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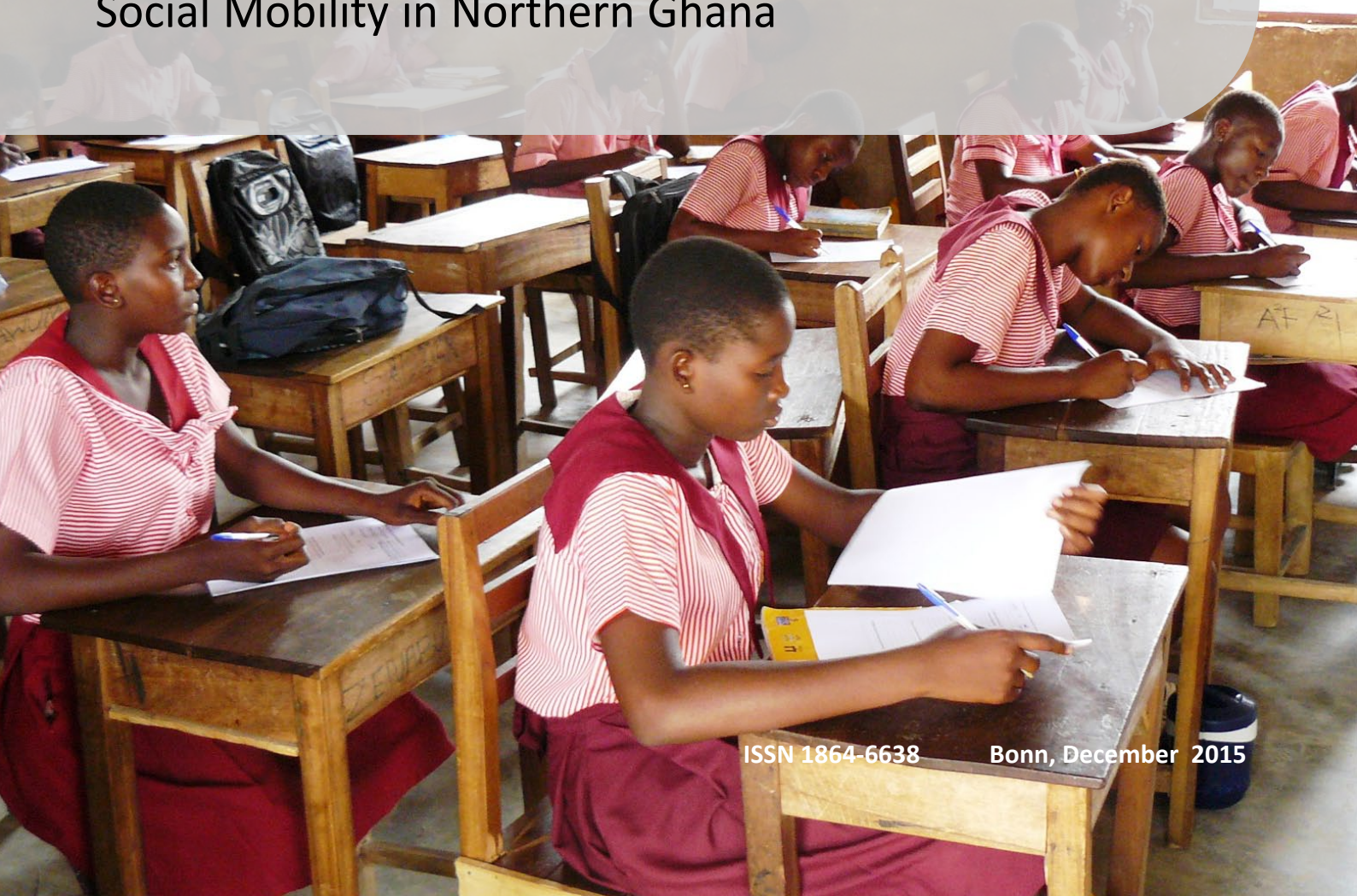

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Wolfram Laube

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 in how far new career pathways lead to upward social mobility. Results from qualitative and quantitative research show how weak public education and a lack of educational funding as well as employment opportunities frustrate local aspirations and undermine upward social mobility. However, 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

1 Introduction

Discourses of the Ghanaian government and international donors portray rural northern Ghana as a region in which smallholder-based agricultural growth and the integration into agricultural commodity chains provides the main avenue for poverty reduction and economic development. Given environmental changes (Eguavoen, 2012; Laube, Schraven, & Awo, 2012), and the often problematic integration of smallholders into global commodity chains (Lee, Gereffi, & Beauvais, 2012), this seems overly optimistic, while at the same time the aspirations, which rural actors have for their own future are often neglected. For them formal education and modern careers have become 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 educational demand in northern Ghana and mainly promote agricultural development. This neglect seems irritating in a situation in which the local population is greatly investing time and money into education and professional careers, but when the quality of public education is extremely poor and is producing devastating results in terms of educational achievement and student progression beyond Junior High School (JHS) (Danquah Institute, 2011).

This paper sets out to document and explain changing rural aspirations and the negative consequences that their neglect bears. 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. It is discussed in how far new aspirations actually enable upward social mobility, or rather lead to marginalization. The paper shows how changing aspirations under the absence of conducive conditions undermine rural livelihoods, but also emphasizes that adaptations of old cultural models of personal success based on an appreciation of reciprocity help to ameliorate poverty and afford the seemingly marginalized actors social recognition and status.

1 Youth', especially in the African context, is not a straight forward concept and it is difficult to define clear age brackets (Abbink & Van Kessel, 2005, p. 6). Local definitions may vary between 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 forties, who have not reached the status of decision making elders, while married women mothering multiple children in their thirties would certainly not pass as youth. However, within the context of this research, which is interested in the role of education and patterns of occupational choice and social mobility the focus was on female and male people in the age bracket between 12-35 years.

2 Aspirations and Cultural Models of Success

Looking for a conceptual framework helping to focus on expectations and plans the rural youth develops for the future that are shared beyond the individual level, I engaged with the literature on aspirations. Aspirations are individual ideas about the future and about good life which are culturally defined (Appadurai, 2004, p. 67). This focus 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 (Appadurai, 2004, p. 62). Closely related to culturally shared visions of the future is the 'capacity to aspire'. This contains the actual know-how, developed by own experiences and those of other actors' immediate social environment that is necessary to achieve one's aspirations. Appadurai (2004, p. 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 different avenues into the future and a good life, which limits their capacity to aspire. This lack of the capacity to aspire available according to Appadurai (ibid.) defines poverty. Following this thought much of the economic and educational studies that have worked with this approach, have focused on the limits of the capacity to aspire – 'aspiration failure' as Ray (2006, p. 409) terms it – and how it can explain sub-optimal economic behavior of the rural poor (e.g. Bernard, Dercon, & Taffesse, 2011) or educational underachievement of disadvantaged students. However, my perspective is somewhat different. This study rather looks at the changes that aspirations underwent in the poor rural environment of rural northern Ghana over time. Showing that many rural poor have the capacity to aspire, it shows that in the case of northern Ghana it is rather the lack of quality education and the lack of financial means (both public and private) to promote education beyond the basic level, which leads to aspiration failure.

But 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, p. 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 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 theses schemas" (Shore, 1996, p. 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 Claudia Strauss (1992) in her seminal book chapter "What Makes Tony Run? Schemas as motives reconsidered", I am interested in the way individual actors are motivated by, try to conform with, but also redefine schemas and cultural models in adverse 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. In a similar vein, 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 (ibid.) 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.

This need to adapt cultural models to idiosyncratic experiences was also apparent in the study area. As will be shown below, many young people in the research area aspire educational achievement and social upward mobility based on modern careers. Like their peers in the west, they want to become financially independent, have good access to social services such as health care and education, and look for material improvements (food security, housing, means of transport, etc.). However, since it is often difficult to live up to (their own) expectations, they combine 'modern' cultural models of education and career with local cultural schemata of success that accredit social status to relative (in terms of personal capability) contribution to networks of reciprocity. So culturally enshrined 'modern' aspirations are combine with cultural schemes of success that allow to obtain social status independent of (rather unlikely) personal educational and professional success.

3 Research Area and Methodology

In order to assemble the empirical basis for my analysis I conducted 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 in Biu, a small farming village of approximately 3000 inhabitants about 20 km south of Navrongo, the district capital, where I had carried out extensive research on smallholder farming and changing natural resource regimes (Laube, 2007) and the local integration into global commodity chains (Laube, 2015), and therefore had good rapport with the local community. Initially, qualitative interviews with a host of male and female actors such as students, parents, school drop outs, teachers, officers of the Ghana Education Services (GES) and the local district assembly, as well as local (neo-) traditional authorities were conducted 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. Interviews were held in English where possible or held 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 their aspirations, but also the problems they see in continuing education, and developing modern careers. To find out in how far aspirations are realistic, a follow-up study on all students that passed Biu Junior High School (JHS) from 1987-2012 was conducted. Furthermore, a census of 194 households in Biu was conducted to get a broader picture of local educational achievements over time. Research also involved two trips to Abuakwa, Kumasi, a major destination for migrants from Biu. Here individual ten in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions on the living conditions, perspectives and strategies of young educated migrants were conducted.

3.1 Research Area in Historical Perspective

In the 18th and 19th century the research area was politically relatively independent from the larger kingdoms of the Mamprusi, Dagomba towards the South and the Mossi towards the North. But 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 slowly change. One 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 since the 1910s as the demand for labor in southern Ghana greatly increased (Lentz, 1998b, p. 214). But soon many people went to the south voluntarily and labor migration reached huge dimensions from the 1920s onwards when people started going south to earn money, to gain experience, running away from problems at home, or out of curiosity (Nabila, 1987).

While migration became an important feature of local society (Ungruhe, 2010, p. 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 eloquent resistance against their rule and to protect the reserve of cheap labor that northern Ghana provided for the colonial economy (Bening, 1971; Plange, 1979, p. 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 from1948 (interview with R.A. male educationist, 75, Navrongo, 27.04.2012).

The picture started changing slowly after Ghana's independence in 1957, when Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah promised to abridge the underdevelopment of northern Ghana. Many schools were built, teachers trained, and free basic education as well as special stipend programs for northern students offered. This led to the creation of a growing educated elite of foremost men, but

with some difficulties also women (Behrends, 2002), which were able to attain modern careers, e.g. in the educational sector, administration, security services, or academia (Bening, 1990). However, up to the 1990 more than 80% (Kelly & Bening, 2007) and up to 2010 52.5 % (GSS, 2010) of the population of northern Ghana was illiterate.

The population of the KNEM continues to be relatively young, quickly growing, predominantly illiterate, largely rural and agricultural (see Table 1).

Table 1 Demographic information of the Kassena Nankana East Municipality

	KNEM
Population	76.975
Population growth (2000-2010)	20.8%
Population below 25years	60.1%
Rural population	72.7%
Agricultural households	82.7%
Literacy	47.5%
Poverty incidence*	70.4%

Source: (* poverty incidence for the Upper East Region as reported by Coulombe & Wodon, 2007; GSS, 2014)

As will be shown below, a decline in the contribution of local smallholder agriculture to rural livelihoods has seen increases in seasonal and permanent out-migration, as well as investments into education, to escape the smallholder poverty trap.

4 'Book Gives Power': Historically Changing Local Aspirations

During pre-colonial times, local societies in the research area were hardly diversified. Apart from artisanal specialists such as blacksmiths and potters, the large majority of the population consisted of peasants that 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).

But local aspirations slowly changed over the course of the 20th century. In response to forced and voluntary labor migration, a 'culture of migration' (Hahn, 2004) developed. Young men - and later young women, too - were expected to go South, not only for economic reasons, but as part of becoming adults. They gained experience, knew 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 at Navrongo, the local center of colonial and missionary activities. But life in the villages was only partially affected. Up to the 1950s, for instance, only a few boys from Biu were going to school and Christianity had only begun to spread. Careers in colonial administration, in church, or even schooling were not really aspired for 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, nurses, or assumed positions in the Catholic Church, when people slowly realized the value of education and the benefits of 'modern' careers. But interest in education stalled when in the 1980s a large irrigation scheme was constructed close to Biu. Forceful 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. But since the 1980s and 1990s, irrigable land became scarce and depreciated prices for agricultural products as well as the abolishment of farming subsidies and technical support under structural adjustment programs made farming less attractive. Farming – once the basis of local aspirations and success – has lost its appeal. As Chief Affa, 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 onto 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 with migrants from Biu in Kumasi, they stated that migration to southern Ghana is increasingly problematic. The cost of living in urban centers has greatly risen, while jobs are difficult to get. Widespread youth unemployment in southern Ghana forces young Southerners to take up jobs they were formerly leaving to migrants from the north and manual labor in the plantation economy 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. Felix Apribu, a lecturer from Biu working in the school of nursing in the nursing training college in Agogo, for example, has achieved a considerable degree of educational and professional success. Although he entered school late, because he had to take care of his father's cattle until he was 12-13 years old, he was able to complete secondary school, become a trained nurse and constantly continue to further his education. After nursing college, he got a diploma in education and administration and a BA in nursing from the University of Ghana, a M Phil. in nursing from the same institution and a MSc in health professional education from a university in the Netherlands. At the time of our interview he was teaching and at the same time trying to pursue a PhD to become a lecturer at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). Apart from his personal educational and professional achievements he feels that he has become a role model in his community:

"I am among the highest qualified in the village. When you look at education [laughs] it does not only mean book knowledge […], but affects your understanding of life. If you look at how education has helped, I just want to look at my classmates I was with and who have not been able to complete school.. They even feel shy to greet me. They feel I am on a particular level. But this not how I feel.

By the fact that I have had an opportunity to go to school, I collect salary. And my salary, if you compare it with [the salary of] most people who work, is better. I am able to do a lot of things. And my understanding of issues in the village is well advanced. So education is something that has positively affected my life personally. But not only my life! But I have also realized that my personal life, so many people have looked at it. And it has influenced a number of people to go to school. There are some of my mates, who could not go anywhere, who have vowed that their children will reach where I have reached. So I can see that my life is not only influencing me, but others, too." (Felix Apiribu, Biu, 08.04.2012)

The important role of role models has been frequently emphasized in the Ghanaian context (Behrends, 2002; Behrends & Lentz, 2012; Lentz, 1998a) and it is obvious that 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, 70, Biu, 04.11.2012)

The inability to deal with the bureaucratic and political challenges of modern life in Ghana, and especially to effectively present and defend ones interests in the interactions with politicians, officials and NGOs is another reason rife in local discourse. The link between 'modern' education, locally referred to as 'book', and empowerment was often stressed by the respondents. As a popular local song recorded 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 of musicians who usually play at weddings and funerals in Biu and neighboring villages. Their polyphonic songs, usually accompanied by drums and flutes, are locally very popular as they often comment on social and political developments. Apart from condemning school drop outs, who will have to become labor migrants having to perform tedious and despised jobs away from home, the song reflects historical experiences in the 1980s, when the people of Biu where deprived of large tracts of lands for the construction of the nearby irrigation scheme constructed under the auspices of expatriate engineers in collaboration with Ghanaian security forces often from southern Ghana (Laube, 2007, p. 92 ff). Despite their perceived wealth – the people mostly affected belong to the local earth priest lineage of Dozindema – the villagers lacking education and self-confidence, were not able to resist unlawful and forceful expropriation. Only in the late 1990s, with the help of educated locals, Biu was actually able to regain considerable control of land within the irrigation perimeter (Laube, 2007, p. 313 ff).

Results from a census of 194 households in Biu reflect the increasing importance of school enrolment in Biu (see Table 4). While 68.9% of those people older than 31 years had no formal education, 99.1% of the household members being in the age group between 13-16 had at least entered primary school and/or were pursuing further education. The numbers clearly indicate how schooling has gained local importance and how high enrolment rates are these days.

Table 2 Educational attainment among the member of Biu households according to age groups (N=1221)

Age groups according to educational levels	Educational attainment (in %)						Total
	None	K.G.	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 is also reflected in the survey conducted with 120 male and female final-year students from five JHSs in the KNEM. Of the 116 respondents answering the question whether they could imagine to be farming in future, less than half (43.1%) could imagine to do so (see Table 3). Whereas more boys than girls were contemplating a farming future, it was rather the urban youth from Navrongo that seemed to be interested. Asked for explanations 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 Navrongo, where many state employees and local business men engage in commercial farming activities.

Table 3 Percentage of students imagining a future as farmers (in percent)

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 actually imagine engaging into labor migration 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 (see Table 4).

Table 4 Occupational choice of final-year students (in percent)

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.

5 Educational Outcomes, Professional Careers, and Social Mobility

In order to find out in how far 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 until 2008. Despite the assistance from the headmaster of Biu JHS, Jaob Afeliga, we were not able to recover all past and present information. School records are patchy and not all students, especially those coming from neighboring communities, could be followed up. In a number of cases even relatives were not able to report 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 remaining cases the poor educational attainment of students of Biu JHS becomes apparent (see Table 5). About 10% of the students drop out and do not finish JHS. More than 40% of the students do not pursue further education after JHS, and only 31.4% and 10.4% respectively were able to join SHS and proceed to tertiary institutions.

Table 5 Educational status of students leaving Biu JHS from 1990-2008 (in percent)

	Sex		
Educational status of students (N=567)	Female	Male	Total
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, only less 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 lack in trained teachers, lacking teaching materials, as well as the difficulties of students from educationally deprived households, who cannot get sufficient intellectual support at home, contribute to a situation where educational success is difficult to reach. This is acerbated by the fact that there are no real examinations in the public Ghanaian education system before the end of JHS. Although teachers may ask students to repeat classes when they are performing badly, this is not obligatory and many students continue their education despite serious deficits. Progression within primary school and to JHS is automatic and the first exclusionary exam used to be the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). Up to 2013, students who arrived at aggregates higher than 30 points were not allowed to continue their education in Secondary High School (SHS), but needed to repeat (parts of) JHS or to rewrite the BECE to improve their aggregate. Students with better aggregates stand higher chances to be admitted at popular SHSs with 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% of students passed their BECE (GNA, 2012), while in the KNEM, the number of passing students dropped below 30% (Vibe Ghana, 2012). While records were patchy for Biu JHS, out of the 395 students for which BECE results were recorded until 2008 only 151 (38.2%) obtained results 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 finally were able to get results allowing them to progress to SHS. As the BECE does not qualify 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 of an aggregate of 40 were allowed to enter SHS in 2012 and in 2014 almost all students were eligible to proceed to SHS (Dery, 2014). Given the deficits of many JHS students it is questionable whether this is sustainable or just helps to prolong waithood and keep the youth in costly educational institutions, while not offering a way ahead for most students.

But students do not only waste time but also resources. Education, which is free during primary school and JHS, has to be paid for at SHS-level. Fees were at 328 GHS (approx. 200 USD) for first year SHS students per term in 2011/2012 and have risen to 668.50 GHS per term for the year 2014/2015 (Dery, 2014; GNA, 2011). But the cost of SHSs are significantly higher since Parent-Teacher-Associations (PATs), which undertake important infrastructural projects, fix additional fees independent of the 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 and the oppositional National Patriotic Party flagged free SHS as one of their central election promises during the presidential election campaign in 2012 and the 2014 budget promised that "Government 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." (Terkper, 2014) However, despite greatly rising numbers of students at all levels the educational budget has stalled at about 24% of the Ghanaian budget over the last decade, and the governmental expenditure per-student has dwindled along with donor support for the educational sector. Long-discussed programs for 'brilliant-but-needy-students' are still missing.

Especially for female students it is very difficult to continue education if results are bad and funding is scarce. Less female than male students attended 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 trainings such as apprenticeships than boys, often after having given birth.

The difficulty to get ahead becomes even more obvious when looking at the employment that the JHS-leavers assume after the 'end' of their education. Of 530 former students 165 (31.1%) were continuing their education at various stages. But only few of the remaining 365 students, who had completed their education, were actually able to enter 'modern professions' (see Table 6).

Table 6 Employment of former Biu JHS-students in 2012 (in percent)

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

These results contrast starkly with the aspirations of the rural youth (see Table 4), 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 as well as inputs are difficult to acquire and 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 letting people migrate. Some of the migrants interviewed in Kumasi were already above 30 years and continued living on menial and frequently changing jobs that afforded them between 50 and 150 USD monthly in 2012. Caught in a seemingly inescapable situation they nevertheless had families and still supported their relatives at home. This is also true for those who remain behind and become farmers or engage in various crafts. While their livelihoods are precarious and they are not able to achieve their aspirations they still try – and often successfully so – 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 performances, but behind their aspirations lies a second layer of cultural models 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.

6 'Who Wants to Leave Without a Name' Changing Cultural Schemas of Success

Changing schemas of success were captured through in-depth interviews with women and men of different ages in the research area. 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, p. 43 ff) when reasoning about which personal attributes and characteristics contribute to a person's fame. The metaphors referred to four different domains explaining the past cultural model: personality, marital life and reproduction, economic achievement, the engagement in networks of reciprocity, and the 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 depended on one's performance in these domains (see Table 7).

Table 7 Male and female attributes in the 'traditional' cultural schemas of success

Domains essential for the attainment of *'nyuaa'*							
Personality		Marital life and reproduction		Economic domain		Reciprocity	
Male and female attributes							
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Diligent Moderate Respect-ful Helpful Generous	Diligent Moderate Respect-ful Helpful Generous	Multiple wives Many children	Many children Coordinating polygynous HHs	Feed the family Agric. surplus Cattle owner-ship	Indep-endent contri-bution to HH upkeep	Labor exchange Rituals and funerals (food, drink, animals) Food and seed for the needy	Labor exchange Rituals and funerals (food, labor)

According to the attributes of this cultural schema of success, men largely aimed at generating agricultural surplus, being able to feed the family, raising cattle, the currency for bride prices and marrying more women. In turn, marrying a number of women and having many children increases labor availability and again 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 controlled the marital options of their daughters, were eager to let 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, p. 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 thus 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, p. 56)

As this citation shows, reciprocity was central, but not necessarily based on entirely altruistic motives. 'Gifts' (Mauss, 2000) or services were rendered with the clear expectation that they will be reciprocated at a later point of 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 his status, but his/her generosity and the way he channels his belongings into networks of reciprocity, that gives him/her '*nyuaa*'. In the citation above, it is not by accident that reference to funerals is made. Peoples' status epitomizes in funerals and is assessed in the extent of compassion, number of visitors, and degree of support the bereaved family encounters. Thus success was seen as the assistance one can draw on in crises 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 and potential assistance within webs of reciprocity that are the larger foundational schemas 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 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 shape of rural public social infrastructure in their communities or to support their family (see Table 8). A sixteen-year-old male student from Saboro, for instance, stated 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 trying to match their own skills or targeting high incomes.

Table 8 Motives for occupational choice of final year students (in percent)

		Sex of respondent		
Reasons for occupational choice (N=115)		Female	Male	Total
	Assist community	29.6	31.3	60.9
	Support family	7.0	0.8	7.8
	Matches 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

This result is certainly influenced by the fact that the students interviewed want to correspond to social expectations that they encounter in the curriculum (e.g. Foli & Asante, 2005). However, apart from school text books, such statements are rife in local discourse. Like a middle-aged women who had never seen 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 peoples' 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 motorbikes keep disappearing. People cheat on their own parents and siblings to gain advantages, but on the normative level reciprocal behavior, much like in Fortes observation from the 1930s, often tied to accounts of funerals and post-mortal reputation, continues to be promoted. And this is not to no avail. While some people 'misbehave', many other young men or women from the research area, in Biu or in the south, forgo basic amenities, 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 migrated in order to make a living, sponsor their siblings' schooling. Again this is not purely altruistic, but very often 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 yardstick for individual success, reciprocity remains a central aspect of '*nyuaa*' and more than 30% of all boys and girls mentioned the need to support their families and communities. But other aspects seem more important. 91.5% of the female students and 81% of the 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. It is interesting that especially 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 past inequalities. Personal respect and food security do not seem to be very important. However, when asked about the essential characteristics of successful men or women, between 40-50% of the respondents felt that it is the respect they command.

Table 9 Priorities of school leavers in five schools in KNEM in 2012 (in percent*)

Priorities of current school leavers (N0117)	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 (see Table 10). In the realm of marital life and reproduction the large majority of respondents, apart from few boys, emphasized the need to remain monogamous and to reduce the number of children. For girls the educational performance of their kids served 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'*							
Personality		Marital life and reproduction		Economic domain		Reciprocity	
Male and female attributes							
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female

Diligent Respect-ful Generous Powerful Educated	Diligent Respect-ful Helpful Generous Educated	Mostly single marriage Moderate number of children	Single marriage Moderate number of children Educational attainment of children	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 live up fully 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, child birth) or excessive demands from home (e.g. funerals) – plays an important economic role, helping to pool and buffer risks. But 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' is Samson Avaala from Navrongo. He is a 35 year old shoe maker in Accra, father of four kids, who completed SHS in 2002 and unsuccessfully tried to join the Ghanaian army. 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 relatives, while he suffered to buy materials for his trade and spare parts for his sewing machine. This seemed to be highly irrational especially from an economic perspective. But as he explained, on the one hand he hopes that investing in his brother's education will help his own children in the future. But more importantly, on the other hand, his thrust to share 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 street 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 very limited educational, professional, and economic attainment.

7 Conclusion

This article showed 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 social upward 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 nice block houses, good clothing and their own means of transport. They aspire to have small families and to afford their children good education. These aspirations are largely in line with the models of modernity that are promoted in Ghanaian school books, churches and mass media. However, it was shown that the large majority of rural school leavers are actually not able 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 – like 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 under which the rural youth tries to develop its 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, both in the rural areas but also in Ghana overall, are the real obstacles holding back the youth. Despite all 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 paradox that currently the Ghanaian government as well as international donors largely neglect the educational sector, but mainly focus on the commercialization of smallholder agriculture to revert the underdevelopment of the region. While in the past, school feeding initiatives and the provisioning 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. 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 new aspirations backfire. While educational and professional failure is perceived as shame, 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 schemas underlying the achievement of success and status are adapted to the real-life circumstances of the youth – both by themselves, but also by the wider (local) society. Of course they are often in precarious positions and follow piecemeal strategies, switching back and forth from education, to work on the family farms, 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. But not as the result of individual educational or economic success, their ability to obtain cattle, pay bride prices, build houses and independent households, but on the basis of re-defined cultural schemas 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 schemas such as '*nyuaa*' is helping to overcome waithood and the hardships of everyday life.

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