

The Creation and Implications of Rural Malawian Understandings of Donors and Development – The Impacts of Development Tourism

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Development tourism provides communities with a limited tool to negotiate the role of NGOs within their region. NGOs are increasingly encouraging donors and Northern staff to visit Southern rural development projects. This process, to which Salazar (2004) refers as ‘development tourism’, serves as a form of donor management, combining the personalization of relations between donors and Southern staff with tourist opportunities for these donors. The little that has been written on development tourism focuses on the experiences of the donors, or on how the NGO or local elites use this experience to naturalize development as externally provisioned (Salazar 2004; Shrestha 2004; Barber and Bowie 2008). This paper will expand upon this literature by arguing that members of a community where development tourism takes place use the process in their negotiations with NGOs over the roles and responsibilities of NGOs in rural development.

The paper will utilize two ethnographic vignettes from Northern Malawi. Initially it will detail a visit from some private donors to *Mbewzi* (pseudonym), a local NGO with British connections. This recounting will show how the donors’ visit was used by community members to posit NGOs as patrons for the village and argue that these donors had taken on financial responsibility in the area. The paper will then focus on a meeting between *Place of Learning*, (pseudonym) an English run and funded CBO, and members of the community. During this meeting community members used the understanding of NGOs as patrons to reject a notion of sustainability as self-sufficiency that *Place of Learning* was advocating. The paper will argue that rural Northern Malawians utilized their role in the donors’ development tourism to create a narrative of an unequal relationship between the donors and the community, where the donors, rather than community members, were obligated to provide resources for development projects.

This paper is significant because it contributes to the exploration of an emerging phenomena in rural development; development tourism. It further adds to actor-network literature, where rural actors utilize development narratives in constricted frameworks when negotiating with more powerful actors who are bound by the same narratives (Long 1990; Long 2001; Mosse 2005; Olivier de Sardan 2005).

Development tourism is the organization by NGOs of rural field visits for Northern staff members, donors or potential donors (Salazar 2004:94). This rarely studied practice has been growing more common over the last decade due to the decreasing cost of air-travel and the increased importance of private philanthropy in development funding (Barber and Bowie 2008:752; Pratt, Hailey et al. 2012). In Malawi’s tumultuous relationship with donor nations has led to a proliferation of small NGOs, funded by international private donors (Chinsinga 2005). The few reports that deal with development tourism claim that the process is costly, that it highlights the gross inequity between the donors and community

and that the donor management goals of the NGO often do not align with the tourist experiences the donors desire (Salazar 2004; Barber and Bowie 2008).

Development tourism can be interpreted as a form of donor management. NGOs attempt to deter probes into their work and reduce the donors' demands for quantifiable reports by manufacturing personal relationships between Northern and Southern staff members and sensitizing donors to rural living conditions (Ebrahim 1999:193; Ebrahim 2002; Townsend, Porter et al. 2004). In an era of increased competition for public and private donations, development tourism also serves as a 'value add' for NGOs in their relationship with private donors (Pratt, Hailey et al. 2012). For these reasons, donors, like other non-traditional tourists, are managed and insulated from important parts of their destination (Salazar 2004; Carrier and Macleod 2005). This management takes place through limiting and scripting the interactions between donors and beneficiaries (Ebrahim 2002). Other authors detailing donors visiting rural areas detail how local staff and elites select beneficiaries for the donors to interact with and organize ceremonies where the community praises the donor (Shrestha 2004; Mawdsley, Townsend et al. 2005; Hollenbach and Ruwanpura 2011). This process is used to encourage future donations and simultaneously manufactures an obligation from the donors to the community.

This paper will use development tourism to problematize two interrelated criticisms of the relationship between donors and beneficiaries. These are Crewe and Harrison's (1998) statement that recipients exchange deference and compliance for the donors' provisioning of resources, and the broader claim that donor visitation naturalizes the dependence of the community on the donor (Barber and Bowie 2008; Hollenbach and Ruwanpura 2011). The paper will argue that beneficiaries utilize their agency, albeit under constrained conditions, when praising donors. While they may naturalize dependence, beneficiary communities influence the shape of their dependence through praising the acts of donors that they see as assisting their lives and subtly questioning acts that do not. Further, beneficiaries use this dependence to negotiate a diminished financial responsibility for the provisioning of projects with other development bodies.

Development tourism in Southern Africa ties into a broader discussion about NGOs being understood as patrons in rural regions. Many Southern African communities, especially Malawian villages, incorporate norms of patronage, where the powerful gain status through distributing wealth among their dependents, who gain security through praising their patrons (Smith 2004; Devereux, Baulch et al. 2006; Swidler and Watkins 2007). The relationship between patrons and clients is unequal but reciprocal (Englund 2002; Chinsinga 2004; Smith 2004). Patrons are often essential to the food consumption of their clients, while clients protect patrons from accusations of witchcraft, perform underpriced manual labor and (most importantly for this paper) spread the prestige of the patron through praise (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Englund 1999; Gilman 2002).

Patron-client relationships develop between NGOs and rural communities. NGOs are often seen as similar to (but wealthier and more accessible than) local patrons and government bodies (Kaler and Watkins 2001; Mosse 2001). Understandings of NGOs as patrons utilize societal norms, with Weisgrau (1997) and Chowdhury (1989) observing NGOs in East Asia

adopting East Asian patronage norms. Both NGOs and client communities have an interest in maintaining ties of patronage that deliver benefits to the village, through stabilizing the relationship of dependency (O'Reilly 2010; Reith 2010).

This paper claims that development tourism enables rural residents to negotiate and evaluate their relationship with their donor and NGO patrons. Beneficiaries participate in rituals that give praise to donor, aware that without them the donors and NGO staff would be unable to create a discourse justifying their acts (Hollenbach and Ruwanpura 2011). The following ethnographic piece will show that community members praise aspects of the NGO and of the NGO's work to compare it to the aspects they did not praise, or praise less thoroughly, cementing the obligation for the NGO to continue its support and problematizing unpopular projects.

Mbwezi's Donors Visit to Malawi

The remainder of this paper is based upon eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Malawi. The fieldwork focused on the relationship between several NGOs and villages along the Malawian lakeshore. *Mbwezi*, one of these NGOs, ran a collection of agricultural, educational, microfinance and HIV prevention projects out of a single office on the Northern Malawian lakeshore. These were funded primarily by private donations from English citizens and corporations. Some funding came from wealthy Malawians and Malawian and international development organizations. However the staff told me they played down these sources and focused on the connection between the donors and recipients. Donors and England based staff visited the NGO every three or four months and would engage on highly scripted tours organized by the local staff. The tours necessitated a discourse in which the NGO was the provider of development to the community. However, within this discourse the community had an opportunity to communicate both with the donors and staff members, highlighting to the staff its role in appeasing the donors and requesting increased material support in exchange for this.

A group of Taiwanese university students who had donated funds and materials to *Mbwezi* came to the region for three days in July 2012. They wanted to see a class being taught but it was the middle of student holidays and the school was shut. The NGO staff and teachers went around the village to find a classroom full of the best students to participate in a simulated class, which consisted of the teachers detailing the material poverty of school to the Taiwanese visitors. The teachers then praised to the point of exaggeration the assistance that *Mbwezi* had given the school in the form of school books and infrastructure. After this the Taiwanese students presented the principal of the school with tables and chairs they had bought to the village and gave each of the students a toothbrush and a disposable tattoo.

The next day the Taiwanese students were taken to Revor, a village that was about half an hour's drive from the school. The headman of Revor organised community members to entertain them through traditional dancing, drama and poetry readings. Many of activities lavishly praised *Mbwezi*, for instance a high school student read a poem called 'getting to know *Mbwezi*' which detailed all the things *Mbwezi* had brought to Revor. This poem praised a tree planting project that was unpopular in the village, due to requiring significant

free labour, yet everyone assembled clapped and cheered. After this, two men senior to the poet performed a skit where one was determined to volunteer for *Mbwezi* but the other rebuked him, as *Mbwezi* did not pay. The play's dialogue comprised several puns, culminating in "I don't care if they're from Tai-one Tai-two or Tai-three" to which both the donors and assembled villagers laughed heartily. The performance ended with the villager who had declined to participate due to lack of payment realising that this was the only way to bring development and crying as he was not developed. However before reaching this conclusion, the difficulty of both participants' life and their need for money was stressed through their increasingly drastic claims to be hungry and sick. Despite their clear enjoyment of the pantomime, shown by their earlier laughter, the villagers did not clap or cheer.

During these festivities the headman, Taiwanese volunteers and *Mbwezi* staff sat on plastic chairs, while the rest of the community, including senior males, sat on the ground. After the entertainment *Mbwezi's* manager, stood up and explained to the community that the Taiwanese people would not be bringing them anything this time, as it was the first time they had come to Revor. He continued that the Taiwanese had donated heavily to Mpande (the village with the school in it) yesterday, after going there last year, and that as such it was important to look after these guests. The headman's speech followed on from this and he implored the Taiwanese to help him build the school and pointed out the need for iron sheets and planks. He also thanked *Mbwezi* for their support, including a popular bridge building project that *Mbwezi* had not been involved in.

Finally, a local female elder who had been a leader in the dancing spoke. She initially praised *Mbwezi* lavishly, complimenting them rhetorically for things like stopping malaria, as well for things they actually did, like the passing out of seeds. She then asked for both the Taiwanese donors and *Mbwezi* staff for more help, to large applause. She listed specific issues where she disagreed with *Mbwezi*, focusing on a micro-loans program that was not available in Revor, which again received large cheers. Throughout this process various actors confirmed the notion that the *Mbwezi's* donors were patrons and attempted to both shape these patrons' future projects and encourage their continued assistance.

The donors did not interact with members of the community who were not employed by the NGO or the lodge they stayed at outside of these ceremonies. Had they done so, that they would not have been able to communicate effectively due to the low quality of English spoken in the area. Further, community members would have been reluctant to confront donors overtly with any grievances they had, fearing that any interaction not encased in praise may result in their patron withdrawing from the community. A long conversation between fishermen in an outer village about whether to hold *Mbewzi* to account for a failed project ended when the chief interjected;

"Once a lady has died her children are suffering, it is the same with donors, once they have left their project will stop".

Villagers would not criticize a patron under normal circumstances, however the regular instances of donor tourism that *Mbwezi* organized gave an opportunity to subtly communicate grievance with the donors and NGO staff.

Analysis

Development tourism offered rural Northern Malawians the opportunity to negotiate and problematize the role of NGOs in their community. While they publically conflated the NGO, its staff and donors, through their involvement in these ceremonies, village embedded actors were concurrently communicating different ideas with each set of actors.

The emphasis on the extreme poverty of the school and region could be interpreted as extraversion to the donors. The community members who were selected to interact with these donors exploited and exaggerated their dependence as a moral request for assistance and as a way to posit themselves as conduits between the donors and community (Peiffer and Englebert 2012). They combined this with a praising of the NGO and donors to create an obligation in these patrons to continue supporting the projects they had correctly praised them for supporting, and to compel them to support those they had praised them for unjustly¹. This praising of the NGO for projects that it had not been involved in also encouraged the depiction of the NGO as responsible for all the development in the area, which (as this paper will show) allowed community members to problematize calls by another NGO's staff for them to take on greater responsibility for the area's development. Similarly, the patron-client relationship offers little opportunity for a client to publicly criticize their patron (Booth, Cammack et al. 2006). The female local leader was able to respectfully ask for specific assistance in areas where *Mbewzi's* projects were out of line with community expectations due to the praise that her complaint was couched in. On the much more divisive issue of the free labor the NGO had required of the community, villagers used an innovative method to communicate with the donors. They first praised the project then juxtaposed this against a play, which while agreeing that the NGO provided development through its free labor, highlighted the financial difficulties that many community members had as a way to ask their donor patrons to reconsider payment. This was underscored through community members' silence at the end of the play. In this way, the Northern Malawians who were able to interact with the donors reinforced a discourse where these donors provisioned development externally through their generosity, emphasizing and fabricating the community's dependence. They respectfully problematized the donors' failure to pay them for their labor without questioning the need for donors to assist the community or endangering their relationship as clients of these donors through criticism.

The community members were simultaneously covertly communicating with the NGO staff. Their exaggerated praise signaled to the NGO workers present that they were aware of their importance to the performance and through this awareness they were able to negotiate the role of the NGO in their community's development. Lies about the involvement of the NGO

¹ Swidler and Watkins (2007) and Gilman (2002) provide excellent detail on rural Malawian's strategies for utilizing their patrons and this observation is an appropriation of their ideas.

that served to praise donors, were simultaneously a list of grievances or demands on the NGO. Scott (1990) has written extensively on the use of drama by the subordinated to communicate their discomfort to the powerful. He claims that this represents an opportunity for the community to air their grievances, with retaliation difficult due to anonymity or innocuous understanding of the context. The presence of donors, enabled through development tourism, emboldened this show of grievance. People clapped unpopular projects and gave subversive performances to show to the NGO workers that they were able to communicate with the donors and to demonstrate to the NGO workers that they understood their own importance to the relationship between the NGO staff and donors.

Development tourism, and the manufactured interactions it entailed, reinforced a discourse of development as externally provisioned. Development was depicted as being dependent on making donors happy through praising them. As the community members were crucial for the pantomimes that the donors desired they used these performances to negotiate their responsibilities towards development with the NGO staff. While it naturalized the NGO's primacy in development provisioning, this understanding problematized the need for community to make large uncompensated labor contributions. They argued that the donors, to whom the community had fulfilled their responsibility (by contributing through praise to their increased status) would want to pay for the regions development, as these donors were the community's patrons.

Sustainability and the Primacy of the "Development as Donor Driven" Narrative

Development tourism enabled the NGO staff and village residents to advocate a narrative of development as externally provisioned. This narrative posited the donors as patrons and argued that the village's primary role in the development process was praising and pleasing these donors, in return for which the donors would provide the financial means for development. Debate raged through these performances as which projects should be prioritized and whether locals should be paid, however the performances solidified the understanding that the cost of development should be covered by the donors. This narrative, posited by *Mbwezi* and many in the community, could be used to resist the claims of other organizations who wanted a different development discourse.

Place of Learning, a British run CBO utilized a discourse of development as self-sustaining. Donors were involved in the construction of the youth center from which *Place of Learning* ran their project and most of the CBO's projects involved international volunteers either teaching or working in a nearby medical center. However, *Place of Learning's* long term vision was for its projects to be entirely resourced through selling goods generated in their youth center, primarily electricity and vegetables, or through donations from inside the community. *Place of Learning* utilized an understanding of development as self-sustainable, an offshoot of the sustainable development discourse, to justify their attempted extraction of resources from the community. Literature implies that fuzzwords like 'sustainable' should allow the development literate CBO staff to coerce the village into providing labor in accordance with global and Malawian understanding of sustainability and self-sustainability (Cornwell 2007; Swidler and Watkins 2009). The community members were able to use the discourse generated through their interaction with *Mbwezi's* development tourists to reject

this. They argued that sustainability instead meant keeping donors happy, as relying on their generosity was more sustainable than having the community pay for its own development. Drawing meaning from *Place of Learning's* interaction with the community requires an overview of sustainability in Malawi. Critics have shown that sustainability (and related terms like self-sustainability) serve primarily to enable engagement between actors with disparate goals due to the term's ambiguous meaning and fulsomely positive connotations (Lele 1991; Cornwell 2003; Cornwell and Brock 2005; Sneddon, Howarth et al. 2006; Smith 2011). This engagement typically favors elites and external development provisioners, whose superior discursive skills allow them to utilize the ambiguity of these terms to shape development in an area (Gaynor 2010; Rosenthal 2012). However, fuzzwords are occasionally re-appropriated by local actors to problematize the interpretations of the elite ((Gaynor 2011:18). In Malawi specifically, sustainability (and self-sustainability in particular) is associated with communities providing volunteer labor to projects and donors providing seed capital to community activities that are expected to continue after the funding finishes (Swidler and Watkins 2009; Freidus 2010). The Malawians studied used *Mbewzi's* development tourism to contest the former with *Mbewzi's* staff and to reject *Place of Learning's* to impose the latter.

Place of Learning was unpopular as they charged for their goods and services. Despite selling eggs, vegetables and electricity at less than the market-price, *Place of Learning* was often accused by people in the community of deceiving its donors, who the community claimed wanted these services provided to Malawians for free. Northern Malawians translate both sustainability and self-sustainability to *kulutisiya*, which translates just as comfortably into the verb 'continuing'. They argued that a project was at least as likely to continue if its continuation relied on donors' generosity as if it relied on extracting resources from rural Malawians whose livelihoods were growing ever more tenuous. I was told by a long term informant:

“for development to be sustainable, it just needs money, it is better that this money is found outside, where there are many donors, than here, where everyone is poor”

Place of Learning held a series of meetings to explain the advantages of self- sustainability. The meetings took place in villages near their youth centre and comprised a local staff member (who was paid), a white volunteer and any members of the community who chose to attend. A meeting I observed began with the staff member telling a fable about a fisherman who gave away all his fish for free. This fisherman was popular with his village but, as he was unable to pay to have his net repaired when it was damaged, he had to stop fishing. The community had reduced their farming in response to him providing free fish and, when he was no longer able to provide, the community starved.

People spoke through the story, to the frustration of the speaker and volunteer. After he had finished, the staff member attempted to ask a variety of questions to the community, who subverted these through their responses. The staff member asked; “what should the net owner have done?”

A senior man in the community responded; “we cannot judge the net owner, we do not know what was in his heart.” The staff member repeated himself and other older man, ignoring the question stated:

“Last week I went to your clothing market and bought two pants and some underwear. You took a photo of me when I received the clothes, but not one when I was paying. This is so that you could show the donors back in England that you had given me the things which they gave you for free”

There was a rumble of agreement among the onlookers and the speaker continued “however we need more of these things in the community and they [clothing markets] should happen more often.” The white volunteer spoke, claiming that the donors knew they were selling the clothes, as *Place of Learning’s* donors approved of sustainability. Over the protests of the meeting attendees, the staff member asked “What is sustainable development?”

The headman stated loudly: “Development is when you help the community, it is a mistake to focus on sustainability’. After the NGO staff member protested that this was outside their mission statement, the chief replied;

“We know that other NGOs have been shut down because they failed to deliver the development they promised... you should just take photos and show them to donors and then they will help us, why do you need to find money here?”

The meeting finished with the staff member stating “we will take comments at the end, what is sustainable development?”, and the group disbursing.

Analysis

Mbwezi bringing donors to the area emboldened community members in their demands on *Place of Learning*. While discursive contests over the meaning of terms like sustainability typically favor the NGO staff, community members were able to use their previous interactions with *Mbwezi* and its donors to argue for a concept of sustainability that advantaged them. However, this argument reinforced an understanding of donors as the primary provisioners of development, and a link of conduits between them and community members that included NGO staff and community elites who were able to speak at meetings.

Place of Learning was not able to use the term ‘sustainable’ to acquire resources from the community it resided in. Normally, the use of this word, or a related term like ‘self-sustainable’, empowers the educated party (Cornwell 2007). In Malawi this is particularly pertinent when the term’s usage can be associated with the will of donors (Swidler and Watkins 2009), which the white volunteer did by claiming the donors knew and approved of *Place of Learning’s* demand for self-sustainability. However, the community co-created with *Mbwezi* of a discourse where donors provisioned developed in exchange for praise. This allowed them posit a meaning of suitability that removed their financial responsibility for *Place of Learning’s* continuation. They instead suggested, confident in their experience of donors that *Place of Learning* was either deceiving or managing their external patrons and that sustainability would be achieved through better donor management.

The community's utilization of development tourism naturalized unequal power dynamics both within and external to the community. Only elite community members were selected to speak to *Mbwezi's* donors or had the confidence to argue publically with *Place of Learning's* staff. As communicating with donors and the NGO had been depicted as the primary way in which development took place, these local elites were able to entrench their high social standing². Development tourism enabled community members to reject *Place of Learning's* call for self-sustainability. However, it reinforced the role of community elites as conduits between the community and NGO, and the role of the NGO staff as conduits between the community and patrons.

Conclusion

Existing work on development tourism has not yet explored the constricted negotiating positions that the process emboldens. The limited and structured interactions between a community and donors or Northern NGO workers allowed members of the community to communicate both with these external actors and with the Southern NGO staff who made decisions with a large impact on their lives. Through this locals were able to praise donors as they would other patrons, both thanking them for what they had provided and manufactured an obligation to provide more. They were also able to underscore the importance of their involvement to NGO staff through this process, empowering them in negotiations with these staff members.

Development tourism enabled the community to posit a discourse where they contributed to development through pleasing donors. This discourse was used in negotiations with other development organizations, assisting them in arguing a meaning of sustainability that did not involve extracting resources from the community. However, the structured nature of development tourism and the discourse of development as externally provisioned that it entailed naturalized intercommunity power dynamics, entrenching the position of the NGO staff and of those senior enough to control the community's interaction with the NGOs.

² A notion similar to extraversion (See Peiffer 2012), where community and national elites serve as gatekeepers between the seemingly dependent community and external assistance

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