What Makes Kofi Run? Changing Aspirations and Cultural Models of Success in Northern Ghana

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Résumé :

Qu'est-ce qui fait courir Kofi ? Aspirations changeantes et modèles culturels du succès dans le Nord-Ghana. Au nord du Ghana, de nombreux jeunes, mais également des parents, des enseignants comme des représentants des autorités locales considèrent l'éducation formelle et les carrières professionnelles comme le seul moyen efficace d'avancer dans la vie pour les jeunes de milieu rural. L'article met au jour la façon dont les aspirations des jeunes ont évolué dans le temps et analyse dans quelle mesure de nouvelles trajectoires professionnelles entraînent une certaine mobilité sociale. Les résultats de la recherche qualitative et quantitative montrent qu'une éducation publique faible, ainsi qu'un manque de moyens et de débouchers professionnels sont des sources de frustration locales et sapent la mobilité sociale ascendante. Néanmoins, des modèles culturels de succès personnel plus stables, basés sur une intéressante combinaison de valeurs sociales et de discours sur le développement, offrent à la jeunesse marginalisée des voies de sorties vers une certaine reconnaissance et un statut social.

Mots-clés : Jeunesse ; aspirations ; éducation ; mobilité sociale ; succès ; changement culturel ; réciprocité ; Ghana

Abstract :

In northern Ghana, many young people, but also parents, teachers, and local authorities, believe that formal education and professional careers provide the only effective means for the rural youth to get ahead. This paper shows how aspirations have been historically changing and analyses the extent to which new career pathways lead to upward social mobility. Results from qualitative and quantitative research show how weak public education and a lack of funding as well as employment opportunities frustrate local aspirations and undermine upward social mobility. However, more stable cultural models of personal success based on an interesting mix of local social values and developmental discourses afford the marginalized youth avenues to social recognition and status.

Keywords : Youth; aspirations; education; social mobility; success; cultural change; reciprocity; Ghana

Abstracto :

¿Qué es lo que hace correr Kofi? Aspiraciones cambiantes y modelos culturales del éxito en el Norte de Ghana. En el norte de Ghana, numerosos jóvenes – pero también padres, profesores y representantes de las autoridades locales –, consideran que la educación formal y las carreras profesionales son el único medio eficaz de avanzar en la vida para los jóvenes del medio rural. El

artículo actualiza la forma en que las aspiraciones de los jóvenes han evolucionado en el tiempo y analiza en qué medida las nuevas trayectorias profesionales ocasionan una cierta movilidad social. Los resultados de la investigación cualitativa y cuantitativa muestra que una educación pública débil, así como la falta de medios y de nuevos profesionales, son fuentes de frustración local y socaban la movilidad social ascendente. No obstante, los modelos culturales de éxito personal más estables, basados en una interesante combinación de valores sociales y de discursos sobre el desarrollo, ofrecen a la juventud marginalizada vías de salida hacia un cierto reconocimiento y estatus social.

Palabras clave : Juventud; aspiraciones; educación; movilidad social; éxito: cambio cultural; reciprocidad; Ghana

Introduction

The Ghanaian government and international donors portray rural northern Ghana as a region in which smallholder-based agricultural growth provides the main avenue for poverty reduction and economic development. Discourses and policies focus on the integration of smallholders into (international) agricultural value chains. Given environmental changes (Laube *et al*. 2012) and the often problematic integration of smallholders into global commodity chains (Lee *et al*. 2012), this seems overly optimistic. At the same time the aspirations that rural actors have for their own future are often neglected. For them, formal education and modern careers are increasingly important. But major donor and government initiatives (Northern Rural Growth Programme [NRGP] 2007; Savannah Accelerated Development Authority [SADA] 2010) largely fail to address the demand for education in northern Ghana and mainly promote agricultural development. This neglect seems irritating in a situation in which the local population is investing a lot of time and money in education and professional careers, but when the quality of public education is extremely poor and is producing very weak results (Danquah Institute 2011).

This paper sets out to document and explain changing rural aspirations and the negative consequences of their neglect. It shows how rural aspirations – influenced by changing socio-economic, political and ideological contexts – have changed over time into a situation in which the youth[1], supported by their families and peers, want to develop their future based on "modern" ideas of school education and professional careers, rather than engaging in (commercial) smallholder agriculture. The paper discusses the extent to which new aspirations actually enable upward social mobility, or rather lead to marginalization. The paper shows how changing aspirations in the absence of conducive conditions undermine rural livelihoods. It also indicates that the adaptation of old cultural models of personal success based on an appreciation of reciprocity helps to ameliorate poverty and affords the seemingly marginalized actors social recognition and status.

Aspirations and cultural models of success

Looking for a conceptual framework helping to focus on expectations and plans that rural youth develop and that are shared beyond the individual level, I engaged with the literature on aspirations. Aspirations are individual ideas about the future, success and social status, and about good life which are culturally defined (Appadurai 2004: 67). This focus on shared perceptions does not imply an essentialist and static view of culture, but acknowledges internal dissent and weak cultural boundaries in a globalized world (Appadurai 2004: 62). Nonetheless, a certain degree of cultural consensus is assumed within loosely defined social entities. While acknowledging its indeterminacy, this is what Lentz (1998: 63) calls a "grammar" when writing about legitimacy with respect to political power and economic success in northern Ghana.

Closely related to culturally shared visions of the future or success is the "capacity to aspire". This contains the actual know-how needed to achieve one's aspirations, developed by one's own experiences and those of other actors in the immediate social environment. Appadurai (2004: 69) argues that this capacity is not evenly distributed in society. Affluent members of the society can more easily navigate pathways into the future and more frequently exchange the knowledge that forms the basis for the capacity to aspire. For poor people, like the large majority of people in the study area, it is actually the lack of experience of (or lack of "maps") outlining avenues into

the future and a good life which limits their capacity to aspire. According to Appadurai (ibid.) the lack of the capacity to aspire defines poverty. Following this thought, many of the economic and educational studies that have used this approach have focused on the limits of the capacity to aspire – "aspiration failure" as Ray (2006: 409) terms it – and how this limitation can explain sub-optimal economic behavior among the rural poor (Bernard *et al*. 2011) or educational underachievement among disadvantaged students. However, my perspective is somewhat different. This study looks instead at the changes that aspirations undergo in the poor rural environment of northern Ghana over time. Showing that many rural poor have the capacity to aspire, this study indicates that in the case of northern Ghana, it is rather the lack of quality education and funds to promote education beyond the basic level which leads to aspiration failure.

Aspirations do not exist in a vacuum. They are located "in a larger map of local ideas and beliefs about: life and death, the nature of worldly possessions, the significance of material assets over social relations […]" (Appadurai 2004: 68). To explain how changing aspirations relate to, are based on, or alter other shared local norms, values and preferences, I turned to the literature dealing with cultural schemas and models. Cultural models, the "grammar", are understood as socially shared cognitive patterns that, far from being deterministic, have the potential to structure perception of reality, decision making, and individual behavior (D'Andrade & Strauss 1992). A distinction can be made between higher and more complex forms of models, or "foundational schemas" that subsume and inspire a number of related cultural models, and actual cultural models that are "particular and more concrete instantiations of these schemas" (Shore 1996: 53). Looking at my example, socially shared perceptions of success would form the foundational schema I am interested in, while aspirations I would perceive as their instantiations. But like Strauss (1992) in her seminal book chapter "What Makes Tony Run? Schemas as motives reconsidered", which inspired the title of this paper, I am interested in the way individual actors are motivated by, conform with, but also redefine schemata and cultural models in adverse, uncertain contexts. Strauss shows how white, male, blue-collar workers in the United States who have evidently not acquired wealth, redefine or adapt to social expectations of "getting ahead" and living the American dream. With regard to northern Ghana, Behrends (2002) has written about the normative uncertainties that three generations of early elite women from the Upper West Region encountered when trying to get educated and develop 'modern' careers while having to live up to local societal conventions that emphasize the domestic role and submissive character of women. Behrends (2002) convincingly shows how, partially aided by their elite status and the particular opportunities open to the first few generations of literate women, many of these women successfully developed strategies to deal with the normative uncertainty emanating from the attempt to fulfil "traditional", missionary/Christian, and modern expectations, and were often able to attain considerable social status.

It has been argued that the clash of different expectations, but also a lack of resources and the high degree of social, economic, and physical uncertainty, particularly – but not only – in African societies, combine to constrain individual capability to engage in intentional behavior, to plan how to achieve aspirations, and to conform with the ideals formulated in the cultural grammar. Discussing female family planning in southern Cameroon, but extending her findings to other domains such as career planning, Johnson-Hanks (2005: 368-369), for instance, states: "No kinds of futures could be envisioned, no plans made, no intentional action undertaken: the future had been retracted. Uncertainty was naturalized to the point that many people found assertions about certain futures laughable, absurd."

Following ample discussions with young people in the field, I do not find that the attitude of

the majority mirrors such a fatalistic stance. On the one hand, this may result from the positive economic, social, and political development that Ghana – despite certain difficulties – has recorded over the last decade or two: two peaceful democratic changes of government, halving of extreme poverty, continuous economic growth, implementation of a public health insurance scheme, etc. On the other hand, this may result from specific norms and values emphasizing agency.

Many students and young people that had left school, often against all odds – when not performing very well in school and lacking resources to continue their education – still felt that they could achieve their aims in life. Self-discipline, hard work, and determination were often mentioned as important personal traits and the basis for individual success and social status. These values or personal traits are cherished in household education and are also promoted in public or missionary schools (Behrends 2002: 117 ff). Although the transfer of these norms from the domestic to the public realm has proved difficult at times, especially for girls, many boys and girls believe in their ability to achieve their aspirations. A good example of this determination that I often encountered when talking to young people is Agnes Agrumah, whose father gave her away to a foster-mother in Kumasi when she was three or four years old. When the foster-mother, for whom she did domestic work, refused to send her to school, Agnes, by then 11 years old, insisted on returning to her home town Biu to go to school. Staying with her father again, she completed junior high school (JHS) in 2004. Since her father refused to finance further schooling, she went to Kumasi, where she found work as a teacher in a private school, while waiting for the results of the JHS final exams. She saved some money and with the help of the husband of her older sister, managed to pay the fees for Zamse Senior High Technical School. Still working as a teacher during holidays to pay for books and teaching materials, she completed secondary school in 2008. Afterwards, she returned to Kumasi where she worked, funding her younger sister in senior high school (SHS), while at the same time raising funds to attend nursing school herself. When I met her in 2012, she had just been admitted by a nursing school and was retaking some of her SHS exams to better her results for future undertakings. When asked about her aspirations, she stated:

“Yes, I have aims; I have aims, so many aims. Right now when I am going to the nursing school, I am going to do lab technology. I want to offer that one. So, after that, if God permits me, and I get enough money, I will proceed to the university [laughs] […]. In the remedials [rewriting of final SHS exams] I am going to write about four subjects. I am determined to get very good grades in them. So if I am able to get those grades then it will improve my overall grade. […] You know if you do lab technology in nursing school, you can go to university to proceed and get a degree. Oh, I will go!” (Agnès Agrumah, Kumasi Abuakwa, 18/04/2012).

This is not to say that young people from humble backgrounds like Agnes ignore the uncertainties of life or the realistic chance that they may not succeed. They are faced with too many sad examples. But they believe in their ability to make it and to achieve their aspirations. I will try to show that this belief and determination are driven by socially shared cultural schemata and models. At the same time, as with Behrends’ elite women, they redefine and re-combine components of different social conventions or cultural models in order to enhance their physical and psychological security. It is not without reason that Agnes was supporting her sister in SHS while trying to earn money to continue her education. On a material level, helping to educate her sister strengthens bonds of reciprocity and at the same time enhances the sister’s potential to reciprocate. This may prove valuable if in future, Agnes needs assistance. On a more ideational level, Agnes’ ability to support her sister is already a sign of her own progress and well in line with local cultural schemata of success in which social status rests on the relative ability to share rather than on individual material

success.

Research area and methodology

In order to set the empirical basis for my analysis, I undertook several field trips to northern Ghana from February 2012 to April 2014. The main focus of my study was the Kassena Nankana East Municipality (KNEM) in the Upper East Region (UER) of northern Ghana. Research centered on Biu, a small farming village of approximately 3,000 inhabitants about 20 km south of Navrongo, the district capital, where I had undertaken research earlier on smallholder farming and changing natural resource regimes (Laube 2007), and therefore had good rapport with the local community. Being an anthropologist working in a development research institute, I decided to take a mixed-method approach combining qualitative methods such as in-depth and life history interviews with quantitative approaches such as household censuses and surveys. Initially, to gain a better understanding of the changing aspirations and cultural models of success, and typical life paths of the rural youth in historical perspective, I conducted qualitative interviews with several male and female actors such as students, parents, school dropouts, teachers, officials of the Ghana Education Service (GES) and the District Assembly, as well as local (neo-) traditional authorities. Interviews were held in English where possible or held in *Buli, Nankam,* or *Kasem* with the help of a translator. In most cases the interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. To better document the aspirations and capacity to aspire of the youth, a survey of 120 school-leaving male and female students in five district schools was conducted. The questionnaire asked for demographic background and contained open questions in which students were asked to write short paragraphs about not only their aspirations but also the problems they see in continuing their education and developing modern careers. To find out the extent to which aspirations are realistic, a follow-up study on all students that passed through Biu Junior High School (JHS) from 1987-2012 was done. Furthermore, a census of 194 households in Biu was conducted to get a broader picture of local educational attainment over time. The research also involved two trips to Abuakwa, a suburb of Kumasi that is a major destination for migrants from Biu. Here, I conducted individual and group interviews on the living conditions, perspectives and strategies of young educated migrants.

Research area in historical perspective

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the research area was politically relatively independent from the larger kingdoms of the Mamprusi and Dagomba towards the south and the Mossi towards the north. However, the peasant population was frequently attacked by slave raiders and warlords (Goody 1967). Under British colonial rule – in the research area since 1905 – local life started to change slowly. On the one hand, the *Pax Britannica* brought slave raids and warfare to an end; on the other hand it led to the introduction of forced labor and taxes payable in kind, brokered by ‘traditional’ authorities under indirect rule. Forced labor migration became increasingly important from the 1910s as the demand for labor in southern Ghana greatly increased (Lentz 1998: 214). Soon, many people went south voluntarily and labor migration reached huge dimensions from the 1920s when even more people started going south to earn money, to gain experience, to run away from problems at home, or out of curiosity (Nabila 1987).

While migration became an important feature of local society (Ungruhe 2010: 262), formal education did not play any major role for the majority until the end of colonial rule in 1957. The British consciously suppressed efforts – made for instance by missionaries – to promote formal

education, to curb articulate resistance against their rule and to protect the reserve of cheap labor that northern Ghana provided for the colonial economy (Bening 1971; Plange 1979: 13). In a village like Biu, the son of the local catechist was the first to join the mission school in Navrongo in 1947, and only a handful boys attended the newly opened native authority school in neighboring Kologo from 1948 (interview with R.A., male educationist, aged 75, Navrongo, 27/04/2012).

The picture started changing slowly after Ghana's independence in 1957, when Kwame Nkrumah promised to end the underdevelopment of northern Ghana. Many schools were built, teachers trained, and free basic education as well as special stipends for northern students offered. This led to the creation of a growing educated elite, the great majority male but including, with difficulty, a few females (Behrends 2002), which was able to attain modern careers, for example in the educational sector, administration, security services, or academia (Bening 1990). However, up until the 1990s more than 80 percent (Kelly & Bening 2007) and by 2010 some 52.5 % (GSS 2010) of the population of northern Ghana was illiterate.

The population of the KNEM continues to be relatively young, rapidly growing, predominantly illiterate, largely rural and agricultural (below). It is characterized by high rates of poverty.

Table 1: Demographic information of the Kassena Nankana East Municipality

	KNEM
Population	76,975
Population growth (2000-2010)	20.8%
Population below 25 years	60.1%
Rural population	72.7%
Agricultural households	82.7%
Literacy	47.5%
Poverty incidence	70.4%

Sources: poverty incidence for the Upper East Region as reported by Coulombe & Wodon (2007); see GSS (2014).

There has been a decline of local smallholder agriculture while seasonal and permanent out-migration has increased, as well as investments in education, to escape the smallholder poverty trap.

"Book gives power": historically changing local aspirations

During pre-colonial times, local societies were hardly diversified. Apart from artisanal specialists such as blacksmith and potters, the large majority of the population consisted of peasants who took care of most of their own needs. Spiritual and political leadership was largely based on kinship and organized around principles of seniority (Dittmer 1958). There was little room for individual advancement and education was highly gendered and meant to prepare children for their future roles in the local society. Practical education was based on experiential learning and children assumed increasing responsibilities as they learned from seniors, before they married and founded

their own semi-independent households. Similar to the transfer of practical knowledge, skills and technology, assumption of political and spiritual office included long periods of “on-the-job” training by assisting in rituals, meetings and negotiations, (as described by Fortes 1938: for the neighboring Talensi).

However, local aspirations slowly changed over the course of the 20th century. In response to forced and voluntary labor migration, a “culture of migration” developed (Hahn 2004). Young men and later young women, were expected to go south, not only for economic reasons, but as part of becoming adults. They gained experience, got to know new places and languages, acquired skills, and bought goods, which symbolized the new “status”. Therefore, migrating southwards became part of local aspirations.

Christianization, the expansion of the colonial administration, and the promotion of “modern” education opened up new life paths, career opportunities and ways to get ahead in Navrongo, the local center of colonial and missionary activities. The Kassena in particular, living close to the mission and benefitting from the fact that the first French missionaries had learned their language across the border in Haute Volta, took advantage of these opportunities . But life in the villages further away from Navrongo was only partially affected. Up to the 1950s, for instance, only a few boys from Biu went to school and Christianity had only just begun to spread. Careers in the colonial administration, in church, or even schooling were not really desired by many and those who pursued such careers were referred to as “having gone astray in the bush”. It was only later, in the 1970s and 1980s, when the first people from Biu became teachers and nurses, or assumed positions in the Catholic church, that people slowly realized the value of education and the benefits of “modern” careers. Interest in education stalled when in the 1980s a large irrigation scheme was constructed close to Biu. Forced land acquisition and the construction activities initially proved traumatic and many established farmers were alienated, but many younger men saw irrigation as beneficial and therefore continued to focus on agriculture (Laube 2007). Increased labor demand – also on children – that resulted from the expansion of farming activities, kept rates of school attendance low. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, irrigable land became scarce and falling prices for agricultural products as well as the abolition of farming subsidies and technical support under structural adjustment policies made farming less attractive. Farming – once the basis of local aspirations and success – lost its appeal. As Chief Afaa, one of the chiefs of Biu pointed out:

“And […] even if you’re talking of farming, if you look at all those who are at the farms working, they are very lean. They are farming the whole year round and they are not healthy because they’re spending all their energy on the farms and they are getting no good returns. So we say we are farming and are not getting profit on the farm. You farm, there is no fertilizer. There is no weedicide for you to remove grass. The birds will come and take away all the rice. Then you come out with less than what you’ve put inside. So what profit is it? So it’s like putting a rope around your neck.” (Chief Afaa, male, 60, Biu, 08/11/2012)

Like smallholder agriculture, labor migration proves to be less beneficial these days. In interviews in Kumasi, migrants from Biu stated that migration to southern Ghana is increasingly problematic. The cost of living in urban centers has risen greatly, while jobs are difficult to get. Widespread youth unemployment in southern Ghana forces young people there to take up jobs they formerly left to migrants from the north and manual labor in the southern plantations is increasingly replaced by the use of machinery and agro-chemicals.

Farming and labor migration have thus greatly lost their attractiveness. Furthermore, successful local role models epitomize the benefits of education and professional careers and have influenced local aspirations. Comparing returns from farming or migration with the benefits that people who acquired education and got employment are enjoying, the aspirations of most local people changed.

Apart from economic reasons, it was also the feeling of disempowerment and deficiency that goes along with illiteracy that local respondents stressed when saying: “I am sitting in darkness. And this is a worry. Since I am already in darkness, I would not want my children to be in darkness. I don’t want to send my letter to anyone to decode for me. That is why I want all my children to go to school.” (Amina Abaaba, male farmer, aged 70, Biu, 04/11/2012)

The inability to deal with the challenges of modern life in Ghana and especially to effectively present and defend one’s interests in the interactions with politicians, officials and NGOs is another reason prominent in local discourse. The link between “modern” education, locally referred to as “book”, and empowerment was often stressed. As a popular local recorded song goes:

“If you teach a child, and he does not want, Leave him, let him go to Tamale to throw yams [becoming a labor migrant]. Today, no *Filiga* [white man] will come to your house and you shit, No *Kambunga* [Ashanti] will come to your house and you shit. The olden days are over.Even if you have acres of land or cooked food in abundance, If you do not have schooling what knowledge do you have? If you have cattle and keep driving them onto the kraal, without book you have nothing. Book gives power. Book gives power” (Dozindema Singers, Biu, 09/04/2012)

This song was performed by a local band that usually plays at weddings and funerals in Biu and neighboring villages. Their songs, usually accompanied by drums and flutes, are very popular as they often comment on local social and political developments. Apart from condemning school dropouts who will have to become labor migrants performing tedious and despised jobs away from home, the song also reflects historical experiences in the 1980s when the people of Biu where deprived of large tracts of land for the nearby irrigation scheme constructed under the auspices of expatriate engineers in collaboration with security forces often from southern Ghana (Laube 2007: 92 ff). The people most affected belonged to the local earth priest lineage of Dozindema and despite their perceived wealth, neither they nor other villagers (who lacked education and self-confidence) were able to resist unlawful and forceful expropriation. Only in the late 1990s, with the help of educated locals, was Biu able to regain considerable control of land within the irrigation perimeter (Laube 2007: 313 ff).

Results from a census of 194 households in Biu reflect the increasing importance of school enrolment (Table 2 below). While 68.9 percent of people older than 31 years had no formal education, 99.1 percent of household members aged between 13 and 16 had at least entered primary school and/or continued their education further. The numbers clearly indicate how schooling has gained local importance and how high enrolment rates are these days.

Table 2: Educational attainment in Biu households, by age group (N=1221)

Age groups according to educational levels	Educational attainment (%)						Total
	None	KG	Primary	JHS	SHS	Tertiary	
0-3	70.2	17.0	12.8				100.0
4-5	11.1	37.0	51.9				100.0
6-12	4.9	6.6	87.4	0.5	0.5		100.0
13-16	0.9		69.8	28.3	0.9		100.0
17-20	12.8		31.1	37.8	16.9	1.4	100.0
21-25	19.3		16.3	28.9	31.9	3.7	100.0
26-30	31.1		22.2	24.4	17.0	5.2	100.0
≥31	68.9		16.6	7.5	4.3	2.7	100.0

The shift in aspirations towards school education and professional careers was also reflected in the survey conducted with 120 male and female final-year students from five JHS in the KNEM. Of the 116 respondents answering the question whether they could imagine themselves farming in future, less than half (43.1%) could do so (Table 3 below). Whereas more boys than girls were contemplating a farming future, it was rather the urban youth that seemed to be interested in farming. Asked to explain, many respondents stated that they wanted to do some part-time farming to complement the salaried employment they were actually looking for. This is typical for the area, in which many state employees and local businessmen have engaged in commercial farming activities since the 1970s (Konings 1986; Laube 2007; Tonah 1993).

Table 3: Proportion of students imagining a future as farmers (%)

Future in farming (N=116)	All respondents	Girls	Boys	Rural youth	Urban youth
Yes	43.1	39.0	47.4	28.2	66.7
No	51.7	54.2	49.1	67.6	26.7
Undecided	5.2	6.8	3.5	4.2	6.7

The number of students who could imagine themselves as labor migrants in the future was particularly low. Only slightly more than one-third of the students were willing to do so. Asked for their preferred occupations, three-quarters of the final-year students stated that they were dreaming of careers in the public sector, particularly in the health, education and security fields (. below).

Table 4: Occupational choice of final-year students (%)

Occupational choice (N=119)	Sex of respondent		Sum
	Female	Male	
Public sector	Doctor	14.3	23.2	37.5
	Nurse	15.2		15.2
	Teacher	8.9	6.3	15.2
	Security services		5.4	5.4
	Gov. other		1.8	1.8
	Total			75.0
Private sector	Bank manager	5.4	1.8	7.1
	Journalist	5.4		5.4
	Lawyer	1.8	1.8	3.6
	Pilot	0.9	1.8	2.7
	Priv. Other	0.9	5.4	6.3
	Total			25.0
Total				100.0

Local aspirations have changed greatly and the youth, many of them first-generation literates, have the “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2004), understood here as the know-how to pursue educational and occupational objectives, which go far beyond the professional achievements of their parents. They are aware of modern professions and the importance of education in order to develop modern careers.

Educational outcomes, professional careers, and social mobility

In order to find out the extent to which aspirations actually translate into educational outcomes, occupational success, and social mobility, I conducted a follow-up study on 600 students that entered Biu JHS from 1987 and left by 2008. Despite the help of the headmaster, Jacob Afeliga, we were not able to recover all the information. School records are patchy and not all students, especially those from neighboring communities, could be traced. In a number of cases, even relatives were not able to give information about the current status of former students. These missing cases introduce a positive bias in the study, since it is usually those students who discontinued their education and joined the rural and urban precariat of southern Ghana, who severed their links to their home community.

Looking at the results for the available cases, the poor educational attainment of students of Biu JHS becomes apparent (↓ below). About 10 percent of the students drop out and do not finish JHS. More than 40 percent of the students do not pursue further education after JHS, and only 31.4 percent and 10.4 percent respectively enter SHS and proceed to tertiary institutions.

Table 5: Educational status of students leaving Biu JHS from 1990-2008 (%)

Educational status of students (N= 567)	Sex		Total
	Female	Male	
Primary school	9.7	9.7	9.7
JHS	45.9	39.1	42.3
Vocational training	10.1	2.7	6.2
SHS	28.0	34.4	31.4
Tertiary education	6.3	14.0	10.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Despite high aspirations, fewer than half of all JHS leavers were able to continue their education. This highlights the problematic nature of educational progress and professional careers in the research area.

When trying to understand what influences local people's ability to progress, attention is easily drawn to the poor quality of rural education in northern Ghana. Large classes (especially in primary schools) with up to 60 students, a shortage of trained teachers and teaching materials, as well as the difficulties of students from educationally deprived households, contribute to a situation where educational success is difficult to attain. This is exacerbated by the fact that there are no real examinations in the Ghanaian public education system before the end of JHS. Although students may be told to repeat classes when they are performing badly, this is not obligatory and many students are promoted despite serious deficits. Progression within primary school and to JHS is automatic and the first exclusionary exam is the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) at the end of JHS. Up to 2013, students who had BECE aggregates higher than 30 points were not allowed to continue their education in senior high school (SHS), but needed to repeat (parts of) JHS or to rewrite the BECE to better their aggregate. Students with better aggregates stand higher chances of being admitted at schools with a good reputation, if they can afford the often exorbitant school fees.

How poor the overall performance of northern students was, can be seen from the fact that in the UER, in 2012, less than 50 percent of students passed the BECE , while in the KNEM, the proportion of students who passed dropped below 30 percent . While records were patchy for Biu JHS, out of the 395 students for whom BECE results were recorded up to 2008, only 151 (38.2 percent) obtained an aggregate that qualified them for further education. Out of the 244 students who got aggregates above 30, only 27 students rewrote the BECE at Biu and only seven were finally able to get results allowing progress to SHS. As the BECE is not a qualification for any higher form of professional training, especially within the government sector, students who want to progress need to attend SHS. The SHS admission policy in Ghana has changed and students with an aggregate of 40 were allowed to enter SHS in 2012 and in 2014 all students who had passed the BECE were eligible to proceed to SHS regardless of their aggregate (Dery 2014). Given the shortcomings of many JHS students, it is questionable whether this is sustainable and just helps to prolong waithood and keep the youth in costly educational institutions, while not offering a way ahead for most students.

This is especially problematic since education, which is free during primary school and JHS, has to be paid for at SHS level. Fees were at GH¢ 328 (about US$ 200) for first-year public SHS students per term in 2011/2012 and have risen to GH¢ 668.50 per term for 2014/2015 . But the total cost of

SHS is significantly higher since Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), which undertake important infrastructural projects, levy additional fees independent of school fees. Given the poverty levels in rural northern Ghana, many families find it difficult to raise these amounts. As this problem prevails nation-wide, SHS fees are a recurring topic in Ghanaian politics. The opposition New Patriotic Party flagged free SHS as one of its central election promises during the presidential election campaign in 2012 and the 2014 Budget promised that "[g]overnment will progressively absorb GES-approved examination, library, entertainment, SRC, science development, sports, culture, and internet fees charged to secondary level students in the effort to make SHS free" (as cited in IMANI 2015). However, despite greatly rising numbers of students at all levels, the education budget has stalled at about 24 percent of the total budget over the last decade, and public expenditure per student has dwindled along with donor support for the education sector. Previously discussed programs for "brilliant-but-needy-students" are still missing.

For female students in particular, it is very difficult to continue education if results are bad and funding is scarce. Fewer female than male students attend SHS and tertiary institutions. Parents often invest in boys rather than girls, as boys are believed to support the parents in future, whereas girls traditionally move to their husband when marrying, thus leaving the needy parents behind. Lacking support, many girls marry after finishing JHS and discontinue schooling. However, girls are more likely to engage in vocational training such as apprenticeships than boys, often after having given birth.

The difficulties of getting ahead become even more obvious when looking at the employment that JHS-leavers get after the "end" of their education. Of 530 former students, 165 (or 31.1 percent) were continuing their education in various forms. However, only few of the remaining 69 percent were actually able to enter "modern professions" (see Table 6 below).

Table 6: Employment of former Biu JHS students in 2012 (%)

Current employment of JHS-leavers (N=365)	
Farmer	31.2
Unemployed	12.3
Employment program	9
Casual worker	12.3
Petty trader	6.6
Craftsperson	10.7
Private employee	7.1
Business person	1.1
Government employee	9.6
Total	100

Only 10.5 percent of former students attained qualified positions, mostly as teachers, nurses or security personnel in government services or as independent business people. Some 17.8 percent attained some moderate degree of social mobility and worked as craftspeople (seamstresses, carpenters, masons or hairdressers) or private employees – jobs that do not pay very well, but provide a steady income. However, for the large majority, social mobility was an unattainable dream – 31.2 percent had become farmers and 40.2 percent were either unemployed, trying to make a living as casual laborers or petty traders, or had entered poorly paid, rather short-lived, and highly controversial governmental youth employment programs (Odoi-Larbi 2013).

These results contrast starkly with the aspirations of the rural youth (. above), who mainly dream of government employment and modern professions. It is obvious that only a minute fraction is able to achieve their aspirations and to attain good education, "modern" careers and meaningful

upward social mobility.

For many of those who are stuck along the way, this is a traumatic experience and they feel ashamed to remain in Biu as farmers or even craftspeople. For many of those who complete JHS, engaging in manual labor equals failure. This is even more so as it is increasingly difficult to become a farmer. Land and inputs are difficult to get. In a group discussion with former Biu JHS students who live as casual workers in Kumasi, the lack of alternative employment opportunities, land, and capital to engage in farming were mentioned as the most important reasons causing people to migrate. However, nagging parents, overly criticizing 'unproductive' children, and the shame associated with not being able to continue one's education were also mentioned as important reasons pushing people to migrate. Some of the migrants interviewed in Kumasi were already above 30 years old and continued living off menial and frequently changing jobs that afforded them between US$ 50 and US$ 150 a month in 2012. Caught in a seemingly inescapable situation, they nevertheless had families and still supported their folks at home. This is also true for those who stayed behind and became farmers or engaged in various crafts. While their livelihoods are precarious and they are not able to achieve their aspirations, they still try – often successfully – to attain a certain level of social recognition and status, which, I would argue, keeps them from becoming frustrated. Seemingly, their aspirations are not the only measure they apply to evaluate their own performance. Behind their aspirations lies a second cultural schema of success, which they, despite their apparent failure to live up to their own expectations, are able to attain. That is where their performance in networks of reciprocity plays an important role.

"Who wants to leave without a name": changing cultural models of success

Changing cultural models or schemata of success were captured through in-depth interviews with women and men of different ages. The central concept for individual success mentioned was *nyuaa* (the *Buli* term for name, fame, social status). Speaking about *nyuaa*, the respondents used different metaphors and key words (Quinn 2005: 43 ff) when discussing which personal attributes and characteristics contribute to a person's fame. The metaphors referred to four different domains explaining the cultural model: personality; marital life and reproduction; economic achievement; and engagement in networks of reciprocity and willingness to assist people in need within the own extended family and the larger social environment of the lineage, section, or community. Personal success is based on social recognition or status that depends on one's performance in these domains (. below).

Table 7: Male and female attributes in the "traditional" cultural model of success2

Domains essential for the attainment of *nyuaa*			
Male and female attributes			
Male	Female	Male	Female
Personality		**Marital life and reproduction**	
Diligent Moderate Respectful Helpful Generous	Diligent Moderate Respectful Helpful Generous	Many children Multiple wives	Many children Coordinating polygynous households
Economic domain		**Reciprocity**	
Feed the family Agric. surplus Cattle ownership	Independent contribution to household upkeep	Labor exchange Rituals and funerals (food, drink, animals) Food and seed for the needy	Labor exchange Rituals and funerals (food, labor)

Men largely aimed at generating agricultural surplus, being able to feed the family, raising cattle (the currency for bride price) and wedding more women. In turn, marrying a number of women and having many children increased labor availability and productivity and the ability to invest in cattle as well as reciprocal networks and thus increase one's fame or status. *Nyuaa* in itself helped to get access to women, as many parents, who control the marital options of their daughters, are eager to have their daughters marry men with a good reputation, hoping that the girl will be treated well and will not return home (Interview with A.A. Biu Kapaania, 08/04/2012). As the respondent, a well-known elderly farmer owning a large herd of cattle remembered: "When my second wife died [in the 1980s] people from as far as Paga [some 30 km away] came to my compound and asked me to marry their daughters. This was all because of my name." (*ibid*.)

The central role of reciprocity in the research area is long established. While Hart (1974: 343) with respect to the neighboring Frafra emphasizes that sibling collaboration is one of the main features of the local social fabric and collaboration within kinship networks is common (K. Hart 1988), Fortes writes about the Talensi sharing a similar social, economic and political set up with the Kassena, Nankana and the Builsa:

"The principle of reciprocity which is […] early learnt in association with siblings and age mates is one of the basic moral axioms of Tale social life. If a man refuses to come to the assistance of a neighbor who has invited a collective hoeing party, the latter will retaliate by refusing assistance to the former at a later date. Often at mortuary ceremonies someone, not obliged by custom to do so, will bring an animal to be slaughtered for the dead, 'because when my father died, he brought a sheep to be killed'." (Fortes 1938: 56)

These forms of collaboration and reciprocity have also been observed in Biu (Laube 2007: 122 ff; Tonah 1993: 62). Although reciprocity was central, it was not necessarily based on entirely altruistic motives. 'Gifts' (Mauss 2000) or services were rendered with the clear expectation that they would be reciprocated at a later point in time. Reciprocity could be delayed but ought to be balanced (Sahlins 1972).

As the respondents pointed out, it was not the character, size of the family, or overall wealth of a person *per se* that determines status, but his/her generosity and the way he/she channels belongings into networks of reciprocity, that gives him/her *nyuaa*. In the quotation above, it is not by accident that reference is made to funerals. A person's status is demonstrated in funerals and is assessed according to the extent of compassion, number of visitors, and degree of support for the bereaved family. Thus success is seen as the assistance one can draw on in crisis and the respect one commands *post mortem*. As Reinner Alongweh (male, 52, Biu, 24/04/2012), a local teacher and one of my key respondents said: "Everybody wants to die and leave his name. Who does not want to be remembered?"

While these are rather trivial findings for African smallholder communities, they are worth stressing here, because it is the quest for fame, status as well as potential assistance within webs of reciprocity that constitute the larger foundational schemata that originally underlay and – as I argue – continue to underlie the cultural models of success and aspirations of many local actors, including the youth. In a similar vein, but with respect to the legitimacy of power and wealth among powerful elites among the Dagaba of north-western Ghana – and even northern Ghana as a whole – Lentz argues:

"[…T]here seems to exist something like a common 'grammar', metaphorically speaking, which regulates the on-going debates on 'bigness', morality and interest – a 'grammar' to which the powerful and their critics both subscribe at least to a certain degree. One element of this 'grammar' seems to be the common ground of a general norm of redistribution. Whether invoking religion, constitutionality or 'natural justice', the legitimation of all power and wealth [and thus social status I would argue] hinges on providing some measure of redistribution and reciprocity." (1998: 63-64)

This need to legitimize their elite status and to achieve social recognition through redistribution and social engagement has also been observed with respect to the first three generations of educated women from North-western Ghana. In order to reduce the distance between themselves and the local (partially) illiterate population, they engaged in development initiatives such as training programs and women's groups. Such initiatives of increasingly urban elites, often residing in southern Ghana, became institutionalized within the framework of home town or home land clubs/ associations that became the vehicle for common social activities of urban migrants from north-western Ghana. But they also engaged in concerted development activities in the home regions. Apart from these "developmental" activities, the participation in and contribution to social events such as funerals both within the diaspora and at home, as well as generosity during home visits, were crucial for the recognition and social status of the elite women (Behrends 2002: 234 ff).

Cultural models of success focusing on redistribution and reciprocity were also important for the JHS leavers interviewed. Responding to an open question in the survey, more than two-thirds of the students said that their occupational choice depended on their wish to ameliorate the poor condition of public social infrastructure in their communities or to support their family (Table 8 below). A 16-year-old male student from Saboro, for instance, wrote in the questionnaire he filled in that he wants to become a doctor because: "My community people fall sick and are not able to buy medicine and go to the hospital because of lack of money. I want to take care of them in future." (Balobia JHS, 12/04/12) Only about one-third of the respondents mentioned rather individualistic motives, such as developing their own skills or targeting high incomes.

Table 8: Main reason for occupational choice of final-year students (%)

Main reason for occupational choice (N=115)	Sex of respondent		
	Female	Male	Total
	Assist community	29.6	31.3	60.9
	Support family	7.0	0.8	7.8
	Matches own skills	8.7	8.7	17.4
	High income	5.2	6.1	11.3
	Other	1.7	0.9	2.6
Total	52.2	47.8	100.0	

These results are certainly influenced by the fact that the students interviewed want to meet social expectations that they encounter in the curriculum (Foli & Asante 2005) and that are prominent in larger societal discourses (Lentz 1998). The extent to which they are the result of a larger program of disciplining and indoctrination that seems common in Ghanaian secondary schools, and has been described in detail for some well-known secondary schools in north-western Ghana (Göpfert & Noll 2013) can be doubted. This is because during primary school and JHS, students do not board and in most schools visited, the large number of students did not make for a high degree of discipline and efficient learning, let alone indoctrination. As Behrends (2002) described for the norms promoted during the education of elite women, or the "grammar" underlying legitimacy of wealth and power mentioned by Lentz (1998), the prevalent cultural models seem to consist of an amalgam of Christian values, nationalist propaganda, and local cultural models that fit well together, because local discourses also emphasize social responsibility and reciprocity. A middle-aged woman who had never attended school stated, when asked about her perception of *nyuaa*:

"It is not important how much money someone is able to get. It is how you spend it. If you do not help people, help your community, if you do not attend and contribute to people's funerals, nobody is going to respect you. Your family is going to be ashamed when they bury you, because nobody will come to your funeral." (Atabem Atapombila, Naga, 08/02/13)

This is not to romanticize local reciprocal behavior. Criminality is on the rise and fowl and livestock, bicycles, and even motorcycles keep disappearing. People cheat their own parents and siblings to gain advantages, but on the normative level, reciprocal behavior, much like in Fortes' observation in the 1930s, often tied to accounts of funerals and post-mortal reputation, continues to be promoted. And this is not a lost cause. While some people 'misbehave', many other young men or women from the research area, in Biu or in the south, forgo amenities and lead humble lifestyles in terms of housing, nutrition, entertainment, in order to support the medical or educational demands of members of their families. Very often, people who had to discontinue their education and started farming or who migrated in order to make a living, sponsor their siblings' schooling. Again, this is not purely altruistic, but part of social management based on hopes that they themselves or their children may be assisted, when the one helped finally gets ahead.

Looking at what current school leavers see as yardsticks for individual success, reciprocity remains a central aspect of *nyuaa* and more than 30 percent of all boys and girls mentioned the need to support their families and communities. However, other aspects seem more important – 91.5 percent of female students and 81.0 percent of male students said that gaining financial independence was their major aim in life. While boys focused more on their future jobs, many girls seemed to be more interested in business opportunities. Girls focused more on material goods,

such as houses and clothing, than boys did. This may be explained by changing gender roles and the need to compensate for existing inequalities. Personal respect and food security do not seem to be very important. However, when asked what are the essential characteristics of successful men or women, between 40-50 percent of respondents felt that it is the respect they command (Table 9 below).

Table 9: Main aims in life reported by school leavers in five schools in KNEM, 2012 (%*)

Aims in life of current school leavers (N=117)	Female	Male
Support family	15.3	13.8
Support community	16.9	17.2
Personal respect	5.1	3.4
Financial independence	91.5	81.0
Material goods	28.8	15.5
Food security	1.7	1.7
Other	1.7	24.1

*Multiple answers were allowed.

While personal attributes have largely remained the same, young men frequently mentioned personal (political) power as a yardstick for success (Table 10 below). In the realm of marital life and reproduction, the large majority of respondents, apart from a few boys, emphasized the need to remain monogamous and to reduce the number of offspring. For girls, the educational attainment of their children serves as major measurement of their success. Looking at the schematic depiction of the current cultural model of success as reconstructed from the student interviews and in-depth interviews with parents, elders and local authorities, the following picture emerges:

Table 10: Male and female attributes in the “modern” cultural model of success

Domains essential for the attainment of *nyuaa*			
Male and female attributes			
Male	Female	Male	Female
Personality		**Marital life and reproduction**	
Diligent Respectful Generous Powerful Educated	Diligent Respectful Generous Helpful Educated	Mostly single marriage Moderate number of children	Single marriage Moderate number of children Educational attainment of children
Economic domain		**Reciprocity**	
Financial indep. House Good clothing Means of transport	Financial indep. House Good clothing Means of transport	Funerals (food, drink, animals, cash) Financial contribution to family and community	Funerals (food, labor, cash) Financial contribution to family and community

Looking at the aspirations of the local youth and the realities of educational attainment and upward social mobility, it is clear that only few are able to fully live up to expectations, especially in the economic domain. Thus the role of reciprocity is particularly important. On the one hand, reciprocity within families and in the form of collaboration and mutual help between peers – both in the form of group labor and resource pooling in agriculture as well as organized mutual assistance between migrants in case of personal need (sickness, weddings, childbirth) or excessive demands from home (e.g. funerals) – plays an important economic role, helping to pool and buffer risks. On the other hand, engagement in networks of reciprocity affords the youth social recognition, status and self-respect.

A good example for “what makes Kofi run”, the importance of social management and reciprocity-related social status that forms the basis for social recognition and individual self-esteem, is Samson Avaala from Navrongo. He is a 35 year old shoemaker in Accra, father of four kids, who completed SHS in 2002 and unsuccessfully tried to join the army. Being close friends we have discussed his situation a number of times. Initially, I always wondered why in his difficult situation he still financed the SHS education of his younger brother and supported two sisters as well as a changing number of extended kin, while he struggled to buy spare parts for his sewing machine and materials for his trade. This seemed to be highly irrational especially from an economic perspective. But as he explained, he hopes that investing in his brother’s education will help his own children in the future. More importantly, his sharing is driven by the need to be perceived as a provider. When he gets home to Navrongo, he is not perceived as a poor shoemaker working and sleeping on the streets of central Accra, but as a provider and respected family head living up to his responsibilities. For him, reciprocity and the ability to help are an essential strategy to get *nyuaa*, despite his lack of educational, professional, and economic attainment.

Conclusion

This article has shown how aspirations as well as the foundational schemas of success of the youth

in a rural area of northern Ghana have been changing under changing historical socio-economic and political conditions. Current aspirations, both of male and female youth, focus on educational achievement and upward social mobility based on modern careers, preferably in government institutions, that provide sufficient security as well as room for complementary economic activities. Young people want to be financially independent, have good jobs or their own business, and have a nice cement-block house, good clothing and their own means of transport. They aspire to have small families and to afford good education for their children. These aspirations are largely in line with the models of modernity that are promoted in Ghanaian schoolbooks, churches and mass media. However, it was shown that the large majority of rural school leavers are actually unable to attain good educational outcomes – most end at JHS level – and find it very difficult to follow modern careers. Most return to farming, an activity that is locally perceived to be unrewarding, or engage in labor migration, which has also lost its appeal as most migrants join the urban or rural precariat in southern Ghana.

The local youth, following the example of local role models, have modern aspirations, but also the "capacity to aspire". They know how to get ahead and most young people I spoke to truly believe that they can make it. But it is not – as Appadurai (2004) or economic studies focusing on "aspiration failure" (Ray 2006) would argue – the lack of the capacity to aspire that constitutes local poverty. The actual reason for the failure of the youth to get ahead and move out of poverty has to be sought in the structural conditions in which the rural youth try to develop their potential. The poor quality of public basic education, high cost of senior secondary education, and the lack of opportunities in vocational training and modern employment, in the rural areas but also in Ghana overall, are the real obstacles holding back the youth. Despite all the big talk since independence, these patterns of northern underdevelopment have not fully changed.

Given local aspirations and the greatly limited educational achievement and upward social mobility in northern Ghana, it seems a paradox that currently, the Ghanaian government as well as international donors largely neglect the education sector, but focus on the commercialization of smallholder agriculture to reverse the underdevelopment of the northern regions. While in the past, school feeding initiatives and the provision of new school infrastructure has helped to achieve almost universal enrolment, the focus on enrolment figures and a lack of investment in capacity building, enrolment of qualified teachers, and teaching materials has led to an enormous drop in the quality of education in public schools, at least in the study area. Individually, families try to escape this deadlock by putting their children in private schools – even in Biu a private primary and JHS are available – hoping that here education will be better and that their children will be able to move ahead.

Nevertheless, for the majority of past and current school leavers, modern aspirations backfire. While educational and professional failure is perceived as shameful, the poor social status of manual labor – not only on the farms, but also as artisans or casual laborers – makes reliance on such livelihood activities dissatisfactory. However, I would not argue that many people are caught in waithood, understood as the inability to achieve the social status of respectable adulthood (Honwana 2014; Langevang 2008). The concept does not seem to capture the way in which cultural schemata underlying the achievement of success and status are adapted to the real-life circumstances of the youth – by themselves, but also by the wider (local) society. Of course the youth are often in precarious positions and follow piecemeal strategies, switching back and forth from education, to work on the family farm, to casual labor down south, still trying to fulfil their expectations. But despite the resulting uncertainty, frustration, and deprivation that can be traumatic – and are typical

characteristics of waithood – many manage to gain social recognition and status. However, this is not as a result of individual educational or economic success, or ability to obtain cattle, pay bride price, build houses and independent households, but on the basis of redefined cultural schemata in which individual virtue depends on personal character and the individual's contribution to larger networks of reciprocity that connect relatives but also peers within and in-between rural and urban settings. For many young people, in the absence of the ability to achieve modern aspirations, relying on seemingly pre-modern schemata such as *nyuaa* is helping to overcome waithood and the hardships of everyday life.

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Notes

1 “Youth”, especially in the African context, is not a straightforward concept with clearly defined age brackets . Local definitions may vary in different contexts, e.g. the social and political domain, and in relation to different groups of people, e.g. along gender lines. In northern Ghana, for instance, members of youth associations, mainly active in the political domain, can be adult men well in their 40s, who have not reached the status of decision-making elders, while married mothers of multiple children in their 30s would certainly not pass as youth. From an emic perspective the category “youth” could therefore include people from approximately 12 to 40 years old. However, within the context of this research, which was interested in the changing role of education, occupational choices, patterns of social mobility, and changing perceptions of success, the selection of respondents was more comprehensive. Quantitative interviews were conducted with male and female final-year HS students (15-20 years old), but to grasp historical changes in attitudes and strategies and to be able to develop a better understanding of patterns of social (im-) mobility and the ways in which people cope with lacking educational and professional achievements and/ or opportunities, qualitative interviews were also conducted with men and women beyond this age group.

2 This schematic portrayal of the local cultural model of success in Tables 7 and 10 in no way implies that each and every member of the society sees these norms and values as binding or behaves according to them. As explained in the theoretical section above, a focus on cultural models or on shared perceptions does not imply an essentialist and static view of culture, and internal dissent and weak cultural boundaries in a globalized world are acknowledged. However, for heuristic reasons, these tables enable a summary of rather complex findings from qualitative interviews and a student survey within the limited space of this article.