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Thomas McNamara, *A Village and Its NGOs: Co-constructing NGO Presence in Rural Malawi*. Publisher: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2022. 175 pages. ISBN 9789004513518 (paperback), 9789004513525 (e-book). \$72.00.

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A Village and Its NGOs: Co-constructing NGO Presence in Rural Malawi focuses on Malawi's rural communities and their perceptions of and interactions with Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs). Its author, Thomas McNamara provided a succinct goal statement:

This book examines how development signifiers were re-imagined and negotiated, and explores how any individual NGO's presence was influenced by intra-community relationships, power dynamics and narratives of development; it also demonstrates how the grandiosity of NGOs, as signifiers that linked development, westernization and personal affluence, reduced the credibility of alternative development discourses. (3)

This book targets and challenges development experts, particularly Western based, and African Studies scholars and experts, who research or work in rural development and anthropology or related areas. Dr. Thomas McNamara, who holds a PhD in Development Studies from the University of Melbourne, Australia, previously published journal articles on the study in this book. He uses his expertise in Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies, to effectively pull from these articles and his extensive field experiences to identify the interrelationships between development and moral economics in Eastern Africa. His descriptions and analysis are based in Social Anthropology constructs and methodologies that produce a critical practitioner ethnography focused on a community participants' understandings of development. He demonstrates how the mere presence of an NGO alters the positioning of local leadership within communities and the impact that it has on community life.

This book highlights his ethnographic study that was conducted over an 11-month period during 2012 to 2013 in fishing and farming villages near Lake Malawi. Six villages and four NGOs were included in this study. The villages included, Jumpi (Tonga people) and Pungwe (Tumbuka); Kamolongo, Usiku and Mututu; and Revori. All six villages are located in Vsawa, a predominately Tumbuka area, made up of approximately 30 fishing and farming villages. The NGOs included Mbwezi, ChurchCare, Nkuvira, and Green Earth. Their targeted projects included HIV/AIDs prevention, land conservation, food relief, formal education (western style national curriculum), and women literacy and economic programs. McNamara's research demonstrated significant changes in local leadership's political power vis-a-vis their associations with NGOs in the area. McNamara explained that NGO's primary impact was from the cultural capital that an NGO's presence provided to local leaders and how this capital, based in westernized ideals of individual development, influenced culturally bound moral economy constructs of mutual assistance and reciprocity as local leaders negotiated intra-community entitlements and obligations. According to McNamara's observations, the actual NGO projects and resources were of less significance to village life than the individual status and material and intangible benefits of association with an NGO.

A central concept to this book is what McNamara terms "moral economies". He describes moral economy within its relationship to development, kinship, and patronage, and the varying inequalities that may emerge directly or indirectly to how the NGO's presence is handled within each community. Simply put, leaders negotiate who receives the most benefit from their presence and how it may be rationalized within the constructs of community life. Morality from traditional villagers' perspective is built through mutual dependence that is best viewed through the communal workings of each village. No one questions the need for group help; and reciprocity among family and neighbors is embedded in village life. Therefore, the presence of the NGO is seen as a group resource. There are some inequalities that surface in accessing these resources due to the individual positions of the villagers.

The most evident is the village headman's role to represent and lead the villagers; so this places him in an advantageous relationship with the NGO. This means that the men of the village are the gatekeepers of accessibility, and they and their family members often have first access to NGO benefits, such as job or volunteer positions, as well as intangibles, like NGO staff as references or sponsors for school or employment. This creates an affluence by association perspective regarding the NGO; so many villagers follow the Village headman's lead in participating with the NGO, to access such or at least be seen to be associated with these tangible benefits.

The research for this book was developed based on earlier ethnographic works that studied NGO's impact on participants' community status. The first was Harri Englund's *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (2006) that focused on Malawi's youth and their agency in using NGO material signifiers, such as t-shirts, volunteer or program participation certificates and associations with staff to enhance their socio-economic status within their community. The other major work was Ann Swidler and Susan Cotts Watkins' article, "'Teach a man to fish': The sustainability doctrine and its social consequences" published in *World Development* (2009), that summarized their ten-year study Malawi's HIV programs or "industry", where they observed NGOs' impact on community members' social status, even when they were not directly involved in or beneficiaries of NGO projects. They framed this status as coming a community's imagined ideals of NGO influence or benefit. Their book, *A Fraught Embrace: The Romance and Reality of AIDS Altruism in Africa* (Princeton 2017) expands on this theme.

McNamara's book includes an extensive list of related studies and writings that are contemporary to his work, but not identical. His work rather stands at a cross-road. It is a decolonializing critique of North South relations that persistently leave many African nations, like Malawi with Aid dependent national economies. Although some would argue that McNamara's first contribution is his ethnography; a text that effectively utilizes research to demonstrate the realities of NGOs' impact and the reconstruction of their meaning within a dependent economy by local leaders and village participants to meet their culturally based moral economies. McNamara's more significant contribution is placing this important participant centered study as part and parcel of the larger neo-colonial constructs found in North South "development" studies.

The main points from McNamara's *A Village and Its NGOs* are that while every NGO considers issues of sensitizing its role to the cultures or communities they work with in development roles, they rarely directly addressed the impact of their presence on the internal structure of a community's leadership. As agents of their communities, local leaders and astute individuals who see opportunity in an NGO presence come with their own understandings of development that have often less to do with utilizing an NGO to gain the stated goals of a given project, rather than to increase or shift advantages to imagined or real benefits of NGO resources, to benefit their personal and moral standing in the community. A stated threat in McNamara's work is that this very perception of NGOs' promise of affluence stifles internal, indigenous development projects. From the beginning to the conclusion, McNamara describes throughout this work, "how the grandiosity of NGOs, as signifiers that linked development, westernization and personal affluence, reduced the credibility of alternative development discourses" (3).

The reality of NGO development, as McNamara presents it, is that even when an NGO's impact as per stated development goals is negligible; the participants, who they work with, use their presence to gain what they can in the interim. McNamara's comparison to other works, like R. Silver's *Sex, Schooling, and Moral Triage in Malawi*, dissertation (2019), and T.M. Li's *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier* (2014) present a cautionary tale for any scholar or development organization that the real problems are large scale infrastructural problems, that no NGO can effectively address.

The rural areas are marginalized by their national governments and mostly left to fend for themselves as demonstrated through the scarcity of good roads, stable and accessible electricity, and communications networks. Infrastructure mainstays that are non-negotiable as foundations to any sustainable development program. In the meantime, until national governments address these infrastructural necessities, village headmen and other astute villagers will continue to negotiate their intra-community relationships in the face of NGOs in what they see as the best ways to utilize their presence to enhance an otherwise limited future. Any scholar or expert or student pursuing development work or academic work in African Studies will greatly benefit from McNamara's detailed accounting of a dependency-based economy that is re-imagined on the local level through negotiated meanings within local leadership. His work brings the national political economy's role and North South relations into full view by demonstrating NGO's limited agency in local development.

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