was the most development literate person in the area. His chieftaincy was unstable and could have been damaged were a potential rival to use volunteering to strengthen their claim to be a development expert. VH Mwalimu asked three uneducated men to attend home-based care training, despite Mbwezi wanting Vsawans who had completed school. He made this decision in front of myself and a couple of villagers who had finished secondary school. After the uneducated villagers had agreed to volunteer and had left his

---

\(^{217}\) As GVH Chipeso persuaded villagers to attend  

\(^{218}\) Which meant he could continue to use selecting people to volunteer as a reward for his allies
house, I asked VH Mwalimu why he sent unqualified men to training when there were educated people available. Addressing both the educated villagers and myself, he stated:

If I told you to go to Mbwezi, would you go [there] or would you work [on your own farm]? You would work! [He pointed to another villager] If I told you to go to the hospital [to volunteer with ChurchCare], would you go or would you work? You would work! I send simple people, who whenever there is something at Mbwezi, say ‘pick me’.

His statement implied that an intelligent villager would prefer to work on his or her farm, rather than their wasting time doing free labour for Mbwezi. This claim should therefore discourage those who listened to him from valuing volunteers. VH Mwalimu had made it clear that he (unlike GVH Chipeso) did not believe that volunteering made a person an expert on development. Further, as these men were uneducated, they were still less likely to be able to present themselves as development experts, even if the training had been valued. In this context, neither they nor more serious potential rivals could use volunteering to claim to this expertise and therefore challenge VH Mwalimu.

VH Mwalimu’s volunteers stopped attending home-based care training after finding out that they would not be paid. However, unlike GVH Chipeso, he did not punish them for this. He instead treated their lapsed attendance as indicative of the limited value of volunteering. VH Mwalimu appeared nonchalant towards volunteers. He did not reward those who presented themselves as volunteers with government fertiliser coupons or access to seeds through NGO programs. He sometimes did not remember, or would pretend not to remember, whom he had given NGO peer educator roles to. Through these processes, VH Mwalimu limited the perceived value of volunteering, making it difficult for his villagers to utilise this to negotiate their social standing. He also created a situation where, if any villager praised a volunteer, it could be interpreted as an indictment of his leadership. However, because he discouraged popular villagers from volunteering, his constituents rarely praised them.

219 An important caveat to this was VH Mwalimu’s treatment of the sister of Chiefy (the local oligarch and supporter of VH Mwalimu introduced in the introduction). When he was losing popularity in the village (see chapter five) VH Mwalimu selected this woman to be a HIV peer educator and stressed that she should be selected for any paid training as a way to retain Chiefy’s support. Simultaneously, he was a strong supporter of the kind of volunteering where large numbers of villagers performed labour for infrastructure. None of these villagers became development experts through this process and instead it appeared to his village that he was bringing more development. His actions further prove that intra-community concerns and his own legitimacy were more important to VH Mwalimu that any value that volunteering provided.
In the same manner as GVH Chipeso, VH Mwalimu can be seen to have considered his own intra-village status when determining who to select to volunteer and how to treat them. Where GVH Chipeso appeared to use choosing and praising volunteers as a way to cement alliances with those who he believed could bring development, VH Mwalimu did the opposite. He encouraged villagers who could not be considered developers to volunteer and treated volunteering with distain. This tactic impeded potential rivals who could have otherwise utilised volunteering to present themselves as development experts. Both headmen seemingly used NGO presence to tactically cement their intra-village status and in doing so altered villagers’ relationships with volunteers. Their acts provide context to the interactions between volunteers and other Vsawans; they demonstrate that volunteers’ utilisations of NGO presence were constrained by the interests of elite villagers (in this case headmen); and that villagers respond to concerns other than just local narratives of modernity when praising or slandering a volunteer.

**Traditional elites’ and volunteers’ tactics as influencing modernity**

Headmen influenced volunteers’ interactions with villagers. This indicates that volunteers’ utilisations of NGO presence were tactical rather than strategic, as they could not reduce the significance of headmen in giving their role meaning. It also adds clarity to the depiction of a co-created Vsawan modernity (earlier in this chapter) by demonstrating that the discourses of modernity that emerged through Vsawans’ treatment of villagers incorporated intra-village regimes of power. In making these claims, this section reinforces key themes of my thesis. It explores myriad Vsawans’ tactical utilisations of NGO presence in intra-community negotiations; acknowledges that the NGOs, as potent signifiers of development and modernity, mediated and catalysed these negotiations; and it details how, through this process, Vsawa re-created traditional power structures while managing the elevation of those who could be considered modern.

Volunteers maximised their individual circumstances and relationships by responding to the desires of their headmen and of other villagers. However, they could not change the structures that gave meaning to their social role. The chieftaincy was one of these structures and VH Mwalimu’s denigration of volunteers highlights its role in constricting the tactics available to them. For instance, it is unlikely that Griffin would have been able to

---

220 As mentioned on page 151 Honwana (2005) defines tactical agency as a person’s ability to temporarily maximize their individual circumstances.

221 Utas’s (2005) describes strategic agency as the ability to change the structures that create and give meaning to one’s social role. See page 151
demonstrate that he respected village hierarchies by buying his headman alcohol if his headman (like VH Mwalimu) did not want volunteers to be praised.

Olivier de Sardan (2005) observes the potential of volunteers to form alliances with traditional mediators. He claims that, in this symbiotic partnership, both parties broker the relationship between the NGO and its encompassing village. GVH Chipeso’s ability to ensure that villagers listened to his volunteers implies that headmen are advantaged within this alliance, as they influence a volunteer’s relationship with their peers. This constrains volunteers’ tactics and makes any social gain they obtain unstable. For example, Ely’s social standing would likely quickly diminish if her headman appointed a new woman to be peer educator because she challenged him, or if he decided that ridiculing volunteers would help him achieve his personal best interests. In this manner, the social elevation that volunteers obtained through brokerage was tenuous and they were incentivised to re-create Vsawan power structures.

Through influencing the relationship between villagers and volunteers, each headman can be seen to have altered local constructions of modernity. Their actions therefore proved that Vsawan modernities reflected intra-village interactions and local power dynamics. These actions also responded to the social changes that volunteers (and NGO presence more generally) signified.

Relationships between villagers, volunteers and headmen both utilised and reconstructed local modernities, combining narratives about NGO presence with Vsawan social realities. When villagers sat and listened to GVH Chipeso’s home-based care volunteers they appeared to do so (in part) because they believed that these volunteers were modern. In this case, their polite questioning of the volunteers would have reinforced the discourse that NGOs brought development from the outside world and that a small group of volunteers guided their interactions with the community. The headman sitting on the chair next to this presentation affirmed villagers’ belief that this development did not have to wholly destroy Vsawan hierarchies, as there was a role for the headman in this new development activity. However, intrapersonal concerns can be seen to have been equally salient to villagers’ decision to listen to these volunteers. They knew that not listening to the volunteers would anger GVH Chipeso. Further, by sitting next to these volunteers, the headman was simultaneously affirming his friendship with these educated locals, who were becoming more powerful as modernity was perceived to be arriving. Volunteering had a different resonance for VH
Mwalimu’s villagers and can be understood through a different combination of relationships and understandings. Because VH Mwalimu had described these volunteers as ‘simple people’ his villagers were less likely to consider them modern. Further, were a villager to praise these volunteers, and in doing so imply that they were modern, this villager would damage his relationship with VH Mwalimu.

Discussion over whether volunteers were modern, and broader narratives of modernity, therefore incorporated the actions of the headman and villagers, while simultaneously shaping the decisions these people took. Narratives of modernity and development were generated in the context of intra-village relationships and power dynamics, making some volunteers in some villages modern, but others not so.

**Conclusions**

In this chapter I have argued against the assumption that volunteers are inherently valued by their community and that they model an external modernity to their peers (Akintola 2011; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Rodlach 2009). To do so, I have claimed that Vsawans interpret the presence of volunteers, and of NGOs, to signify changes to their society. In the context of the difference that villagers perceived between those who were equipped to interact with the modern world and those who could not, specific Vsawans took on the label ‘volunteer’. Through praising the volunteers who they perceived to guide NGO-driven development and who respected village norms and hierarchies, villagers affirmed the importance of these traits to their local modernities. However, the interests of other Vsawans (especially headmen) affected both the social status of volunteers and the emergent discourses of modernity. In this context I claim that volunteers’ social gains were always unstable and that local modernities reflected a conflation of villagers’ understandings of volunteers, NGO presence and various Vsawans’ best interests.

This chapter has focused on answering my final two research questions. It has explored how volunteers were able to lodge themselves within the disjuncture between the NGOs and villagers, in a manner that headmen and NGO employees could not. This enabled some volunteers to elevate their social standing vis-à-vis other Vsawans by serving as brokers for the NGOs’ presence, rather than just their projects. They seemingly persuaded their peers that they could navigate the threats and prospects that they depicted NGOs as posing. However, the tactics of all three groups of actors interacted, with the volunteers’ social gains dependent on the machinations of their headmen and the continued disconnect between NGO staff and
villagers. In this manner, headmen, NGO staff and volunteers all encouraged Vsawans to conceptualise NGO presence to signify the incursions of a powerful, yet threatening, modernity that most villagers were ill equipped to interact with.

This chapter has therefore also explored how NGO presence influenced Vsawan discussions over the relationship between development and modernity. Rather than inherently understanding volunteers as modern, villagers use volunteers as signifiers when negotiating local modernities. I argue that the volunteers are actors in these negotiations while NGOs are macro-actants within them and that villagers praised or vilified volunteers as a way to communicate about the opportunities and dangers they saw entering Vsawa. Through doing so, they negotiated a Vsawan modernity, where volunteers guided the wealth associated with development into the village, while tempering the perceived threat development interventions posed to local values and hierarchies. NGO presence, and the negotiations in which it was invoked, therefore enhanced the entitlements of the already socially privileged and of those who could link their advancement to modernity.

I placed this chapter directly before the conclusion of my thesis as it restores intra-village interactions to the centre of analysis. It does so in contrast to much of the development studies literature, which has often focused on the relationship between villagers, in this case volunteers, and NGOs. The thesis has explored how NGO presence impacts upon intra-village negotiations without removing the agency of individuals who utilise and shape local understandings of development interventions. One of the ways that I have demonstrated this was to show that NGO presence enabled volunteers to alter their individual social position while this presence simultaneously influenced Vsawan’s responses to the changes they associated with the external, modern world.
Overall Conclusions and Reflections

In this thesis I have argued that development studies literature focuses too exclusively on development interventions and presents these interventions as the primary cause of social change within a community. In contrast, my thesis focused on intra-village interactions that were influenced, but not wholly caused by, the presence of NGOs. Doing so required a deliberate foregrounding of the acts and agency of rural villagers. It also necessitated an actor-network methodology, in which NGOs were conceptualised as macro-actants, in a chain of actors and actants, from which purposive action emerged. My ethnography of Vsawa both proved the utility of this form of study and demonstrated how it would work in a specific environment, in this case, a collection of lakeside Malawian villages where people perceived themselves to be experiencing rapid social change.

I divided my thesis into three sections. The first section provided academic and geographic context to my study. It highlighted that development studies literature typically either orients its gaze toward a development intervention or is written from within one. Through doing so, development literature presents these interventions as wholly causing changes that take place in the communities that they study. I then explored the role of actor and actor-network ethnographies in detailing the interactions through which development beneficiaries experience and conceptualise an intervention. I situated my study within these traditions, focusing on interactions that did not necessarily involve developers, and conceptualising NGOs as macro-actants. I explored previous actor-oriented studies of development brokers and demonstrated the utility of focusing on these brokers’ intra-village relationships. I then briefly detailed the literature on NGOs and on Malawi. I highlighted the northern centric nature of much of the NGO literature, then explored Malawians’ understandings of the relationship between NGOs, development and modernity.

The second half of this section, chapter two, described Vsawa and the NGOs that operated there. I claimed that Vsawans conceptualised the area as changing rapidly. They attributed this to their increased access to the outside world. I described each of the NGOs that operated in Vsawa, highlighting how these NGOs’ presence impacted upon villagers’ lives and understandings of development, in ways which were not encapsulated by exploring their projects. This section concluded with an introduction to Vsawa’s dominant development narrative; where ‘development’ meant externally provisioned resources and modernising
social changes. Vsawans conceptually related these advancements to, yet carefully separated them from, threatening changes to village values and hierarchies.

In the second section of my thesis I explored changes to Vsawan narratives of modernity, social change and development. I also showed how conceptualising NGOs as macro-actants allowed for an analysis of their influences on intra-village discourses, and therefore obligations and entitlements, while maintaining a focus on the actions and agency of individual villagers. To this end, chapter three explored how Mbwezi’s presence guided, and was utilised within, Vsawan discussions over changing patterns of resource-sharing and accumulation. This analysis was structured along the four ways that Sayes (2014) presents macro-actants as having agency. I claim that Vsawans utilised Mbwezi’s presence as a placeholder for individual, westernised consumption (chalo chazungu). However, through linking this consumption to development, Mbwezi mediated Vsawan negotiations over food sharing and altered the moral resonance of individualistic resource use. Further, the NGO gathered unequally powerful actors and discourses, enabling some Vsawans to increase their access to others’ food, while NGO-related concepts of modernity guided a broader reduction in food sharing.

In chapter four I explored the way that NGOs influenced Vsawan understandings of the meaning and purpose of education. I argued that the symbols that NGOs emitted and the actions of the NGO staff encouraged Vsawans to see education as primarily useful for interacting with a conflation of development and modernity that they saw as existing outside the village and was encroaching upon Vsawa. Some Vsawans appeared to use associating with NGOs as a way to prove their acumen for interacting with this outside world, and therefore their education, in increasingly negotiable educational claims. However, seemingly because Vsawan narratives relating to both NGO presence and development incorporated intra-village concerns, these claims could not be made by marginalised women and the destitute. I therefore argued that, through discussions over the relationship between NGOs and education, Vsawans elucidated their desire for development and their apprehensions over the challenges to intra-village norms and hierarchies that they conceptualised as social change. These discussions guided the elevation of a new elite who could navigate the modernity that was entering the village, while ensuring respect for Vsawa’s traditions.

In the final section of my thesis I detailed the lived experiences of people whose social role placed them in the disjuncture between the village and the NGOs’ decision makers. I claimed
to show how the NGO’s presence provided Village Headmen, NGO staff and volunteers, with opportunities to renegotiate their social standing vis-à-vis the majority of Vsawans. These people’s actions and best interests were crucial to Vsawan’s understandings of the NGOs and therefore to the influence of NGO presence on village social life. However, the NGOs, and the networks of actors and actants that encompassed them, also generated liabilities for those positioned between NGOs and the community. Further, I argued that NGO presence encouraged these people to reinforce dominant development narratives that tied development to the modern, external world and to reinforce existing structures of power and traditional hierarchies.

In chapter five I examined how three headmen tactically determined whether to associate with or disassociate themselves from NGOs. Through comparing two headmen in villages where an NGO maintained a permanent presence with one in a more remote village that only received NGOs’ projects I posited that the presence of NGOs made it impossible for headmen to fully control their villagers’ interactions with developers. Further, irrespective of the tactics that they used, these headmen appeared strategically unable to alter chieftaincy’s dyad of development and tradition. For this reason, their long-term legitimacy was weakened when the NGOs’ linked development to an occidentalised modernity. In this context, the presence of NGOs encouraged headmen to use tactics that would temporarily elevate their intra-community status, but reinforced the expectation that development would be provided by external interventions.

In chapter six I discussed how institutional structures, Vsawan social networks and Malawian development narratives discouraged interactions between NGO employees and most Vsawans. Migrant NGO staff did not form relationships with villagers and Vsawan-born NGO employees were seemingly forced to choose between ‘developer’ and ‘villager’ identities. This reinforced villagers’ understanding that developers were different from Vsawans and that they brought development from a wealthy, but threatening, outside world; a narrative which was used to justify the status of local elites and to deny women educational opportunities. This chapter highlighted the relationship between dominant development discourse, local development institutions and those who are advantaged through development. I argue that these actors, actants and macro-actants have a symbiotic relationship which reinforces development norms and legitimises the actions of the already powerful.
Finally, in chapter seven I explored why Vsawans chose to volunteer with NGOs and why villagers rewarded some volunteers but not others. I claimed that successful volunteers extracted rewards from the community through proving their ability to interact with the modernity that NGOs signified. This was done by guiding the development that NGOs brought while mitigating the challenge they posed to Vsawan values and hierarchies. However, this social elevation was contingent on the machinations of the gerontocratic elite and of myriad other villages. I claimed that through praising some volunteers and not others, all Vsawans could be understood to be involved in a process that used NGO presence to communicate and negotiate local narratives of modernity, development and social change.

**Answers to Specific Research Questions:**

What approaches and theories can be used to examine an NGO’s influence on village life while maintaining a focus on rural people’s interactions and agency?

What would such a study look like in practice?

In this thesis I have argued that the nature of development literature means that foregrounding the agency of development ‘recipients’ requires a conscious analytic reorientation. This reorientation involves focusing on intra-village interactions, in which individuals either discuss NGOs or utilise their presence to conceptualise social change. Doing so challenges the way that villagers are frequently analysed as interlocutors for an NGO’s project, a process that results in social change being causally over-attributed to these projects. Instead, I conceptualise each NGO as part of these villagers’ social landscape, utilisable in their intra-village interactions and interpreted through, yet simultaneously guiding, villagers’ understanding of the world around them.

Specific approaches enabled this type of study. The most important of these is actor-network theory. It provides a framework for attributing agency to non-human *actants* and macro-*actants*. Conceptualising NGOs as macro-*actants* allows for an exploration of how they enable human agency, mediate interactions, alter moral associations, and assemble actors, objects and discourses. In doing so, actor-network theory provides an understanding of causality where many actors and *actants* generate each purposive action. Complementing actor-network theory as a methodological device is Scott’s (1990) understanding of the relationship between hidden and public transcripts. This is assisted by the work of authors including White (2000), who focus on how gossip and rumour are used to negotiate social change. I used these theoretic tools to explore the influence of NGO presence on villagers’
covert and overt negotiations over their obligations and entitlements, which remain primarily motivated by intra-village concerns.

The entirety of my thesis demonstrates how a focus on the agency of rural villagers would alter studies of development interventions. However, this is most clearly elucidated in chapters three and seven. Chapter three is explicitly structured around this purpose; it recounts rumour, negotiations and gossip in which Vsawans invoked *Mbwezi*. It explicitly parses this into the four ways that macro-actants influence, but do not determine, purposive action. The remainder of this thesis used this framework less overtly. In this context, chapter seven rejected the conventional depiction of NGO volunteers as primarily having their lives changed through the impacts of that NGO’s project on their village. It, instead, claimed that volunteering enabled, and gave meaning to, new negotiating techniques for volunteers and for the community at large. The presence of a development intervention can therefore be explored for its influence on intra-village interactions. It is utilised by villagers to conceptualise, yet guides their understanding of, the world around them.

*In what ways does NGO presence in Vsawa influence discussions over the relationship between development, modernity and social change? How do these changing narratives influence intra-village obligations and entitlements?*

I contend that Vsawans understanding of the presence of NGOs both guided and reflected village narratives of development, modernity and social change. Vsawans acts and words imped that they perceived NGOs to embody a link between these concepts and to signify their increased salience to village life. Often, NGOs reinforced dominant discourses about the differences between Vsawa and the outside, modern world and valorised this as a site of development and wealth. However, they also presented the world external to the village as a place with values that were threatening to Vsawans. When villagers discussed NGOs they therefore speculated about this outside world. They used NGO staff’s failure to share food (chapter three) or their perceived sexual proclivity (chapter six) to elucidate their fears about the social changes that they associated with it. They praised villagers who were perceived to guide the development that NGOs brought without altering local social structures (for example the volunteers detailed in chapter seven), seemingly communicating their desire for this particular convolving of development and modernity.

Specific narratives of development, modernity and social change became dominant in conjunction with the presence of NGOs. Vsawans came to understand modernity as existing outside and slowly entering their village. NGOs’ outlandish wealth (for instance, the
ownership of multiple 4WDs), their mastery of English and their access to azungu made them almost indisputably modern. Their increasing visibility within the community and comparisons between the NGOs and the village was therefore evidence of modernity’s encroachment on a Vsawa that saw itself as isolated and traditional. Behaving like an NGO employee, or better still befriending one, was often accepted as evidence that a Vsawan was modern (chapters three and six) and therefore educated (chapter four). As most Vsawans appeared to see themselves and Vsawa itself as not modern, these few villagers who they perceived to be modern became increasingly important for interacting with the external world and for guiding development while mitigating social change.

NGO presence reinforced the relationship Vsawans perceived between development and modernity. Through presenting themselves as patrons (chapter three) and through their overt linking of their presence to development (for example, Mbwezi’s sign reading “to the people of Vsawa … development”), NGOs encouraged Vsawan to believe that development was provided by benefactors outside the village. NGO presence therefore severed the link between development and traditional rule (chapter five). The resources of these NGOs and their staff (smartphones, laptops and restaurant meals) symbolised the great wealth that development provided to those who associated with it and the potential of this development to drastically improve village life.

I claimed that intimately tied to development, yet conceptually segregated from it, was a collection of changes to Vsawan social life. These included: a perceived shift in gender roles, as NGOs ‘looked for jenda’ (chapters four and six); a loss of gerontocratic authority, both in increasingly multigenerational households (chapter two) and in intra-village decision making (chapters four and five); and the normalisation of personal resource acquisition and consumption (chapter four). Villagers expressed apprehension about these changes. They wanted the development that they associated with social change, yet desired to minimise the threats it posed to the hierarchies and norms that Vsawans conceptualised as culture.

I observed the relationship Vsawans perceived between development, modernity and social change being constantly renegotiated. It reflected not just the actions of the NGOs but other economic changes and Malawian development narratives. Significantly, understandings of the NGOs incorporated intra-village power dynamics and relationships. For example, Vsawans described reading at Mbwezi’s library to be evidence that a person was educated. This appeared to be because interacting with NGOs typically signified that a person could
manoeuvre the outside world; because *Mbwezi* confirmed dominant Vsawan development narratives by the bringing of wealth from external benefactors; and because powerful Vsawans read there. In contrast, reading at *Kulutilizya Msambiska*’s library did not show that a person was educated. Associating with an NGO was typically evidence of the ability to interact with the modern world. However, *Kulutilizya Msambiska*’s emphasis on local financial sustainability jarred with Malawian development narratives, according to which NGOs bring resources, rather than asking for them. Further, the NGO’s library was primarily patronised by women and Vsawa’s poorest people.

Chapters three and four explored how narratives relating to development, modernity and social change affected Vsawans’ intra-village obligations and entitlements. Chapter three argued that *Mbwezi*’s presence was used by some villagers to link individual consumption to modernity and westernisation. This linkage came to be seen as morally righteous through the correlation between individual consumption and development that *Mbwezi* depicted. This process largely reduced Vsawans’ obligations to share resources with each other. However, tied to it, and explored primarily in chapter four, was an obfuscated re-examination of gerontocratic leadership. Occurring concurrently to this was a perceived increasing role for those who could interact with NGOs and guide the conflation of development and modernity that their presence signified. These modern, educated, villagers gained new intra-village entitlements through this process.

In this manner, I argue that narratives of modernity, development and social change, which were associated with NGO presence, assisted in a covert, and limited, transfer of power from gerontocratic leaders to a new, modern, elite. However, these narratives simultaneously justified increased inequality. The ability to present oneself as a volunteer (chapter seven) or educated (chapter four) often incorporated a privileged intra-community social position. Further, the decreased intra-village obligation that came through these NGO-related narratives, and the new entitlements of the modern elite, harmed the already poor.

How do Vsawans with differing social roles interact with NGOs in ways that elevate or diminish their social standing vis-à-vis other villagers? How do these interactions re-create or alter Vsawans’ understandings of NGO presence? Vsawans whose social roles placed them in consistent contact with NGOs could often use NGO presence to temporarily enhance their intra-village social standing. They did this by controlling the disjuncture between the NGO and the community. Unlike other studies, my thesis has focused upon the intra-community rewards (or lack thereof) that these people
received, rather than the resources provided to them by the development organisation. In doing so, I highlighted the agency not only of the Village Headmen, NGO staff and volunteers positioned in this disjuncture but also of all Vsawans, who used their treatment of these people to negotiate social change within their community. However, I argue that the strategic agency of all concerned was inhibited by the institutional composition of the NGOs, intra-village expectations, and the national development discourses that the NGOs’ presence embodied. Vsawans could therefore only improve their long-term social standing when their own best interests (and those assigned by their social role) were served by reproducing dominant development narratives and the structures and relationships these justified. In this context, the agency of Village Headmen, NGO staff and volunteers appeared to be primarily tactical rather than strategic. They therefore almost inevitably reinforced villagers’ belief that NGOs and their staff were irreconcilably different to most Vsawans and that development was provided to the village by powerful external interveners.

Vsawan Village Headmen could not present themselves as ruling over NGOs. This was because of the NGOs’ comparatively obscene wealth and their ability to connect both with villagers and powerful individuals outside the community (for instance, TAs). Headmen could instead temporarily improve their local authority by associating themselves with an NGO and claiming credit for the development it brought. Or they could consolidate their existing legitimacy by presenting the NGO and, therefore its development, as outside the traditional domain. These tactics were inherently unsustainable. Village Headmen had little recourse when an NGO did something that angered their villagers. They would then be seen as an impotent traditional protector or as someone who did not influence the NGO’s development decisions. Further, through these tactics, headmen seemed to confirm to villagers that NGOs brought development from an external, modern world. This severed the dyad of development and tradition. It reduced the long-term legitimacy of all headmen and reinforced Vsawans’ belief that the relationship between NGOs, development and modernity threatened their social values.

Migrant NGO staff failed to form social bonds with Vsawans. This appeared to be caused by a combination of the way NGOs meet their employees’ needs, the Vsawan expectation that wealthy newcomers should share their resources, and the pan-Malawian belief in the distinction between developers and villagers. Villagers who were hired by an NGO were forced to choose between seemingly incompatible identities as a sophisticated developer or a dutiful villager. These Vsawans could sometimes improve their intra-village social standing
by remaining engaged with the community and sharing the wealth that the NGO had provided them (as Dalila did). However, doing so was correlated with being censored by senior migrant NGO staff. Most Vsawans hired by an NGO, instead, reduced their local social standing. They would fail to act as intra-village patrons and would perform acts like ‘jenda’ (see the case of Lamek, chapter six). They became associated with an external developer identity and cemented the binary between being a developer and being a Vsawan.

This understanding incorporated and enabled the machinations of various villagers. It allowed powerful Vsawans, who could interact with the NGO staff, to demonstrate their talent for bringing development. They could therefore improve their intra-village social standing. However, the perceived difference between developers’ values and those of Vsawans provided men with a reason to reduce women’s educational opportunities. These men argued that Vsawan women who had been hired by an NGO behaved in a manner that was inconsistent with village morals.

Vsawans’ desire for development and their apprehension about rapid social change enabled some volunteers to improve their social standing. These people demonstrated their ability to interact with the NGOs, guiding development while mitigating challenges to village values and hierarchies. These volunteers were almost always from the community’s elite and their increased social standing was influenced by the machinations of their headmen. This meant that their social elevation was often unstable and that they were encouraged to reinforce existing hierarchies and structures of power. Further, their enhanced status was a symbol, and consequence, of growing inequality within the community.

Headmen, NGO staff and volunteers were all incentivised to recreate dominant development narratives. In these narratives NGOs brought development from outside Vsawa, but interaction with them required modern skills, and their presence came with threatening changes to Vsawan life. Headmen could only serve their temporary best interest by doing this. However, the few Vsawans who obtained a permanent job with an NGO, as well as some volunteers, generated long-term improvements to their livelihoods. Simultaneously, myriad Vsawans praised or ridiculed these people in order to enact their short- and long-term goals, negotiate their obligations and entitlements, and elucidate their desired narratives of development and modernity. In this manner, NGO presence can be understood to have been used by all these actors in order to enact their tactical agency, yet Vsawans could not strategically guide the changes that NGOs embodied and signified.
Concerns and Contributions

Concerns
Like all ethnographic projects my conclusions are only valid in the context of the idiosyncrasies of my field-site. Important particularities of this study include the Malawian entwinement of hierarchy and morality and the dichotomy that villagers perceived between a supposedly static Malawian culture and a conflation of development and modernity that they associated with the outside world (Booth et al. 2006; Ribohn 2002). These norms were crucial to Vsawan understandings of the presence of NGOs and of the broader social changes that they used NGOs to discuss and respond to. Similarly, many Vsawans found talking to non-Tumbuka (even, to an extent, other Africans) difficult. This encouraged the convolving of English use and education and the creation of special statuses for those who could communicate with external actors.

In Vsawa there were few symbols of development or external bodies. This meant that discussions relating to the outside world necessarily included NGOs. In other areas these discussions may have focused upon different symbols and structures – for instance, shopping centres or internal roads. These may also serve as actants that embed and influence development narratives but in a different manner. Further, I have utilised Malawians’ distrust of NGO workers and their naturalisation of Malawi’s dependence on azungu donors, cultural traits noted by Morfit (2011) and Wroe (2012), however I have not unpacked either of these.

I am conscious that, in following an actor and actor-network oriented tradition, this thesis has focused on tactical and strategic changes to understandings and social positions. It is not my intention to reduce Vsawans’ genuine beliefs to tactics or to question the earnestness with which they discuss NGOs and social change. Rather, I claim that their understandings are intertwined with their agency – with Vsawans’ beliefs both constructing, and limited by, the actions and tactics that they used in social interactions. For instance, villagers’ genuine expectation that development was provided by external azungu encouraged social claims by those who had a special relationship with these developers. Intra-village tactics then fuelled this belief, through its repetition and through the rewards that accumulated to those who set themselves up in volunteering positions.

The NGOs’ presence frequently enhanced the social standings and entitlements of a youthful elite and diminished the intra-village statuses of women. In this way the seemingly innocuous transition of power from the aged hierarchical leaders to their youthful, educated decedents,
concealed a more insidious shift. To avoid the trap of invoking culture in order to depoliticise the differential treatment of an already disadvantaged group, I will now make explicit some of the ways that this thesis has shown NGO presence’s involvement in the further marginalisation of women.

Women appeared less able than men to make claims to associate with an NGO. Narratives that utilised NGO presence to explain social change typically advantaged men at the expense of women, as did the actions of the organisations and of their staff. For example, the belief that NGOs were patrons for the entire community was disproportionately used to claim the resources of widows who had benefited from an NGO’s projects (chapter three). In contrast, men were more likely to have the time to interact with NGOs, and staff saw males as more capable of roles like gardener and night-watchmen. These positions could be used to demonstrate an association with an NGO or, ideally, to find employment through volunteering (chapters three, four and seven).

Smith-Hefner’s (2009) work on rural Indonesia observes that gossip and censure have a greater impact on a woman’s intra-community social position than a man’s. In Vsawa a similar censure manifested through a mockery of women who tried to claim a special association with an NGO and even those who obtained permanent employment. For instance, women faced rumours that their interactions with NGO staff or their managers were primarily (and inappropriately) sexual (chapter four and six). The one organisation where women were comfortable was ridiculed because of its rejection of Vsawans’ gender and gerontocratic hierarchies and because it did not provide development in accordance with dominant (male) Vsawan expectations. Most problematically, the actions of the NGO staff and associates entrenched the notion that gender equity was associated with the outside world. This world was sometimes venerated and sometimes vilified. However, both of these acts reinforced a narrative where rural Malawian life was strictly and, sometimes, brutally patriarchal.

The presence of NGOs was indicative of the changing gender, age and economic hierarchies within Vsawa. Rogers (1975) argues that women are advantaged in environments where informal and household economies are important. I argue that NGO presence was utilised to renegotiate women’s diminishing control over intra-household and intra-community food sharing. NGOs were macro-actants that accelerated and justified this process (chapter three). Women’s (and marginalised people’s) inability to access the new opportunities that the

---

223 Which Maes, et al. (2010) claim often happens in works that venerate indigenous solutions to social issues.
presence of NGOs offered was combined with an increased tolerance for inequality that favoured men, as they generally possessed more resources.

Specific female and marginalised Vsawans were able to use NGOs to improve their social position. Richard was HIV-positive and did not have a family or any schooling. However, he shrewdly utilised the symbols of Mbwezi and his HIV status to manufacture a perceived relationship between himself and the organisation. He leveraged this to compensate for his inability to perform difficult physical labour in his horizontal social network (chapter three). Similarly, Ely manipulated local norms relating to appropriate behaviour for women (and Mbwezi’s ignorance as to Vsawan understandings of their volunteers) in order to persuade villagers that she guided Mbwezi (chapter seven). Importantly, both of these individuals had a strong intra-network position: Ely was influential due to her brother’s remittances and Richard’s fishing network was almost exclusively low status actors and he went to church with the most important members of this group. These two individuals combined personal and structural advantages with tactics that enabled them to achieve more than most disenfranchised Vsawans.

An actor-network understanding rejects the proscription that all marginalised people are further disenfranchised by any development process. Instead, it acknowledges the interplay and mutual determination of internal structures and external interventions with specific actors’ strategies and tactics (see Long 2000). I have attempted to do this, acknowledging the idiosyncrasies of Malawi and Vsawa’s relationship with NGOs, while exploring how specific Vsawans’ tactics and beliefs were involved in networks of meaning that determined not only these people’s social standing but also conceptualisations of the NGOs and changes to village sociality.

**Contributions**

In this thesis I have foregrounded the role of unequitable intra-village negotiations in determining the meanings and processes of development. This enabled contributions to the literature on the creation of local narratives of development and modernity and on development brokerage. These observations were made possible by my most significant contribution – using actor-network theory to explore the presence of NGOs, while orienting my gaze on intra-community interactions.

My thesis has foregrounded the importance of examining intra-village negotiations and power structures when studying local narratives of development and modernity. A significant
body of literature depicts development interventions as bringing modernity into a rural environment (Crewe and Harrison 1998; Weisgrau 1997). In contrast, authors including Pigg (1996) Johnson-Hanks (2002) and Bulloch (2013) demonstrate that symbols of the outside world and narratives of development influence how rural people create their own modernities, rather than proscribing a modernity to them. Pigg (1997) Hilhorst (2001) and, in Malawi, Swidler and Watkins (2009) all explore how intra-village understandings of modernity and development are guided by a local elite. This elite present themselves as ‘modern’, ‘educated’ or ‘developed’ and obtain respect in their community through this.

I have added to Pigg (1996) and Bulloch’s (2013) work by showing how NGOs are used by Vsawans to conceptualise and create modernities. NGOs are potent symbols of development and modernity (Crewe and Harrison 1998; Hilhorst 2003). Detailing the intra-village discussions through which NGOs’ presence is explored and examining the lives of ‘locally modern’ Vsawans (like Griffin) reinforces these authors’ discourse on modernity. It shows that NGOs guided and mediated Vsawan discussions about what modernity entailed, rather than bringing with them a modernity that was filtered through the village.

I have also expanded upon Pigg (1997) and Swidler and Watkins’s (2009) work by detailing the intra-village advantages that a ‘modern’ villager receives. I have compared this with the broader changes to obligations and entitlements that villagers associate with the modernities they create. In Vsawa being modern entitled a villager to their peers’ resources and respect. Yet, the modern world, or chalo chazungu, signified and encouraged a general reduction in resource sharing. These observations show the livelihood implications of Pigg (1996), Johnson-Hanks (2002) and Swidler and Watkins’s (2009) inequitably negotiated modernities.

My most significant contribution to the study of narratives of development and modernity has been exploring the role of intra-village negotiations and power differentials in determining local meanings of these terms. NGO presence was invoked in the Vsawan conversations through which concepts of modernity were created and scrutinised. These discussions reflected Vsawans’ understandings of the modern world but also their personal best interests, social values and communal hierarchies. For example, villagers arguing over whether a peer was educated would consider this person’s years of schooling and their ability to associate with NGOs – symbols of their modernity. However, villagers’ analysis also incorporated the person’s wealth, their gender and their intra-village social standing. The wealthy, male and well-connected were therefore more likely to be considered educated and through this,
modern. Broader narratives about the meaning of modernity and understandings of the presence of each NGO emerged from these discussions. This process became mutually reinforcing, with understandings of modernity, development and NGO presence incorporating the machinations and agency of unequally powerful Vsawans. Through these negotiations, narratives of modernity and development emerged. Villagers saw these as justifying traditional hierarchies and the elevation of a wealthy, educated (typically male) modern elite.

My thesis therefore expands upon the understanding of modernity and development in two ways:

a) It supports Pigg (1996), Johnson-Hanks (2002) and Bulloch’s (2013) conceptualisation of modernity as created within the community, incorporating symbols of the outside world but combining these with local concerns and understandings.

b) It demonstrates that these understandings of modernity and development are negotiated in the context of intra-community power dynamics. They therefore incorporate, and often cement, conservative local social values and traditional hierarchies.

My thesis has also foregrounded the role of power structures and negotiations in giving value to development brokerage. Bierschenk, et al. (2002) defines development brokers as the intermediaries between the intended recipients of a development project and the financiers of a development intervention. They are understood to obtain financial and social capital through positioning themselves in the disjuncture between developers and beneficiaries and acting as a screen between the two (Aveling 2011; Kaler and Watkins 2001; Lemarchand 1972). In doing so, they create stable and coherent representations of the community for the developer and visa-versa (Lewis and Mosse 2006). Through studying villages with an ongoing NGO presence, I have shown how brokerage takes place when maintaining a full ‘screen’ is impossible. In this context, development narratives and differences in livelihoods still discourage interactions between the vast majority of villagers and NGO employees. However, as VH Jerimani found out, villagers are prepared to interact with NGOs when they feel that the status quo has not provided them with sufficient development.

I have shown that, even in the absence of geographic distance, Village Headmen, NGO staff and volunteers still have a significant role in determining intra-village understandings of
NGOs. In Vsawa these brokers re-created and highlighted the difference between villagers and development providers. However, villagers’ treatment of brokers was both predicated upon, and simultaneously negotiated, their own understandings of the meaning of development and of the purpose of each NGO. For example, villagers praised volunteers who not only guided NGOs’ resources but also protected Vsawa from the challenges that they perceived NGOs to pose to village norms, and the broader changes to village life of which NGO presence was a symbol. Therefore, if there is not geographic disjuncture between villagers and developers, one is likely to be constructed discursively. However, brokers did not construct this disjuncture alone, and with it independently create stable representations of villagers for developers and visa-versa. Instead, this disjuncture was a construction that incorporated the (unequally positioned) agency of myriad villagers. These villagers communicate their own understandings and expectations of development onto brokers, again reinforcing dominant development narratives and hierarchies.

In this context, dominant development discourses often make brokers’ social gains tactical and tenuous. Authors including Aveling (2011) and Angotti (2010) describe the potential of brokers to improve their long term social or economic positions. This typically occurs through rewards provided by the development organisation rather than by villagers. Swidler and Watkins (2009) detail rural volunteers’ attempts to turn their long term involvement with an NGO into paid positions in the Malawian development sector. This was the case for a small number of the NGO staff I observed, including Lamek. However, the vast majority of the development brokers that I studied were primarily rewarded for their brokerage by villagers. This was true of headmen, who gained legitimacy through guiding their villagers’ relationships with NGOs, and of volunteers like Griffin and Ely whose peers gave them praise, favours or even cash. These positions were unstable, with headmen occasionally dethroned and volunteers frequently ridiculed by either their peers or traditional leaders. In this context, development brokers were incentivised to foreground their immediate utility by exaggerating the difference between villagers and developers. Narratives about development, including the understanding that development was provided by wealthy outsiders and the perceived incompatibility between villagers and developers, meant that villagers were likely to see headmen and volunteers as increasingly subordinate to NGOs in the development process. Yet, these brokers re-created these narratives to obtain the temporary social elevation

224 Oliver de Sardan (2005) suggests three types of development brokers: traditional mediators, development agents and local brokers.
they provided. In this context, I have expanded upon development brokerage literature in two ways:

a) I have shown that brokers’ agency is primarily tactical rather than strategic. A development broker is able to manipulate (and exacerbate) the disjuncture between villagers and developers but cannot fully control the discourses and relationships that give value to their social role.

b) Further, brokers often demonstrate their value through reinforcing dominant understandings of development and through negotiating the relationship between external developers and local hierarchies and power structures. I have shown, therefore, that brokers are encouraged to entrench dominant development narratives and to justify existing regimes of power.

My most important contribution is the orientation and theoretical approach that allows for a study of NGO presence. This combination enables my contribution to the brokerage and modernities literature. It allows for a focus on intra-village interaction, without discounting the influence of external development intervention. To this end, I have expanded upon the actor-network development literature and upon the NGO focused literature more generally.

Actor-network theory has had limited use in development studies. It is utilised to examine how structures both constrain and enable behaviour, yet are reproduced and legitimised through the performances that they embolden (Law 2009). Mosse (2005) uses actor-network theory to examine how project documents, national policy and development professionals mutually recreate standard development practice. In doing so, he conceptualises the documents and policy as actants. These actants exhibit agency through their involvement in a network of actors and actants from which purposive action emerges (Latour 2004). As Sayes (2014) demonstrates, a core role of actor-network theory is to distil causality, allowing myriad actors and actants to ‘cause’ any event.

I have utilised Sayes’s (2014) observations in order to build upon Mosse’s (2005) conceptualisation of development. I have shown that, as well as containing actors and actants that reproduce development norms, NGOs are macro-actants, which influence intra-village behaviours and negotiations. These negotiations in turn reproduce and legitimise dominant understandings of NGO presence. Combining Sayes (2014) and Mosse (2005), I explore NGOs (and the actors and actants they contain) as limited causal agents. This enables a focus
on the impact of their presence, while primarily analysing the actions and agency of rural Malawians

My most significant contribution to the development studies literature is orienting the academic gaze between villagers whose lives are influenced by an NGO’s presence. There is a strong tradition of ethnographic literature on NGOs (Crewe and Harrison 1998; Englund 2006; Hilhorst 2003). Nauta (2006) calls these studies ‘embedded tales’ – works that explain how history, politics and personal relationships shape life within an NGO and, through this, how NGOs impact upon the community. Many of the observations I unpack are alluded to in these embedded tales of NGOs’ projects. For example, the way that NGOs conflate modernity, wealth and westernisation is vividly recounted in Englund’s (2006) *Prisoners of Freedom*. However, these observations are rarely foregrounded. This is because NGO ethnographies orient themselves from either behind or inside an NGO, looking outward onto a community and exploring the effects the NGO’s projects. In contrast, I have oriented my gaze between community members. Their actions, motivations and interactions are my primary concern, with NGO presence influencing, but not wholly causing, these acts. This has been made possible by using actor-network theory to conceptualise NGOs as partially causative macro-actants and by building upon the observations of the NGO ethnographies, while exploring NGOs’ presence rather than their projects.

To return to where my thesis began, my primary contribution is adding the stories of people like Lebani to the literature on NGOs. I have shown that NGOs affect the lives of everyone to whom they serve as a symbol of development and modernity, rather than just those who are beneficiaries of their projects. Their impact is felt through intra-village negotiations and through changing concepts of development. However, they do not proscribe these changes, and the agency of Lebani and the people around him is guided, rather than removed by, NGO presence.
Reference List


Bastian, M L. 1993. "'Bloodhounds who have no friends': Witchcraft and locality in the Nigerian popular press." In Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in


Bott, E. 1957. _Family and Social Network:_ Tavistock Press.


Chinsinga, B. 2006. "The interface between tradition and modernity: the struggle for political space at the local level in Malawi." Civilizations 1/2(54).
Clarke, G. 1998. "Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and politics in the developing world." Political Studies XLVI:36-52.


Flick, U. 2009. An Introduction to Qualitative Research. London: SAGE.


Moleni, C M and B M Gallagher. 2007. *Youth, service and development in Malawi. Special Issue on Civil Service in the Southern African Development Community*


Ramirez-Valles, J. 2001. "'I was not invited to be a [CHW]...I asked to be one" Motives for community mobilization among women community health workers in Mexico." Health Education and Behavior 28:150-165.


Scott-Villiers, P. 2011. “We are not poor! Dominant and subaltern discourses of pastoralist development in the horn of Africa” Journal of International Development 23(6):771-781


Shrestha, C H. 2006. ""'They can't mix like we can'": Bracketing differences and the professionalisation of NGOs: Understanding Organisational Processes,'


Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
McNamara, Thomas

Title:
A village and its NGOs: community embedded utilisations and understandings of NGO presence in rural northern Malawi

Date:
2015

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/56701

File Description:
A Village and its NGOs: Community Embedded Utilisations and Understandings of NGO Presence in Rural Northern Malawi