

“We Need to be Relevant”

*An Ethnography of Kenyan Anthropology Students*

Ida Skjong Grøvik



Master Thesis

Department of Social Anthropology

University of Oslo

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## Abstract

This thesis is based on seven months of ethnographic fieldwork among Kenyan anthropology students at the Institute of Anthropology, Gender & African Studies (IAGAS) at the University of Nairobi. I explore anthropology students' 1) everyday life, interests, aspirations and motivations; 2) the relationship between their personal background and approach to anthropology; and 3) how they interpret society and assess their potential to contribute to it as social scientists. A prevalent theme of this thesis is an ambivalence toward anthropology in Kenya, which can be seen to be derived from a tension between "traditionalism" and "modernism" in the cultural politics of postcolonial Kenya. This ambivalence further manifests itself in current students' evaluations of their academic endeavors.

I begin my thesis with a historical overview of the emergence of anthropology in Kenya, assessed within a broader context of decolonization, Africanization of academia and concurrent shifts in developmental discourse. In chapter 2, I direct my focus to current anthropology students and how they perceive their education and prospects as anthropologists-to-be in a political-economic situation where education is becoming geared towards the "market," and which questions the very "relevance" of the anthropological project. In chapter 3, I discuss the economics of Kenyan anthropology in more detail, with particular attention on the influence of political-economic conditions' on research selection. In the final two chapters, I address the students' worldviews and their ideas of "work," discuss the ambivalence of their pursuits and multiple meanings of being "relevant" in Kenyan society. These chapters serve to illustrate that student aspirations reflect a transcendence of economic constraints and opportunistic self-interest to include a commitment to benefitting society and giving back to their own communities.

While my thesis is limited to Kenyan students in 2014, triangulation with my own experiences as a student of social anthropology in a very different economic and cultural context suggests that the lessons learned from the Kenyan field site might have wider purchase for the discipline. In an increasingly globalized world where the logic of the market is propagated at all costs, the significance of all social science is called into question. An anthropologist in the making myself, I shared, across obvious contextual differences, many of these concerns and dreams about the future. In this sense, my ethnography is premised on an assertion of likeness rather than difference.





## Acknowledgements

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My sincerest gratitude goes to my supervisor, Paul Wenzel Geissler, for his valuable and sharp comments, as well as his generosity of time in guiding me through the writing of this thesis. One simply could not wish for a more encouraging or friendlier supervisor. I am also dearly grateful to my partner, Daniel Tesfa Salole, who has been by my side throughout my fieldwork and writings and meticulously read several drafts. He has also been a consistent inspiration for me by sharing his own anthropological ideas. My gratitude is also extended to Mai Salole, who has carefully proofread and provided useful suggestions for improvement. Finally, I wish to thank my mother, Tove Skjong, for her constant support throughout my academic career.

I would like to emphasize my gratitude to IAGAS for approving my research. I take for granted neither the openness required for an institution to open its doors in such a way, nor my good fortune for being allowed in. I have tried my utmost to provide an accurate account and analysis of people and their endeavors, and any shortcomings in this regard would be entirely my own responsibility.

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## Introduction

Walking out of our morning class in Applied Anthropology and Development, I glanced over at Erick and Samuel. They had amazed me today with their presentations on “project designs,” “needs assessments,” and “SWAT analyses” which gave me flashbacks to a marketing course I had taken before joining anthropology. We joined Rachel and Isaac outside the Education Building and as we headed through the archway of the main entrance to campus I asked the two of them why it was important to lecture the architecture students on anthropology, a position they had recently taken up. “Architects should have basic knowledge of human culture, that is where Isaac comes in,” Erick said jokingly. “It is like car design, it has to be customized to the people who are going to use it... and it doesn’t exist in a vacuum, it has to comply with society,” Isaac explained and pointed to the Kenyatta International Conference Center (KICC) building in town: “If you look at that building it has an African hut on top. That stands for the environmental adaptation of the African people.” Erick then turned to me, tongue in cheek, and uttered patronizingly: “I wish you were exposed to Geertz...”

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Atieno, Kamau, Rachel and I were walking from the library to Main Campus while discussing my progress. I had just told them about a focus group discussion I had conducted the day before, and they were not impressed. Apparently, I had not done it “properly” since there had been no passive observer to add valuable secondary interpretations. Moreover, they were perplexed as to why my classmates and I had not been exposed to any qualitative analysis software—a necessity to properly deconstruct FGDs. After being criticized on methodology by my “informants,” I felt miserable. It was only later I realized that this ongoing peer evaluation was invaluable to a first time ethnographer, and the unique luxury—albeit a frustrating one at times—of studying students from the same academic field.

## Topic and Research Questions

When I set out to do an ethnographic study of anthropology students in Kenya, I knew it would be methodologically and analytically challenging. I was going to register as a student in a different anthropological milieu, at the Institute of Anthropology, Gender & African Studies (IAGAS), at

the University of Nairobi (UoN).<sup>1</sup> Here I intended to study the students, while they studied anthropology, all the while conducting anthropological research and studying anthropology myself. This methodological brain twister was a challenge I took on with open eyes. This research was born of an interest in changes within Africanist anthropology and the emphasis on likeness instead of otherness in relation to the idea of “Africa” advocated by, e.g., Ferguson (2006) and Mbembe (2001; see also Mbembe and Nuttall 2004). With these core anthropological themes as my foundation I set out to study a group with whom I shared a common status, the principal difference being that I was normally located elsewhere. Consequently, my analysis also builds on our shared experiences as anthropology students.

The place of “Africa” has been crucial for the development of key ideas in anthropology, but the continent’s assumed radical “otherness” that underbuilt the earlier structural-functionalist works (except for the Manchester School approaches (Kuper 1996), see e.g., Gluckman 1940) became an increasingly contested idea after the 1960s (e.g., Moore 1994). In contrast to the postmodernist/deconstructionist trends which led many anthropologists to turn away from the very category of “Africa” (Ferguson 2006), however, recent Africanist anthropology has used this category to write about globalization, the rise and fall of modernity, and sameness (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; Roitman 2008; Simone 2008). Inspired by Ferguson, I will focus on “Africa” and its “place-in-the-world,” and discuss questions of likeness which he argues force a shift “from a question of cultural *difference* to the question of material *inequality*” (2006, 20, emphasis in original).

This study is also inspired by the project Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Arturo Escobar (2006, 1) call the “world anthropologies”—“the possibility of establishing new conditions and terms of conversability among anthropologists on a global level.” This call is made to challenge the “asymmetrical ignorance” of anthropology earlier pointed out by Gupta and Ferguson (1997, 27), where: “Anthropologists working at the ‘center’ learn quickly that they can ignore what is done in peripheral sites at little or no professional cost, while any peripheral anthropologist who similarly ignores the “center” puts his or her professional competence at issue.” Hence, in the words of the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o, this type of anthropological endeavor is about moving the center, “move the centre from its assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world” (wa Thiong’o 1993, xvi).

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<sup>1</sup> As I will come back to, I conducted this study with a formal approval from the administration of IAGAS, as well as with consent from students and lecturers who all were aware of my objectives and status as researcher.

This thesis centers around the following research question: How do anthropological knowledge, geography, life experience and everyday life intertwine in a Kenyan context? Within this general research question, I am specifically trying to understand and describe anthropology students' 1) everyday life, interests, aspirations and motivations; 2) the relationship between their personal background and approach to anthropology; and 3) how they interpret society and assess their potential to contribute to it as social scientists.

My initial plan had been to assess anthropology as a discipline in Kenya within a broader context of decolonization, political sensibility and “African” identity. The history of anthropology in Africa has been strained and several African scholars have been outspoken regarding their misgivings about the discipline (Asad 1973; Huizer 1979; Onoge 1979; Owuzu 1979) (see below and chapter 1). Over time, however, the ground has slowly shifted to accommodate the introduction of anthropology as a valuable education. Parallel to changes in Western anthropological practice, an aim for many African anthropologists has been to create an Africa-oriented and engaged discipline with new intellectual agendas, working practices and collaborations (Ntarangwi, Mills, and Babiker 2006). Hence, I initiated this study as an exploration of an African anthropology, students' perspectives on anthropological research agendas, their fieldwork practices and the “kinds of knowledges these other practices of ‘the field’ make possible” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 29). This initial orientation—a crucial contextualization of the historical development of anthropology in Kenya—proved to be highly productive in preparing me for fieldwork.

As I started to spend time with students, however, I realized that the younger generation of anthropology students seemed less devoted to the postcolonial critique than their fathers and grandfathers. Nearly eighty percent of the population is under thirty-five, and the official unemployment rate for the under twenty-fives is twenty-five percent (UNDP 2013). With this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that the youth of today seem preoccupied with concerns about the qualifications and connections needed to secure livelihood and status. As a consequence of this early realization, I chose to shift my focus to students' thoughts about studying anthropology, the balance between passion and economic concerns, their ideas about “work” and future prospects, and the ways in which they imagine society and anthropology's role within it.

A principal object of my investigation is students' and faculty's pursuit of "relevance." I have come to see their ambiguous notions of relevance as indicators of how individuals value their academic endeavors. In essence, I believe that students' dynamic definitions of what it means to be relevant can be over-simplified to a fluctuation between two conflicting "regimes of value" (Appadurai 1994): on the one hand being "useful" to society and on the other being "marketable" to employers. This question of the value of labor and the balance between altruism and self-interest, extends to the fundamental anthropological dichotomy of gift and commodity. While it is a well-rehearsed mantra of the global "knowledge economy" that scholarship has a market value, my material shows that Kenyan students' academic ambitions are not limited to personal gain, but include a potentially conflicting desire *to give* something to society.

Economic concerns are a recurring consideration throughout this thesis, and I will discuss students' and faculty's research interests in relation to changing higher education policies and financial pressure. It seems that the financial restrictions social science departments are facing all over the world, are experienced more acutely in Africa. This begs the question: What is social science for contemporary Africa? Which role should it play? While focusing on the particular case of Kenyan anthropology, I never lose sight of the implications these questions raise in relation to practices of anthropology elsewhere, for example in the "West." All around the world anthropology is being forced to answer to the global economy, even justify its existence, begging important reflections on the significance of anthropology to society, and ways in which it might change in the future.

In the last section of this introductory chapter I return to a systematic outline of the thesis to clarify where different topics will be covered. I now turn to a presentation of the theoretical and thematic approaches, as well as highlighting some of the scholars which are particularly useful to my analysis.

## **Anthropology, Values and Postcolonial Critique**

Anthropology experienced a "crisis of representation" during the 1980s (Marcus and Fischer 1999), when the postmodern critique served to dismiss the grand theories, meta-narratives and claims to objective truth, which had hitherto characterized the discipline (Moore 1999; Crewe and Axelby 2012). The hegemonic European and American anthropological traditions came to be seen as ethnocentric, ethnographic "truths" were relabeled "partial" and "incomplete"



(Clifford 1986), and the anthropological object, “the other,” was understood to be a “cultural construct” (Abu-Lughod 1991; Fabian 1983).

Slightly preceding this period of restructuring of Western anthropological thinking and practice, Talal Asad (1973), and several African scholars such as Omafume Onoge (1979) and Maxwell Owusu (1979), had presented their own misgivings about the discipline, revealing its colonial origins. In fact, the future for anthropology as a taught subject in African universities seemed bleak until the late 1980s, and in Kenya this was first and foremost down to the critique put forward by the country’s first President, Jomo Kenyatta. In chapter 1, I detail this progression in Kenya, culminating in anthropology’s arrival with its own clear agenda.

Postmodern and postcolonial critique are of vital importance in providing a framework for changes in anthropological thinking in general, and the development of the anthropological discipline in Kenya in particular. Crucially, the postmodern critique has led to legitimation of other worldviews and, even though African anthropology is still absent from Western writing, attempts have been made to redefine this “asymmetrical ignorance” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2011). *African Anthropologies* (2006), edited by Ntarangwi, Mills and Babiker and articles on the Pan-African Anthropological Association by Paul Nkwi (1998; 2006), have provided me with comparative accounts of the way anthropology has developed in different African countries. Despite considerable variance in the history and practice of departments across the continent, I support Ntarangwi et al.’s (2006) notion of an overarching shared commitment by African anthropologists to contribute to both knowledge and social reform on a continental scale during the 1980s and 90s.

Questions of “relevance” and conflicting motivations or values will be a recurrent theme throughout the thesis. The theoretical basis for my discussion is David Graeber’s (2001) discussion of value. Value, he suggests, can be seen as “the way in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality—even if in many cases the totality in question exists primarily in the actor’s imagination” (2001, xii). An example of this is students interpreting their education primarily as a means to gainful employment, where the totality imagined is the “total (market) system” and the ultimate value of their actions will be reflected in monetary form (*ibid.*, 67). As Graeber suggests, the intricate and fluid nature of social relations opens the door for an infinite number of imagined totalities. As such, when I claim that students are primarily concerned with “helping people back at home” or being “useful

to society,” I am suggesting that their thoughts and behavior are founded in different conceptions of value, one that is meaningful in another, potentially contradictory, imagined totality. Another useful theoretical construction is Appadurai’s (1994, 82-83) notion of “regimes of value.” At the core of Appadurai’s thesis is a recognition of “value coherence” as highly variable, and a rejection of the supposed dualism between reciprocity and market exchange, which portrays some societies as “economies writ large” while others as “solidarity writ large” (ibid.). It is worth noting that I sympathize with Graeber’s criticism of Appadurai’s naturalization of the commodity form as an unwitting reproduction of neoliberal logic (Graeber 2001, 32). However, I find Appadurai’s term most useful as a framework to describe the ambiguity of student motivations. The point to be made, in any case, and where Graeber and Appadurai would likely both agree, is that even though regimes of value or imaginary might conflict, they can comfortably co-exist.

## **Imagining Work and Status**

Employment opportunities represent a central preoccupation of this thesis because these were a central preoccupation of the anthropology students I met during my fieldwork. I approach students’ ambitions and ideas of “work” in reference to recent research and publications on the relationship between work, identity and belonging in Kenya and Africa in general. A recent article by Ruth Prince (2015) on the meaning of voluntary labor in relation to the value of formal employment is particularly relevant. She builds on James Ferguson’s (2013) argument in his recent article stating that people excluded from the world of waged labor position themselves as dependent on powerful persons and institutions, and thus “seek incorporation.” Even though my informants had a degree of social protection through their student loans or income through formal part-time jobs or informal labor, their future job prospects remained uncertain and this provoked considerable anxiety. Prince and Ferguson’s perspectives are very useful as they point out the great value placed on waged labor in East- and Southern Africa. Prince’s (2015) further describes some of the strategies used to achieve such work which I recognized from my own fieldwork. Anthropology students are precariously positioned in a country with staggering youth unemployment and a harsh job market, characterize by short-term contracts. However, they refuse to compromise their aspirations to formal work, and specifically white-collar jobs in powerful national and international organizations. I will argue that the desire for these jobs reflects not only a pursuit of income, but also social recognition and a sense of belonging to something larger, a claim I believe can be extended to my colleagues in Norway.

## **Social Science for Contemporary Africa**

Anthropology at IAGAS is characterized by a strong focus on medical and developmental research within Kenya, collaboration with international organizations, interdisciplinary aspirations, and a strong quantitative approach to supplement anthropology's qualitative orientation. My fieldwork suggests that the research direction of IAGAS is not purely down to academic interest. It can be linked to the economic constraints of Kenyan anthropology, and society more broadly, and is symptomatic of its imbalanced and dependent relationship with Western academics. As I started to interview former students and explored earlier theses and projects, I found several indications that students and faculty had "followed the money" by choosing to conduct research which was likely to attract donor funding.

Several authors have written about economic transformations in academia. Among others, Etzkowitz, Webster and Healey's, *Capitalizing Knowledge* (1998, 8), describes the emergence of the "entrepreneurial university" and argues that universities are increasingly engaged in "translating knowledge into marketable products." Gerald Wangenge-Ouma (2008) discusses this in a Kenyan context, showing the way in which the provision of higher education in Kenya has become increasingly based on privatization and commercialization. Moreover, I have drawn upon comparative accounts from the United States and Britain, where "relevance" and "wealth creation" have become crucial (Okely 2013, 9), and pressure from economic restructuring has raised concerns for anthropology's future (Basch 1999; Peacock 1999; Rylko-Bauer, Singer, and Willigen 2006).

## **Methodology**

I conducted fieldwork in Kenya from early January until mid-August 2014. I was there for the registration of first-year students in January and followed them, as well as the third- and fourth-years until May, when the first-years went for their long holiday and the fourth-years completed their studies. From May until mid-August, I followed the second- and third-year students, while also trying to keep contact with the fourth-years to follow up their adaptation to the job market and employment.

Throughout my stay, I lived in a hostel run by the Young Women Christian Association, which accommodated mostly young students, both women and men. The hostel was located a short seven-minute walk from the university and the students' dormitories. Especially in the beginning of my fieldwork, I frequented the dormitory halls to visit students, use the internet café or eat in the student cafeteria. After the fourth-years graduated, I spent less time there as I started arranging more formal meetings with lectures and students, as well as spending more time with master's students who lived off-campus.

I spent the first week establishing contacts at IAGAS and working on the formal requirements for my affiliation with the institute. My mentor at the institute, Dr. Onyango-Ouma, put me in touch with a student, the chairman for Nairobi University Anthropology Students Association (UNASA). He was an important resource for me in the beginning by sharing information on the course structure, introducing me to other students and inviting me to participate in the orientation week for the first-year students from January 13<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>.

As of January 22<sup>nd</sup> and throughout the rest of my fieldwork, I effectively became a student at UoN, going to lectures, taking notes, participating in discussions, doing group work and giving presentations. The students had an intensive schedule with lectures for up to six hours per day, not to mention group work and individual assignments. A lot of time outside of class was spent at the library, where students prepared for lectures and took advantage of the computer-facilities. As I did not take exams, I spent most of my time exploring the library collection and browsing through old MA- and PhD-theses, noting titles and source of funding. During breaks, I had the chance to engage in informal talks with students. In fact, the time I appreciated most were the hours I spent with some of my colleagues, sitting and observing life on campus, "as anthropologists." Towards the end of my fieldwork I was spending a substantial amount of time with some of the master's students in a borrowed office, to be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

There were three extra-curricular events in particular which complemented my data. The first was the Open Day organized by the university where all departments occupied stands to inform and recruit secondary school students, discussed in chapter 3. The second was an Anthropological Forum organized by UNASA, where students discussed issues which engaged them, elaborated on in chapter 4. The third event was a conference hosted by the United Nations Office in Nairobi in relation to International Women's Day where students from

IAGAS participated, to which I return in chapter 5. An additional interest I developed and followed avidly was student politics, briefly summarized in chapter 4.

In order to supplement the data derived from my activities and conversations at UoN and provide the basis for comparison, I also talked to students and lecturers at two other anthropology departments in Kenya, Maseno University and Moi University. In addition, I made a short trip to the Nyang'oma Research Training Site (NRTS). It has served as IAGAS' research facility for MA- and PhD-students, mainly from Kenya and Denmark, since the 1990s. My fieldwork also included a visit to a fourth-year student in her home community, and a journey to connect with a master's student conducting his fieldwork.

As an additional note to chapter 3, I should point out that I have not had access to the institute's formal finance and accounting. As the monetary flows go far beyond the limits of my observations—my aim to “follow the money” (Hart and Ortiz 2014) has been restricted to a secondary analysis of macroeconomic developments in higher education policy and finance; reading of government papers and the institute's reports, and public updates on the institute's webpage. More illuminating, perhaps, are the interviews conducted with faculty and students who shared their accounts of ways in which they “follow the money.”

I conducted thirty-four semi-structured interviews with lecturers and former students. They were based on a rough interview guide, but flexible to unexpected turns of conversation. In addition to interviews, I arranged eight focus group discussions (FGDs) with students. I organized class-based groups of both women and men, with the number of participants ranging from five to ten. I tried to make two groups out of every class, and conducted eight FGDs in total.

One of the principal methodological challenges was lack of random selection for my FGDs due to the fact that individuals often withdrew at the last minute. I therefore had to turn to a more “opportunistic selection” whereby I simply invited participants who were present and willing to participate. In these groups, students discussed their perspectives on the discipline and their aspirations for the future. We also spoke more broadly about cultural change and what they regarded as social problems in Kenya. Another limitation pertains to the relative outspokenness of some students compared to others who spoke as little as possible. One group lacked a sufficient number of participants and two did not achieve an optimal gender balance. Furthermore, my decision to change the question set after conducting the initial FGDs means

that I cannot make comparisons between all groups with regard to content. Limitations aside, most of the FGDs were successful, and this was a productive way of generating debate and gaining insight to students' perspectives on key issues. A benefit of conducting the FGDs later in my fieldwork was that I already knew the majority of my participants. This put me in a position to probe them critically if I felt they were not expressing themselves freely or truthfully.

## **Ethnography of colleagues elsewhere**

As Sierk Ybema and Frans Kamsteeg (2009, 102) argue, organizational ethnographers are often relatively close socially and culturally to the field they study, and strangeness is therefore not something given, but rather something which needs to be achieved. Organizational ethnographers are thus “much more like fish trying to discover the water that surrounds us” (ibid.). However, I never felt that I was running out of naïve questions, confusion or curiosity. Indeed, this fieldwork remained as perpetually strange as it was perpetually familiar. We studied “the same” thing, but our reasons were different; we had the same disciplinary forefathers, yet operated with different definitions; we were all going to “the field,” but with different tools and different economic constraints; we had different backgrounds behind us and futures ahead of us, yet shared so many dreams as well as strategies to accomplish them.

In my interaction with the students I believe they viewed me, or at least referred to me, as a “classmate” or sometimes, “the master’s student from Norway,” despite their awareness that I was studying them. As a classmate I came in close contact with many students and our interactions were always friendly. In the different classes I tried to become acquainted with as many students as I could, but I was obviously not able to talk to all of them. As to be expected, some of my relationships became closer than others as a necessary side effect of my “positionality” (Okely 2012). This type of daily contact can be a sign of integration rather than “contamination,” and anthropology has recognized that key associates can have crucial importance for in-depth knowledge (ibid., 14, 142).

My role as the master’s student from Norway served to differentiate me from my informants in two important ways. On an academic level, my status as a graduate meant that many of the undergraduates looked up to me. This perception challenged my wish to be defined as a classmate on level terms. On a physical level, I stood out more obviously from my informants, and it proved difficult to disassociate myself from my automatic identity as *mzungu*

(European/white) with all but my close informants. The whiteness of my skin provoked curiosity from many of my informants, which at times facilitated, and at times obstructed my research. Though an uncomfortable differentiator, it was one that I could not ignore, and I came to understand the obsession with my obvious otherness as a manifestation of the economic inequality it represented. The fact that I had the ability to travel abroad to do my fieldwork was, after all, the most distinguishing factor between me and my informants, and my positionality as Norwegian or Mzungu served primarily as a symbol of this distinction.

Many students were very interested in my research, and frequently approached me to ask if I was getting enough data. Some students challenged my methods and findings, and others went so far as to teach me how to do things “properly.” The nature of my research has provided me with the rare opportunity to receive immediate feedback from informants with the technical capacity to offer me the frustrating luxury of an ongoing peer evaluation of my own methodology.

Unfortunately, I did not learn any of Kenya’s many local languages, nor make much notable progress with Swahili, Kenya’s lingua franca. I have therefore been limited to conversing in English. Since lectures are taught in English and almost all of the formal interactions between lecturers and students are in English, my lack of language skills has not been a major issue at the university. However, informal conversations between students sometimes reverted to an incomprehensibly fast Swahili, which I was not always lucky enough to have translated to me.

## **Ethical considerations**

While some tasks were more bureaucratic and cumbersome than I expected, I remained committed to establishing informed consent from all parties contributing to my research and otherwise fulfilling all requirements dictated by IAGAS. Early in October 2013, I sent an application letter and my research proposal to the director of the institute to inform him of my aim and interest and ask for permission to conduct the research. I received the approval early in December, and thereafter proceeded to get a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Although these initial proceedings meant that I had cleared my research with the administration at the institute, this obviously did not mean that everyone was informed of what I was doing. Therefore, I had to inform the lecturer and the students and ask for permission to participate before every class, until they all knew what I was doing. Before interviews and FGDs I repeated the aim of my project and asked for permission

to use a tape-recorder. In the FGDs I obtained approvals to participate through the use of consent forms. In accordance with my research approval, I deleted audio files after transcribing and password-protecting the documents. In this thesis I use aliases for all students, while I have sought approval to use full name of lecturers, as an anonymous identity is neither practical, nor perhaps desirable.

Having done fieldwork at a research institute among students of the same academic field, I have felt a particular pressure to comply with my strictest notion of research ethics. Before I left Kenya, I was requested to hold a presentation about my research and findings for members of staff, as well as some students at IAGAS. At that stage my material was not fully analyzed, but I agreed to present some preliminary findings nonetheless. I am grateful for this challenge set by Dr. Onyango-Ouma, as this was a good opportunity for me to achieve transparency and garner all-important feedback from the subjects of my study.

## **Thesis Outline**

The first chapter in this thesis gives a historical account of IAGAS (former Institute of African Studies), and the development of anthropology in Kenya. This chapter will substitute a chapter about the “study area” in traditional ethnographic writing since “my field” is ultimately not committed to a geographical “field site” or a city, but rather to the “multiple social-political sites and locations” of an academic discipline (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 37). The main goal of this chapter is to describe how and why the discipline came to emerge and its particular contours and characteristics in Kenya today.

In chapter 2, I address the preconceived notions students have of anthropology when they join university and how they interpret their prospects as becoming anthropologists. Chapter 3 proceeds to describe how anthropologists and anthropologists-to-be are constrained by political-economic realities in Kenya. In chapter 4, I focus more directly on the students’ academic activities, in addition to describing fragments of the multilayered engagement of student life at the university. This chapter will address several issues, but one overarching theme is the way in which students imagine their society and assess their potential to contribute to it as social scientists. In chapter 5, I analyze students’ ambitions and discuss their ideas of “work” more explicitly.



## Chapter 1:

### The Emergence of a Kind of African Anthropology

The study of Anthropology is now widely recognized in developmental circles as a crucial subject in the development of any nation. In the recent past, development institutions including the World Bank have realized the centrality of culture in development. They are now incorporating people's way of life in everything they do for developmental sustainability. (...) Despite the demand for anthropologists, we still lack adequate number of practicing anthropologists in Kenya. Therefore there is need to train more anthropologists to help address the current and emerging development challenges in Kenya specifically and Africa in general.

- Degree Description, IAGAS' website<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by this message, I found myself eager to explore the intellectual agendas and working practices of Kenyan anthropology. Before I embark upon my ethnography of Kenyan anthropology students, I present a historical account of the emergence of the discipline in Kenya, followed by a description of its current contours. In the first two sections, I introduce early anthropological work in Africa and portray the postcolonial criticisms raised by many African scholars. From there I proceed to describe the way in which the ground slowly shifted to accommodate the introduction of anthropology at the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at UoN. Finally, I discuss the institute's orientation towards "engaged" training with a strong regional focus, supported by my own ethnographic material from one particular research project.

#### Early Africanized Anthropology

Anthropology has a long history in Africa. The continent has served as an important platform for the development of key anthropological ideas, as well as for studies of radical "otherness" (Barnard 2001; Ferguson 2006; Moore 1994). However, as Sally Falk Moore (1994, 79) argues, new generations have tried to transcend the failures and models of earlier generations. One of the earliest "post-1960s attacks" from within the discipline was directed at anthropology's relationship with colonialism (ibid.). Talal Asad (1973, 17) criticized anthropologists' passive attitudes towards colonialism, even claiming that they contributed towards "maintaining the structure of power represented by the colonial system." While much of this critique has later been considered overstated and insufficiently nuanced (Mills 2006), many accounts of

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<sup>2</sup> URL: [http://african-studies.uonbi.ac.ke/uon\\_degrees\\_details/883#.reg\\_anchor\\_883\\_1136](http://african-studies.uonbi.ac.ke/uon_degrees_details/883#.reg_anchor_883_1136)

anthropology's history in Africa have focused on the continent's role as a "research laboratory for the metropolitan academy" (Ntarangwi et al. 2006, 7). An example of this type of account is *The Expansive Moment* (1995) by Jack Goody, describing the achievements of British social anthropologists in Africa between 1918 and 1970. Much of the early anthropological work in Kenya can indeed be tied to the colonial project, in addition to a perceived urgency to document customs and practices of African ethnic groups that were perceived as threatened by the arrival of colonialists, missionaries and travelers (Ntarangwi 2008, 85).

Other accounts of anthropology's development in Africa have highlighted the contributions made by African scholars and political activists, exemplified by Lyn Schumaker's (2001) historical account of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI) in Northern Rhodesia. Schumaker discusses the enormous influence of African research assistants, emphasizing the extent to which their personal life experience and academic training facilitated their crucial roles as cultural and political brokers. In *African Anthropologies: History, Critique and Practice* (2006), Ntarangwi et al. draw a parallel argument that anthropology's history in Africa started: "in the pre-colonial and early colonial period with the pre-professional anthropologists, who included European missionaries, Arab and European travellers, and administrators on the one hand and local educated Africans, chiefs and church leaders on the other" (2006, 9). Rather than overemphasizing the importance of colonialism and external influence, Ntarangwi et al. choose to highlight the creative contributions made by African scholars and political activists. I wish to follow in the same vein.

## **Jomo Kenyatta and an African Backlash Against Anthropology**

Although anthropology was not introduced to Kenyan universities until the mid-1980s, it is possible to trace its roots back to a single Kenyan academic/politician. Jomo Kenyatta, who became Kenya's first president at independence, studied anthropology at the London School of Economics under Bronislaw Malinowski (Ntarangwi et al. 2006). In his book, *Facing Mount Kenya* (1962 [1938]), Jomo Kenyatta wrote about his people, the Kikuyu, and applied it in defense for their cultural practices and in the fight for self-determination (Nyamongo 2007; Onyango-Ouma 2006a). The book is openly political, serving as a "strategic reclamation and celebration of Africanity in ways that would challenge Western and colonial perceptions and constructions of Africa" (Ntarangwi et al. 2006). Kenyatta's anthropological background did not, however, make

him an advocate for the introduction of anthropology in Kenyan universities, to which I shall return shortly.

Until the mid-1980s, a common perception among African academics was that anthropology was a colonial tool. Among them were Omafume Onoge (1979) and Maxwell Owusu (1979), who both raised the question of how anthropology could liberate itself from the “intellectual ‘imperialism’ of Europe” and produce “a common stream of knowledge and understanding about man free from oppression, deprivation, and the weight of privilege” (Owusu 1979, 158). The critique by these scholars slightly preceded the “crisis of representation” (Marcus and Fischer 1999) experienced in the social sciences of Europe and America in the 1980s. This turn, inspired by postmodern criticism, challenged anthropology’s grand theories and claims to objective truth (Moore 1999; Crewe and Axelby 2012). It stressed that it is only possible to understand “difference” in relationship to the observers’ position, and thus that the object of anthropology, “the other,” is a cultural construct (Abu-Lughod 1991; Fabian 1983; Crewe and Axelby 2012). Lila Abu-Lughod (1991, 143) argued that: “Culture is the essential tool for making other,” and therefore proposed different modes of writing *against* culture and subverting the process of “othering.” Later, anthropological workings at the “center”— American, British and French—were further criticized by Ferguson and Gupta (1997, 27), who asserted that they marginalized other anthropological traditions at the “periphery” in the geopolitical hegemony.

If the African nationalist movements had not preceded the period of anthropological self-critique, anthropology in Africa might perhaps not have been driven underground to the extent that it was. The fact that they did meant that the discipline was intentionally kept out of Kenyan universities in spite of the fact that Kenyatta served as Chancellor of the University of Nairobi when it was founded (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo 2006). Even though he appreciated the benefits of anthropological analysis, he abandoned his anthropological engagement and argued that there was no room for the discipline in an independent Kenya (Nyamongo 2007, Onyango-Ouma 2006a). Kenyatta’s reservations about anthropology differ, however, from the criticism of Onoge and Owusu. As the eminent Kenyan historian Ogot argues, Kenyatta had ambitions of “modernizing” Kenya, and he and his government were of the opinion—in an apparent reversal of his argument in “Mount Kenya,” noted above—that “they could not modernize unless they altered or abandoned their traditional institutions, beliefs and values to suit the demands of development” (Ogot 1999, 144, in Ntarangwi 2008, 88). Thus, as anthropology was largely understood as the study of “primitive” societies, disciplines such as sociology and economics

were favored as they focused on “civilized” societies and as such reflected African development ambitions (Mamdani 2001; Nkwi 1998). While Kenyatta had celebrated African cultures in his ethnography during the struggle for freedom, he turned into a flag-bearer for the destruction of traditional African institutions when he attained power. In this light, Kenyatta emerges as an embodied prototype of the inherent ambivalence associated with the anthropological tradition in Kenya, which I will return to below.

African scholars’ anti-anthropological stances reflected the post-colonial pursuit to reclaim “Africanity” (Ntarangwi et al. 2006). At the same time, these stances reflect a subscription to modernization theory which informed the development discourse in the West following the Second World War. This theory argued that the road to economic takeoff was through the breaking free of the chains of “‘traditional’ social and cultural impediments” (Lewis and Kanji 2009). It seems that in this period anthropological studies were perceived to promote cultural diversity and “tradition,” which in turn stood in the way of elite ambitions of multiethnic national unity and socio-economic change (Ntarangwi et al. 2006; Onyango-Ouma 2006a). This tension between liberatory “traditionalism” and progressive, universalist modernism underscores the ambivalence of “mimicry” in the cultural politics of postcolonial Africa (Ferguson 2006). With skepticism on both the political and academic front, the future for anthropology as a taught subject in African universities did not look promising until the late 1980s.

## **Changing Ground**

It was Kenyatta’s successor, Daniel T. Arap Moi who provided the impetus for anthropology’s upswing. He came to recognize anthropology as a way of giving graduating university students understanding and respect for national cultures, to enable them “to be of assistance to the people and especially as extension officers” (University of Nairobi 1989, 489), i.e. government officials “extending” modern knowledge of agriculture and health to poor people. According to Gabrielle Lynch (2011), Moi had been an outspoken proponent of “majimboism” or regionalism since the 1960s and eventually came to combine a “defensive politics of ethnic belonging” with marketization and “promises of development” (ibid., 11). His promotion of anthropology further reflects the way in which education has been inextricably linked with national development pursuits since independence (Lebakeng 2010, 27). By the 1980s, academics and developmental professionals were beginning to question modernization theory and were pursuing alternative paradigms. Eventually came the popular shift toward a range of “people-

centered” and “participatory” approaches (Chambers 1993; Lewis and Kanji 2009, 50). Ogot argues that Moi stood at the forefront of this change of focus in Kenya by actively promoting culturally motivated policies and not merely socio-economic progress (Ogot 1999, in Ntarangwi 2008, 89). In 1985, he gave a directive to implement the discipline among the courses offered at UoN, and a year later, anthropology was introduced under the Institute of African Studies (IAS) (Onyango-Ouma 2006a; Nyamongo 2007).

Despite the ambivalence of cultural politics in the early postcolonial years, the university had taken small steps to “Africanize” certain aspects of academia through the establishment of the Cultural Section of the Institute of Development Studies in 1965, which later became the IAS in 1970 (Ntarangwi 2008). From its inception in 1970 until 1986, IAS had exclusively been a research institute and was given the responsibility to conduct studies in the field of African history and prehistory, ethnography and social anthropology, material culture, African languages and linguistics, ethnomusicology and dance, religion and other belief systems. When Moi mandated the introduction of anthropology at IAS, it seemed predestined to continue in IAS’s “Africanized” tradition.

The first director of IAS was the historian Bethwell Allan Ogot, and other eminent scholars joining the institute included: William Robert Ochieng’ and Henry Stanley Kabeca Mwaniki (also historians), and Christopher Lukorito Wanjala and the Ugandan Okot p’Bitek (creative writers and literary critics). The above were also among the participants in the “District Socio-Cultural Profiles,” which was the institute’s major project from 1981 and was led by Professor Gideon Were. Its aim was to provide a series of comprehensive sociocultural studies of the different districts throughout the country. Sponsored by the Ministry of Planning and National Development, the project was in natural alignment with state policy to redirect developmental planning and implementation from the center to the districts.

The foreword of the district profile from South Nyanza in 1986 (Were, Kipkorir, and Ayiamba 1986), refers to the importance of understanding and appreciating local cultures to avoid misunderstandings between them and development workers. By keeping up with changes in developmental discourse, the institute gained recognition from the government and external donors as an important stakeholder, and one capable of providing crucial information about traditional technologies, cultural practices and factors that should inform development initiatives. I had several long talks with Mr. Mathu who had been employed at the institute longer than any

other serving member of staff, and he was proud of having been involved with what he called “the project of knowing ourselves.”

Mr. Mathu proudly recalled that before the collaboration with the government started, he had been able to secure funding for the project from UNESCO. Unfortunately, government and UNESCO funding dried up. This resulted in the ultimate demise of the project as no alternative financing was achieved. The IAS had nonetheless managed to produce reports from almost every district in Kenya, and this project was highly regarded among all staff at the institute at the time of my research. In a conversation with the current director, Dr. Charles Owuor Olungah, he even explained that the project had inspired future prospects for the institute, as they currently were considering the potential of conducting similar research on the newly formed political counties of Kenya.

The District Socio-Cultural Profiles project reflects the emphasis on cultural anthropology at the institute at the time. As the table of contents shows, the reports are divided into roughly nineteen chapters, covering topics such as: history, production systems, agriculture, food and drinks, medicine and health, political and legal systems, traditional education and material culture (Were, Kipkorir, and Ayiamba 1986). In addition, the institute’s focus on archaeology has led to a close collaboration with the National Museums of Kenya, the center of archaeological work in the country. This focus was probably inspired by Kenya’s heightened presence as center stage for paleontological research after the discoveries made by Mary and Louis Leakey, a Kenyan born paleontologist, archaeologist and anthropologist of British descent (Ntarangwi 2008). While UoN has followed the British tradition and kept archaeology under the department of history, the anthropology program introduced at IAS was also intended to familiarize students with linguistics, archaeology and physical anthropology. This tradition has proven durable, and three of the current lecturers have a background in archaeology, among them the former director and distinguished archaeologist, Professor Simiyu Wandibba.

So far, we have seen how changes in Kenyan domestic politics and international developmental discourse created the space for anthropology’s recognition as a course of potential value. The discipline was allocated a home at the Institute of African Studies, which was already providing the government with a series of comprehensive sociocultural studies. In the next section, I argue that the context of decolonization and criticism offered by African scholars have established

grounds for an anthropological tradition that is more locally “engaged” through its problem-oriented focus.

## **From African Studies to African Anthropology**

By 1986, when the undergraduate syllabus in anthropology was launched, teaching had surpassed research as the core activity of the IAS. The foundational years were orchestrated by academics with backgrounds in a variety of fields, including history, archaeology, linguistics, and even nutrition.<sup>3</sup> This facilitated the institutionalization of the multidisciplinary nature of the discipline in Kenya.

Professor Joshua Jason Akong’a was the only anthropologist on the first curriculum committee, and undoubtedly had a lot of influence on the curriculum. He told me that he brought a broad-based approach to his teaching due to his “liberal” anthropological training at the University of California. Given the controversial history of anthropology and the continued desire for independence among African scholars (Obbo 2006; Nkwi 2006), however, the curriculum was far from a direct continuation of the American (or British) anthropological tradition. Akong’a and his colleagues recognized the importance of “localizing” the knowledge, which aligned itself with IAS’ core ideology. This localization is clear from 1980s course descriptions, and is equally evident today.

I found that sixteen of the twenty-three courses in the undergraduate program from 1989 have explicit references to Kenya or Africa as focus areas, while several others have such references in examinations. For example, in Economic Anthropology, emphasis is placed on “indigenous African economic systems” in relation to “modern economic systems;” Urban Anthropology focuses on social life, cultural values and urban challenges in African cities; Theory and Practice in Archaeology stresses the important role of East Africa in world archaeology; and Leadership and Ethics focuses on “the significant role played by leadership and ethics/public morality in national development, particularly in Africa.” From Introduction to Anthropology in 1991, exam questions included: “The Luo were recently described by one of their leaders as being a lazy people. What is your view as a student of anthropology?” and “Anthropology is the study of ‘the other’ or ‘the primitive.’ Discuss this view with reference to: a) European anthropologists. b) East African anthropologists.” From Gender Studies in 1997, some of the questions were:

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<sup>3</sup> From interview with Mr. Tom Ondicho, April 24<sup>th</sup> 2014.

“Describe factors which influence gender access to wage employment in Sub-Saharan Africa” and “What is patriarchy and how does it affect gender access to and ownership of resources in Sub-Saharan Africa?” From *Demographic Anthropology* in 1999, questions included: “Explain the demographic transition theory and discuss factors currently responsible for declining mortality in Kenya” and “Explain the social, economic and cultural factors responsible for high infant and child mortality in Nyanza province of Kenya.”

Due to Kenyan anthropology’s localized approach, practically all the institute’s research has been done in Kenya and can thus be labeled “anthropology at home.” This stands in contrast to how traditional anthropology created a sharp contrast between “field” and “home”—even suggesting a “*hierarchy of purity* of field sites” (Ferguson and Gupta 1997, 13, emphasis in original). This is not to say that Kenyan anthropologists *should* do fieldwork “at home,” nor that Kenya *is* necessarily familiar or “home” to these scholars. It would be misguided to assume, that insider-outsider dynamics and axes of familiarity and distance are less significant factors to Kenyan and other African anthropologists than they are to Western anthropologists in Africa (see Nyamnjoh 2012; Onyango-Ouma 2006a; Sorre 2005a). First of all, Kenya is a multiethnic and multilingual country, and language barriers, cultural and religious differences can be a challenge for anthropologists doing fieldwork. Juma Scolastica (2003, 31), a former student of IAGAS, incisively captures this in her thesis where she writes about her challenges doing fieldwork in a Muslim community during Ramadan:

My request for any refreshments at a time that was considered “odd hours” was often met with such remarks as “wewe sio mmoja wetu” (which literally translates to “You are not one of us”). Some other people also remarked that “wewe ni mbara au Mjalu” (which literally means, “you are from upcountry or a Luo”). I was rather uncomfortable with these expressions as they alluded to my “outsider” identity. Therefore, I also decided to try my hand at fasting. Unfortunately, I could only manage to stay without food or drink for 48 hours.

The students discussed “culture shock” as a common feature of doing fieldwork and frequently suggested avoiding or reducing its impact by conducting research in an area that was as familiar as possible. This was especially critical as their master’s fieldwork was to be conducted in no more than three months. Finally, as Onyango-Ouma (2006a) shows, doing fieldwork “at home” can also be experienced as confrontational due to one’s identity as urban or educated. Being a “Western-trained post-colonial subject,” he states that among the people he studied, he was the



“other” (ibid., 260), which suggests class as a more significant differentiator than culture for many Kenyan anthropologists doing fieldwork “at home.”

The localized or African orientation with its accompanied practice of doing fieldwork “at home,” while not forsaking “difference” or “otherness” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), is a core pursuit of the institute. At this juncture, I believe it necessary to clarify my position in support of (Ntarangwi et al. 2006) in their distinction between an “African” and “Africanist” anthropological project. They consider the latter either to be largely referring to Western scholars with minimal personal commitment to African development, or to scholars who are sometimes writing authoritatively about African cultures without a sound understanding of local cultural practices (ibid., 26). “African” anthropology, on the other hand, refers to African scholars mainly based in the continent, who have an anthropological engagement which reaches beyond commitment to the discipline to include the very lives of the people they study, endeavoring to shape the society where they themselves belong (ibid.). Whilst acknowledging the economic determinants that also inform this academic tradition (see chapter 3), the commitment to shape society is implied in both IAGAS’ problem-focused approach and in the objectives of the Pan African Anthropological Association (PAAA), to which I shall return.

## **The Problem-Focused Approach**

From its inception in 1986, the curriculum of anthropology at IAGAS has been revised and expanded several times, and at least three trends are noteworthy. Although it had been part of the curriculum since the very beginning, an increased focus on developmental and medical anthropology is distinctly visible through the number of courses on offer, as well as the number of students venturing into these fields for their MA. Medical anthropology in particular appears to have been growing in recent years. This can be tied to the problem of tropical diseases such as malaria and HIV/AIDS, which have created a demand for an anthropological understanding of the sociocultural dimensions of health and disease. Many lecturers at IAGAS are able to secure consultancies through the large number of international organizations and NGOs operating in the area of health in Kenya. The Kenyan government’s long-term developmental goals, as encapsulated by Vision 2030 (Republic of Kenya 2007), further advocates a focus on health and development. The institute can be seen to be responding to this requirement and opportunity by covering development-oriented and applied courses. Last but not least, this problem-focus

appeals to prospective students' interest, hereby securing student enrollment, on which the institute is entirely dependent in order to secure government support (see chapter 3).

The second trend is a focus on gender, which was, and continues to be, part of the curriculum of anthropology. However, reflecting the increased focus in the 1990s on issues including gender/women in development and gender/women and HIV (Parker 2001; Schoepf 2001; see also Jahan 1995), the program of Gender and Development was introduced as an additional degree within IAS in 1999, and currently attracts more students than anthropology at MA level. This also led the former director, Collette Suda, to change the institute's name to Institute of Anthropology, Gender & African Studies (IAGAS).

Kenyan anthropologists further tend to participate in multidisciplinary research groups, which I mark as the third trend. Onyango-Ouma (2006a) argues that many are driven into consultancy work because of poor salaries and lack of funding for academic research. However, anthropologists have earned recognition within research and intervention programs (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo 2006), and intervention also appeals to many students who are eager to address pressing social issues, to which I shall return below (and again in chapter 5). The increasingly common experience from these intervention projects translates back into the curriculum where one focus has become the training of anthropology students to participate in development networks.

While the discussion above has largely been based on historical documents I came across, the following section relates to a project I explored ethnographically. This project has had important bearing on the development of anthropology at IAGAS, and clearly illustrates an engagement that reaches beyond commitment to the discipline.

### **“More Than a Quest for Knowledge”**

The Kenya Danish Health Research Project (KEDHR) in partnership with the Institute for Health Research and Development (DBL)<sup>4</sup> and funded by Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA), was inaugurated in 1994 and in operation until 2004. It involved extensive institutional links as it comprised a total of nine institutions (four Danish and five Kenyan), and was also multidisciplinary, consisting of six disciplines (anthropology, health

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<sup>4</sup> Formerly Danish Bilharziasis Laboratory.

education, health systems research, nutrition, education psychology and parasitology). In an interview with the project leader, the Danish anthropologist Jens Aagaard-Hansen, he acknowledged that training anthropology students to work in multidisciplinary teams was an established goal of the initiative. The main activities of KEDAHR centered on individual MA or PhD student projects. At least twenty-seven Kenyan MA students and four PhD students,<sup>5</sup> benefitted from this collaboration. In addition, fourteen Danish students (including my supervisor, Paul Wenzel Geissler) received external funding (Nyamongo and Aagaard-Hansen 2006). Furthermore, seven associates from IAGAS benefitted from the DBL Diploma Course on Research Methodology in Copenhagen through an exchange agreement.

A large part of the fieldwork for students' projects was conducted in Bondo district in Western Kenya. Here, students could benefit from the Nyang'oma Research Training Site (NRTS) where they had access to accommodation and computers, bikes, census and books, as well as trained field assistants and a good rapport with the local population (*ibid.*). I paid NRTS a visit during my fieldwork, and was lucky to be able to talk to two of the field assistants, James and Carolyn, and an older lady, Margaret, who all had been of assistance to the students and staff of KEDAHR for many years.

In our interview, Aagaard-Hansen argued that reciprocity and community feedback was integral to the research training provided for the anthropologists. The field assistants excitedly reported that the project had provided a crucial two-way platform for feedback, allowing staff to offer an understanding of the research, as well as providing locals with the opportunity to suggest topics worth addressing. Mr. Charles Olang'a, who was in charge at NRTS at the time of my visit, discussed to what extent his surroundings had influenced his own research. As a student, he had set out to study sexual violence, but when he saw people dying around him in the village due to HIV/AIDS, he knew he needed to reconsider his topic. "I just had to stop my work and respond to that problem first. And through that time I had money to bring almost thirty people to the health facilities for tests and healthcare. And that was just because of my bicycle. I was the one riding." In Kenya, like much of sub-Saharan Africa, the epidemic of HIV/AIDS has touched just about everyone either directly or indirectly, and reached into the very fabric of society (Geissler and Prince 2010). It is plausible that its heavy presence may have contributed to fostering such a strong social commitment among students.

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<sup>5</sup> Most were degrees in anthropology, while a few in other disciplines.

Notwithstanding the ethical challenges that emerge due to such intensive involvement, and the “consequential presence” of the anthropologist (Emerson et al. 1995, 3), Charles believed that he had done the right thing. He was resolute that the research they were doing should be “more than a quest for knowledge,” and ought to add value to the community. He argued that this was indeed the case with studies conducted by KEDHR. The project above for example, had opened dialogue around HIV which served to contribute to demystification and destigmatization of the disease, thereby increasing hospital visits, which in turn decreased the death rate and chance of further transmission.

Collette Suda and Jens Aagaard-Hansen (2003) discuss the fact that students from the two respective countries had been brought up in drastically different anthropological traditions. The Danish students had a reserved academic approach with a qualitative focus on participant observation and in-depth interviews, while the Kenyan students had a more practical problem-solving approach, and a quantitative focus with regard to techniques of data collection and analysis. As a result of the project, however, the Danish students became more exposed to challenges of conducting applied research in communities with unfulfilled basic needs, where some of the local anthropologists were bound to lifelong engagement (Suda and Aagaard-Hansen 2003; Onyango-Ouma 2006a). Concurrently, exposure to Danish colleagues encouraged the Kenyan students to open their minds to the implementation of more qualitative methods and became more flexible with regards to research design.

Although the institute’s methodological approaches became more qualitative as a result of the project, the residual quantitative expertise of Kenyan anthropology students attracted my attention (probably amplified by the fact that we are not offered quantitative training at the University of Oslo). According to my research, students are generally limited to three months of fieldwork, and some try to complete their research even quicker. This goes a long way in defending a quantitative focus, as the objective of conventional participant observation seems over-ambitious when conducted in such a short period of time. Use of questionnaires also facilitates the employment of junior field assistants, which is very common. Out of twenty-one randomly chosen methodology chapters, only two make no reference to the use of questionnaires. Most used a mixture of methods: questionnaires, key informant interviews, FGDs, direct observations, case studies or life history interviews. A couple of the students who explicitly referred to observations, noted that they used it to “help enrich the findings” or “to eliminate biases.” MA students who were planning their fieldwork in 2014 referred to the

perceived importance, based on the above reasons, to “triangulate” the three main methods planned: questionnaires, key informant interviews and FGDs. Both lecturers and students argued that this type of training would benefit students, as they would have a diversified approach when encountering the job market. This was also a strategy to avoid the labeling of anthropologists as practitioners of a “soft science” potentially relegated to peripheral concerns with “real scientists” in charge of important research (Onyango-Ouma 2006a, 265).



Figure 1: Charles Olang'a outside NRTS

Despite a residual quantitative orientation, the KEDHR has had a profound effect on the trajectories of anthropology at IAGAS as it initiated both new focus areas and new research opportunities for students. The project's thematic areas of focus were medical anthropology, nutritional anthropology, education and child anthropology, veterinary anthropology (including perceptions of animal health), and the community (including community-based care and women's groups) (Nyamongo and Aagaard-Hansen 2006). These fields, and particularly medical anthropology, became the specialization of several of the students who went on to become lecturers at the institute, an in turn inspired a new generation of students. Many of the lecturers have published a body of articles and reports in these thematic areas (see e.g. Bukachi et al. 2014; Olungah 2012; Subbo et al. 2009). Furthermore, a number of new projects grew out of this

collaboration and inspired practitioners at IAGAS to work towards establishing the institute as a regional training center at the forefront of health social sciences (Nyamongo and Aagaard-Hansen 2006).

In addition to offering specialization in medical and developmental anthropology in their MA program, the revision of the undergraduate program from 2014 builds on expertise and continued interest in applied anthropology. New courses include: Anthropology of Children, Anthropology of Poverty, Anthropology of Disabilities, Anthropology of Human Sexuality and Anthropology of Conservation and Natural Resource Management. I should stress that the orientation of Kenyan anthropologists is not exclusively one of applied anthropology, as many are not specifically trained in applied methodology (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo 2006), and consultancies do not necessarily require an applied background (Ntarangwi et al. 2006). It is, however, regarded as a field of much potential and a preferred trajectory for many students and faculty members.

On the one hand, KEDAHR can be seen as an example of how collaborations and funding can create opportunities as well as direct research within certain fields. On the other hand, research interests are not solely an economic matter, and I found that students and faculty expressed aspirations of pursuing engaged and committed training and research. The example above, which describes the way many former students of IAGAS found that KEDAHR appealed to their desire to contribute to health and development issues in Kenya, reflects this fact.

## **What is Anthropology for Contemporary Africa?**

When comparing the diverse anthropological traditions that have developed in sub-Saharan Africa, it becomes clear that the pursuit of a practical application for the discipline represents a common objective among African anthropologists (see for example Muzvidziwa (2006) for a Zimbabwean context). Moreover, in 1988, this project became institutionalized through the Pan African Anthropological Association (PAAA). The aim of the PAAA was to create a new anthropological forum where African anthropologists could demonstrate their potential contribution to world anthropology (Nkwi 1998). More importantly, however, this forum was designed to demonstrate the potential role of an anthropology engaged in solving social problems in Africa through anthropological expertise within issues such as health, gender roles, population, environment and city planning (ibid.).

The IAGAS shares objectives with PAAA, and additional links were established when the former director of the institute, Professor Isaac Nyamongo, became director of the association. However, PAAA's objectives for an African anthropology provoked skepticism among many of the lecturers I spoke to. Currently it is hard to find records of the PAAA's work, and the last issue of their journal, *The African Anthropologist*, was published in 2010. This can be principally attributed to financial constraints as the PAAA has struggled to maintain a regular annual fee-paying membership (Nkwi 1998). Another immediate problem when it comes to the strengthening of regional association is the fact that salaries of many academics do not allow for travel to conferences outside their countries. In addition, Mwenda Ntarangwi (2010) makes the valid claim that even individuals with disposable income are unlikely to prioritize attending a professional conference. This makes some kind of remuneration a precondition for participation. The history of the PAAA illustrates the prevalence of strong aspirations for a Pan-African anthropology. Many emphasize it as an ideal way of aligning anthropological intervention with national and regional development objectives based on African terms and conditions. The fact that the association continues to fail in delivering its objectives, however, suggests continued challenges for the development of a Pan-African anthropology.

Amuyunzu-Nyamongo (2006, 247), a former student of IAGAS practicing applied anthropology, argues that the environment for research is becoming increasingly constrained. Current government policies have created a harsh environment for Arts courses and, in contrast with the Moi era, there no longer seems to be a political demand for anthropologists. In 2010, the former Minister of Higher Education, William Ruto, announced that all Arts courses should be "scrapped" as they were not contributing to the government's long-term developmental goals; the achievement of Vision 2030 (Nganga 2010). Dr. Olungah from IAGAS countered Ruto's provocative claim in one of the national newspapers, arguing that the problems in Kenya were social and thereby in need of "social surgery" (Olungah 2010). Despite the defense, Ruto's statement made an impact and was repeated to me by students and lecturers alike as evidence of anthropology's perceived lower academic status in Kenya.

## **Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter I have given a historical account of Kenyan anthropology's development and described some of the discipline's current characteristics. I have argued that changes in international developmental discourse and shifts in national policy served to open the door to

the introduction of anthropology at university level. The essential argument of this chapter is that there exists an inherent tension in Kenyan anthropology. This tension is born from debates on the discipline's relationship with colonialism and Western constructs of "Africa," challenged by both post-colonial African scholars and post-modern Western scholars. This ambivalence is epitomized by President Jomo Kenyatta's decision to turn his back on anthropology in the pursuit of "modernizing" Kenya by abandoning "traditional" culture. As I have indicated in the last section, skepticism towards the discipline remains, and a certain ambivalence continues to characterize Kenyan anthropologists-to-be. This will become more evident in the final chapters where we explore the imaginaries of the anthropology students of today.



## Chapter 2:

### “What am I doing here?”

I take this precious opportunity to congratulate you for securing a change to come to the University of Nairobi. (...) Just like you, I was once a first year and I totally knew nothing about this Anthropology. Some threatened me on how I will come to the University to become an undertaker, and maybe later on, specialize on exhuming dead bodies. The most outstanding one was to study insects. I confess that on no time have I ever interacted with insects within my Anthropology, and with time I learnt that all that they were telling me were mere fallacies. The move to continue with Anthropology right now proves to be one of the best decisions I have ever made academically (...) Welcome to Anthropology!

- Chairman of UNASA

This personal welcome message is taken from a flyer produced by UNASA to welcome prospective students to anthropology. It clearly illustrates how many students perceive the discipline before they register for the program. In this chapter, I will describe the preconceived notions students have of anthropology and their prospects as anthropologists-to-be, as well as how these notions change for those who remain with the program. In order to create a better basis for understanding motivations and aspirations as well as doubts and concerns about the future, I will also provide a context of the social-economic and political landscape in which these students make their professional choices.

### Registration of New Students

In my second week of fieldwork, I was able to observe and converse with the new students during their first encounter with the University of Nairobi and anthropology at orientation week. Early on Monday morning, January 13<sup>th</sup> 2014, I stood alongside officials from UNASA welcoming and registering students. We had a stand outside the Education Building on Main Campus, and our role was to disseminate flyers with basic information about anthropology, answer questions, give directions and essentially help in any way possible. The main objective this week was to reduce the number of students who tried to transfer to other courses. I had already learned that many of the freshly admitted students did not know what anthropology was, and that they were eligible to apply for an inter-faculty transfer within the first two weeks. The notion of students coming to study anthropology without knowing anything about the discipline

puzzled me. It also led me to question my own research interest: why study anthropology students who are not interested in anthropology?

In their last year of secondary school, hundreds of thousands of Kenyan students sit for their Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). This examination is seen as a major determinant of a student's future opportunities as only candidates that score C+ and above are eligible to attend university under a government subsidy. Due to limited university slots, however, the requirements are de facto higher as universities use a cut-off point system to filter out their candidates. Hence, in 2014, only men with B (sixty points) or women with B- (fifty-nine points) were selected for a degree course (Achuka 2014).

Before students leave secondary school, they can choose three preferred options for university education. Those who qualify are admitted to university through the Joint Admission Board of Kenya (JAB).<sup>6</sup> If the students' results from the KCSE are not high enough to qualify for any of their three preferred options, they have the option to revise their course application to avoid being allocated to another, non-preferred, course. This is a disappointing situation for many students, and this is exactly the position where many prospective anthropology students at UoN find themselves. This having been said, many still feel very fortunate to have been admitted to the most popular and recognized public university in the country, and are proud of their status as the "top-cream of Kenya."<sup>7</sup>

This sunny Monday morning, Main Campus was full of students with suitcases and brown envelopes with admission papers. At around 8.30am they started walking along the line of stands representing the different faculties and departments within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. Some students came walking towards our stand, sometimes with a smile but often with a degree of unassertiveness. The first one was a young lady. The UNASA officials welcomed her and Philemon, one of the most enthusiastic representatives, was quick to ask what she already knew about anthropology. Modestly, she replied that she did not know much but she thought it was something to do with history and archaeology. It seemed like Philemon was expecting this; he responded in a rehearsed way that these fields were just fractions of the discipline and anthropology was just as concerned with contemporary society. He continued listing up some of

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<sup>6</sup> The Joint Admission Board was in 2014 replaced by Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS)

<sup>7</sup> Different versions of the same expression were stated by students (mostly in FGDs); in messages from the administration of UoN in a student information handbook; as well as in a debate on Citizen TV.

the units that were being taught at IAGAS; e.g. Medical Anthropology, Legal Anthropology and Anthropology of Tourism, and gave short descriptions of what each entailed.

Prospective students kept on coming, while Philemon and other UNASA representatives continued answering questions and talking passionately about anthropology. Another new student, Sarah, thought anthropology was the study of artifacts and old things. Eunice told us that her parents thought anthropology was the study of human bones and rather wanted her to pursue a B.A. in Economics. She, however, knew that anthropology involved studies of human culture. When a prospective male student approached us in a determined manner, it was my turn to ask if he knew anything about anthropology. His reply was brief and adamant: “Yes, it sucks!” I could not resist the urge to laugh, but quickly collected myself and asked what he meant. Yazan told me that his friends said anthropology was about museums and he could not imagine anything more boring. Anyhow, he wanted to give it a try because he had also heard that he might change his mind.

So far I have provided a glimpse of the prevalent ignorance of, and skepticism toward, anthropology among incoming students. In what follows, I will continue exploring their perceptions, but now through the lenses of locality, architecture and materiality of the institute and how these might inform student perceptions. I will do this partly through my own embodied experience of locating the institute for the first time.

## **Locating the Institute**

One of the things that influence students’ perception of anthropology is its physical, as well as symbolic, location. Many students have chosen UoN due to its reputation, name and situation in the center of the capital city. Only a highway separates Main Campus from the central business district. This location has its adverse consequences, such as extreme traffic and the resulting air pollution and potential for road accidents. However, the location and buildings also represent forces of development, opportunities and success with the city’s business and employment structures only a stone-throw away. The IAGAS, however, is not located here.

Museum Hill, where the National Museum of Kenya and IAGAS is located, is a ten-minute walk from Main Campus along the heavily busy and polluted Uhuru Highway. The first time I subjected myself to this walk, I had just passed a huge billboard marketing Nairobi News with

the well-suited question: “Does Nairobi have opportunities for me? Get the answer to the City’s most burning question,” when I noticed a secluded, green and lush area. My instincts told me that I was in the right place and I walked inside a big brown gate. In front of me was a big beige building with bold pillars and a sign which read “National Museum of Kenya,” to the left a large sculpture of a dinosaur and behind it the Louis Leakey Auditorium.

White Land Rovers were parked outside one of the grey brick-buildings, and women and men were walking around in white lab coats. I saw a couple of idle security guards, and approached them to ask if they could direct me to the institute. One of them offered to show me and I followed him crisscrossing between grey brick buildings. The area was full of trees and bushes and sometimes I had to bend my head so as not to scratch my face on the branches. I was puzzled by the scenery and the fact that the institute was located in this hidden lung in an otherwise crowded and dusty city. Somehow, this place seemed like an island where time stood still.<sup>8</sup>

After successfully navigating the shrubbery, the security guard pointed me to the building that has been the location of the institute since 1971. Next to the entrance hung a sign in UoN light blue with the name of the institute and the subtitle: “In co-operation with the National Museum.” It was a simple two-story brick building, with the director’s office, a computer room and a small library on the ground floor and a material culture collection on the first floor. The once grey bricks had been dyed reddish brown by the volcanic soil, and it gave the building an old, rustic look and feel. Appropriate for the study of history, human bones, insects and the like. The contrast between red and brown buildings and the green trees struck me. It looked exotic, like a little piece of “Africa” tucked away in a bustling, generic metropolis. My fieldwork felt instantly more anthropological.

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<sup>8</sup> This is not true of the main museum building, which was modernized and expanded between 2005 and 2007.



Figure 2: The building of IAGAS



Figure 3: IAGAS' local scenery

I entered the building, walked past a room with six stationary computers and into an approximately 25m<sup>2</sup> room with “Library” written on the door. On the left wall and at the back of the room there were bookshelves. A central bookshelf divided the room in two with six desks on either side. On the right side three windows offered the main source of light into the room. A map dividing Kenya into language and dialect zones was placed on the wall next to the windows. The room also had a desk with four computers. These were the only seats taken this day, and they, along with the seats in the computer room, proved to be by far the most popular seats in the building.

I took a short tour to get an overview of the selection and categorization of books. Many of them were dusty with a yellowish brown color and an old smell. The wall by the entrance was also covered in books, with one separated section reserved for MA- and PhD-theses and another meant for the District Socio-Cultural Profiles. The shelves at the back of the room were occupied with pamphlets of previous exam questions and a small collection of the institute's journal, MILA, the last copy dating from 2010. The rest of the library was not easy to divide into clear categories or areas of specialization. I could find books from the four fields of anthropology taught at the institute: physical, cultural, archeological and linguistic anthropology. I also recognized an emphasis on applied anthropology and several books about gender, globalization, development and medical issues. A significant proportion of the library's materials

reflected the history of the institute as the Institute of African Studies. Accordingly, one could find old books and manuscripts about African history and archaeology, different ethnic communities, religion and social systems, as well as colonial reports and books about the African education system after independence. Some of these accounts (I later learned) were written by top Kenyan scholars formerly working at the IAS—a number of which I referred to in the previous chapter—but the majority of books had been written by foreigners.

Even though the institute had its main offices and library at the museum, they had been allocated an additional, rather large room in the basement of the Education Building at the Main Campus, where their lecture halls are located. The walls, ceiling and floor of these halls are made of concrete, and only a few have windows. Every sound echoes through the dense air during the (often excruciatingly) long lectures. While I cannot speak to the reasoning behind it, the symbolism of anthropology being relegated to the basement of the Education Building is food for thought.

What did students think about these places? The spectacular University Towers on Main Campus stood as a symbol of economic development and promise, while the international headquarters scattered around town represented interconnectivity and power. In opposition to these pervasive symbols, IAGAS evoked altogether different impressions and expectations. As many students did not know much about the discipline—or what they thought was that it only dealt with excavation of bones, artifacts and old things; or, confused with the study of arthropods and thereby believed to be the study of insects—the institute’s location behind the museum added to their already misconceived understanding of anthropology. As Philemon later told me: “The location of IAGAS at the museum made me think that anthropology is an archaic old school course and if you pass the course there is no other place to work apart from the museum.” The fact that several students gave similar accounts, speaks not only to the skepticism many have towards anthropology when they begin university but also the significance they attach to the symbolic location of the institute, and their preoccupation with career prospects.

The institute has had a close collaboration with the National Museum although this collaboration weakened when the institute became a research and teaching institute in 1986. Archaeology is still, and will most probably continue, to be part of the curriculum. As I argued in the previous chapter, however, medical and development anthropology are far more popular specializations as they are believed to offer opportunities for the future. Archaeology and material culture, by

contrast, are uninteresting and, for some, fields with which they do not want to be associated. Rather, students want to be moving forward and working with what they regard as current issues. With its location on Museum Hill, the students' first impression was skepticism as to whether this discipline was keeping pace with the economic development and changes they could see and desired around them.

## **The Choice of Profession Within a Kenyan Context**

Over the course of the two registration days, we heard several accounts of new students' and parents' perceptions of anthropology. The UNASA representatives clearly had a lot of experience explaining, "what anthropology was actually all about," due to friends' and relatives' persistent interrogations. Moreover, they all knew what it was like to be the new student—worried about what this unknown and mystical discipline spelled A-N-T-H-R-O-P-O-L-O-G-Y could offer them in terms of future job opportunities. My initial impression from registration, which would become cemented over the course of my fieldwork, is that anthropology is largely unknown in Kenya and that students are first introduced to the discipline when they join university. This is in stark contrast to courses such as education, engineering, economics, law and medicine, which are seen, especially by their parents perhaps, as virtuous and prestigious. According to university application statistics from 2013, the five most popular courses at UoN were: (1) Bachelor of Law; (2) Bachelor of Commerce (B.COM.); (3) Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery; Bachelor of Economics, and Bachelor of Economics and Statistics. In 2012, the top-five list constituted the same courses but in a different order.<sup>9</sup> Of the fifty-five courses listed, Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology came out as number forty-four in 2012 and forty-seven in 2013. The different admission criteria for a specific course are dependent on the number of applicants. As anthropology is among the courses with the lowest pre-required entry points in the university, it is logically interpreted as a course of low academic standing. In addition to the low entry requirements, students' perceptions about the discipline and their own future prospects are also influenced by their personal background and experiences, as well as the cultural, socioeconomic and political reality to which they are bound.

With a growth rate of approximately five percent per year, Kenya can boast one of the few successful economies in spite of the global economic downturn. Although the country's

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<sup>9</sup> In 2012, the five most popular courses were: (1) Bachelor of Commerce; (2) Bachelor of Law; (3) Bachelor of Economics & Statistics; (4) Bachelor of Medicine & Bachelor of Surgery, and (5) Bachelor of Economics.

population growth rate has decreased, the country has a youth bulge, meaning that nearly eighty percent of Kenyans are under thirty-five years old (UNDP 2013). The youth bulge presents economic and social opportunities, but also huge challenges for both the youth and the country, of which the high unemployment rate among young people is the most critical (Kempe 2012; UNDP 2013). The United Nation Development Programme (*ibid.*, 5) reports that while the national level of official unemployment is at 12,7 percent, the rate among young people is estimated to be about twice this figure.

Accompanying the Kenyan youth bulge is a dramatic increase in means and demand for higher education. Whereas UoN was the only public university in 1970, Kenya's higher education system is expanding, currently counting seven public and twenty-seven private universities, in addition to twenty-four constituent university colleges. Furthermore, due to the reduced large-scale funding of higher education as a result of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 1990s, public universities have tended to implement dual track tuition fee programs (Lebakeng 2010; Wangenge Ouma 2008). In addition to students that receive a government subsidy (Module I students), full-paying and privately sponsored Module II students are being enrolled into "parallel programs" ahead of regular students (*ibid.*). I will return to an elaborated account of the changes in the higher education system in the next chapter. At this stage it is sufficient to say that the parallel program is part of a broader trend toward the commodification of tertiary education experienced in Kenya (Mamdani 2008; Wangenge-Ouma 2008) as well as globally (Basch 1999; Etkowitz et al. 1998).

Many of the anthropology students spoke of the parallel program with resentment and complained that it was only for the rich. Instead of being admitted to university because of their grades, the parallel students join because they have the ability to pay the high fees. In addition, they are free to choose whichever course they want. The numbers are telling, in the years from 2009 to 2014, only fourteen people applied for anthropology as Module II students. The fact that many of the anthropology students did not choose anthropology but were enrolled into the program through JAB suggests that they cannot afford the option of paying to pursue their preferred choice. One of them, Kevin, told me that he had always wanted to be a lawyer, but when he did not receive high enough grades to study law, becoming a Module II student was simply not an option. As a Module I student, his parents already paid approximately KES 30,000 (USD 321) per year in fees, while as a Module II student they would have had to pay KES



108,000 (USD 1,157).<sup>10</sup> Both of his parents were teachers in primary school and earned around 25,000-30,000 per month. “And I was the first born! I could not do it to them,” he compassionately explained. Despite the fact that anthropology had not been his first choice, Kevin had developed an interest for the subject before he came to university, and now, after four years of undergraduate studies he called himself a “proud anthropologist” and had just applied for the MA Program as a self-sponsored student.

The more time I spent with students, the more stories they shared about how they ended up in anthropology and which careers they, or their parents, had dreamt of. I came to see that understanding students’ motivations and aspirations—particularly first-year students—was not only about understanding reasons for choosing anthropology, it was equally about reasons for *not* choosing anthropology. It appears that their perceptions about the different study subjects and the potential professions associated with them are informed by ideas about which courses are marketable and which are not. Teboho J. Lebakeng (2010) argues that the market-oriented education system is found across the African continent due to the impact of SAPs. As a result of corporate or commercial interests driving research, students are becoming “extrinsically motivated by utilitarian or bread-and-butter issues such as to pass examinations with the anticipation of securing a job or promotion” (ibid., 28).

Although Kenya is presently facing large challenges with regards to the youth bulge and the high youth unemployment rate, my informants do not experience the situation as one of economic decline. In contrast to James Ferguson’s brilliant ethnography, *Expectations of Modernity* (1999), where he explores the Copperbelt’s mineworkers’ responses to sharp economic decline, I understand the students in Nairobi to be dealing with concerns balanced out by an optimism about the future. The capital is undergoing rapid change through the master plans of Vision 2030, aiming at transforming Kenya into a middle-income country, which can offer “world-class infrastructure” and a “globally competitive financial sector” (Republic of Kenya 2007, 15). Although these shiny visions are seen as speculative and highly ambitious, they provoke aspirations and expectations among student all the same. Students’ preferences for courses such as commerce and economics, as well as other “marketable courses,” should be seen in relation to the government’s vision of targeted economic growth. In fact, under their “social pillar” the government has targeted education, training and research with an emphasis on science and

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<sup>10</sup> Calculated April 19<sup>th</sup> 2015.

technology courses, and promised to increase funding to enable institutions to support activities that underpin the “economic pillar” (ibid.). But where does this leave the anthropology students?

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, William Ruto’s dismissive statement about Arts courses made a mark and exacerbates the situation for the anthropologists-to-be as it condemns their studies as inferior vis-à-vis more “marketable” subjects. Again, the market orientation of the education system is made visible by the decision to rank courses in relation to their contribution to economic growth. If the government does not recognize the potential of the Arts, then who will? How important are anthropology students? Which role can they play? These questions haunted many students I met and serves as an important context for understanding how the political-economic realities in Kenya condition students’ academic lives.

“For our group, I think we had a really rough time in anthropology,” said Benson, a day the two of us were sitting in his room at the students’ dormitories preparing for a lecture. He had come to the impression that anthropology actually had a lot of advantages and that he could use it in any field, even in medicine. It had nonetheless taken him a long time, and interestingly enough, three interviews for an internship at the UNDP to come to this conclusion. An explanation followed: In his second year he had applied for the first time, but had been hesitant when they had asked him to explain what anthropology was at the interview. He had told them that he did not really care about anthropology, and that he was more interested in medicine and IT—the latter a degree he was taking parallel with anthropology. The interviewers dismissed him as unconfident and confused. This pattern repeated itself three times before a professor in medicine working for the UNDP had helped him understand the value of anthropology by telling him that medicine did not only involve the biological, but also the psychological and cultural. On his fourth and final attempt, he had made a much better impression. After he graduated I texted him to find out what he was up to and I was happy to learn that he was happily employing his anthropological skillset: “I’m in Ugenya... A place where a whole village are drinkers, divorced and poor... I have been sent to find out why.”

In this section, I have addressed how marks and university structures, as well as political initiatives, economic realities and household economies, are conditioning students’ academic lives. In the next section, I will continue focusing on student perceptions, but shift away from the new arrivals to the students who have chosen to stay.

## Becoming an Anthropologist: On Choosing to Stay

Even though there were a few cases of people “not settling within the discipline” in their second year, most students I spoke with described themselves as dedicated to the discipline and were confident that anthropology had plenty of opportunities to offer. MA students spoke of anthropology with tremendous pride and confidence when discussing their fieldwork and the value of an anthropological approach to research. I was surprised to learn that even several of the lecturers had not chosen anthropology and had been skeptical when first introduced. Mr. Shilabukha, for example, spoke of a whole group of students from across the country who had chosen law but were called to do anthropology because there had been problems with the selection process in a number of schools. All of them intended to do an inter-faculty transfer when they joined because they did not know anything about anthropology. However, some of them chose to stay:

We said: ‘What these people are teaching us is actually quite interesting’. And learning about cultures in the Pacific, cultures in the Arctic, people in Netherlands, that know so much about fish... is interesting. We decided it’s no point to change... We should stay, for interest.

Undergraduate students also expressed confidence in anthropology as a discipline and path to a career. Especially during the FGDs, students spoke passionately about different fields for potential research, and recited a number of potential employers. I was particularly curious to hear how the first-years felt about their opportunities after their first semesters were through. While there were dissidents, most were positive: Bernice argued that anthropologists were everywhere, even in banks. She mentioned that their lecturer, Mr. Ondicho, had been able to work as an advisor in the office of the president. Moreover, there were cultural centers all over Kenya, and “you can go to your home area and start something like a museum; you’ll be self-employed, so we don’t need to worry about jobs.” Juanita said anthropologists could be employed by NGOs and UN-bodies. Grace recanted the story of how forensic anthropologists had to be brought from the US to investigate the Westgate attack in September 2013 due to a lack of qualified professionals in Kenya. Yusuf went against the tide and claimed that the reason why anthropologists in Kenya were able to secure jobs was because there were so few of them, and most of them were still forced to work as freelancers and struggled to find permanent employment. Collins was also critical, saying that there might be jobs, but they still had to

explain themselves to people who “think that you go to recover human bones and stuff.” On a more positive note, Raphael reminded us that anthropologists could always work as researchers: “you can go and research all over the globe.”

I found the hopeful thoughts students shared about the future inspiring, and a welcome contrast from their regular worries about the job market. As already mentioned, their image of society and their role in it seems more optimistic than the Copperbelt miners in Ferguson’s (1999) “ethnography of decline.” After all, Kenyan society is not marked solely by structural adjustments or decline, but offers the promise of a growing economy and the opportunities associated with the plethora of international organizations based there. Nevertheless, I could not avoid more skeptical paths of thought. Mr. Ondicho spoke of a friendlier job market at the time when he graduated, and I realized that only few, if any, students can join their lecturers in academia. Raphael’s idea of researching “all over the globe” was a pleasant thought, but seemed naïve when keeping in mind that Kenyan anthropologists are limited both in terms of personal resources and potential funding. At the same time, however, I was uncomfortably aware that this desire for travel and exposure was not only one I shared, but one I represented. But *did* we share the same desire? As I will return to in the last chapter, it does not seem to be a romantic idea of exotic fieldwork that appeals to them, but rather a career in the third sector—a life they were constantly confronted with in their home city. Indeed, when traditional “exotic” fieldwork was discussed, its relevance to the Kenyan job market was questioned.

Despite the general tendency towards optimism the FGDs also indicated a resentment of future employers as incapable of understanding the relevance of anthropology. Some of the students shared frustrating, but comical experiences, from job interviews. Milka, who had completed a program in human resources as well as anthropology, said: “They were like: ‘what is this anthropology? How do you intend to help us with human resource management and anthropology? How will this combine; humans and animals?’ So I had to explain myself and sometimes it’s frustrating.” In another FGD I had with the third-years, a student complained that a friend of his had sent more than a hundred CVs without reply. A female student followed up and said she did not think anthropologists in Kenya were given opportunities. This started a heated discussion about students who did not know where to apply, and concluded with a general agreement that they, themselves, were responsible for presenting and marketing their qualifications to potential employers. They referred especially to the contribution anthropologists could offer as policy makers for national and county authorities, stressing the importance of

applying anthropological knowledge before intervention measures were put in place. Another possible avenue for the application of anthropological knowledge was in research, business and marketing firms. One of the more ambitious students imagined her future in either UN, UNHCR or the Red Cross. All in all, students' sentiments tended to vacillate between positive emphasis on self-reliance and more discouraged complaints about external circumstances which seemed bound to limit their future opportunities.

### **“We Look For Passion Later”**

Students that developed an interest, or had chosen anthropology “out of passion,” “for the sake of knowledge,” or, “the joy of learning,” also struggled to convince people around them. Kibet, for example, had identified anthropology as his first choice after having read Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in secondary school, but still had a hard time convincing his parents: “When you speak about anthropology at home, not many people share your interest. My father wanted me to take education or law, but I didn’t want that. I chose anthropology. But that also meant that I didn’t have support.” Tom, a third year student, gave a similar account:

The only problem I’ve had is the society. You know, we have been brought up in this kind of environment where, if you take a certain course, people will ask you: ‘So, what kind of job will you get?’ (...) So it’s the returns... I mean... That investment parents put in to help you pursue that course... At the end of the day they want to know that you’re going to get a job.

These students could also be met with skepticism by their classmates. In one of the FGDs I conducted with the fourth-years, an impromptu discussion began on whether money or passion was the most important factor in choosing your field of study. The first three were adamant that money was most important, while the next two claimed it was passion. Omar, who claimed that money was most important, tried to explain the position he took: “It depends on your background... If it’s somebody who comes from a home where the whole family depends on you, the first thing you would want as a graduate is money... Then, maybe you’ll look for passion later.”

Such narratives are obviously very important to understand students’ socio-economic background and thereby gain insight to their motivations, aspirations and goals. The fact that the majority of students did not select anthropology leads me to believe that they were not from the most affluent families in Kenya. As previously mentioned, self-sponsorship represents a more

practical alternative for those who can afford it. It is worth noting, however, that some students have the means to supplement their anthropology program with self-sponsored evening classes in other disciplines.

A common object of complaint was the rising cost of living in Nairobi and that “students were suffering.” A secondary indicator of the students’ economic background is their food budget which, according to my closest informants, hovered around KES 100 (USD 1) per day. To illustrate, the cost of one tomato in the local markets was ten shillings, an avocado was twenty shillings and a chicken was approximately 200 shillings, the latter simply out of reach for most students. Many students had a stock of corn flour, rice, oil and sugar brought from home as the basis of their diet. For many, this was the only alternative, and several admitted they skipped meals when they did not have money. High unemployment accompanied with a relatively high cost of education leads to a precarious situation for students. They are constricted by their own fusion of aspiration and uncertainty, as well as the pressure to pursue something that will bring returns to their families. When Thomas Owen Eisemon (1979, 515) interviewed mathematicians and zoologists at UoN in 1978, he found the same: They did not necessarily choose their area of specialization because of interest. Rather, it was based on their “pragmatic assessments” of the research fields which could attract funding and governmental support, and their potential to fulfill the responsibility they felt towards their extended families.

When students’ choices of profession are viewed in this light, it becomes very understandable that money is *the* motivating factor for many and material comfort is privileged over their academic pursuit. This does not exclude interest or passion from the equation, it merely shifts priorities to make such pursuits subordinate to the primary motive. As the lecturer Dr. Onyango-Ouma put so eloquently: “We are not at a state where we can say people can look for education or knowledge for knowledge’s sake yet. When people are fighting for basics: food, clothing, shelter and disease; people then talk about secondaries.”

## **Concluding Remarks**

What becomes apparent in this chapter is that students are largely ignorant about anthropology when they start their program, and many confuse it with archaeology. This creates an image of anthropology as restricted to dealing with the past—an unappealing trajectory for many youths who want to be “moving forward” and do not see the relevance or marketability of such a

pursuit. After gaining more knowledge about the discipline, many students start developing an interest and change their perception of what anthropology is and what it has to contribute. However, a large number still have doubts as to where anthropology might lead them, and their most pressing question therefore concerns strategies for creating a link between education and work.

When I compare my experience to that of my informants, I note that despite our shared field of study, there are several important differences. First of all, I had the finances that enabled me to travel and conduct research abroad. Secondly, I live in a country with free education and a welfare system which (still) ensures a certain standard of living, even if I were to remain unemployed for some time. Or, as the Norwegian anthropologist, Unni Wikan (Wikan 2013, 216) notes: “We can entrust the state with our problems and opt for professional care and social security.” The free education system further leads to less pressure from our parents who have not made the same sacrifices for us to pursue our education as Kenyan parents have, and (tends to) free us from the expectations of caring for our relatives financially. Thirdly, social sciences have a relatively strong position in the country and even though anthropology is far from a “top-course,” Norwegian anthropology students are probably less apprehensive about our course being “inferior.” Other differences exist, such as Kenyan students’ more familiar experience with issues such as poverty and disease, as well as how our societies contrast each other in terms of hierarchy and inclusion/exclusion, to which I shall return in the last two chapters. As a result, anthropology students in Norway and their counterparts in Kenya have vastly different backgrounds.

Despite the many differences, there are a number of similarities between our worlds which made it easy for me to understand their misgivings and apprehension. In the course of my upbringing in anthropology—and despite my passion for it—I have, as have my fellow students, continuously questioned the extent to which this education is equipping us with a knowledge base geared to future job opportunities. The title of this chapter is therefore not a question limited to Kenyan anthropology students as we all have our reasonable doubts: What will I do with this education? There does not seem to be any obvious roles for anthropologists to play in society, and such questions are often unpleasant thought experiments for anthropologists-to-be. The younger generation of Norwegian anthropology students has to orient itself in a society which largely lacks the optimism of the postwar period and the rise of the welfare state. In our case, we have been raised in a society where our opportunities are directed by “market forces,”

and we are utterly aware of the hard fates of thousands of youth in Europe who have missed out on the prospects of their parents' generation due to financial crises. Furthermore, while Norway has a low unemployment rate, we too frequently hear that students study "wrong" or "irrelevant" courses which do not contribute to the "economic returns."



## **Chapter 3:**

# **The Economics of Kenyan Anthropology**

The focus of this chapter is IAGAS' teaching and research activities, with particular attention to students' research interests in relation to changing higher education policies and financial pressure. My main objective is to describe how Kenyan anthropology is conditioned by economic constraints. Students' decisions to do fieldwork in Kenya are not based solely on preference, but also reflect the pressure of pursuing relevance in the market economy.

In the first two sections of this chapter, I will discuss the changing role of the university and faculty due to shifts in higher education policies and market demands. This analysis forms the basis for my discussion on the implications these political and financial constraints have had for research and training at the institute. I go on to describe the director's strategies to ensure a future for the institute, before shifting focus to students' strategies for choosing individual research projects. I conclude with a broader comparison of the practices and challenges of anthropologists in Kenya to the situation of their colleagues in the West.

### **The Emergence of the Entrepreneurial University**

According to Gerald Wangenge-Ouma (2008), there have been three higher education policies in independent Kenya: The era of free higher education (1963-74); the era of cost sharing (1975-mid-1990s), and the era of privatization and commercialization (mid-1990s onwards). The era of free higher education was based on the aspiration to replace the departing colonial administrators with highly trained people, as well as to ensure equity of access for students. Kenya's first Development Plan rated education and agricultural development as top priorities, and tertiary education was almost entirely financed by the state (*ibid.*) The combination of increasing demand for higher education, declining national economic performance followed by world economic recession in the 1980s, however, made the state's goals impossible to achieve. Eventually, the World Bank also made a break with the earlier "statist" approach, and development jargon came to be encapsulated in "by-passing the state" (The World Bank 2008). Corresponding with this paradigm shift were the SAPs, which drastically reduced state funding of social services such as higher education in many developing countries (Ferguson 2006). According to new World Bank demands, students, or their parents, were to cover both tuition

and the maintenance costs, although university remained heavily subsidized (Wangenge-Ouma 2008; 2012).

As Wangenge-Ouma explains, the economic downturn continued into the 1990s and the Kenyan government had increasing difficulties financing higher education, ultimately leading to their withdrawal from the sector. This transition is evident at UoN, where the percentage of the budget covered by the state decreased from seventy percent in 1998 to thirty-nine percent in 2005 (2008, 223). Both Wangenge-Ouma (2008) and Mahmood Mamdani (2008) call this the era of privatization and commercialization. In the government's 1997-2010 *Master Plan*, universities were requested to seek non-public sources of revenue such as income from research and consultancies, manufacturing for the market, and grants from NGOs. As such, the economic model of higher education in Kenya has transitioned from the free "developmentalist university" of the nationalist era (Mamdani 2008), through a phase of cost sharing between state and student, to the current status of increasing privatization and commercialization. This process is not unique to Kenya or Africa, but is reflective of an international trend whereby universities have broadened their activities from "education and research for its own sake to meeting specific research needs of industry" (Etzkowitz et al. 1998, 8).

In their book, *Capitalizing Knowledge* (1998), Etzkowitz et al. describe the emergence of the "entrepreneurial university" and argue that universities and firms have become more alike in the sense that they now both engage in "translating knowledge into marketable products" (ibid., 8). According to the authors, this process is neither new nor exclusive to the capitalist-free market, but is rather reflective of an intensifying and increasingly international trend. In the United States, enhanced academic-industrial relations have been imagined as a pivotal step toward economic revitalization, and academics are under increasing pressure to align their research with private sector interest. This stands in stark contrast to the early post-war era when they could allow themselves to be relatively unconcerned with the practical outcomes of their research as they were virtually guaranteed government support (1998, 4-5). Since the early 1990s, public and corporate leaders in the United States have raised concerns about inefficiencies in higher education and stressed new values and practices which emphasize "market share, niche, cost-effectiveness, and efficiency to the academic sector" (Basch 1999, 6).

Critiques of this change have focused on potential conflicts of interest between private and public interests in research, with the possibility of commercialization leading to an erosion of the

basic science base (Etzkowitz et al. 1998). In Kenya, however, public universities have primarily developed revenues through parallel programs and “private” students (the dual track tuition fee programs for full-paying students, see chapter 2), with less success in securing significant earnings from other market sources (Wangenge-Ouma 2008). An emerging problem with this type of privatization, which Wangenge-Ouma (2012) points out, is the fact that privatization has led to a predominance of self-sponsored students, while government-sponsored students diminish in number and become an unpopular minority in most of Kenya’s public universities. Even worse, admissions records seem to suggest that government-sponsored students may be excluded from enrollment altogether, at least in “marketable” courses such as medicine and engineering (ibid., 221).

## **Changing Roles of Faculty**

The limited success of universities in diversifying their income base does not extend to individual faculty members. Many lecturers at IAGAS take on consultancies to significantly supplement their relatively low salaries as public university lecturers (Ntarangwi et al. 2006; Onyango-Ouma 2006a). In a conversation with Dr. Onyango-Ouma, he argued that the effort required to achieve the title of professor—often involving moving between institutions—no longer makes economic sense. He would therefore rather stay in Nairobi where there are more opportunities for consultancies, than move to other universities where requirements for a professorial post are lower. Due to dissatisfaction with their salaries, Ntarangwi (2008, 91) claims that lecturers are “scholars out for hire to anyone with a paycheck.” This reality is not exclusive to university lecturers, however, as many Kenyan anthropologists can only obtain relevant work through consultancies with international organizations. Ntarangwi refers to anthropological enterprise’s future in Kenya as “the anthropology of short-term consultancies that not only dictate the duration, but also the direction of the research” (ibid.).

There are several challenges worth addressing with regard to anthropologists’ extensive engagement in consultancies. For one thing, bureaucracy may restrict intellectual production and scholarly creativity to mere routine reports (Ntarangwi et al. 2006, 30). Mary Amuyunzu-Nyamongo (2006, 240) considers the potential conflicts of expectation between discipline and client. For example, while a multidisciplinary research institute may require a precise research protocol, an anthropological supervisor will not only expect objectives and methodology, but also a conceptual framework and a comprehensive literature review. Onyango-Ouma (2006a,

257) argues that a common dilemma for the consultant might be between choosing to produce objective reports which risk sacrificing good relations, and submitting to the pressure to report positive progress so as to remain “in their good books for a future contract.”

Returning to the role of academics and universities engaged in commercial activities, Etzkowitz et.al (1998) argue that this can be achieved in at least two ways. They can try to keep these activities detached from their more traditional roles and responsibilities, or these activities can be redefined, “as part of the legitimate role of academics and universities who define their tasks as contributing to innovation and economic growth as well as pursuit of knowledge” (ibid., 14). Precisely such a legitimization is put forward by a former Vice Chancellor of the UoN, Crispus Kiamba, in his narrative on the introduction of privately sponsored students and the emergence of what he refers to as the “entrepreneurial university.” Kiamba (2004, 4) claims that with a “business model” the university would not only be doing good business, but “it would be providing the much-needed impetus for a national knowledge economy,” while relieving the nation of a financial burden. Etzkowitz and Webster (1998, 39) argue that in the literature of structural changes in universities, some claim that a new type of academic institution is emerging, “one that is oriented much more directly to playing a role on behalf of the state as an agency of economic development.” They suggest that we might come to see a new “social contract” between academia and society. In Kenya, this has already become policy, and universities are urged to have a “strong orientation on economic impact” and contribute actively in the government’s national ambitions of becoming a knowledge-based economy (Republic of Kenya 2012, 107). Moreover, universities are evaluated on how their graduates are employed or create employment opportunities, as well as the extent to which they incorporate the needs of industry—a move which is said to “deter universities from offering irrelevant courses” (Muindi 2011).

## **Between Restrictions and Emerging Openings**

The institute—as part and parcel of the university structure—is inevitably restricted by the same government regulations discussed in the previous section. With this in mind, it becomes clearer that the orientation of the institute is not merely a consequence of chosen direction of research and teaching, but also founded on necessity and survival. In this section, I will show how economic conditions create challenges for the progress of the anthropological discipline in many African countries, and how Kenyan anthropologists cope with these challenges.

In chapter 1, I described the institute's disciplinary orientation as localized, or Africa-oriented. Despite the diverse national traditions that have developed in sub-Saharan Africa over the last twenty-five years, there is a claim to be made for a mutual research interest in practical issues such as health, agriculture, politics, environment and ethnicity (Nkwi 2006). This shared interest has led to a desire to strengthen collaboration regionally through the likes of the PAAA. Despite this desire, such initiatives perpetually fall short of their objective and it is clear that intercontinental networks still outweigh their relatively underdeveloped intra-African counterparts in terms of influence (Ntarangwi et al. 2006). This is reflected in the fact that almost every member of the IAGAS faculty received scholarships to conduct part of their training in places like Denmark, England, India, New Zealand and the United States. The institute has in turn attracted American guest lecturers, as well as exchange students from several Western countries.

The institute has thrived on workshops, conferences, research funding and participation in joint research projects through international networks. Anthropologists at the institute have been actively involved in several projects, including the KEDAHR project (1994-2004) mentioned in chapter 1; the REACT Project (2005-2010) with financial support from EU; the Governance Project with financial support from UNDP; the Research Capacity Strengthening (RCPlus) with financial support from World Health Organization (WHO); the Cystercercosis in Eastern and Southern Africa Project (CESA) with financial support from DANIDA, and The Women Studies Project (1987-1992) with financial support from Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). The returns from such collaborations are high, and a strategy of the IAGAS is to secure future prospects for the institute through partnerships of this type. As the anthropology program attracts few self-sponsored students, the revenues from such market sources—not to mention the fully self-sponsored program Gender & Development Studies—represent a crucial source of income. It is evident that the pursuit of established collaborations and funding from alternative sources has become increasingly important as the government is pushing universities to seek alternative income and to participate in consultancies (Republic of Kenya 2012).

In spite of the international links, virtually all research done at the institute has been conducted in and around Kenya. The funding that lecturers and students at the institute have received has been directed into local research on issues of health, women, environment and governance. For instance, out of the 117 MA and seventeen PhD theses I assessed, all fieldwork locations were

within the country, with the exception of one in Mozambique. Not all research topics or research questions have been Kenya-specific, but Kenya has either been the natural/preferred choice or the only option for the students. This inclination can be explained by the fact that both students and lecturers believe that their chances of securing employment are significantly higher after the completion of relevant research in Kenya. Dr. Olungah explained that he regarded his time studying in Cambridge as temporary, and since he always knew he would be returning to Kenya, he wanted to conduct relevant post-graduate research on ethno-medicine and reproductive health.

Students mentioned several economic factors as critical considerations when deciding what and where to do research. A question students have to ask themselves is whether they can afford to pay for accommodation, food and transport where they are intending to conduct fieldwork. Although they argued that the choice of topic was the priority, it seemed that many of them selected field sites either close to their home where they could live with relatives, or in Nairobi where they already paid rent. Another consideration popularizing this strategy is the perpetual language barrier in Kenya, and even this potential challenge can be translated into economic terms due to the additional cost of an interpreter.

As is the case with faculty seeking opportunities as consultants, students' motivations for MA projects are to a large extent steered by market considerations and funding. As I will return to in chapter 5, students expect higher education to secure them formal employment, and they aspire to jobs that not only ensure a livelihood, but also provide status. Faced with the bleak reality of large-scale youth unemployment, however, they believe they have to think and act strategically to secure such jobs. The notion of relevance is therefore crucial to their choice of research topic and these choices tend, as a result, to reflect tendencies within developmental discourse. For example, from 1987 and through the 1990s, women and gender-issues were popular research angles. In this period, the institute increased its teaching and research on gender-issues due to the Women Studies Project that was being funded by NORAD at the time. This enticed students to write theses such as "Decision Making Among Small Scale Women Horticultural Farmers in Limuru Location of Kiambu District, Kenya." From 1996 onwards, the research started centering on medical issues and reproductive health. As discussed in chapter 1, this increased interest can be traced back, in part, to the introduction of the KEDAHR, which focused on medical anthropology and assured students of a reliable source of interest-specific funding.

There have been other popular research interests at the institute, and some of the recurrent fields are agriculture, farming, food security and environmental degradation. Agriculture's status as the single most important sector in the Kenyan economy has kept it a top priority for the government since independence. It has also been a focus of interest for international actors, including the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), which has invested heavily in Kenya since 1979. Other international organizations which have funded student research into agriculture include the German Education Exchange Service (DAAD), the International Development Research Center (IDRC) and Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI).

One can clearly see that students choose research topics to carve out their niche in the increasingly global process of translating knowledge into a marketable product (Etzkowitz et al. 1998). They do not necessarily have funding that directs their research and findings from the outset, but it seems as if the vast majority choose their topic strategically in the hope of securing a sponsor. The majority of Kenyan students are not free to travel to faraway exotic places to study ritual dance or the importance of the mother's-brother in matrilineal kinship systems—nor do many express a desire for such a study. As Professor Harrison Maithya, Head of the Department of Anthropology and Ecology at Moi University (MU), puts it when explaining the aim of the institute: “We want to see how we can utilize anthropological knowledge to impact change and development”; or, as the critical Paul Zeleza (1997, iv, in Ntarangwi et al. 2006, 31) formulates it: “African scholars cannot afford the disengaged academic recreations of faddish theorizing others seem to be able to indulge in.” I will return to a more elaborate account of students' research choice strategies after concluding the discussion on the institute and its faculty response to altered educational policies and market orientation of the university.

## **A Critical Game of Recognition**

As I have argued, applying anthropological knowledge is a desirable pursuit for students and faculty alike at UoN, MU as well as Maseno University, and all universities can be seen to be revising their curriculum to “meet the market needs.”<sup>11</sup> I was able to observe the critical game of marketing the discipline on various occasions. One such event was the Open Day at the university in May 2014, where representatives from the institute intended to market the course to

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<sup>11</sup> From interview with Harrison Maithya July 23<sup>rd</sup> and Isaac Nyamongo March 24<sup>th</sup> 2014.

a group of new potential students. A Power Point Presentation ran on loop at the back of the stand, presenting eminent alumni in important positions as anthropology's poster children. The critical objective seemed to be convincing the Chancellor herself of the important contributions IAGAS had to offer. A tense atmosphere and a tail of cameras followed her around as she moved through the obstacle course of stands and exhibitions greeting the different representatives. When she arrived at the anthropology stand, the director made a huge effort to encourage her recognition of their research. This game seemed to be crucial in determining whether the department contributed to the university's "irrelevant" or "employment-creating" courses, only the latter worth the consideration of future students.

The institute announces important events and updates on the activities of faculty on their website. Recent updates have informed browsers that the director has been in the process of establishing a partnership with Oxfam and Women Empowerment Link; that Professor Nyamongo has prepared a statement on the Ebola virus for the World Council of Anthropological Associations and UN; that IAGAS has held a role modeling event called "Hidden Success, Emergent Opportunities" focusing on the role social scientists could play in agriculture; in addition to various research, conferences and workshops faculty members have attended. The website serves as an arena for lecturers to market their expertise and qualifications, and for students to get a sense of their own potential prospects. Anthropology has to be promoted as a course that will provide opportunities outside of academia to be able to attract and retain students. Such prospects are, as I have argued, of no less importance to lecturers who need to look to the market to supplement their salaries. Furthermore, the efforts of the director to establish new international links is as important to the institute as a potential source of funding as it is to students with ambitions of working for these big international organizations and to connect with the world beyond Kenya (see chapter 5).

So far, I have explained how anthropological practice in Kenya is conditioned by changing higher education policies and financial pressure. This reality is not restricted to Kenya, nor to the anthropological discipline alone, but reflects an emerging global process changing the role of the university to one of facilitator to economic development (Etzkowitz et al. 1998). For anthropologists in Kenya, this process is particularly evident as the focus on long-term fieldwork becomes abandoned in favor of temporary consultancies. The strong regional focus of the institute can be seen as a consequence of today's economic reality, as there is a real lack of



alternatives for researchers. In the following section, I will focus more directly on students' individual research projects.

## **Grabbing Opportunities: the Anthropological Entrepreneur**

Over the course of my fieldwork, I had several conversations and interviews with current and former students, as well as lecturers, about their own fieldwork and research projects. One of the former students I met was Deborah. She had recently switched fields and was now using her anthropological skills to run a marketing firm which she had founded with a friend. While still at the institute, one of the lecturers had helped her secure a job at The Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI), where she had signed a two-year contract. From this experience she learned that she wanted to continue with medical anthropology and returned to university to pursue her MA. During her program, she was offered a one-month contract with the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), with a two-month extension if she agreed to do fieldwork for them. She accepted the offer and ended up doing an evaluation on orphans and vulnerable children. When I met her, she had still not submitted her thesis: "Looking back, I really struggled to write that paper and I'm still revising because it wasn't my passion. I just did it because there was funding, but if I had done what I wanted, I would have graduated last year."

Deborah was far from the only one who had accommodated donor interest at the expense of her own. When I met Nashon, another medical anthropologist, he was working as a research coordinator for the Department of Psychiatry at UoN. Nashon explained that he had been interested in female reproduction and had written a proposal to study obstetric fistula when Jens Aagaard-Hansen connected him to the Steno Diabetes Center in Denmark, who wanted to fund research on body image and health. Like Deborah, he chose to abandon his original proposal and accept the offer. Unlike Deborah, however, Nashon did not regret the decision and spoke enthusiastically about his research. He explained that people who lived in rural areas regarded "big as healthy," which made them susceptible to diabetes. He had been able to compare his findings with another student who had done a similar study in Nairobi and experienced different attitudes towards body size and obesity. Although Nashon was happy with his research topic, he did not hesitate to stress the importance of funding:

That is now the orientation that I'm taking... But if I get different funding for example for my PhD, I will most probably drop the body image, diabetes and

obesity and pick up a topic that will help me through my PhD (...) You might have your own interest, but with lack of funds your interest will not be achieved.

Thankfully, Nashon had developed an interest for the research he was funded to conduct, and was excited by his findings as a result. He took the opportunity that came along, but from the eagerness with which he described his fieldwork, it did not seem as though the funded route to a degree was his only motivation. He seemed to take genuine pride in what he had done, and had an interest in medical anthropology in general, allowing him to be pragmatic when offered funding.

This opportunistic, yet dedicated, attitude towards research was a common one among students. The first time I met the master's student Obonyo, for example, he was working on a proposal to do a study on health-related challenges faced by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersexed (LGBTI) people. Obonyo stood out as one of the students with the most passionate commitment to anthropological research, extending well beyond the lecture halls. He was part of a group called the African Cultural Network, headed by a retired Kenyan anthropologist, Magoiga Seba, which included several other students from the institute. One of the main objectives of this organization was to raise funds and organize activities “favouring the development and revival of African culture” (African Cultural Network 2004), and Obonyo talked passionately about ideas for the way forward, and criticized the lack of political will to invest in these issues. He also participated in conferences, and had held a presentation at the university about homosexuals' double health burden—a topic he was clearly passionate about. It was due to this keen interest in sexuality that I was surprised to hear that he too had abandoned his own project when an institute he had been working for offered him the chance to do research.

I visited him in May, during his fieldwork on Rusinga Island in Western Kenya. He was participating in a multidisciplinary research project, called SolarMal, trying to prove the potential of mosquito traps eliminating malaria on the island. After having spent a whole year on the island, he explained that he had developed a good understanding with the community and been able to add valuable knowledge to the project, which the rest of the research group was unaware of. “While they are students of mosquitos, we are students of a bigger and more intelligent thing—a cultural being,” he said, making a point of differentiating the little group of social scientists including himself, from the researchers in medicine and entomology. Although he was appreciated for his contribution to the project, he was not entirely satisfied with the

collaboration. Obonyo complained that he was confined within the pre-existing parameters of study, and that he had to deal with the expectations of the other scientists in the group: “They want me to quantify my data and give them percentages, and they always question my progress,” he explained dejectedly. Despite his frustration, he had enjoyed the advantages of funding, such as the free accommodation and computers available, and was bitter about the university’s inability to help students pursue their favorite research subject:

I think they [UoN] give you 9,000 Kenyan Shillings... That’s too little and it can’t take you anywhere. So if you’re a student and you want to go to the field, but the university isn’t funding you, then you start looking for funds. Then it becomes funding first—before you figure out what you want to study.

The limited research grant offered by the university certainly constrains students. “That’s not funding! I haven’t even claimed for that money yet!” said Atieno one lazy afternoon when he, Erick and I sat in the office talking about fieldwork and funding. “Academic research should be independent... While intervention studies are intervention studies; academic research should be academic and there should therefore be funding for academic research. But because of the opportunities to get funding by NGO’s, most go into intervention,” Atieno continued. He had just finished his thesis about cash transfer programs for children, which he had proudly completed without a sponsor. Erick, by his side, was yet to begin his fieldwork about the “re-emergence of female genital mutilation and relevant interventions among the Kipsigis.” The issue of female genital mutilation, or cutting (FGM/FGC), was and remains an important topic in Kenya, and Erick was in contact with an organization targeting abandonment of the practice. He explained his situation like this:

I’m a developmental anthropologist; I wanted to do something like Atieno... But since this organization needs research, and since I’m a poor student and need funding... Then... I’m doing FGM... To me it wasn’t a priority area... I wanted to look at the practical aspects of development interventions—the effects of development programs.

Erick had talked about his project for a while, but this was the first time he admitted that he actually would have preferred to do something else. I therefore asked him to confirm if he was really not interested, and he answered that: “Once an organization is funding and dictating you, that research will not be from the heart. It will be more of the money than the mind.” Atieno disagreed and said that he could still develop an interest: “I’ve developed interest in every study that I’ve been involved in,” he explained. I asked if he would like to continue working with this

issue, and he said he would not have anything against that, but, not necessarily out of interest: “We have been socialized to grab the opportunities that come our way and make the best out of it. As long as it isn’t something that goes against the ideologies that I believe in. For example, I wouldn’t work for an organization that’s pro-FGM,” he said, and quickly added: “Passion is in Western countries,” and both of them laughed. “I have passion!” Atieno objected. “Yes, of course, but that’s often secondary... If you got funding, then you would do something else,” Erick replied.

The discussion above illustrates many of the economic constraints I have discussed in this chapter. Students and faculty regularly referred to competition in the job market where the ever-growing number of graduating students have to battle for survival. Even more frequently, however, they commented on the lack of awareness about anthropology, a complaint they largely directed as a (self-)criticism of the institute’s representatives, at Kenyan anthropologists’ squeamish attitudes to self-exposure, and at the governments exclusive focus on science and technology. As I will return to in the following chapters, students aspire to achieving personal success as well as providing public service: through their graduate program they either nurture the interest they developed in their undergraduate program or grab an opportunity to pursue an MA with a scholarship. They motivate themselves to pursue a degree that is neither well-known nor prestigious hoping that their particular brand of knowledge will somehow be recognized in the future. While speaking fervently about “solving problems back at home,” they appear ever-ready to abandon their passion for a paycheck.

## **Comparative Experiences**

The changing political economy and resulting financial pressure on colleges and universities, coupled with the undermining of academic pursuits have raised important questions and concerns for anthropology as a discipline. An example of this is the uncertainty around job opportunities in academic anthropology and possible directions for a more engaged anthropology going forward (Basch 1999; Peacock 1999; Rylko-Baver, Singer, and Willigen 2006). Anthropology is no longer restricted to the academy, and academia is not even the largest employer of anthropologists, at least not in the United States (Greaves 1999). Tom Greaves (1999) gives an account of the academic employment situation in the United States since the 1970s. He claims that an increasing number of institutions have started offering anthropology degrees, with full-time positions for anthropologists continuing to rise. However, these

institutions have produced almost twice as many PhDs as there are openings in the professoriate. Greaves compares the situation to an overcrowded railway station where many have given up waiting for a ticket to the professoriate-train and rather board other vehicles. Not surprisingly then, he argues that most students, and practically all master's students end up in nonacademic jobs (*ibid.*).

James L. Peacock (1999) is among those who worry about the undermining of anthropological endeavors. He calls for a "proactive anthropology" with anthropologists taking a stand as public intellectuals and not merely as academics. Peacock suggests that we should be critical of our inclination to reward those who contribute inwardly, and seek rather to reward contributions which "resonate with larger human issues and are communicated in ways that resonate widely" (*ibid.*, 25). Similarly minded, George Marcus (2008, 210) argues that there is currently much enthusiasm for a public, or "citizen anthropology," in the US, as well as greater resemblance of research interests between anthropologists of the "center" and those of the "margins." Rylko-Baver et al. (2006), also refer to recent calls for a more "public" and "relevant" anthropology, which, they argue, has led a considerable number of anthropologists to turn towards what they regard as pressing social issues. They expand on these appeals and make a call to reposition applied anthropology as a suitable framework to achieve the "discipline's goal of pragmatic achievement" (2006, 178). Rylko-Baver et al. (2006, 182) stress the need to examine common misconceptions about applied anthropology, exemplified by the notions of the "purity" of academic pursuits. This qualification relies on a false dichotomy of pure and applied, suggesting that applied anthropology is conceptualized as inferior to the standard type, namely "pure" anthropology (Rylko-Baver et al. 2006; see also Marcus 2008 and Ntarangwi et al. 2006).

Transferred to the Kenyan setting, such a dichotomy would subordinate Kenyan anthropology as a "peripheral" tradition in the eyes of the hegemonic "central" anthropology. Lecturers did not express any sense of inferiority with regard to the pure:applied dichotomy. On the contrary, they emphasized the value of applied or "relevant" anthropology as it stood opposed to "pure" anthropology preoccupied with "irrelevant" things and producing theory. All too familiar with the normative interpretation of the applied:pure dichotomy, however, some lecturers did not hesitate to highlight the challenges they faced as a result, such as the difficulty of getting published in peer-reviewed international journals. As shown in the previous section, students were more concerned with a passion:necessity dichotomy which they also associated with West:Africa and they often commented that my research was "free" in contrast to their own.

Students seemed largely ignorant of, or unconcerned with, the normatization of the pure:applied divide. Seemingly unaware of other circles' persistent affinity for "irrelevant" subject matter, they remained convinced that an applied and "relevant" approach was the way forward.

The condescending connotations to the pure:applied divide are also confronted in the project of "world anthropologies," which aims to make visible the geopolitical dimensions of anthropology where "dominant anthropologies" (Anglo-American, British and French) operate like "*normalizing machines*" (Restrepo and Escobar 2005). Restrepo and Escobar argue that the dominant anthropologies—especially the United State academic hegemony—have been produced by structures of global capitalism and are "part and parcel of the modern intellectual division of labor" (ibid.). Thus, they stress the crucial importance of problematizing power relations between different anthropological traditions and locations to avoid constraining other anthropological practices and knowledge. On a more positive note, Marcus (2008, 209) argues that US anthropology has become more "accountable" due to the effectiveness of the discipline's self-critique in the 1980s, and that this is "bound to be changing the nature of the center-margin relations between US anthropology and its professional 'others.'"

The ongoing debate on the relevance of anthropology in the United States and Europe has largely been constructed in dichotomous terms. Firstly, it has been imagined as either pursuing relevance constrained to the "ivory tower," or pursuing relevance which extends to wider political issues, in line with the authors above. Alternatively, it has been framed as a debate between academic freedom and relevance as dictated by liberal politicians and the market. Ulf Hannerz (2008, 228), for example, notes that the habitats of anthropologists are changing, and this also leads to pervasive demands from a "neoliberal culture complex" affecting the rhythms of both research and training. Linda Basch (1999, 3) similarly argues that the decline in state funding and increased application of market values in the US raises questions of "worth" and "productivity" in academia. Judith Okely (2013, 9) reports on a parallel situation in Britain, where liberal politicians have called for "usefulness," "relevance" and "wealth creation" in academic research. Norway also has its share of "William Rutos," as the current government's new long-term plan states that research funds are to be directed in compliance with political priorities. Furthermore, there has been increased political focus on strategies for attracting Norwegian students to courses which are "more useful" to society, those that contribute to "productivity" and "economic returns" (NTB 2014). While the situation is experienced more

acutely in Kenya, these discussions pose serious questions of the role anthropology plays in society and the manner in which this role might change.

## **Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter I have discussed IAGAS' teaching and research activities, as well as students' research interests in relation to changing higher education policies and increasing pressure from economic restructuring both within Kenya and internationally. I have shown the degree to which structural adjustment and government policies have forced the institute to secure its own future by attracting students and securing external financial support. We have seen that faculty are driven into consultancy work due to low salaries, a trajectory which is likely to remain a significant component of the future for the discipline in Kenya. I have argued that Kenyan anthropology has prospered due to communication and exchange with Western colleagues and international networks; prospects which the director strives to provide and sustain. Such collaborations have nonetheless confined research to the Kenyan setting, resulting in the fact that Kenyan anthropologists have been unable to do the "exotic fieldwork" that has served as "gatekeeper" to Anglo-American anthropology (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 14). Perhaps staying closer to home humbles Kenyan anthropologists who tend not to construct fashionable anthropological theories in obscure language which gains little resonance in the wider world (Peacock 1999, 25). They are more concerned with the extent to which their research is marketable to potential employers, and on the other side of the coin,<sup>12</sup> also worthwhile and useful to Kenyan society. A parallel discussion is ongoing in Western countries, where anthropologists worry about anthropological research being undermined due to demands from liberal politicians and the market, or make calls for an anthropology which is more proactive or public.

The principle objective of this chapter has been to describe the extent to which Kenyan anthropology is conditioned by the economic constraints on its practitioners, and their strategies to overcome challenges and seize opportunities in this environment. I have also hinted that students' motivations are ambiguous, and not solely influenced by economic considerations. In the following chapters I show that there is more behind their pursuits than a mentality of opportunism, and that a decision to do fieldwork in a Kenyan community can also be seen as a reflection of a sense of commitment to "solve problems back at home."

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<sup>12</sup> See discussion on Graeber (2001) in chapter 5.

## Chapter 4:

### Ambivalent Pursuits

Kenya is a third world country, which means it is a developing country and we have the potential to grow. So what I have learnt as an anthropologist is that the solutions are mainly with us, but it is just that people don't know about it. Even the food crisis that we are always experiencing... it should not be happening because we have the potential of growing the crops. (...) So I think most of the problems we are facing: insecurity, food crisis, poverty... they are things that we can solve ourselves.

- Female second year student in FGD

This chapter focuses on students' academic activities and how these play a role in forming their anthropological knowledge. An overarching theme through the many issues raised is the question of how students envision society. Questions of "society" are central to social scientists on an academic level. Beyond this, we have our own personal experiences of participating in, and contributing towards, our societies, which both inform and are informed by, our academic interpretations. How do our experiences inform these notions of society, and possibly our role as anthropologists? The previous chapter had a predominantly economic focus, arguing that students and faculty are largely guided by a mentality of opportunism conditioned by their financial constraints. In this chapter, however, I seek to nuance this claim by revealing some different and, at times, contradictory aspirations of students and faculty. Despite, and perhaps because of, the prevalent imaginary of Kenyan society as guided by marketability, limited opportunities, and resulting cynicism, many students seem to be reaching for change and display a desire to contribute to society.

The initial section begins with a brief return to the first-year students' encounter with the university and anthropology through the orientation meetings arranged by the institute. Here I will describe the manner in which anthropology is presented and methods former students use to promote the course as marketable, or useful. In the second section, I give an account of two typical lectures and strategies for student preparation. As student life is a multi-layered engagement (Ntarangwi 2010), I proceed to turn my attention away from academia to provide some brief insights into other rhythms of student life at the university. The chapter concludes with a focus on the political engagement of anthropology students, showcasing their implementation of the "Anthropological Forum" as a form of social debate.



## **An inspirational meeting**

On January 17<sup>th</sup> 2014, I participated in an orientation meeting for the first year students. Most of the institute's staff was present, as well as three alumni who were invited by the director to speak of their experience as anthropologists in the workplace. After opening with a prayer, Dr. Olungah reassured the students that the meeting would touch on job related issues, knowing only too well that this was a pressing question for students, and would likely determine whether or not they chose to stay. The first alumnus, Dalmas, spoke of his initial skepticism towards anthropology, but referred to the fact that it had ultimately turned out to be a great choice. He acknowledged the challenges students faced in the competitive job market, but argued that their advantage as anthropologists would be their "holistic" and "multidisciplinary" approach, which gave them a broad spectrum of research arenas and prepared them for a wide range of career opportunities. Dalmas was working for the African Resource and Research Forum (ARRF) at the time, and by the end of my fieldwork, he had also started lecturing part-time. I met him several times and heard him speak passionately about the "beauty of anthropology" and his ambitions for the discipline as well as the institute. However, he was critical of the lack of initiative of students and faculty to apply their knowledge politically; and frequently lamented the vacuum of strong anthropological associations as well as a gap between theory and practice at the institute. Dalmas wanted anthropology out of the ivory tower and into humanitarian agencies to contribute to real issues. He felt it the responsibility of the institute to create structures that could link students to these institutions.

The second alumnus was a young woman whose confident introduction was simply, "you are going somewhere!," referring to herself and Dalmas as solid proof. Sarah confessed to being as unsure as they were when she first started, but cautioned them against quitting before knowing what the course entailed. Like Dalmas, she elevated "holism" as the discipline's strength and commented that anthropology was "necessary" in their multicultural environment. Sarah went on to ask students where they thought they could work which provoked a hum of chatter and laughter. A miserable voice at the back offered "at the museum," which made Sarah join her audience in laughter. "That is a very important job," she said, but explained that the museum was predominantly staffed by those who specialized in archaeology, and anthropology was much more diverse. She explained that she, herself, was working for Transparency International Kenya where they investigate and work against corruption and "empower citizens." She eagerly informed them that her boss was also an anthropologist, and that she was certain that all of her

fellow students had found gainful employment somewhere. Her encouraging speech was met with solid applause from the audience. The final alumnus then took the stage with an enthusiastic speech about her decision to alter path from medicine to anthropology, and that she actually was “better off” than many of the medical students. “And now you think... What!?” she joked, and the audience appeared as shocked as her rhetoric suggested they were bound to be. She claimed that anthropology students had a competitive advantage compared to the thousands of undergraduates with a degree in Business or Economics.

The rest of the meeting continued in the same vein with lecturers highlighting anthropologists occupying important posts around the world. They emphasized the “success” of former students who mastered job interviews and stood out from the crowd thanks to their “cultural knowledge,” and who had benefitted from the institute’s local and international networks. In this meeting, anthropologists were advertised as “big people,” a sentiment contested by one student in particular in consideration of anthropology’s low entry points. Whether or not participants were satisfied with the meeting is hard to ascertain, but most of the speeches were followed by excited applause from the hundred or so students that were present. In the following days, opinions were mixed among students I met, and I was often put on the spot: “Is it marketable? Is there money in it? Are there really opportunities?” It seemed, however, that by the end of their first semester, most remaining students had been convinced that anthropology had career prospects to offer them. Moreover, the number of students remaining after the inter-faculty transfers was the highest the institute had ever seen, 126 in total.

The general focus of this meeting was a clear indicator of how the participants envisioned their society and their role within it. Remembering their own concerns as insecure beginners, the alumni chose to highlight job opportunities to set new students’ minds at ease. They claimed that the tropes of anthropology as “holistic” and “multidisciplinary” could be capitalized on as competitive advantages in the existing competitive market economy. However, the Kenyan alumni were not exclusively preoccupied with the pursuit of marketability. They also spoke of the potential of anthropological knowledge to bring change and “empower the citizens.” Indeed, as the opening quote indicates, it was sentiments such as these which appealed to the anthropology students on an ideological level. This is further evidenced by the FGDs I organized, when students spoke of anthropology’s role in society and the kinds of work they were eager to do after graduating.

The orientation week was boosted by an article in the Career-section of the national newspaper, Daily Nation, on January 20<sup>th</sup>, in which one of the lecturers was interviewed. In the article, Mr. Shilabukha explains anthropology as the study of “the origins of humans and their physical, social and cultural development,” and that the work of anthropologists is to confront and try to resolve human problems (Kairu 2014). Moreover, he mentions the important role of anthropology in dealing with the HIV pandemic, and the fact that forensic science in crime scene investigation emanated from anthropology. While stressing the hard work that anthropologists do and the inquisitive attitude they need to acquire, Mr. Shilabukha showcases anthropology as an honorable profession that gives center stage to social problems and provides critical knowledge to social implementers.



Figure 4: Printed article from Daily Nation, January 20<sup>th</sup> 2014.

## Training for the Future: as Social Engineers and Medical Anthropologists

The requirements for completing a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology are a pass grade for a minimum of forty-five course units. It is a four-year program with two semesters every year, but the institute operates with three semesters, which keeps it running throughout the year. During

the two semesters I was present, I attended eighteen different course units—some only once, others more regularly—which covered all undergraduate levels as well as MA level. A typical day started at 8.00 or 9.00am with a lecture that lasted between one and three hours, depending on the lecturer. After lunch, students either had the rest of the day off or continued with an afternoon class from 2.00pm.

In the first semester, students take Introduction to Anthropology, Introduction to Ethnology, Fundamentals of Archaeology, as well as HIV/AIDS and Computer Literacy, the latter being mandatory courses for all university students in Kenya. Introduction to Anthropology was taught by a very humorous and lively lecturer who kept the students going for hours, despite the dense air in the auditorium. This course, and particularly the first lecture, seemed to pick up where the orientation meeting had left off. The lecturer, Mr. Francis Kiragu Kibe, was very concerned with promoting anthropology and told students they were going to become “social engineers.” I thought this a clever rhetorical ploy since many Kenyan students think of engineering as a prestigious field and such a construction could serve to dismiss student imaginations of “settling for less.” Mr. Kibe claimed that anthropologists were qualified to customize products and services for people according to their cultural preferences, going so far as to claim that companies who did not include anthropologists when developing new products, would fail. After forty-five minutes of promoting anthropologists as market consultants for product design and export marketing, Mr. Kibe finally began introducing the academic content of the course by providing students with definitions of anthropology and what he called the “five elements of culture” (norms, values, beliefs, attitudes and cognitive mappings). Throughout the rest of that initial class and, indeed, the rest of the course, Mr. Kibe continued to draw attention to the practical contributions anthropologists could make in research, especially within the fields of medical, environmental and cultural anthropology.

By the end of the first semester, student dialogues revealed that many of them looked forward to a bright future. They imagined potential employment by NGOs, the government and as researchers, and some also clearly drew inspiration from Mr. Kibe’s take on anthropology. Sitting in Wairimu’s room one afternoon, she told me that she might work for Kenya Tea Development Agency where she could do research on people’s different tea preferences in different countries. “Maybe Germans prefer to buy tea from countries like Kenya, while people from Holland prefer to buy it from somewhere else,” she explained. An alternative corporate employer was Bata Shoes, a global footwear manufacturer with several outlets in Nairobi.

A class I took with the fourth-years was Anthropology of Infectious Diseases with Dr. Salome Bukachi. She began the first lecture by asking what we were expecting from the course. Some of the students were clearly prepared and gave thoughtful answers, while others were unsure and one even admitted that he just wanted to pass. Dr. Bukachi explained that we were to begin by learning to differentiate between infectious diseases and other diseases, before looking at the history of anthropology of infectious diseases, and how we, as anthropologists, could play a role in preventing the proliferation of these diseases. She explained that an innovative solution succeeding in “Village A” would not necessarily succeed in “Village B.” “A community may reject a project, maybe just because it’s not explained well enough or because some sociocultural aspects were not taken into consideration,” she added. This launched a short discussion on challenges of uptake of vaccination in Kenya and the possible cultural reasons behind these attitudes. Although malaria and HIV in Kenya were to be the two main diseases to address, she also wanted to draw attention to tropical neglected diseases. Each of us was to prepare a presentation on a particular infectious disease that she selected for us, and mine was bovine spongiform encephalopathy (commonly known as mad cow disease).

This unit was among the most interesting courses I attended during my fieldwork, and several students regarded it as their favorite subject. It was not overly theoretical, as it focused more directly on specific sociocultural aspects of infectious diseases and the causes of contagion, hereby also identifying practical strategies to resolve the problem. The chosen case studies had a clear regional focus, except for neglected diseases, which could be found in other parts of the world too. I was particularly impressed to learn of students’ extensive pre-existing knowledge of diseases such as malaria when confronted with my own relative ignorance during a group presentation, and indeed throughout the course. Another interesting pedagogical strategy Dr. Bukachi applied was to describe a course of events which led to the outbreak of a disease, and require us to identify both the disease and the causes of the spread. This approach gave me and the other students a clear indication of the way in which anthropologists might work with such issues.

Lecturers at IAGAS have designed several courses with the intention of professionalizing the image of the discipline and hereby attracting an increasing number of students. In the MA program, students study applied courses to learn how anthropologists can use their knowledge to, for example, establish “successful” intervention programs which overcome potential “cultural barriers.” Students regard such practice-oriented course units as important because they make

their “expertize” explicit and create an image of anthropology as a course on par with other professional courses they admire. This phenomenon might also go a long way in explaining students’ evident engagement in the medical unit. These examples are all indicative of students’ desire to be of value to society.

An additional aspect of their wish to help society or “empower” people, is the notion of the “expert” or the status of the “educated” or “learned” person in relation to those with less or no education, which has evolved in Kenya and East Africa due to an elitist school system from colonialism onwards (Meinert 2008; Ntarangwi 2010; Onyango-Ouma 2006b). Such a notion would be alien to most Norwegian students I know, who are socialized to view their society as egalitarian and would generally feel uncomfortable stating that they were there to “empower the citizens.” When such a notion is harbored, it would in any case be unpopular if made explicit.

Both courses described above informed students’ anthropological knowledge, while simultaneously illustrating how anthropology feeds at least two powerful models of interpretation of society. Medical anthropology points to the possibility of conducting immediate problem-oriented and valuable research within their multiethnic country. Wairimu on the other hand, took Mr. Kibe’s prospect of becoming an “anthropological engineer” and constructed an imaginary of her participation in a multicultural *global* economy of coffee and shoes as a “cultural expert.” The appeal of a problem-oriented approach to begin with speaks to a view of society “in need of a social surgery,”<sup>13</sup> and the appeal of carving a niche in international business reflects their notion of society as an arena for competition over resources.

## **How to Learn Anthropology**

A typical lecture amounts to a lecturer reading from his notes while students transcribe it practically verbatim into their notebooks. Students enjoy giving presentations, which is the other principle component of an IAGAS lecture, but they are first and foremost concerned with passing exams, and taking good notes is crucial in this regard. Indeed, as students explained, some lecturers expected them to reproduce lectures in exams, thus making revision of transcripts the best preparation for finals. A common expression around exam time was “cramming notes”; reading books and articles simply did not pay off. This conclusion is based on students’ comments alone, and it is likely to vary from lecturer to lecturer, but it still offers an indication

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<sup>13</sup> See Dr. Olungah’s statement in chapter 1.

of the extent to which students read the curriculum. Every course outline includes a reading list with anything from six to seventy-nine references, but none of the students seemed under the impression they were expected to read much of it. Due to limited funds and other priorities, students did not buy books and the selection of books at the library was limited. To compensate for this, some lecturers made copies of important articles, and students accessed some of the curriculum on Google Scholar in addition to frequenting Wikipedia.

Some lecturers do require their students to read books, and in one of Mr. Mathu's units, Political Anthropology, students were expected to write a book review of an ethnographic classic. Mr. Mathu has a background in History from the United States and despite being seventy-four years old at the time I was there, he still taught. He found it important that students were aware of the way African people and societies had been described by the likes of Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown. Mr. Mathu hoped that this would inspire them to "put things right" by publishing books of their own.

The attitude among students towards cramming notes is a result of pressure to pass exams, and it is an obsession shared by their Norwegian colleagues. As Lebakeng (2010, 28) argues, the market oriented education system leave students anticipating a job or promotion after graduating, and passing exams thereby becomes a means to creating a marketable status. Similarly, Mwenda Ntarangwi (2010, 62) argues that the American anthropology students he studied regarded exams as a means to an end, and that this is a symptom of the commercialization of colleges and universities where students are indoctrinated into corporate culture. At this juncture it is important to stress the particular background of the Kenyan students who start with exams as early as "baby class" at the age of three. From this stage onwards, national examinations become the valid parameter for assessing academic knowledge. The scramble for success peaks in secondary school where grades determine each individual's chance of attending university to pursue a desirable degree. As graduates, good marks remain an advantage in the fiercely competitive job market where the relatively assured opportunities associated with a university degree are a thing of the past. For those who wish to pursue an MA and do not have the means to pay their own way, especially in anthropology where there are only three scholarships, a First Class Honors is a must. Hence, the education system found in Kenya, and East Africa as a whole, is generally hierarchical, categorizing people into those who fail and those who pass. The latter are able to advance through the system, which is interpreted, as well as experienced, as "the key to success" (Meinert 2008, 64).

The majority of students are hardworking and committed to their studies as well as to a notion of academic integrity. Others take advantage of alternative means to attaining a degree at the university. It did not take me long to realize that the printing and photocopy offices around campus also work as “bureaus” offering other dubious services. Students with economic means are able to pay to get their Continuous Assessment Tests (CATs), term papers or even master’s theses produced by these bureaus. Several anthropology students admitted that they were writing CATs for students from other disciplines as a way of making ends meet. While they were not proud of plagiarizing for profit, they recognized it as a part of the status quo of academic life. Why should they not benefit? Another example pertained to the prevalence of “lazy lecturers” who recycled exams over and over, making it easy to pass.

Despite their criticism of the status quo, students had little faith in their capacity to affect change. This ambiguousness is typified by a discussion I had with two students who questioned the very purpose of higher education institutions, proclaiming that they served only as engines of the status quo, or as they put it “filling the system.” They went on to explain, however, that they were lazy and by challenging the lecturers, the workload would land on them. They acknowledged that they were only “cheating themselves,” but at the same time, they felt that the problem was not at an institutional level alone but entrenched in society at large. At the end of the day they were mainly concerned with passing exams, because “out there,” it was “survival of the fittest.” This notion of “cheating ourselves” with open eyes is far from anomalous and can be attributed to many of us around the world. We know we should be attending to issues such as global warming and socio-economic inequality but, suspecting that we cannot change anything, we keep on reinforcing the status quo. In his non-fiction book *The Cheating Culture* (2007), David Callahan provides multiple examples of “cheating” in recent American history and argues that people seem to have a “second moral compass” which allows them to cheat in order to progress academically, professionally or financially (ibid., 14). He blames the situation on rampant inequality, the increased pressures of today’s competitive economy and the prevalence of a winner-takes-all mentality.

So far, I have focused on the orientation meeting, the academic activities that students engage in as well their approach to attaining a degree. I have described the way lecturers and alumni market the course to prospective students, and how their academic activities inform students’ anthropological knowledge. Different course units present diverse images of Kenyan society along with a variety of opportunities for anthropologists to support these images. These images



are cemented by student's own experiences of society which also inform their imaginaries of society and their potential role within it. On the one hand, they imagine their society to be guided by marketability, "cheating" and limited opportunities, where their primary concern is to secure a future. On the other hand, students imagine Kenya as a "developing country" where their expertise can affect "change" or "empower the citizens," which also reflects their imaginaries of a hierarchical society where they are the "experts." In the following sections I will continue to explore these ideas of society, turning briefly away from academia to reflect on other rhythms of student life.

### **Extra-Curricular Life on Campus**

Throughout my fieldwork, I visited several students in their dormitories. On weekdays, we would cook, relax, talk, gossip, and watch television, much like I do with my friends at home. Several of my informants were involved in the business of selling downloaded movies, and watching movies was definitely one of their most common pastimes. Every student that I visited, with the exception of one, had a laptop which enabled them to watch movies, and some had a TV connected to their computers by cable. Internet access for phones or computers was accessible and seemed affordable for most students. Individuals who did not have private internet access made use of cyber cafes and TV-rooms available in the different halls.

While there might be less disparity among the anthropology students I studied, I observed a more marked inequality between students on campus as a whole. Although sometimes misleading, this type of inequality is indicated through clothing, type of cellphone, financial access to private accommodation, or type and cost of leisure activities. This is not solely an indicator of economic background, however, as students are not exclusively reliant on their family's economy or loans from the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB). Many engage in income-generating activities on campus, including the sale of clothes, food, electronics, even marijuana or chang'aa (an illegally brewed alcoholic drink). In addition, there are groups of students with the potential of making big money on campus—student "politicians" and their accompanying squads of "goons," to which I shall return below.

The general standard of the living quarters is poor, and the shared toilets are usually filthy and flooded with water. Nevertheless, students (especially females) seem to appreciate the freedom of living there. Students generally spoke of "the rural areas" as an environment with limited

freedom, where parents stressed moral values and upheld strict rules. This newly acquired freedom, combined with peer influence, was said to cause considerable behavioral change among students. I cannot evaluate this “change” myself due to the fact that I observed my informants almost exclusively in Nairobi. The exception to this was the week I visited Maureen at her sister’s home in Kisumu shortly after her graduation. Every morning during my stay, Maureen would jump out of bed at the crow of the rooster ready to take responsibility for her sister’s two young children. Between playing with and feeding the kids, Maureen washed and ironed clothes, cooked dinner for the rest of the family and cleaned up around the house. Every evening she got into bed with tired, bloodshot eyes. One evening, while Maureen was cooking dinner, she glanced over at me with an exasperated demeanor. “I wish I had your freedom to travel,” she said. At a loss, my inadequate response was to ask where she would go first. This provoked a chain of consciousness which led to the root cause of her distress. She missed the freedom of her room in Nairobi.

While observing life on campus together with some of the MA students, they “taught” me how to distinguish newly arrived students from the third- and fourth-years by style of dress alone. The move from the rural areas to the metropolitan city is a way of positioning oneself as an urban Kenyan, and I often got the feeling that the level of adaptation to the “Nairobi style” is interpreted among students as an indicator of sociocultural upward mobility. This interpretation is supported by a study done by Bernard M. Sorre (2005b), a Kenyan anthropologist who studied socio-psychological behavioral change among students at Moi University. Sorre argues that students from urban areas tend to feel superior and present themselves as role models to students from a more rural setting. These attitudes also reflect their perception of society as characterized by a vast inequality between rich and poor, urban and rural, and formal and informal workers. This dualistic categorization can be seen as a manifestation of students’ efforts to associate with one part of “society” and disassociate themselves from another.

My informants tended toward a rather ambiguous view of students’ cultural adaptation to life in the city. As can be seen in the paragraph above, they expressed a desire for, or pride in, an urban lifestyle. However, students also took a critical stance to what they labeled as a pursuit of “westernization.” Over the course of my fieldwork, it became progressively more difficult to distinguish between the two categories, and I came to see the two terms “urbanization” and “westernization” as two emic expressions referring to the same process of cultural adaptation,

but with different connotations, the former positive (usually in reference to oneself) and the latter negative (usually referring to an *other*).

On the one hand, many students spoke passionately about the dilution of ethnic lines and integration in the city: “We are all Kenyans in Nairobi” was a common phrase. On the other hand, they critiqued westernization on the grounds that it consumed “traditional” values and culture. In the FGDs many students celebrated their backgrounds and “cultural ways” with remarkable pride and were of the opinion that culture was not respected enough in Kenya. As one female second-year student explained: “In our classes we’re advised to speak out about our culture, embrace it and be proud of it. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. I love that about anthropology.”

## **A Religious Commitment**

Sorre also observes a waning religious commitment among students. Most were Christians, continuing to participate in church functions, but beyond ceremony, he argues that the seriousness among churchgoers is fading (Sorre 2005, 88). This is probably also true of anthropology students at UoN. I was, however, surprised by a seemingly strong religious commitment among students in Nairobi compared to students I know in Oslo. Most of the students I got to know well go to church (or mosque) frequently, and attend additional functions outside of weekly services such as bible study groups, charity groups or youth groups. I occasionally joined some of them for church, Catholics on Sundays and Seventh Day Adventists on Saturdays. I also attended meetings of two youth associations that some students participate in—Young Adult Catholic Association (YACA) and Serving A Living Transformer (SALT). Both groups are concerned with providing moral guidance to students in university, but they also serve as a platform for students to develop other skills such as public speaking and leadership.

Understanding religious and moral impetuses, the reasons motivating students to go to church and keeping them there all Saturday or Sunday, is beyond the scope of this thesis. Through my superficial observations, however, it appears to be an activity that students engage in, not merely as a quest to develop skills or build a network, but rather in an honest pursuit of higher meaning. Moreover, their profiles and activities on Facebook seem to reflect a desire to establish or accentuate a certain social identity that is not associated with marketability, but rather characterized by social, political, or religious commitment.

## The Deafening Fuss of Student Politics

Student activism and politics have a long history at the University of Nairobi—well documented by an MA student in History at UoN, Mwangela Kamencu, whom I was also able to meet in person. Kamencu (2013) provides an idealistic portrayal of student political activism from the 1970s to the 1990s as ideologically entrenched in a criticism of Moi’s single-party state, and a vehicle for demonstrating against the continuing onslaught of Western imperialism. Although I would be careful to suggest any radical break between then and now, I have come to interpret current student politics at UoN as something altogether different.

I became very interested in this issue after spending a considerable amount of time talking with “politicians,” or the student leaders of SONU, and their associated group of “goons,” who function as contracted “security guards” to the candidates. Conversations with inactive students tended to revolve around “tribalism” and “corruption.” Both politicians and students claimed that national politicians supported certain candidates, and since politics in Kenya is generally considered as “tribal,” they regarded this support, as well as the mobilization and voting pattern among students, to be a continuation of politics along ethnic lines. While “tribalism” was something that I only explored through verbal utterances and discussions, I did observe election fraud, bribes and violence first-hand. I experienced the vast disparity between regular students and student politicians, who accumulated a lot of money and were not afraid to show it off. They regularly ate at the student cafeteria (unaffordable to most students and most commonly frequented by lecturers), dined out in fancy hotels and restaurants, went out drinking in cool night clubs, rented apartments or rooms outside campus, drove cars, and carried expensive electronics, smartphones and computers.

A pre-requisite to conducting a successful campaign for executive positions in SONU is a strong resource base. The high expenditure on campaigns was very visible during the peak of the SONU-election at the beginning of April. Every wall, pillar, corkboard, trashcan and residence hall was covered in posters with slogans. The candidates were busy building alliances and talking “business,” while the goons collected “taxes.” The most expensive part of the campaign is the “Road Show,” a yearly event where each of the candidates for Chairman rents an open bus, packs it with supporters and blasts loud music and campaign messages on route between the various campuses to hold appeals. The sums invested in the campaigns pale in comparison to what students stand to gain by being elected onto SONU. Even though SONU is mandated to

fight for students' interests, student leaders could confess that they were there to “eat,” a widely used political metaphor in Kenya where misused public funds are considered “eaten” (Haugerud 1997; Bayart 2009), and where the continuation of ethnic politics is based on the argument that “It’s our time to eat” (Wrong 2009).



Figure 5: A campaign bus at Main Campus during the “Road Show.”

The question which preoccupied me was why students did not protest against, or abstain from, the system which they mocked and criticized, rather than vote to sustain it. They knew perfectly well that all the promises and cheesy slogans “politicians” put forward would never be materialized. Some even believed that the university administration was corrupt and favored certain candidates. Indeed, many argued that they saw campus as a “mirror of Kenyan society at large.”<sup>14</sup> Here again, we are confronted with the notion of “cheating ourselves” based on the disheartening perception of an unequal society with limited opportunities and institutionalized corruption. Most students explained that a protest would not lead to anything, and that they have their own personal needs and concerns to attend to. Others sympathized with the

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<sup>14</sup> I heard this phrase on three different occasions, in addition to hearing students describing the same situation but with different words.

politicians, and accepted that it was their “time to eat.” When I asked Kamencu to compare the student activism of today with the one he had described in his writings, he said that the political landscape had changed and now the easily defined enemy of the one-party-state is gone. As a consequence it is harder for student leaders to identify the battles worth fighting. More important, however, was the decline in student living conditions. Whereas students used to be paid 5000 shillings per semester, enjoyed a low cost of living, were given free meals and all but guaranteed a career; students today often take out loans of 200,000 shillings to pay for their education, have a high cost of living, and have more uncertain career prospects. A position in SONU represents a means to an alternative future. Even for the common student, there are opportunities in nurturing a patron-client relationship with a leader, which could mean that their “turn to eat” is just around the corner.

## **The Anthropological Forum**

To conclude this chapter, I will very briefly discuss an anthropological forum UNASA arranged on May 30<sup>th</sup> 2014. This forum was designed as the first in a series of forums where anthropology students could practice public debate and showcase their potential. Around forty students had showed up and the topics for discussion were: (1) What is your take on insecurity in Kenya? Are Kenyans safe? and (2) Can Africa do without the “West”?

As students agreed that insecurity was a reality, and that it came at the “expense of progress and development,” the first discussion centered on identifying possible causes of this. They argued it came down to lack of trust in the police, poor government policies, lack of good technology, the Kenyan military involvement in Somalia, as well as cultural reasons such as loose family ties. The second question generated a discussion on colonialism and the colonial legacy, which serves/served to subjugate Africans to feeling inferior and to implementing an educational system which prevents them from sustaining themselves as Africans, while fostering an obsession with becoming westernized. Students agreed that Africans were dependent on help from both the West and the East, but eagerly discussed how to avoid continued exploitation of resources, imbalanced trade agreements and the “dependency syndrome.” A discussion which had begun as a focus on external explanations, was hijacked by students who claimed that they should stop blaming the West and, alternatively, seek to identify internal conditions for the “failures of the continent.” The problem, they argued, was that Africans were not helping themselves and did not hold their leaders accountable.

The broad questions that connect the different issues raised in this chapter are the following: 1) How do students perceive their society, 2) how do these perceptions inform their strategies and choices as students, and, finally, 3) how do they perceive their role as anthropologists? The picture I have painted is a rather sinister one as it largely portrays the university as an institution which, rather than infusing young minds with ideas that stand to improve society, cultivates an ethos of cynicism, cheating and corruption. By concluding with the case study of this forum, I seek to challenge this image of students' self-concerned and opportunistic attitudes.

The aim of the forum was to develop public speaking and improve employment prospects upon graduation. With this in mind, one could argue that students are predominantly concerned with getting ahead professionally or financially. However, many of the students who showed up had decided to continue with anthropology, and argued that they found it important to stand strong as an association and to enhance their academic identities as anthropologists. Moreover, they displayed strong opinions and spoke passionately about the two topics. Witnessing them debate with such fervor gave me crucial insight into what they thought of as important issues, as well as a sense of their sincere political engagement, juxtaposed to the spirit of SONU politics. I earlier referred to the fact that many students accentuate a religious identity and use Facebook to illustrate a social commitment. In the forum, students expressed engagement as social scientists who can "bring change" by identifying the causes of society's problems, holding their leaders accountable and offering their own expertise to political debate and developmental policy. The participants that day proved their wish to direct an anthropological approach to a social debate that does not only present them as marketable, but also empowers them to contribute to the developmental future of their country.

## Chapter 5:

### Imagining Work and Belonging in Contemporary Kenya

As Kenyans we're juggling different things: working for this NGO, doing this, doing that, teach at the university, volunteer, taking a PhD... You cannot just go to school: you have to look for this opportunity, look for that job, look for this certain payment, and so on... You just have to make yourself relevant outside.

- Former student of IAGAS

In chapter 1, I explored some of the ways in which Kenyan anthropology's history has been linked to national development, before arguing in chapter 2 that the relationship between education, knowledge and work has changed. This changing relationship is reflected in students' increasing concern with strategies for channeling their education into employment opportunities. In this chapter, I develop students' ideas of "work" more explicitly. In the first four sections, I explore their visions of future work and what contributes to the creation of certain imaginaries. Next, I discuss the ambiguity of pursuing "relevance" in contemporary Kenya. In the second part of this chapter I focus on students' assumptions regarding qualifications and connections needed to secure income and status, and examine some of the strategies they apply to become, and be viewed as, relevant in a competitive market economy.

#### The Labor Surplus and the World of Work

In his latest article, James Ferguson (2013) argues that despite economic growth in southern Africa, whole sections of the population have been pushed out of the labor market, often on a permanent basis, in what he calls a "snowball state in reverse" – rolling along nicely, but throwing people off (rather than picking them up) as it goes along" (Ferguson 2013, 230). In Kenya, the majority of those being thrown off are youths. The youth unemployment rate is roughly twice as high as the rest of the population, meaning that the youth employment rate in Kenya is among the lowest in Sub-Saharan Africa (Escudero and Mourelo 2014). Young Kenyans today have fewer prospects than their parents' generation of post-independence "working classes" who were employed as teachers or civil servants on permanent, pensionable contracts with government ministries (Aellah and Geissler in press, 14). Government employment was, at the time, a secure route for people with secondary school diplomas. These certificates have since lost most of their value and many high school graduates end up working in



the informal sector (ibid.). Young people lucky enough to secure formal employment are often under precarious short-term contracts which leave them vulnerable to being dismissed at a whim (Aellah and Geissler in press; Escudero and Mourelo 2014).

Despite the fact that formal employment and long-term contracts are limited to a small proportion of the population, and perhaps because of it, this remains the ultimate professional goal for Kenyans (Prince 2015). Anthropology students are no exception. Of course, they often talked about work as a way of putting food on the table and one student stated that he could do “anything as long as it was legal.” When probed further, however, most students revealed other ambitions. As I discussed in chapter 2, the jobs which were of most interest were project management positions in development institutions or other prestigious white-collar jobs within sectors such as banking, finance, information technology, governance, medical research, and consultancies. They also dreamt of connectedness to powerful institutions such as the government, UN-bodies and NGOs.

Especially in the FGDs, students spoke of their aspirations to work for this type of institution, and the important contributions they could offer as anthropologists who would look at issues from the grassroots up. With this they indicated a desire to improve people’s lives and take part in the developmental future of their country. Certainly, many of these students had a far more direct relationship with the “grassroots” than Norwegian development enthusiasts I was familiar with back home. During FGDs, the question which triggered the most active response was one probing which issues anthropologists were specifically suited to address in Kenya or elsewhere. The responses were predominantly about “solving problems back at home.” As Dalia, a second year student explained:

I want to do something like humanitarian work involving anthropology, or, developmental anthropology so that I can develop my society. Because, I personally come from a very small town where people lack a lot of basic things. Some things which you guys have is like a privilege to us, a luxury (looking at me). We want to move with the global world; we want to move at the same speed and time. So, I want to bring change.

While statements such as this point to a motivation to pursue a career committed to improving other peoples’ lives, it is important to remember that students also associated this type of work with personal growth and a way of forging a professional and respected identity.

Were students that devoted to being relevant to society “bring[ing] change,” or were they primarily concerned with presenting themselves as relevant in the eyes of a potential employer, as “marketable”? At times, I interpreted my informants as politically passionate students with dreams of creating a better society. At other times, however, it seemed they were prepared to put their passion aside in order to secure a job, which as long as it came with high salary and status, need not be anthropology-related. But would this not also be the case for most of my colleagues in Norway? What about me? Is it not possible to make a claim that all our pursuits are based on a selfish motive? According to Graeber (2001, 27-29), this would be playing the cynical game of economists, always extrapolating to the level of self-interest over altruism by claiming that in “objective” reality, everything essentially boils down to self-interested calculation.

There is a tendency to interpret our pursuit of self-interest, epitomized by the inescapable market ideology which defines our economic life, as “balanced” by an opposite in selfless altruism, social commitments or devotion to religion. However, Mauss would claim, according to Graeber, that these represent merely “two sides of the same false coin” (2001, 257) and that our “sharp division between freedom and obligation is, like that between interest and generosity, largely an illusion thrown up by the market” itself (ibid., 221). The false binary of gift and commodity which has plagued economic anthropology leads us only to understand one side of the story, rather than the inherent fluidity in our interpretations of value (ibid.; Appadurai 1994). During my fieldwork, I sought to determine whether students were primarily driven by an opportunistic pursuit of self-interest, or a commitment to help, or give to, others. I came to understand that while both were dominant motivators at times, neither was the exclusive motivator and separating the two was as impossible as it was meaningless. This familiar dynamic ambivalence I recognized in the Kenyan students’ motivations could be explained neither by self-interest nor altruism alone. Instead, I follow Graeber (2001, 104) and acknowledge that in value systems different moral principles coexist, and there are constant competing pressures, as well as continuous shifts in definition.

## **Imaginarities of Futures**

The desire to work for powerful institutions likely has something to do with the image students have of their city’s ever-changing landscape of businesses, NGOs and other international organizations. Nairobi evokes the “fortress city” with its inward looking “‘fortified cells’ of affluence” (Davis 1992, 155), constructing social boundaries and imaginaries of other worlds

through its architecture. Behind campus, across the busy Moi Avenue, stand the tall buildings which make up the skyline of Nairobi's CBD. Restaurant franchises, international banks and stores with global brands line the streets walked by professionals in smart attire and driven by new cars. Scattered throughout Upper Hill and the city's suburbs are other massive buildings branded by numerous international companies and organizations. These are the offices, often regional headquarters, of the likes of World Bank Group, the WHO, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, the Coca-Cola Company and other well-known entities in the global landscape, not to mention the United Nations, to which I shall return below.

The presence of these organizations means a constant stream of foreign diplomats and volunteers, who tend to stay in nice hotels or, more permanently, in one of the city's numerous gated communities. This spectacular architecture of enclaves and security (Davis 1992; Caldeira 1996) with their mobile people, are displays of prosperity. These displays naturally contribute to students' desire for formal employment, upward mobility and connection to an international or global sphere by creating visions of a world students are excluded from, but could become incorporated into. Their desire is further cultivated through the powerful presence of NGOs on the local scene in Kenya. Students' detailed knowledge of third sector players indicated high exposure through their search for opportunities. In a landscape permeated by inclusion/exclusion, the issue of positioning oneself takes on special importance, one different from in Norway where students (still) live in a more egalitarian society.

Due to an increased interest in globalization, there has recently been a lot of interest in the changing nature of work and how we understand what work "is" (Jones 2011, 530). Andrew Jones (2011), for example, builds on the "new sociology of work" and examines the way in which international youth voluntary work is destabilizing the relationship between work and non-work. Jones argues that this phenomenon is a result of changes in "economic rationales, societal values, identities and aspirations, and developing global interconnectedness" (ibid., 542). Volunteer work can thus be seen as a strategic practice motivated by the knowledge and career trajectories that this international work experience provides. In her recent article, Ruth Prince (2015) portrays this type of landscape in the Kenyan city of Kisumu, where an astounding 907 NGOs are registered. In the context of high unemployment, Prince describes the eagerness to work as volunteers for these organizations, due to the fact that this is seen as a pathway to working in the formal sector, cultivating a "working identity," and gaining a sense of social worth. She argues that the "working identity" is tied to someone who has a "professional" look,

is educated, speaks English and has familiarity with technical terms. This individual also wears a shirt, tie and carries a briefcase, and works in an office and not on the streets (ibid., 17). Prince builds on Ferguson's (2013) argument that those excluded from the world of waged labor place themselves as dependent on powerful persons and institutions, and "seek incorporation." Prince (2015, 4) argues that:

Volunteers "seek incorporation" into both a form of work, and the social identity associated with it, and into a powerful institution, which offers a form of recognition and a sense of being part of something larger, an institutional and social collective that reaches into a future.

This pursuit of incorporation into a particular kind of work that provides identity, status and belonging is far from exclusive to Prince's informants, and is a suitable tool for understanding the motivations of anthropology students at UoN.

The working identity Prince describes resembles the identity to which university students aspire. Most students dress in a very professional manner: men in suit pants, shirts and nice shoes, and women in dresses and skirts, but sometimes also in tight jeans. Female students also show high self-awareness and self-discipline regarding their hairstyles, which most of them keep neatly braided. Students' desire for the emblem of a smartphone and the distinct style of office attire reflects their aspirations for prosperity and professionalism. Hence, dress and appearance are "vital embodiments" of being members of the white-collar class (Freeman 1998, 250).

The East African formal education system is elitist and this translates directly into the pyramid-like structure of waged work (Ntarangwi 2010). This pyramid reserves certain types of jobs for people with certain levels of education. Tilling of land, bar tending and house help are examples of "manual work" from which people with higher education are exempt. Similarly, the working identity that Prince's volunteers were trying to cultivate was associated with work in an office as opposed to work on the street. Though still forced to make a livelihood out of petty trading on the streets, the volunteers tried to distance themselves from "*juakali* work, physical labour 'under the hot sun'" (Prince 2015, 14).

The anthropology students certainly do not imagine themselves doing "juakali work" after graduating. Many do earn pocket during their studies by selling *smokies* (sausages) or corn on the cob at the roadside, secondhand clothes at the market or mobile phone credit in the dormitories, but they are not proud of it. On the contrary, many of my informants seemed slightly

embarrassed to tell me about their businesses. Both Asya, who sold downloaded videos from a stand on Moi Avenue, and Ikeno who sold shoes at one of Nairobi's biggest secondhand markets, were both quick to underline that it was only temporary and that they would rather do something that was "relevant" to their future careers. These aspirations for formal employment and "success" are further entrenched into society by daily newspaper articles with titles like: "Think yourself rich" and "Carry yourself like a professional."<sup>15</sup> In articles such as these, the capitalist dogma conveyed is that anyone can get rich and all you need to accomplish it is proper grooming and the right attitude.

When it comes to actually securing formal work, many students regard the plethora of NGOs as their most likely base of employment. The increased role and visibility of NGOs can be attributed to the neoliberal shift in African economies. With the introduction of SAPs and the increased withdrawal of the state as a result, the vacuum of previously state-provided services were occupied by NGOs and private enterprise (Ferguson 2006; Prince and Brown forthcoming). It is worth noting, however, that in line with the new development objectives associated with Vision 2030, the government is again perceived as an important actor. Craig and Porter (2006 in Prince and Brown forthcoming) point out that the responsibility of the state re-expanded during the 2000s due to an increased focus on poverty reduction agendas. This could, in turn, explain the students' views of the government as a potential employer.

Students are currently increasingly likely to consider government employment an option due to the newly established system of devolved government with forty-seven lower level county governments. In addition to the potential of working in different government ministries many now imagine working as development planners or consultants for county governments. In fact, many students not only expressed their desire for being recognized as valuable to the government, they actually argued that they *should* be involved, claiming that without anthropological advice, policies and implementations would fail. Many pointed at interventions without sufficient ethnographic understanding of target beneficiaries as a major problem, and reasoned that anthropologists were the right people to provide the government with this type of important expertise. Others claimed that anthropologists ought to advise the government on

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<sup>15</sup> Omanga, Waceke 2014. "Think yourself rich." Daily Nation, read May 13<sup>th</sup> 2015. URL: <http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/saturday/Think-yourself-rich/-/1216/2253404/-/ektnj5/-/index.html>. Njoroge-Kristian, Irene. 2014. "Carry yourself like a professional." Daily Nation, read May 13<sup>th</sup> 2015. URL: <http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/saturday/Carry-yourself-like-a-professional/-/1216/2293686/-/13579uq/-/index.html>

strategies for managing public resources and funds, as they were the ones with knowledge of people's *actual* needs.

As I have argued, students have a clear idea of the type of work they prefer. They aspire to white-collar jobs in international organizations, or sectors such as banking, finance, research, development and governance, and they imagine themselves working as consultants, doing monitoring and evaluation, or working as project managers. I have made the claim that students face a motivational dilemma between a sense of social responsibility and dreams of salary and status. Their ideas of work and ambitions of connectedness to powerful institutions are tied to their objective of fashioning a professional, worldly-wise and respected identity. At the same time, however, their ideas also involve a commitment to help people “back at home” and take part in the developmental future of their country.

### **Being Connected to Global Domains**

African cities are often described as sites of poverty with rampant informal economies, far from being modern, global cities. AbdouMaliq Simone (2008), however, argues that African cities seem to be acting “in an incessant state of preparedness” (ibid., 144), and that specific arenas and institutions are increasingly connected to certain spaces elsewhere. He explores the ways in which these cities keep their residents constantly searching to gain access to “worlded” domains of operations, while simultaneously maintaining a sense of local “rootedness” (ibid.). I argue that anthropology students are examples of such residents, locally rooted while pursuing global domains through international organizations.

Student's dreams and aspirations cannot be reduced to career ambition alone. When students talked about the work they imagined doing for such institutions, they often shared narratives about their “home village” to exemplify pressing issues on the national agenda. In our conversations and in the FGDs I found myself consistently confronted with elaborate political formulations which suggested a local engagement beyond what I was used to in my own home base. In accordance with Prince (2015, 4), I argue that these localized ambitions represent a desire to “seek incorporation” into a social collective that offers a “sense of being part of something larger.” The allure of international institutions is their potential to mediate conflicting desires by enabling students to contribute to society through developmental work, while simultaneously providing a platform for personal growth and recognition. This type of

contribution to society through international institutions would encourage the respect and admiration that so many seek, and yet few dare to expect on the basis of anthropology's place in the hierarchy of academia.

Although students saw themselves as working primarily in Kenya, these domains and institutions still represent platforms for attaining access to openings that are more global in scope. As Prince (2015, 12) also points out, global mobility and affluence contribute to the attractiveness of international organizations, a common feature among volunteers, diplomats and researchers such as myself. The "figure of the ex-patriate," generally collecting a salary, but occasionally volunteering her labor, represents a senior position in her organization, lives in conditions well beyond the means of local staff, and embodies mobility by the nature of the fact that she carries a passport (Redfield 2012, 359-60). The figure of the global expatriate thus serves as an indicator of inequality between international and national staff within these organizations, as well as away from the workplace where her obvious privilege sets her apart from other local people.

To my informants at the university, I represented global mobility. My very presence was evidence that I was able to travel abroad to do my fieldwork "self-sponsored," and their only potential chance of "going outside" would be through scholarships, internships, volunteer work or employment in international institutions. The majority fostered dreams of going abroad through exchange programs, and explained that if given the opportunity to go elsewhere for their master's they would surely take it. I remember one of the orientation meetings where my presence, as an "exchange student," led to a student raising his hand to ask whether such an opportunity would be available to them. Despite the faculty's global aspirations for their students, they were only too aware that the exchange programs which had facilitated their own MA or PhD's abroad were simply no longer available. Thus the answer to the question was a painful no.

The orientation meeting was one of several occasions where my privilege was made explicit, and although I wanted to sink into my chair at the time, it is important to recognize the inequality between myself and my informants in this regard, and the fact that my presence in some ways served as a perpetual reminder of this inequality. As Prince (2015) argues, "global" volunteers can create dreams of how local futures might unfold, and the lifestyle represented by the "figure of the expatriate" can come to be regarded as the ideal (Redfield 2012). Despite the financial constraints preventing students from travel, a widely recognized notion among both students

and faculty was the idea of belonging to the “global village,” where international organizations represented nodes of connection. The opportunities to access these nodes seemed few and far between for students, however, and the only example I knew of was Benson, the intern at UNDP who has been selected by the UN for a three-month exchange program in Australia. To the best of my knowledge, he was the only one from his class (and among the very few from the institute as a whole) who had been abroad (except for border crossings to Tanzania and Uganda which were slightly more regular).

In the following section, I take a look at students’ experience from, and imagination of, a particularly powerful international institution, the UN, an organization which, seemed to be just about every student’s ideal workplace.

## **Gaining Access and Capitalizing**

On March 6<sup>th</sup>, IAGAS, represented by twenty women and twenty men, were invited to the UN office to participate in a “multi-generational-dialogue” about the status of the millennium developmental goals (MDGs) for women in Kenya. I had been invited to participate, unaware of the secrecy shrouding the selection process.<sup>16</sup> At 8.00am, I met the other students on Main Campus in a sea of sky-blue as we were all wearing the blue UoN shirts we had been given the day before. To my colleagues’ amusement, I had not accessorized up to standard. I wore a long grey skirt which was barely deemed acceptable, but my sandals, backpack and messy hair became the topic of conversation among my female companions. In between laughing fits, they cooperated to try fixing my hair so that I, too, could look my best for the conference.

Upon our arrival in Gigiri where the UN office is located, the anticipation among students, including myself, was palpable. The majority had never visited before and were all very excited—not about the topic, per se, but rather the fact that we were going to participate in a UN-conference. From the outside, the compound seems like the perfect example of an inward looking “fortified cell” of prosperity (Davis 1992, 155). With its walls, gates and guards, the compound displays its “aesthetics of security” imposing distance and exclusion (Caldeira 1996, 308), while inducing imaginations of a world of affluence. After the security check and screening, we walked into the compound and followed the route we had been shown. The space was

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<sup>16</sup> The following days I heard complaints by students that had not been informed about the conference. They were criticizing the students who were in charge of the sign up form for being devious.



enormous, and on our path we saw large green fields with bushes and trees, two-lane roads for transport, several big modern looking buildings and even a swimming pool.<sup>17</sup> At the end of the path lined by flags of all the UN member states, we finally approached the right building, walked into the large conference room and found our seats. My having brought a camera, rendered me the official photographer of the afternoon, and I was encouraged to take pictures of students posing with the headsets accompanying the desks. Playfulness subsided when the conference started. The meeting consisted of speeches from selected participants, including Maureen who represented IAGAS, and a round of comments from the audience to wrap things up. During the session, several anthropology students had comments and called for debate, but this form of engagement was fleeting.



Figure 6: Student in the conference room.



Figure 7: The whole group in front of the UN-sign.

When the conference was over, we mingled and enjoyed the refreshments we had been offered. No one seemed to have anything to say about the discussions, but would mumble something like “it was interesting” or “it was inspiring,” when asked. Maureen and I were equally curious as to our fellow students’ thoughts on the conference. The day before, while we sat in her room nervously practicing her speech, she had predicted that this was “just another meeting” without any real significance to most participants. The students wanted to participate in this “multi-generational dialogue,” but at the same time felt it was meaningless. This detachment from the

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<sup>17</sup> A “virtual tour” of the compound at can be accessed through:<http://www.unon.org/content/virtual-tour-unon>.

issue seemed to contradict the fervent political engagement and ambitions for societal change of most students. I would suggest that this tension may be related to the idea of “cheating” discussed in the previous chapter. While our ambition to change the world for the better is strong, our doubts in the real possibility of such change are stronger.

Students’ doubt in the meaningfulness of the conference begs a questioning of their eagerness to attend. The fact is that despite a general disinterest in the dialogue itself, the students did feel they had gained something by attending the conference. The highlight of the day was to be the photo session we had on our way back to the bus. Students were extremely enthusiastic about getting their photo taken in front of the UN-sign to create evidence of their participation, and I ended up taking in excess of a hundred photos. Moreover, while waiting for the bus back to the university, several of the students discussed how they intended to capitalize on their presence at the conference by referring to it on their CVs. This could be interpreted as a reflection of their opportunistic approach to securing high-status employment, but I do not believe this to be an adequate interpretation. International organizations represented arenas where they could combine their engagement of working “on the ground” with a position that offered both high social standing and global opportunities. Students seemed to imagine that by participating at a UN conference, hereby expanding their international portfolio, would make them more attractive to international organizations. I should stress that I do not mean to downplay the desire that my Norwegian colleagues and I have for an international career. Indeed, many of us have similar dreams, but Kenyan students’ pursuit of this status consists of an additional dimension: to counteract their existing obstructions to travel. The UN Office in Nairobi, its headquarters in Africa, is truly a “worlded” domain, and to the outsider looking in, a sphere of magnificence which understandably leads to dreams.

## **Assuming a Career**

An increasing number of students graduating from university every year, combined with a contracting job market, is clearly affecting students’ assumptions about the qualifications and connections they need to secure a livelihood and status (see Tousignant 2013 for a Senegalese context). I quickly learned that students had very pragmatic approaches and were constantly searching for opportunities they could capitalize on. The fact that “nowadays everybody has a degree,” as I often heard, meant that building a résumé which consisted of more than academic achievements was of great importance. Students had small enterprises, did volunteer work,

became involved in student politics, and /or took additional degrees or online courses, to, as one male student said, “boost my knowledge and position myself better for research opportunities.” Students also emphasized the importance of networking and developing connections. I was observing a time in young pre-professionals’ lives, when everyday life revolved around building a future and making oneself relevant to the job market. The following sections elaborate on some of the diverse strategies employed by students in pursuit of relevance and marketability.

### **The Importance of Having a “Godfather”**

The offices of the institute’s current director and five lecturers are located in a narrow corridor on the third floor of Gandhi Wing. I stopped by on a regular basis to meet lecturers or chat with the very experienced and friendly secretary. This corridor was also frequented by students who came to ask for assistance, advice or pick up documentation. I had the distinct impression, however, that they were there first and foremost to maintain relations with the lecturers. One afternoon, I opened the door to Mr. Shilabukha’s office to find five other students sitting in his office while he was working on his computer. One was reading his newspaper, and the rest of us ended up chatting and making jokes. The fact that former students often referred to lecturers as “friends” is an indicator of students’ efforts to maintain close ties as well as lecturers’ openness to assist and be mentors.

Students who chose to stay in anthropology were often influenced by a specific lecturer’s persuasiveness and guidance. Nashon, a student who ended up doing an MA in medical anthropology, told me: “I would really want to be where they [three specific lecturers] are and I loved the way they would display their fieldwork experience in class. I just wanted to be a medical anthropologist.” Nashon was a special case, due to the unusual circumstance of actually starting out as a medical student before changing to anthropology due to the influence of his role models. However, he was far from being the only medical anthropology student to be influenced by a lecturer.

Most students are under the impression that specializing in medical anthropology increases the likelihood of finding work. Medicine is seen by many students as the most prestigious field to venture into, and for anthropology students, medical anthropologists stand out as figures of success. As such, the eagerness to become a medical anthropologist is linked to the respect for doctors in Kenya. As John Iliffe (1998, 1) argues, doctors were for a long time the core of the

East African modern educated elite, “the cream of the cream.” Being a doctor is seen as the epitome of “making it”—especially, perhaps, by individuals who do not have the academic qualifications or financial means to realistically aspire to this status. Equally important is the fact that medical anthropology has a strong practical application which nourishes the anthropologists’ desire for contribution and public recognition. With this in mind, medical anthropologists showcase the discipline in an especially appealing way, and I think it would be hard to overstate the importance of their role in retaining students in the anthropology program.

Lecturers give specific students the chance to participate and assist them in research and consultancies as research assistants. Although some of these opportunities are probably offered on the basis of academic results, I believe many occur due to these “friendships.” As a former student, Deborah said in an interview:

I started developing interest in my second year because our professors, especially the director, did his fieldwork in my village. Once he saw me in class he recognized me and asked: ‘Are you the daughter of so and so?’ I said ‘yes’. Then we sort of became friends and now he would just mentor me, tell me what anthropology is and the benefits of anthropology. Then in my third year, there was a professor who also did his fieldwork in my village. (...) He held my hand and I am always grateful to him. Then, after my fourth year, he introduced me to KEMRI [Kenya Medical Research Institute].

Regardless of the circumstances leading to these allocations, they represent crucial opportunities for students who want to add experience to their CVs. While there are relatively few students in the anthropology department—which is often seen as an advantage partially down to the potential lecturer-student-relationships to be pursued—they know they have to compete with many other graduating students. Once out of university, students envision that they will have to rely on somebody as a channel to secure employment, and a common saying is that “it is not about the technical know-how but about the technical know-whom.” As one female student said, they need a “godfather” to provide the link to potential employers.

One of the department’s “godfathers” is actually a “godmother”—the only female lecturer at the institute at the time I was there. Madam Bukachi, as she was often referred to, offered students short moral narratives at the end of each lecture to encourage them to work hard or to “go out there and make a difference.” Dr. Bukachi certainly had a way of relating to her students, which might be due to her own background. In an interview with her, she told me that she had managed to complete her MA and PhD while under tight constraints and she was now

encouraging students, especially female students, to rise beyond their limiting conditions. She was the second born in a large family and could not ask her parents to finance her studies since her siblings also needed financial support for their education. However, through support from family and friends, Dr. Bukachi managed to raise money to complete her MA. While she was pursuing her PhD, she became further constrained by the responsibilities of being a wife and mother, with yet another baby on the way, but still managed to successfully complete her studies. Such responsibilities are familiar to some of the current female students, as several of them are engaged or married and have established their own families. In addition to being a mentor and role model, Dr. Bukachi is also one of the lecturers who offers students practical training through her research projects or links them up with relevant job opportunities. Consequently, a close relationship with her is as fruitful as one with any of the “godfathers” on campus. In the last section, I focus on one small group’s endeavors to build a future and make themselves relevant for the job market.

### **Work at the Office: On Making Oneself Relevant**

Towards the end of my fieldwork I spent a lot of time with a small group of MA students in a borrowed office of the American Wing of Main Campus. The room was quite small and simply furnished with two oblong tables and some chairs, and crucially, an internet connection. This was the venue for study and work as well as the added pastimes of chatting and watching movies on YouTube. I joined them to engage in their activities and conversations, as well as to catch up on my own notes and reports.

One of the students in the group, Isaac, told me that he came from a humble background and his studies had been financed by people from his church. Although he had been accepted to a university in England to pursue his MA, the scholarship only covered eighty-five percent of the expenses, so he had to turn the offer down. Instead, he wanted to pursue his MA in Nairobi and specialize in medical anthropology so as to contribute to society. This did not mean giving up on his international aspirations, and for his MA project he was planning to link up with London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. I never doubted his social commitment, but in spite of his efforts to appear unconcerned with his résumé, which was “only a piece of paper of five pages,” I interpreted him as highly ambitious. He had worked as a research assistant for a number of projects, conducted various consultancies and bolstered his résumé with an online course in research ethics.

Erick, preparing for fieldwork at the time, had similar experience. He was working for an NGO called Community Aid International, and had previously worked as a research assistant for International Livestock Research Institute. Rachel, the only woman in the group, had also worked as a research assistant. When Isaac returned from an extended trip to Mombasa where he had carried out needs assessments for children with disabilities, the two of them were invited to teach Introduction to Anthropology to students at the College of Architecture and Engineering at UoN.

Rachel had also worked hard to get to where she was. She had been pregnant and given birth in her third year, but had still managed to graduate with a First Class Honors within the scheduled time. Rachel had been offered a scholarship to pursue her MA, but had her concerns. “I’m thinking about money every day... How will I make money tomorrow?” she could complain. Rachel loved medical anthropology, but she also had to take care of her family and wanted a nice house and a nice car. She believed a master’s degree in anthropology would increase her chances, but she could also understand why students chose to leave anthropology if they considered it as “going back to something that will not feed them.”

In pursuit of a promising future, many anthropology students were concerned with strategies for acquiring additional skills. Isaac and Rachel, for example, had recently taken up a course in quantitative and qualitative data analysis software. When I told them that my classmates and I did not use such tools for data entry and analysis, and that some of our lecturers even occasionally referred to the days of handwritten field notes with a sense of nostalgia, they were perplexed as to why we refused to “embrace technology.” In addition to taking initiative to supplement their resumes in any way possible, the group also made an effort to stay up-to-date on campus opportunities, running back and forth to keep themselves in the loop and maintain networks. Sometimes when they went for meetings they came back with research assignments, and they confirmed that this was their principal channel for employment. One afternoon, Rachel came back with information about a project that she thought Isaac would qualify for, to which Atieno responded with glee “the network is expanding!”

Atieno had already finished his MA and was now self-employed through his own consultancy firm. As he was currently without work and already had learned the application of different research software, he was currently investing time in an online course on International Women’s Health and Human Rights offered by Stanford University. He had already attained a satisfactory

list of previous clients, and his last assignment had been a research project on the rights to privacy and confidentiality for HIV/AIDS patients. However, he readily admitted that most of his clients were MA students from other programs who requested him to write project proposals, conduct research and/or actually write their thesis. Impressively, Atieno had actually written a number of master's theses concurrently with his own.

These students are not representative of all anthropology students in terms of their confident pursuit of an anthropological career. They do, however, demonstrate the dominant attitudes towards, and imaginaries of, employment and the job market. They also use typical strategies for securing positions within the world of waged work. Students were devoted to gaining knowledge and exposure to new technology, practices and networks, and were equally concerned with the transfer of these skills to their CVs.

It is important to remember that Norwegian students share many of the same concerns as the Kenyan anthropology students, and their desperate search for opportunities is not unique. Ross Perlin (2012, 211) argues that the explosion of internships represents a cultural phenomenon, growing relentlessly due to globalized study programs and business practices, the expansion of higher education, and shifts in local labor markets and ideas about work. The youths' motivation is a panicked race to access the "white-collar ward," and as Perlin (*ibid.*, 204) incisively captures:

A whole generation has been utterly professional about their pre-professionalism, forfeiting the more relaxed jobs and leisurely summers of old, ignoring other paths of self-development. These young shock troops of the New Economy keep parachuting into the workforce, bristling with the armor of their credentials.

Amassing experience to distinguish ourselves from the mass of other graduates is integral to modern academic life. We take on responsibilities in student associations; write chronicles for student journals or, more ambitiously, newspapers, we work part-time in consultancy firms, attend meetings held by MSF and volunteer for the Red Cross. Many of these things we pursue in the name of doing something "good" for society or to show how "relevant" anthropology is to society, perfectly aware that we are simultaneously making our CVs more "relevant."

While there are significant differences between our sociocultural backgrounds, life experiences, and not to mention economic status, Kenyan anthropology students share indoctrination into the market economy, concerns over an uncertain future and ambitions to affect change with their Norwegian counterparts. Our dreams, motivations and pursuits are entwined in the same

ambiguity, and we employ many of the same strategies to enhance our chances of securing a working identity, career and status in our highly competitive and capitalistic society.



## Concluding Remarks

My “ethnography of colleagues elsewhere” has been characterized by an odd mix of familiarity and strangeness. Anthropology in Kenya has its own distinct history, and in the first chapter I contextualized the discipline’s development within a broader context of postcolonial critique, Africanization of academia, and the fact that anthropology has become interwoven with national development. I have argued that there is an inherent ambivalence in Kenyan anthropology, born of a tension between anthropology’s particular history in Africa and objectives of “modernization,” and carried forward by students today, albeit in a different form. The more time I spent with the students, the less relevant I found the postcolonial critique. A more pressing interest became understanding how students perceive their education and prospects as anthropologists in a political-economic situation where education is becoming increasingly geared towards the “market.” Many youth around the world feel the same pressures of “market forces” governing our interests and opportunities, and it appears that we draw upon a wide range of shared concerns, dreams and strategies to achieve these goals.

Although so many of my findings transcend the academic and geographical boundaries of my study, my focus has been on IAGAS and anthropology students in Nairobi. I have dealt with questions on the relationship between education, knowledge and work in a contemporary African society marked by both structural adjustments and emerging opportunities in the global market economy. Kenyan students make their professional choices within a certain sociocultural and political-economic landscape which is marked by a youth bulge accompanied by a high youth unemployment rate, changing higher education policies, as well as generational changes in the relationship between education and work. In contrast to their parents’ generation, who enjoyed relatively secure employment opportunities on the basis of a secondary education, students today find little security in a college degree and are left fearing employment in the informal sector.

I found that both students and the institute are constrained by a number of political-economic conditions that influence research, the principle theme of chapter 3. In contrast with the golden era of the 1980s, when anthropology was identified as a course of value with the potential of contributing to national development, the environment for social sciences is becoming increasingly constrained. Two tendencies which reflect this situation are the faculty’s extensive

involvement in short-term consultancies and students' highly pragmatic attitudes to their own anthropological projects. Consequently, an orientation which began with ideological aspirations of "Africanizing" the discipline in liberation from Western anthropological hegemony, has devolved to accommodate the basic need for survival, characterized by a pursuit of "relevance" in order to attract students and funding.

Closer examination reveals that student aspirations and motivations include a larger commitment to *giving* back. I found that while students often imagine their society to be guided by marketability, limited opportunities and resulting cynicism, many still pursue the promise of change and appear genuinely motivated to affect this change. Indeed, the students' worldview emerges as another central theme of this thesis, as their images of society instruct their perceptions of obstacles and opportunities, and with this direct their ambivalent pursuits. This ambivalence is exemplified by students' pursuit of "relevance," which refers both to a wish to be relevant in the developmental future of society, while simultaneously relevant in the market economy. I argue that the fact that these two notions of relevance seem intuitively so difficult to reconcile is the result of an illusion cast by the dominance of market logic in contemporary society. This further points to a lingering anthropological dilemma; the false dichotomy of gift:commodity and our related inability to understand the inherent fluidity of peoples' interpretation of value.

Despite the harsh job market with a high unemployment rate, and with permanent jobs largely replaced by precarious temporary contracts, students do not imagine a future of manual labor or petty trade, but rather seek the ideal of formal work. I found them aspiring to white-collar jobs in powerful institutions which had the potential to offer a sense of belonging to something larger. An important aspect of this argument is the fortified landscape of NGOs and international organizations in Nairobi imposing exclusion, while also serving to plant the seed of imagined alternatives. Through such exposure, students' ideas of work are characterized by a desire to establish a professional, respected identity, as well as the potential to reach out to the world beyond Kenya. When they spoke of their role in international institutions, however, they tended to speak of confronting "problems back at home." It seems that powerful development institutions were imagined as locally rooted nodes of international connection. Above all, these institutions offer a platform where students are able to contribute to society and be appreciated for their anthropological expertise, hereby nourishing their desire for public recognition.

Kenyan anthropology has its own history and challenges, but these localized struggles and pursuits have wider purchase for the discipline. My material is an example of how the global “knowledge economy” puts a market value on academia as reflected in Kenyan anthropologists’ quest for strategies to “justify” working in their field. While Kenyan anthropologists might experience financial constraints even more acutely, our market-ridden society questions the significance of anthropology globally and begs for a critical assessment of anthropology’s role in contemporary society.

In conclusion, Kenyan students’ academic ambitions question a sharp division between self-interest and generosity. Their research interests and practices of “the field” indicate the collapse of such a dualism as their personal ambitions feed a more engaged or committed anthropological practice, able to play an important role in national development and generate social impact. Finally, the call to challenge “asymmetrical ignorance” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) within the discipline is still important, as African anthropology remains too absent from Western curricula. We must contend with the fact that Western anthropologists have the luxury of academic activities which their African counterparts cannot afford. In order for world anthropologies to prosper, we have to challenge the economic inequality and power relations which constrain *other*, currently *peripheral* anthropological sources from reaching their full potential and imparting valuable knowledge.

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