

child sponsorship, evangelism, and belonging in the work of World Vision Zimbabwe

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In this article, I examine the child sponsorship program of World Vision Zimbabwe—offering perspectives from nongovernmental organization (NGO) employees, sponsors, sponsored children, and rural communities being assisted. I demonstrate how transnational processes of giving and membership in a global Christian family contrast with Zimbabwean interpretations of humanitarian assistance and efforts to initiate a Zimbabwean child sponsorship program amidst growing local inequalities. In effect, new perceptions of economic disparity are produced by the very humanitarian efforts that strive to overcome them. I explore the intimate and personal relationships encouraged by sponsorship and the political economies within which they are situated, which include jealousies, desires, and altered senses of belonging. [Africa, NGOs, humanitarianism, transnationalism, development, Christian evangelism, Zimbabwe]

This is a study of the paradoxical effects of Christian humanitarian programs of child sponsorship. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved in child sponsorship seek to transcend economic disparity via personal relationships between individuals in “developed” nations and the children they sponsor in “less-developed” nations. These organizations speak to the potential of eradicating poverty, improving lives spiritually and economically, and uniting sponsors and sponsored children in an international community. The paradox lies in that, as much as these efforts inspire a liberatory potential, they also accentuate localized experiences of poverty and transform relationships of belonging for sponsors, the children they sponsor, and employees of the NGOs. The results of such efforts are indeed ambiguous. The liberatory potential to link people and transcend inequality on a global scale occurs in local political economies that reinforce the very disparities that sponsorship aims to overcome. This is not to say that humanitarian aid is a hopeless task, but that it is a multidimensional process that must be understood in such a spirit.

In this article, I investigate the dual consequences of child sponsorship through an analysis of one religious NGO, World Vision in Zimbabwe. I frame my analysis with the narrative experiences of two men in their twenties—a Zimbabwean who was formerly a child sponsored by World Vision and a Canadian sponsor who visited the child he sponsored in rural Zimbabwe. The cases educe how evangelical narratives of child sponsorship simultaneously transcend difference and exacerbate it—producing unintended consequences for both sponsors and their children. Culled from a larger project focusing on Christian NGOs and the relationships between religious ideas and economic development in Zimbabwe, my focus on World Vision arises from research I conducted in World Vision’s offices (in California 1994–95, in Washington, D.C.

1998, and in Harare and at rural field sites in Zimbabwe 1996–97). The cases are not intended to draw conclusions as to the efficacy of sponsorship. I have not set out to evaluate World Vision as an NGO (whether it is good or bad, for example); I believe this is a job best served by experts trained in assessing rural development and perhaps by World Vision itself. Rather, I aim to move beyond binary moral categories. Through ethnographic analysis of the inner-workings of World Vision, I focus on how humanitarian NGOs link donors and recipients of aid to facilitate processes of giving and helping. My entry into this topic was World Vision itself, and it is the locus of this study. My research in Zimbabwe was conducted with religious NGOs (loosely defined to include donors and constituents as well as NGO staff), in NGO offices, and at project sites where rural development takes place. In this article, I explore relationships of child sponsorship that form the core of World Vision's evangelical theology. I also document efforts by World Vision Zimbabwe (hereafter WV Zimbabwe) to make child sponsorship a local practice, with Zimbabwean sponsors for Zimbabwean children. As Christianity and rural economic development struggle to put down local roots, to "indigenize" in Zimbabwean parlance, or "inculturate" in the language of mission texts and theology (Bediako 1995; Pobe 1992; Sanneh 1989), I inquire how these processes take place and why they have not been successful. Although in Zimbabwe the Christianity of World Vision has become "Zimbabwean," its humanitarianism—as reflected in programs of child sponsorship—has not yet become a localized charitable form.

World Vision, like many other NGOs involved in programs of rural agricultural development, initiates microenterprise development schemes, irrigation projects, and sanitation programs that may include drilling boreholes for clean drinking water, building pit latrines, and constructing buildings for primary school education. There is an enormous body of literature that has emerged to examine the role of NGOs in economic development (Fisher 1997 among others).¹ World Vision is set apart from other transnational organizations in that it is explicitly Christian and attributes much of its work to Christian principles defined in a set of core values that express institutional ethics and the character to which it aspires.² Although religious discourse structures the activities of the NGO, the Christian aspect of World Vision may or may not alter its effects, especially when compared to secular NGOs. World Vision is also distinguished from other NGOs by its primary source of funding—child sponsorship: monthly remittances sent from individuals in "developed" nations to children in "developing" nations such as Zimbabwe. Sponsorship is organized through an apparatus of offices that form World Vision's International Partnership. Donor offices in places such as the United States fund development projects through national offices in places such as Zimbabwe. Structurally, the NGO is a transnational network of offices in which donor offices communicate directly with national offices without the coordination of a central office.³ In 1997, World Vision as a transnational organization claimed to "touch the lives" of more than 61 million people through 4,279 projects in 94 countries (World Vision 1997c).⁴ That same year, individuals in the United States sent monthly remittances of US\$22 each to sponsor 526,694 children around the world. In Zimbabwe, where my research was conducted, over 30,000 children are sponsored by an estimated 26,000 individual sponsors overseas (including, but not limited to, the United States). The majority of resources for the development work of WV Zimbabwe come from child sponsorship.⁵

Economic development in southern Africa has deeper historical roots than the rapidly emerging field of NGO studies may suggest. World Vision is a contemporary missionary organization, an institutional space that has a long history in Zimbabwe—

certainly longer than NGOs. Most Christian and secular NGOs in Zimbabwe began their operations during the liberation struggle in the 1970s. Many came after independence to assist in the transition to African rule and to resettle refugees from the war. World Vision and all of the NGOs that I studied in Zimbabwe share this history; however, they also tread the paths of economic development established before them by missionary organizations. Scholars have noted that one should not be misled to believe that NGO activity and the economic development it supports is a radically new form of transnational capital (Cooper and Packard 1997). Moreover, missionary activity is well documented in Zimbabwe, and there is extensive documentation of church bodies as leaders of education, health care, and social welfare in colonial Southern Rhodesia (Bourdillon 1977; Dachs 1973; Ranger 1994; Rea 1962); the role of religion in Zimbabwe's struggle for independence (Hallencreutz and Moyo 1988; Lan 1985); and the postindependence response of churches to economic development (Chepkwony Ongaro 1991; Gundani 1988; Maxwell 1995). Other scholars have traced intricate relations between missionaries and national governments in southern Africa both in and out of the colonial era (Comaroff 1989; Comaroff 1991; Cooper and Stoler 1989; Gifford 1992; Hastings 1979; Ranger 1962). Missionaries are alive and well in southern Africa today; they are involved in internationally sponsored programs of rural economic development and are Zimbabwean employees of NGOs such as World Vision. Much like mission bodies of earlier eras, transnational Christian NGOs struggle to fulfill expectations from donor offices and to contend with the local contexts in which their work is conducted (for the colonial era, see Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; for contemporary contexts, see Moyo and Katerere 1991; Ndegwa 1994; Riddell and Robinson 1995; Vivian 1994). It is in this regard that Christian NGOs are similar to so-called secular NGOs concerned with issues of transparency, accountability, governmentality, and the most efficient use of donor funds to alleviate poverty.⁶ Even development activity that is not explicitly religious may also be seen as having deeper roots in the religious ethic of Christianity, where advancement and betterment through service are an integral aspect of religious discourse.

the liberatory potential of sponsorship: global Christian families

The personal relationships of child sponsorship, built through correspondence, exist alongside the impersonality of the monetary exchange of child sponsorship—the Simmelian fact (1990) that these relationships are being purchased, through global capitalism, reinscribing those who have money to sponsor children and those who must be sponsored (although many of the sponsors are not wealthy in the context of their own national economies. Most sponsors are pensioners or “middle class”).⁷ The personal connection—from individual to individual in relationships of correspondence—both effaces the global political-economic context that engenders sponsorship and transcends the potential impersonality of a monthly remittance. If these sponsored children threaten to become commodities, embodying the commodification of goodness and development and fetishized as such, the relationships of belonging to one's own nation and to an imagined global community, reaffirm generic humanity in the process. Discourses of evangelism build relationships of child sponsorship within World Vision, transmogrifying money in the form of monthly remittances—a generic and impersonal standard of value—into embodied human relationships with alive, unpredictable, and spontaneous others.

Child sponsorship involves monthly remittances sent from sponsors, through World Vision, to children sponsored in countries such as Zimbabwe. These monthly payments finance World Vision's economic development at rural project sites.

Sponsorship also involves rural communities that elect management committees to oversee development projects and, in concert with local leadership (such as elders and headmen), “identify the poorest families in the community.”⁸ The children identified are sometimes those who have lost a parent or whose parents are economically marginal relative to the rest of the community.⁹ At project sites, sponsorship lasts between 1–10 years and is only one component of World Vision’s broader development initiatives in health, sanitation, education, and microenterprise development—initiatives that also engage the families of children who are not sponsored. Sponsorship monies fund these broader initiatives as well; monthly remittances sent by sponsors are aggregated in donor offices in the nations where sponsors reside and pooled together to budget community development. In contrast to other development organizations that also facilitate rural, agricultural development, the relationships created through child sponsorship, between sponsors and their children, form personal links across national borders and cultures (World Vision 1997b).

World Vision’s publicity materials describe child sponsorship as a humanitarian connection that manifests transcendent love for a stranger. In effect, humanitarian global capitalism spawns relationships across space and facilitates an intercontinental traffic in meaning (see also global ecumene in Foster 1991; Hannerz 1987, 1996). Child sponsorship connects sponsors in “developed” nations with children in “developing” nations through late-capitalist and transnational forms of accumulation. In a provocative essay on transnational accumulation and shifting class relations in the United States, Rouse exemplifies how transnational accumulation is made distinctive by the increased speed with which “people, goods, money, information and ideas move across the boundaries of the state” (1995:358). The speed and flow of capital correlates to growing inequalities and shifting class positions within the global sphere, often in local arenas. These processes are augmented by a prevalence of organizations such as World Vision. Crossing national boundaries and coordinating fiscal flows of humanitarian aid, NGOs encourage ideas of helping and humanitarianism, redistributing transnational accumulation. New forms of accumulation (and humanitarian redistribution) that promise to “shrink the distances between humanity” offer narratives with liberatory potential to unify people across national borders (Rouse 1995:376).¹⁰

My first case is an example of what sponsorship can do for a child being sponsored. I met Albert in Zimbabwe in 1997.¹¹ A man in his twenties who as a boy had been sponsored by World Vision in rural Zimbabwe, he was described to me by the staff of WV Zimbabwe as a sponsorship success story. The national director urged me to meet with Albert to “see what sponsorship can do.” When I met Albert he was doing well, financially, by Zimbabwean standards. Dressed smartly in a pink shirt and tie, he arrived at the World Vision offices in Harare in a company car and suggested we go to his office at a local shopping center. During our interview, he attributed his current success to having been sponsored as a child and recounted how difficult life was for him at the time his sponsorship began. Albert was one of the poorest of the poor and had been chosen by his community to be sponsored. He had grown up in difficult circumstances: his mother had died when he was very young, and his grandmother raised him. When his grandmother died, he moved in with his father, his father’s second wife, and his new stepbrothers and stepsisters. He was not well liked by his stepmother and remembered sponsorship coming when he was feeling “let down,” as if the “Lord had turned his back.” Albert saw World Vision’s arrival in the community as a rescue and a blessing. He said, “Then came the sponsor and everything looked up. . . . The Lord came to my rescue in the form of a sponsor, and He

was there as a provider. It was a great blessing." Albert had fond memories of being sponsored, although it had been difficult for him to understand the logic of child sponsorship at the time. He described sponsorship as being in the dark and being handed a light, as "a great help from nowhere." He had joined the World Vision program during a family relief and supplementary feeding initiative in 1982 at the age of ten. His memories of the time were vague, but he recalled having "lots of milk on Friday." He explained how the sponsored children would come together every fortnight to meet and have Bible lessons at the Methodist church. "I remember the milk," he said, "then there was washing soap, beans, and other things to share with my family"; it was a time of abundance.

World Vision told Albert at the time that he would receive letters and presents, and that a sponsor promised to see him through school. In addition to the food and correspondence, sponsors sent money to their children that World Vision translated into gifts purchased locally, such as soccer balls. It was hard for Albert to grasp what it meant. "How can someone who doesn't know me come and take care of me?" he wondered. "They never met me, yet they are saying how much they love me. It was a bit difficult to believe." There were set times to write letters to sponsors. He addressed his letters "Dear Sponsor" since he did not know his sponsor's name, gender, or country of origin, although he suspected his sponsor was from the United States. Albert's sponsor was truly anonymous. The letters he received were translated into Shona and, since the pronouns were gender neutral, he never knew if his sponsor was male or female. The cards he received from his sponsor were on World Vision stationery with the corners ripped off where addresses had been. For Albert, being sponsored made him feel important. "Personally, it felt great," he said, "really felt like I was belonging, that I am a part of this person's life." He remembered the thrill of being sponsored. "I remember lots of luxury cars and lots of important people coming to see the children. . . . Important cars made us feel important. We felt we are very privileged. [They were] important people in suits and ties and we felt special." Sadly for Albert, however, World Vision phased out the program in 1987 in order to promote the self-sufficiency of the community. He was not told directly that the project was coming to an end. "They just closed up the offices," he explained. He considered it a phase in his life, a chapter that ended. When the project closed, he lost contact with his sponsor. He described it as a "feeling of loss" without the fortnightly meetings or the gifts. Albert experienced World Vision's initiative of self-sufficiency as abandonment.

Suddenly, in 1989, after five years without any contact from his sponsor, Albert's sister received a call from World Vision asking for Albert to come to the World Vision offices in Harare. He recounted how, in Harare, a World Vision staff member had told him he was a very lucky child and that his sponsor had sent him a lot of money: US\$550. Albert said that after five years without any contact with his sponsor he could barely understand it. The sponsor sent enough money for secondary school in Harare, which Albert had never hoped to attend since his father could not afford the school fees. If Albert failed his O-levels, his sponsor wanted him to repeat them; if he passed, his sponsor wanted him to take his A's. The \$550 would pay for two years of high school, for uniforms, and for Albert to come to Harare for his secondary school.¹² He lost contact with his sponsor after this final remittance, and at the time we spoke he was trying to locate his sponsor. He regretted that he never had a chance to thank his sponsor in person and sponsorship had ended so abruptly. "I am optimistic," Albert said to me. "Somewhere in the files, they must have something about the sponsor's identity."

Albert's stepsisters and brothers did not benefit to the extent that Albert did from sponsorship, and this created jealousy within his family. When she heard about the extra funds Albert received from his sponsor for school fees, his stepmother was upset. She had gone with him to Harare to accept the money, and she could not believe that it was only Albert who was to receive it; she wanted him to share the money with his stepbrothers and sisters. Albert recalled how the sponsor relations specialist in Harare had to explain to his stepmother what sponsorship meant and why the extra money was just for Albert. Despite local attempts to translate the discourse of child sponsorship into the Zimbabwean context, child sponsorship had the propensity to become an individualizing force. The individualistic discourse in the developed world, which generates the success of individual-based appeals, created conflict in Albert's life, and, according to Albert, the tremendous gift of an education for Albert made his father feel inferior and suspicious. As our interview was ending, Albert surprised me with a question: "Do you think there are ulterior motives behind humanitarian aid?" he asked. His father was concerned with these motives and their link to colonialism. Albert said of his father: "He told me that after I finish school I shouldn't accept any more money from World Vision. He said the sponsor will send you money for an airplane ticket to the United States, and then you will never come back. They probably can't have their own children and they will want to adopt you. He was afraid of having me stolen."

Although the work of World Vision created a division between Albert and his stepbrothers and sisters, it opened up the world for Albert. He eventually went to the University of Zimbabwe and saw himself as someone who wanted to help others—to be more "Christian." He was forlorn that he could not find his sponsor and that the window of an international community closed after the project support ended. Albert had changed, but the "belonging" had stopped. Instead, he was connected to something new and intangible—an urge to do humanitarian work himself. Albert had a dream of working for World Vision—to "translate my gratitude so some kid will look up at me and say that man helped me be who I am." He wondered whether the real benefactors of child sponsorship, the people who benefit the most from humanitarian, charitable work, were the sponsors themselves. He imagined what could be gained by sponsorship—that "sense of being you feel by knowing you did something for someone." He too wanted this sense of being, to "be involved with the welfare of others," not only for his family or for himself, "but other people because we are just one big family." Yet, in Albert's case, child sponsorship reformed his local identity, placing it in transnational counterpoint to local tensions and conflicts, instead of constituting a unified global (and in this case, Christian) world. Albert experienced a stress between his local family and his perceived sense of place in a global Christian and humanitarian community.

relationships of correspondence

Although the humanitarian community is created by fiscal flows from "developed" to "less developed" countries, relationships move reciprocally between sponsors and their sponsored children. Journalists are fond of critiquing child sponsorship organizations for their misuse of funds or for corrupt and inefficient development practices. For example, a series of articles in the *Chicago Tribune* entitled "The Miracle Merchants" (1998) lambasted four organizations for corrupt practices. Fortunately for World Vision, it was not chosen for the focus of the exposé. This exposé highlights the concern that results when global efforts to connect people result in failure—when children once involved in a program can no longer be located, for example.

Although the four organizations were critiqued for an abuse of donor funds, or lack of “stewardship” (Irvine 1996:273) for money, I argue that global disjunctures on an emotional level are just as significant. In child sponsorship, children are not only ambassadors of hope (Malkki 1997), but they symbolize explosive moral terrain. Critiques of child sponsorship represent children as embodying both hope (of international assistance) and despair (when it does not come to fruition).

Authors (Stephens 1995; Zelizer 1985) have pointed to the importance of studying the social processes through which children are constructed (and deconstructed) as social and historical categories. Zelizer underscores the historical processes that sacralized children in a definitive shift from economic to emotional value, concluding that contemporary conceptions of morally valued, nonlaboring but economically priceless children are modern phenomena. Stephens and the authors in her edited volume, *Children and the Politics of Culture*, examine postmodern contexts to argue that the “child” as a modern category is being eroded by global disjunctures, including war and the economic consequences of globalization and flexible accumulation (cf. David Harvey 1989).

Malkki (1997) extends this argument to examine discursive representations of children in the international community. She argues that international discourses of humanitarianism that equate children with hope for the future stand in contrast to history and politics. Children, as incarnations of utopia in humanitarian discourse, serve as depoliticizing agents in highly political contexts. By exploring the role of being human in the world community and the role of children as manifestations of this humanitarianism, Malkki argues that transnational representations of children do not necessarily transcend the national; they may depend on it. In the supranational imaginings of a world community, the world is an ensemble of nations and children are seen to embody all of humanity. In effect, Malkki argues, children serve the international humanitarian community as embodiments of basic goodness and symbols of world harmony, as sufferers, as seers of truth, as ambassadors of peace, and as embodiments of the future. Children are a “tranquilizing convention,” a depoliticizing agent in the international community (Malkki 1997:17). One could argue that new forms of transnational accumulation engender the consumption of “goodness” and humanitarian ideals while, simultaneously, children increasingly are interpellated as consumer subjects (Rouse 1995).

In contrast to the representation of children as universal and depersonalized, World Vision’s child sponsorship offers the potential for highly personalized and intimate relationships of friendship and membership in families. On July 3, 1997, in Harare, during a focused group discussion with the Christian Witness Committee of WV Zimbabwe (which I attended), the national director of WV Zimbabwe gave a moving example of the depth of these relationships in practice, describing a sponsor who lost a photo of his child:

A sponsor in the States had their wallet stolen, and there was a picture of the sponsored child in it. And they really cried, you know. They didn’t know how much they were attached to this child that they sponsored, and it was really moving. They missed the other credit cards and so, but . . . the point of the deprivation was the picture and the picture of the grandmother of the sponsored child. Now, this is a good powerful story because it’s drawing attention to relationships of people. And to me it has never ceased to amaze me how there is such a strong bond with people who have never seen each other. It’s more than the terms in which we explain it. . . . It’s mysterious . . . because otherwise, you see, we can’t explain all this inhumanity and despair.¹³

Thus, not only are children tranquilizing agents, they are also panaceas for such unexplainable human consequences as “inhumanity and despair.” Through personal relationships, as in child sponsorship, the poverty constituting the “need” for development becomes manageable and pragmatic, something to be solved with a monthly financial commitment. For the national director of WV Zimbabwe, these “relationships of people” are a powerful component of the development work of World Vision. Organizations like World Vision reinforce the category of childhood—to protect innocent children and their sponsors from the harsh conditions of global economic shifts and the injustices that situate some in “developed” and others in “developing” nations. These relationships carry contradictions and ambiguities, proffering what Ferguson (1999) has called “global disconnect” (cf., “disjunctures”; Appadurai 1990) along with the Christian unity they profess. There is a severe gap between the desires produced through transnational accumulation and the realities experienced. Amidst unity, and promises of connection, difference is reinscribed and inequalities increase. For sponsors, humanitarian expectations of a transnational family juxtapose the prospect of loss—a child that cannot be found, for example, or harsh realities of poverty (“inhumanity and despair,” as the national director articulated) that define the urgency of development and humanitarian aid.

In Harare, I interviewed local managers of child sponsorship, such as specialists and correspondence analysts, who monitored the reciprocal correspondence between sponsors and their children. On one occasion, I was invited to the sponsor relations room and offered an opportunity to read mail from sponsors to their children. Although the context did not allow for rigorous content analysis of letters and packages, I was struck by how each letter was simultaneously mundane (with the bland and superficial descriptions of everyday life and the weather) and intensely intimate and personal (about children and grandchildren, husbands and wives, vacation travel, sick pets)—all communicated from distant countries to Zimbabwe. Some sponsor packages contained toys. As I opened the envelopes, I could feel the exoticism of something from far away. I could imagine how excited a child in rural Zimbabwe might be to receive a paint set, a toy car, a coloring book, or even a photo of a family in Canada, Germany, or the United States. The subjects in these portraits emerged as exotic and personal partners in the one-to-one relationship of intimate correspondence, the essence of child sponsorship.

Letters were intensively catalogued and edited by correspondence analysts who cut out the names of sponsors as well as anything relating to politics or sexuality (both to exclude content inappropriate in the Zimbabwean context and to allow World Vision to operate in a space set apart from local and national politics, in effect, to be transnational). Because children were prohibited from soliciting money directly from sponsors, sponsored children did not know the address or names of their sponsors (hence the anonymity of Albert’s sponsor); none of the letters I read contained sponsors’ names. All correspondence flowed through the central office in Harare and children’s replies were monitored as well. Children were encouraged to write the sponsors themselves, and those who could not, received help from World Vision field staff. According to a sponsor relations supervisor in Harare, a Zimbabwean woman in her midforties, most sponsors preferred to receive letters written by the children themselves “in the handwriting of the child.” If the child was too young to write a letter, the project clerk encouraged the child to send a drawing, to which the clerk attached a letter. These letters, she explained, “give a close relationship” between sponsors and children.¹⁴

One analyst, a Zimbabwean man in his twenties, himself desiring to attend college in the United States, oversaw the Mashonaland West province with five community development projects. Letters for this province crossed his desk before being sent to rural project offices. He opened the letters and read them, logging the contents, and making note of any politically sensitive information. He explained the approach:

I read the letter to make sure that certain information doesn't pass to the child, like politics. We cancel that piece of information, for example if they ask about how the president is ruling the country. . . . We either cross it out or cut it out of the letter. And about cultural issues—if they [sponsors] ask do you have a girlfriend or some boy-friends, our children are still young. . . . We do not encourage sponsors to send naked or half-naked pictures to our children. In Zimbabwe, we encourage children to have girlfriends only above 18 [after they are 18]. We don't allow children to ask for money from sponsors directly. The support offices are already doing that for us. [interview with child sponsorship communication analyst, April 24, 1997]

He said sponsors wrote about “family affairs, because World Vision helps the family” and that “religion is a regular question. They ask: do you go to church? What is the name of your church? Sponsors send Bibles to our children.” They also send gifts and sometimes money in surplus of their monthly payments (World Vision's term for these extra allocations was *Gift Notifications*). With these additional gifts—as in the money that paid for Albert's secondary education—children were directed to purchase school fees, for example, or blankets and clothes for the whole family. When items were purchased with Gift Notifications, a photo was taken of items with the child, which was sent to the sponsor, demonstrating the accountability of World Vision and providing proof of a relationship that threatened to be fictive.¹⁵

I looked at one letter from Canada that accompanied a picture of the sponsor's biological children. I wondered what the sponsored child in Zimbabwe would think of the photograph. The letter described the birth of a new grandchild, the weather in Canada, the schooling of the sponsor's children, and a description of her husband who was preparing to plow their field. The salutation read: “With love, your sponsor, it is a blessing knowing you and your family.” There were many letters and postcards describing how “we went here,” “we saw this,” “this is what is happening in our family.” There was a letter from a sponsor's son to their child: “I am glad to know that you are doing well in school, and also that you received my card and contents. Carry it with you at all times and the Cross will bring you good luck.” A young couple from Germany, a secretary and an ambulance driver, wrote a short letter describing themselves to their sponsored child. As I perused letters with photos, pictures, and drawings enclosed, I was impressed by how much the giving that flowed through World Vision had personalities, identities, a sense of humor, and offered snippets of lives. Some letters had been translated into English by the support office in Germany and would be translated into either Shona or Ndebele (the languages of sponsored children) by WV Zimbabwe at the rural project sites. One letter offered almost unlimited possibilities. It was a birthday card that read:

Dear Nomatter,¹⁶ In this time I send you only a birthday letter, because I don't know which present a little African girl wishes for her birthday. You can write me, which present do you want and if I can send this present by mail you get it. And please don't write you have no wishes. I know that every little girl all over the world has dreams and wishes. Happy Birthday to you and all the best for you and your family.

Some of the letters and packages had Bibles or spoke of Jesus; all of them had the sponsors' addresses cut out or covered up. One package contained a *National Geographic*

World magazine; another contained barrettes; others contained talk about families, pets, drawings, a whole collection of an entire foreign world, including cut out magazine pictures. One letter contained a wedding picture of the sponsors, a small beaded bracelet for a child, and a birthday card. There was a package from the United States with a coloring book with the sponsored child's computer-generated picture printed on it and a colored computer-printed letter written by a 27-year old from Virginia who worked for a company that "sells machines that people use in their offices to write things on paper" (I suspect she meant printers). She had made the coloring book for the child. I was amazed at the intimacy, the pieces of lives shared, and the worlds translated in these packages that contained mysteries and evoked hopes. Immense creativity breathed in these packages, in the care that had gone into assembling them. I was touched by the letters; many seemed reasonable attempts to bridge the intimacy and strangeness of sponsoring a child in a country the sponsors had never visited.

In addition to correspondence, annual progress reports resembling report cards with photos are sent to sponsors. They contain descriptions of community development, the child's progress in school, and the activities carried out in the community by World Vision. For example, one report on its way to Canada stated: "School fees paid to all sponsored children. Bibles given to all Chirariro Churches." It continued in three separate short paragraphs to describe that a dip tank was constructed, Blair toilets were built, and the school was renovated. In Mashonaland West province there were more than a thousand children sponsored, and the volume of letters was significant: 50–100 letters per month, doubling during Christmas and Easter. I noticed that on some of the annual reports the "comment section" listed specific personal difficulties: "refuses to go to school on own" or "mentally disturbed." The detail was shockingly specific and human. Children sponsored, who are between 5 months and 14 years, have relationships with sponsors that can continue for years—through secondary education (A-Levels in Zimbabwe). These relationships are built through correspondence in which sponsors and their children strive to bridge economic and social distance—between poverty and wealth, across oceans, languages, and cultures. These distances are also traversed physically, when a sponsor travels to visit his or her child, and conceptually through the imaginations of sponsored children who have not yet met their sponsors. Sponsorship also involves a fiscal relationship of credit and trust, founded on a belief that sponsors will keep paying for their children. Money, like a monotheistic God, is a unifying abstraction. It has the potential to "reconcile all diversity into a single unity" (Simmel 1990:515). This religious unity embraces, and effaces, the diversity of cultures involved in child sponsorship. Yet this is not without consequences.

a theology of sponsorship

Within World Vision, there is a theological link between child sponsorship, Christian evangelism, and institutional origin. An early film made about the founder of World Vision, Bob Pierce, demonstrates the unifying potential of Christianity. Bob Pierce, an American evangelist, journalist, and the founder of World Vision International (hereafter WV International) narrates: "Little darlings, motherless, daddyless, homeless, but thank God these are not Christless. For the missionary has opened up to them the wonderful promises of the word of God. . . . Christ offers a dying humanity, a personal God who personally cares for the personal needs of the lowliest individual" (World Vision 1950). Although World Vision has grown and changed considerably since its early years, employees recounted stories of its beginnings during interviews in both the United States and in Zimbabwe as examples of its Christian basis

(see also Gehman 1960; Irvine 1996). One organizational origin myth revolved around Pierce preaching in a mission school in China in 1947. During one of his sermons, he suggested to the children in the mission school that they not only “accept Christ,” but also “go home and share with their parents their new faith.” The next day, he returned to the school to thank the missionary who had invited him, and he encountered a crying child named “White Jade” who had been beaten by her parents as a result of proclaiming her faith in Christianity. At this point, “the enormous social implications of Christ’s Gospel began to unfold in his mind. The incredibly vulnerable child in his arms was a child of the King. And she needed to be cared for” (World Vision 1994; Irvine 1996). He gave the missionary teacher the contents of his pocket, which was five dollars, and offered to send five dollars every month so that White Jade could live in the missionary school and avoid parental punishment for adopting Christianity. This story, of an initial gift, and the tension between Christian humanitarian families and local dynamics of power between kin, delineated the template for child sponsorship.¹⁷ World Vision’s evangelical philosophy and stories of its early years historically contextualize the contemporary work of WV Zimbabwe and point to the salient relationships—between donors and recipients of humanitarian aid—that form the philosophical core of World Vision’s economic development work today.¹⁸

Personal relationships between individuals are the nucleus of World Vision’s theology, which grows out of a movement in American evangelicalism of the 1940s called the New Evangelical movement (Marsden 1987, 1991; Noll et al. 1994; Wells and Woodbridge 1975), and perhaps World Vision’s global success is due to the resurgence in international missions encouraged by the New Evangelical movement. Yet alongside this expansive reach, one-to-one relationships modeled after a personal relationship that an evangelical believer develops with Jesus Christ are the foundation of child sponsorship; these relationships fund World Vision’s community development work.¹⁹ At development sites (before Christianity and narratives of making Jesus a “personal friend” are introduced), WV Zimbabwe staff carefully cultivate relationships with community members in order to build trust and a context within which people will listen to the gospel. I was told by several people, including the director of WV International’s “Unreached People’s Program,” that “Christ has no grandchildren” meaning it is not enough to be born a Christian, one must be born again (interview, July 20, 1994). Only with a spiritual rebirth can one “enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” Thus, World Vision workers become ambassadors of Jesus Christ, God’s diplomatic corps for a transnational Christian family. Unlike religions such as those found in Zimbabwe, which involve ancestors and spiritual lineages that one must be born into, the Christianity of World Vision involves the spontaneous potential of membership, of becoming part of a “body of faith.” A policy paper on sponsorship published by World Vision in 1997 states: “Relationships based in love for Christ and respect for others bind individuals who together create a body of faith. By forging a friendship with a child who may seem less advantaged or strong, a sponsor extends the body of Christ and cares for that member as it would every critical part of its own physical body” (World Vision 1997d). During a group discussion with the Christian Witness Committee of WV Zimbabwe on July 3, 1997, the national director of WV Zimbabwe urged me to take note of these relationships and described sponsorship as: “A realization of God’s love, which is transcendent. It transcends boundaries and connects people.” He explained that Christianity itself was about relationships, with God and between people. He explained that these were the relationships on which sponsorship was modeled. If child sponsorship programs are propelled theologically by an evangelical desire to link people to Christ in a body of faith, it is not only the

donors and recipients who participate. World Vision staff in their employment applications were required to sign a "statement of faith" acknowledging they accept Jesus Christ as their savior (are "born again"). It was the consensus at WV International that staff at the support and field ends of child sponsorship "are Christian and are working because of the Christian motivation."²⁰ At the community level, the children participating do not have to be Christian, although their parents have to consent to their involvement in World Vision community activities. In a March 24, 1997 interview with me, the sponsor relations manager for WV Zimbabwe explained that at the field level, "we try to show Christ, the love of Christ in the work that we do." He continued to add that it was their "hope that even children that are sponsored . . . will begin to appreciate that Christ loves them. That's why these people are coming to assist them. And they are important in the eyes of God, and that way maybe it can instill in them a sense of wanting to know more about God, as children."

Whose lives does child sponsorship change? The communities that receive boreholes, irrigation schemes, and other more material aspects of development are obviously affected, but individuals who sponsor children are also being transformed according to World Vision. The child's life is improved materially and the "donor's heart" is transformed by helping others (World Vision 1997a). Child sponsorship instigates relationships that extend "families" across borders. World Vision declares that sponsors, too, "often learn a great deal about God's unconditional love and about themselves by caring for a child of a different culture and position—and equal worth to God" (World Vision 1997a). Moreover, while the global family of Christians transcends the national, sponsorship works because of its emphasis on individual agency. Personal relationships initiated by sponsorship give individuals a chance to feel as if they are making a difference in the face of what may seem insurmountable—larger political and economic processes of unequal development, poverty, war, and even natural disasters. World Vision responds to these environments. In Zimbabwe, during a 1997 interview, an international sponsorship coordinator who had worked in sponsorship for both WV USA and WV Australia explained to me: "It seems that the people that we get the funding from can't relate to a big problem and feel like they can have some kind of import. Whereas if you give them one child they think, yes, I could make a difference in that one child's life." Representations of children as depoliticized agents of universal innocence arouse potential sponsors out of their apathy and slumber; they provide means for individuals to forge real and personal connections with generic representations of poverty of Africa. Instead of merely watching children's faces on TV as icons of poverty and despair afar, sponsors are coaxed into action by World Vision, provided a way to connect on a personal level to what threatens to be, as Malkki (1996) has noted, a depersonalized sea of humanity. With national and transnational politics sublimated, child sponsorship is made both possible and intimate.

the political economy of sponsorship: local realities

Despite the intimacy inspired through the correspondence of sponsorship and the liberatory potential that sponsorship evokes, the political economies in which sponsorship is situated accentuate localized experiences of poverty. Specifically, the very humanitarian and evangelical narratives that portend to transcend geographic and cultural distance through community development both elide and reinforce differences of poverty and wealth between sponsors and recipients and within local communities. My second case, drawn from a series of conversations I had in Harare with a Canadian child sponsor named Peter²¹ illustrates the expectations and disappointments inherent in this process. His experiences exemplify a basic contradiction

between, on the one hand, the discourse of humanitarianism that casts sponsored children as part of a global, generic, humanitarian family transcending languages, cultures, and national identities (i.e., a sea of humanity; Malkki 1996) and, on the other, particular and personal relationships of child sponsorship that cut across, and threaten to disable the fluency of, generic humanitarianism. Within this contradiction, identities of sponsors and sponsored children are reconstituted. In visiting his child, Peter moved from the hopeful humanitarian stance of similitude to a heightened awareness of the enormous disparity between himself and the child he sponsored. Peter was young, in his twenties, and had been a child sponsor for about four years. He was working on his Bachelor of Arts and majoring in development at a Canadian university. He was in Zimbabwe with a special program for gifted students and had been on an internship with a World Vision development project in northern Zimbabwe.²² Peter learned of the sponsorship program through his church. Although this sponsor's experiences may illustrate what could be termed more general (secular) humanitarian endeavors to help the less fortunate, they also express the implicit chiliasm in child sponsorship that portends a global Christian family transcendent of economic realities.

Peter told me that, given his sponsorship of a child, he wanted to see World Vision's work, to evaluate the quality of its impact. He had spent three weeks "on attachment" at the World Vision project and was arranging to visit the child he sponsored in southern Zimbabwe. The experience of being on attachment at the development project had been awkward for Peter, especially when a World Vision employee solicited funding from him for study abroad. He encountered a culture of expectation between World Vision staff and visiting donors, and it was a culture in which he was implicated. He said that at first everyone treated him as a donor, but when they realized he was a student they ignored him. He lived in staff quarters, paid for his own food, and paid for the staff's food as well once he became aware of the great disparity of wealth between himself and the Zimbabwean village development workers employed by World Vision and living at the rural development project. Peter had never written to his child, whom he sponsored in Zimbabwe. "What would I say to her?" he asked me. He showed me the progress reports and photos that World Vision had sent him. He believed in World Vision, and in the project of development, to the extent that he had come to Zimbabwe as an intern for World Vision and was majoring in development studies in college. Now that he was in Zimbabwe, he wanted to visit his sponsored child, and World Vision's Bulawayo office was trying to locate her.

His awareness of World Vision began in his Presbyterian church in Canada. He explained how the church was involved in initiating sponsorship of children through World Vision. His church also organized a series of fundraising events called "famines" during which members of the congregation would fast for 30 or 48 hours, donating to World Vision the money they would have spent on food. By participating in these "famines," members of his church raised money to help alleviate hunger and felt what it was like to be hungry, if only for a limited time. He showed me the materials he had received in the mail from World Vision Canada informing him about child sponsorship; they included progress reports on his child. He remembered being told that if he wrote to his child, there would be certain topical constraints. For example, he was not supposed to write about "wealth and natural beauty" although he was not given an explanation as to why. More concerned with development than the Christian aspects of World Vision's work, he thought that sending a small amount of money every month (Can\$27) was an easy way to participate in helping others. He said he continued because of "convenience." He explained that he had more than once seen

the two-hour World Vision telethon documentary at home, on Global TV Canada. "I've watched it and said I should call the number, and finally I decided to do it." The money he gave for child sponsorship was automatically deducted monthly from his credit card.

At first he had misconceptions about his role as a sponsor. Once, his credit card was stolen, and he missed a sponsorship payment. World Vision Canada called him and asked if he wanted to continue sponsoring the child; they said they had covered it for the month he missed. Peter had wondered if the child had not eaten for that month because he missed a payment, speculatively thinking, "Would she write: 'Where were you in March 95?'" Sponsorship seemed that direct. Now he realized it was bit of a myth that the child depended on sponsorship so much and that the fallacy masked the institutional mechanics that really made development possible.

Peter showed me a photograph of the child he sponsored. He laughed when he described how some people displayed the photographs of sponsored children on their mantles with other family photographs. He said he thought this was strange and that he would never do this. "What do I have in common with this child?" he asked rhetorically, expressing how absurd he believed the simultaneously abstract and personal connection to be. On the page facing the photograph, the World Vision report read: "4–5 years old Chipu lives with her parents in a rural area. Her parents are very poor. They live in a one room hut which is too small for their family. The father, although employed, earns so little that it is impossible to meet their needs. Your sponsorship is an important and continuing part of assistance to help this girl and her family attain self-reliance. For this is the development in which World Vision is involved" (World Vision n.d.). Peter remarked that much of the text could be misconstrued by Western audiences. For example, he pointed out that most people in Zimbabwe live in rural areas and in one-room huts, but for many North Americans a rural environment and a one-room habitation imply impoverishment. He added that it was unlikely that his funds directly assisted the family in attaining self-reliance, pointing out that the funds went into community development and not personal gain.

Later that month, Peter called to tell me about his trip to southern Zimbabwe, where he had visited the child he sponsored. During his story, he referred to the child he sponsored as "my child." Contrary to his expectations, he was not treated as a dignitary. He was asked by World Vision staff to pay for petrol and was not given lunch. In fact, he did not eat all day. He took the bus home, getting back to Harare around midnight. An entourage of World Vision staff members joined him on his journey: the project officer, a sponsor relations officer, a driver, and a communications officer who was doing research. Peter was irritated that he was not given better treatment. Although he was prepared to be "treated as a God," and had anticipated the embarrassment of this, he was disappointed when it did not take place. He described his first meeting with his sponsored child:

The sponsor relations officer pointed to a group of kids and asked, "Do you see your child?" and I thought, how am I supposed to know which one she is. I was able to tell by the scar under her eye. The kid couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Ndebele, so it was really awkward at first. I didn't know what to say to her. She was 8 years old; she was shy and didn't say much. The communications officer suggested that she show us around her houses, which she did. I didn't feel like hugging the girl or anything. It was uncomfortable. I brought her gifts—a dress at my professor's suggestion, a coloring book, colored pencils, and a Canadian flag. When I gave her the gifts things got a little looser. . . . There was something to talk about.

The giving of gifts was a language through which both Peter and his sponsored child could communicate.

Peter was disturbed at discrepancies between his project reports and what his child's life was like, materially. Peter had earlier joked about the generic intimacy promoted by World Vision, but he was surprised that his reports did not represent what he saw when he visited. The gap between his experience and World Vision's representation of sponsorship was unsettling for Peter. He described:

She didn't live in one hut [as the project report had stated]; it was two houses and two bigger huts. The father didn't have a job; he is unemployed and has never been employed [again a discrepancy from the project report he had received]. I asked the staff how children were chosen for sponsorship, and they said they were selected by the community, the poorest of the poor. When I asked if it was a random sample . . . , they got upset and assured me that it was the poorest of the poor children that were sponsored.

Peter had an informed and educated view of child sponsorship and the development work of World Vision, and he was himself studying to become a development professional. Nonetheless, he was dismayed by the subtle discrepancies and tiny inconsistencies he encountered, especially the disconnect he experienced between himself and his child, which seemed in direct contradiction to his hopeful participation in World Vision's promise of a humanitarian community. He cared for his child, and was responsibly concerned when his wallet was stolen and he missed a monthly payment. Although he never wrote to his child, he was disappointed that the "relationship" was not what he had imagined. For Peter, meeting his child was not a realization of the humanitarian community of which he had so long imagined himself a part. Local disconnections were all too salient. Peter was uneasy with his burgeoning awareness of the structural relations of power and inequality that had created a transnational space for programs of child sponsorship. He found himself a participant in local practices of place making and identity, where his identity as a donor was in stark contrast to his sponsored child. It is not only donors who experience these stark contrasts. Sponsorship incites discontinuities in the lives of sponsored children as well. These ambiguities—of longing for connection amidst the reality of difference—are part of the political economies that spawn sponsorship practices, and World Vision itself.

The most prolific culprits that contribute to heightened understandings of localized inequalities are Gift Notifications, extra money sent above and beyond monthly child sponsorship dues. These Gift Notifications are sent directly to children and their immediate families, through the local (national and community) project offices. The irony of child sponsorship is that as much as child sponsorship links people across nations in transnational relationships of a global "Christian family," it divides people locally and has immense potential to inspire jealousy. In Zimbabwe (and much of southern Africa), jealousy can invoke witchcraft.²³ One of WV Zimbabwe's sponsor relations specialists, an evangelical Christian man who had been working for WV Zimbabwe for 18 years, has given a great deal of thought to the problem of jealousy. In a 1997 interview, he expressed some of his contradictory findings in that regard: "Some things are done for a child; other things are done for the whole community—dip tanks, crèches, boreholes. The community is not jealous because sponsors send things at different times—they get their sponsors as time goes on." In the same breath, he told me a story in which the threat of jealousy was a paramount danger. He was escorting a sponsor who had traveled from the United States to visit her child. When they were about to leave the rural project, he noticed that the child's mother seemed extremely anxious. He asked her what was wrong, and she said she was afraid they

would have problems later; she was particularly concerned about *zvidhoma* (malevolent spirits sent to harm). World Vision had brought white people to her home, and white people were a sign of affluence; by bringing a sponsor to visit their child, World Vision was making her family vulnerable to the envy of neighbors. I asked the sponsor relations specialist how he responded to this predicament. He said that it was difficult to reassure her, especially since she was so frightened and he had to return to Harare. Although he told the frightened woman "God will help. Don't worry, maybe God will help and protect you because this work that you are doing is God's work so it will protect you," he could tell she was still scared of *zvidhoma*. He said that the community (usually elders) chooses the families to receive sponsorship support from those they considered to be the most in "need." World Vision describes them as "the poorest of the poor." Despite the fact that these individuals are socially and economically marginalized from the community and designated by the community to be "in need," still, there is jealousy. He explained that some people asked the question: "Aren't you dividing the community and making a few kids elite?"

These specific, localized consequences are not lost on organizations such as World Vision. At the time of this research and consistent with recent trends in Missiology²⁴ to "indigenize" Christianity in Africa (Bediako 1995; Pobee 1992; Sanneh 1989), World Vision as a transnational organization was trying to inspire local, Zimbabwean practices of child sponsorship. The initiatives had not yet born fruit, however. Despite the fact that Zimbabweans give support and resources to their extended families, the concept of sponsoring anthropologically fictive kin was met with fear and resistance. Christian doctrines to give to strangers had not become "Zimbabwean" to the extent that other aspects of Christianity had become "African." As much as WV Zimbabwe was encouraging rural communities to be economically self-sufficient through programs of economic development that aimed to be sustainable, WV Zimbabwe was also trying to be locally sustainable and to reduce dependence on partner offices for support. In 1997, when I met with an associate director of WV Zimbabwe who was also the Coordinator for Local Fundraising and Sustainability for Programs, attempts at local fundraising were barely one year old. This associate director, a Zimbabwean and a Christian, had attended a rural mission school before receiving his master's degree in agricultural economics from a university in the United Kingdom during the liberation struggle. He had subsequently worked for the government of Zimbabwe as an agricultural economist for ten years, eventually becoming Deputy Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture before joining the NGO sector and working for World Vision. He had cause and perspective to reflect on development as a simultaneously local and transnational phenomenon.

This associate director was working on building what he called a "culture of giving" in Zimbabwe. He thought it was something that had to be "developed," for Zimbabweans had been trained to be dependent on others. He made a parallel between WV Zimbabwe and the communities its staff members worked with—the potential for self-sufficiency existed, but the community (of villagers or of givers) had to be mobilized first. He thought that dependency had changed how people thought about giving, and this made sponsorship difficult in the local context. Reflecting on the dilemma, he considered dependency something that was affecting Zimbabwe as a nation and added that it was not only the poor in Zimbabwe who adopted this attitude of dependency; it even affected people with money. Those who were wealthy in Zimbabwe were not accustomed to charitable donation. The logic remained: "If you want money, you have to ask Americans and Australians. Those are the donors. We can't be donors; we are not donors." The local resistance to a culture of giving in Zimbabwe

contrasts with the model set by World Vision's donor offices in the United States and Australia, where it was not the wealthy who donated monies to alleviate global hunger, but the "middle class." According to the associate director, the reason this model did not work in Zimbabwe was that Zimbabwe did not have such a middle class.

An Australian couple that had worked for World Vision in the United States, in Australia, and for the past four years in Zimbabwe also felt it was not part of the local (Shona) culture to give to strangers. Because Zimbabweans already had large extended families, giving to strangers was met with resistance. According to this couple, people said, "Sponsorship is already a part of our culture." Thus, forming programs of local sponsorship was extremely difficult (interview with former International Sponsorship Coordinator for World Vision International, World Vision Australia, and consultant for World Vision Zimbabwe, August 21, 1997). The more I talked with the Zimbabwean staff of World Vision, the more concurrence I encountered. It was true: Zimbabweans were not "giving" the way that World Vision wanted them to give. As a result of this dilemma, the woman responsible for spearheading a local child sponsorship initiative, a Zimbabwean in her midthirties, faced a huge challenge. Nevertheless, she was reluctant to declare that Zimbabweans do not give. She argued that child sponsorship was not yet appealing for many Zimbabweans because in Zimbabwe rural life is an unmarked category and is not worthy of extra attention or money. Other political and economic factors—such as stresses on Zimbabweans to care for their families in the face of rising inflation, HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), and a growing disparity between affluence and poverty—were more salient. In contrast to the willingness of donors in other countries to embrace unrelated Zimbabwean children through sponsorship, beliefs about ancestral lineage made it difficult for Zimbabweans to accept nonconsanguine children into their families.²⁵ Without knowing a child's ancestral lineage, a concerned parent would be unable to solve spiritual problems as they arose. Here, the individualism of evangelical Christianity—the very theology that initiated born-again relationships, the transnational "body of faith" and the essence of child sponsorship—faced staunch local opposition.

In a 1997 interview, I asked the communications and public relations (PR) manager for WV Zimbabwe why it was difficult to garner local sponsors. Born in Zambia, and having lived in Zimbabwe for most of her life, she also saw the sale of sponsorship in Zimbabwe as a tremendous challenge, so much so that it had been the topic of staff discussion the morning of our interview. Extended families in Zimbabwe responded to pleas for sponsorship with: "I am already looking after someone, why should I give to other people's children?" Zimbabweans were not adopting children because of cultural resistance, specifically, relationships with ancestors. It was important for parents to know a child's ancestry, especially if it was orphaned, in order to avoid being "haunted by something you don't know anything about." If you did not know a child's ancestors, for example, how could you appease them? Here, the concept of a transnational Christian family was culturally inappropriate for Zimbabweans who relied upon ancestors for spiritual well-being. Because of the high frequency of HIV infection and increasing deaths from AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), the question of orphans was urgent for Zimbabweans and for World Vision.

The PR manager felt that while Zimbabweans were not givers as defined by the West, they helped each other in times of need. For her, this was an important distinction between Western philanthropy and local understandings of assistance. Zimbabweans were not giving because most people felt they also needed help: "Everyone is struggling economically."²⁶ Zimbabweans were not giving to charity because even the African elite did not consider themselves rich (although in Zimbabwe there exists

a tiny superelite that is rich, even by Western standards). She argued that African leaders were poor before independence and that wealth was “new wealth,” something to cling to, not to give to charity. “Put it this way,” she said, “overseas donors most are pensioners or working class people. Here there are a lot of black people with a lot of wealth but they hang onto it. I don’t think we are giving as we should.” She mused that in the African situation people gave money toward the burial, if someone died, and toward the wedding, if someone got married. Yet she classified this as helping rather than giving. It was part of the African culture to help, to be generous to visitors, but when it came to sponsoring a child it was a different story. “On a family or an interpersonal level, you can’t beat us,” she said. “There is a lot of back-up support for each other, but with new wealth there is new poverty as well, and the gaps are getting bigger between the two all the time. People used to be able to fend for themselves and now cannot.”

These descriptions, by staff whose job it was to publicize child sponsorship to donor offices as well as to local Zimbabweans, elucidate how inequalities are constituted through child sponsorship. When help from international sponsors flowed into Zimbabwe, a new impoverishment, a lack of giving, became part of local self-definitions. There was indeed a culture of giving in Zimbabwe; yet, it was giving that extended as far as those one knew, within one’s own group. In contrast to an extended African family, which could of course traverse national boundaries, the model of a Christian family expanded to strangers “in need,” with need as the defining factor. This was the culture of giving that was sought by WV Zimbabwe from potential local sponsors, and it was intimately connected with Christianity. The associate director saw the desired culture of giving as linked to a Christian concept of humanity: “As Christians the qualification is that in the eyes of God we are all the same. We are all human beings; therefore, don’t say because this one is my brother I can help, [or] this one is not my brother, because he is your brother in Christ. We are the same in the eyes of God.” Consequently, when Zimbabweans were expected to sponsor children, this expectation redefined obligations of the extended family as local nongiving, throwing into stark relief local understandings of what it meant to “help” others. At the time of my research, WV Zimbabwe had not yet discovered how to raise funds for its programs in a way that was acceptable to potential Zimbabwean sponsors. That Christianity in Zimbabwe today is African is not disputed. Even so, specific forms of charity—such as child sponsorship—had not found their way onto local soil.

conclusion

By way of concluding, I offer a final vignette. The scene is a 1997 community meeting at a rural development project in northwestern Zimbabwe. I had traveled to the meeting from Harare with a World Vision project coordinator.²⁷ Seated alongside four Zimbabwean World Vision employees²⁸ in a cement classroom built by World Vision, we faced 60 residents of the rural community gathered on rows of wooden benches. This meeting was a formalized dialogue, critical for monitoring processes of rural development. At this project, World Vision had constructed a classroom block, housing for teachers, and 150 pit latrines, drilled five boreholes for fresh water, and donated five sewing machines for the 20 students enrolled in a dressmaking course organized by a local church in collaboration with WV Zimbabwe. After a Christian prayer and formal introductions,²⁹ the project coordinator praised the community for their development efforts and discussed details of a construction project still under way. The headman (*sabhuku*), the treasurer of the project,³⁰ the headmaster of the primary school, and the instructor of the dressmaking classes each spoke to thank World

Vision for its work. They explained that without boreholes the teachers had for six years depended on drinking water from rivers and shallow wells. With the classroom blocks, children no longer had to learn under trees. The headman thanked World Vision for the money it paid on behalf of the sponsored children in the project and elaborated on the context of development work in the area (perhaps for my benefit, the visiting anthropologist). He spoke of the farming land, which was of poor quality, and although his community had not intended to live in such a region, he was pleased it had “developed” because of World Vision. Following the formality of introductions, the meeting resembled a development rally, with the songs and rhythms of a revival. The project coordinator was a Zimbabwean Christian woman in her midthirties. Raised Roman Catholic in rural southwestern Zimbabwe, she had switched to a Pentecostal church. After secondary school in Harare, and a degree in Crop Science from the University of Zimbabwe, she gained employment in the Ministry of Agriculture (government of Zimbabwe) as an Agritex officer, agricultural extension specialist, before joining World Vision as a projects coordinator in 1995. She was particularly adept at such performances, and so she engaged her audience, standing, charismatic, and emphatic.

An elderly parent stood up to speak. His voice filled with concern as he tumbled into issues of child sponsorship. He questioned why extra monies were not sent to parents, so they could buy things for their own children. The project coordinator replied that such practices existed to teach people in the community to work harder. The elderly parent politely thanked World Vision for its work, paid tribute to his child’s sponsor who had given his child money to buy things, and asked World Vision, again, why he could not buy things for his child himself with the sponsor’s money. The project coordinator struggled to reframe his query: “The sponsor looks to the needs of the child, not the needs of the family. . . . The sponsor asks about the child. The parents may want a cart or oxen but [World Vision looks] to the needs of the child. The parents will benefit from drinking water from boreholes when it is directed to children.” The parent became agitated, challenging: “When the sponsor sends money to the child, am I not allowed to buy things for the child?” The project coordinator parried: “World Vision cares about the sponsor’s needs. . . . When you keep on giving to people, they become lazy. It is better to teach someone to fish than to give them fish.” Then, depicting the community as a child, she compared a sponsor’s feelings to those of community members who feel parental delight at seeing their children walking for the first time. She emphasized that people should not depend on others but should work for themselves. She was preaching development, and in her sermon the parent’s question about sponsorship funds was left unanswered.

As the meeting concluded and the community dispersed, I was given a tour of a classroom block where a dressmaking course was in session. I witnessed evidence of World Vision’s success and spoke with women who were being taught sewing skills; yet, my memory of the parent’s unanswered concerns lingered. We walked a few meters to the project office (another small and plain building of cement) where a large photomontage of local development work hung on the wall; the project clerk, a local community member hired by World Vision, noticed my interest and quickly stepped in to narrate. The poster documented assorted transactions between sponsors and their children: the extra monies that had just an hour ago compelled the elderly parent to speak up: Z\$697 from one sponsor (at the time of my research in 1996–97 the conversion rate in Zimbabwe was Z\$10 : US\$1) had purchased a blanket, a goat, and a satchel; Z\$354 bought a goat; Z\$823: satchels, suits, shoes, blankets, and Mazoe drink (an orange syrup to be mixed with water).³¹ Aware of my fascination with the

sponsorship process, the project clerk introduced me to a sponsored child who was about ten years old. I asked her, "How does it feel to be sponsored?" Shy and courteous, she described how she had exchanged two letters with her sponsor. "It feels nice," she said. "Why?" I asked, and she replied: "Because I am feeling like I am becoming part of their family." Her response—alluding to the unifying and expansive potential of humanitarianism—contrasts the response of the parent who asked why he could not be given responsibility for monies sent to his child from a sponsor. When the project coordinator dodged the parent's question, she either did not realize, or at least publicly ignored, that in the process of empowering a child, child sponsorship dislodged the purchasing power of parents and in this sense, their authority.

Hence the double edge of child sponsorship. Such humanitarian practices have two sides. First, they have the truly transformative potential of relationships formed by sponsorship: of material improvements in lives, made possible by gifts of education and opportunity, and relationships with the potential to transcend distance, class, and culture. And second, they have the potential to create localized experiences of lack that stand in the face of benevolent attempts to bridge distance and that may inadvertently be enhanced by humanitarianism itself. The structure of evangelical theology, fuelled by personal relationships modeled after those between believers and Jesus Christ, are the narrative undercurrent for child sponsorship in World Vision. Relationships initiated by sponsorship do not end when projects terminate; Albert is still trying to find his sponsor. Sponsored children become part of transnational extended families. As Albert said, "I felt belonging." What was this belonging to? A Christian family that transcends consanguine lineage? An international humanitarian community? I argue that what survives in relationships instigated by child sponsorship is a cosmological relationship, an abstract emotional configuring of one's place in the world. Photos of sponsored children symbolize the possibility of a loving world, unified through the personal relationships modeled after Christ, and it is the potential of these profound relationships that inspire organizations such as World Vision to create such programs. Whether or not the donors are evangelical or even Christian, evangelical ideas of loving strangers fuel the theology of World Vision's child sponsorship program.

Child sponsorship involves more than economic resources or the goods and services of development; relationships of belonging are also exchanged in transnational remittances. Practices of child sponsorship take place between individuals, simultaneously masking and making the political economy that situates donor offices in some nations and project offices in others. Child sponsorship is indeed a successful transnational practice for the millions of sponsors who give monthly remittances to strangers in order to counteract "inhumanity and despair." Sponsorship helps the poor; a sponsor paid for Albert's education. The effects of such efforts, however, are often characterized by a tragic irony, as global humanitarian aid both connects and disconnects individuals and reconfigures communities. The belonging to a global humanitarian community is temporary for most sponsored children, and the "self-sufficiency" that follows development projects does not account for the transformed relationships of belonging in local contexts, to stepbrothers and sisters in Albert's case. The transcendent aspirations of philanthropic practice not only fail to transcend difference—they may magnify and reconstitute economic disparity. Child sponsorship provides hope for individuals (like Peter) in developed nations; it also creates small divisions and jealousies in locally lived lives. Perhaps the development work of World Vision carries the seeds of its own negation, particularly given the intensified experiences of lack and jealousies spawned in processes of sponsorship. Yet such sponsorship does seem to make a difference in the lives of individual sponsors and sponsored

children. Sponsorship is not easy to dismiss and not easy to accept. Programs of child sponsorship are unsettling—and in this way, perhaps, they transform.

notes

Acknowledgments. Earlier versions of this article have benefited from the patience and keen critical commentary of A. Aneesh, Mike Burton, Matthew Engelke, Jim Ferguson, Liisa Malkki, Bill Maurer, Chrisy Moutsatsos, and members of the Satterthwaite Colloquium on African Religion and Ritual, United Kingdom 1999. Three anonymous reviewers for *American Ethnologist* offered thoughtful critiques that greatly improved this article. To the staff of WV Zimbabwe, WV International, and the World Vision sponsors who were willing to take part in this project, I am grateful. An earlier version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1998. Any errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of the author. Research for this article was conducted in the offices of WV International, Monrovia, California from April–August 1994 and with WV Zimbabwe in Harare and rural development sites from November 1996–October 1997. Funding for fieldwork was provided in 1996 by a research grant from the School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine, and in 1996–97 by the Pew Charitable Trusts through the Overseas Ministries Studies Center's Research Enablement Program. Dissertation writing was funded by a 1998 fellowship from the University of California Regents and, in 1998–99, by a Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship from the Charlotte W. Newcombe Foundation.

1. The literature on this topic is enormous and extends beyond the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology, bleeding into political science and development studies. For studies specifically related to the Zimbabwean case, see Bediako 1995; Bratton 1989a, 1989b; Farrington et al 1993; Moyo 1991; Moyo and Katerere 1991; Riddell and Robinson 1995; Vivian 1994. See Weisgrau 1997 for a unique ethnographic analysis of NGOs in India.

2. World Vision's core values are: "We are Christian; We are Committed to the Poor; We Value People; We are Stewards; We are Partners (with the poor, with donors, and with members of an international partnership); We are Responsive" (Irvine 1996:271–275).

3. This institutional structure has evolved over time. When I conducted my research in the California office in 1994–95, it was centered more around a hub office called the International Office. Since my initial research, this office has lost much of its control and function and there has been a movement to decentralize the organization and to strengthen the national offices and donor offices respectively.

4. According to the World Vision Annual Report (1997c), World Vision has reached 43,894,251 people in Africa; 14,067,226 in Asia and the Pacific; 1,734,279 in Latin America and the Caribbean; and 1,758,151 in all other countries. More than 1.1 million children are sponsored worldwide by World Vision by donors from countries including Australia, Austria, Canada, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, Japan, Korea, Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, Switzerland, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. According to a child sponsorship specialist in Zimbabwe, WV Zimbabwe is sponsored by donor offices in Australia, Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, Korea, Netherlands, New Zealand, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

5. There are also secular NGOs that use the child sponsorship model, such as, Save the Children, and Plan International.

6. This is a central component of the larger research project from which this article arises. A neglected third player in these processes are national governments, and due to spatial limitations here, I address their roles in more detail elsewhere (Bornstein 2001).

7. This theme (that it was not the wealthy who supported child sponsorship) was reiterated in interviews with sponsor relations specialists in WV Zimbabwe (Harare) and WV USA (Monrovia, California).

8. In their interviews with me, sponsor relations staff in WV Zimbabwe stressed this point. Also see Irvine 1996.

9. Although the extent to which this process is truly egalitarian and democratic is beyond the scope of this article, such development processes can be compared to other forms of participatory

rural development critiqued in a corpus of scholarship on the dynamics of local power relations and stratification in development along the fissures of gender, age, and class (see Goebel 1998; Mosse 1994; Rahnema 1992).

10. World Vision has embodied the shift from multinational to transnational capitalism, relying heavily on information technologies to facilitate communication necessary for sponsorship. Whereas at the beginning of my research in 1994, monies flowed from donor offices to the International Office in Monrovia, California, which subsequently disbursed funds to national offices and then to the children who were sponsored, the organization is now structured as an international partnership with direct communication (and accountability) between donor offices and national offices that oversee specific development projects. There is an increasing trend in the NGO world more generally to bypass managerial offices to get closer to the “grass-roots” or the “poor,” and international funding channeled through NGOs is part of attempts of individuals in the wealthy nations to bypass third world states, which many deem corrupt and inefficient. For example, during my research in Zimbabwe, the World Vision support office in Germany that funded a large development project in northern Zimbabwe was considering installing a satellite dish at its sponsored projects to facilitate communication and to bypass the Harare office. This became a minor threat to job security for the Harare office staff; however, they were accustomed to frequent shifts in the organizational structure. One informant explained: “The only thing constant here [in World Vision] is change.” In the case of World Vision, the institutional shift was a response to changing flows of capital—to the desires of donors to have more direct communication with the rural project offices that monitor the sponsored children and to eliminate the middle-management level of the national offices in metropolises such as Harare. The necessity of workers having flexible attachments to their professional identities and job titles (a phenomenon increasingly prevalent in the transnational capitalism of the late 1990s) was evident in the frequency with which employees of World Vision shifted positions within the institution.

11. Albert is a pseudonym.

12. In the Zimbabwean educational system, secondary school lasts from Form I–VI and consists of O-levels (ordinary levels) and A-levels (advanced levels). O-levels are the lower levels of the Zimbabwe General Certificates of Education given after Forms I–IV. The higher level certificates, or A-levels, are given after Forms V–VI.

13. According to the national director of WV Zimbabwe, each year roughly 12 to 14 sponsors come to visit their children. During one month, while I was in Zimbabwe, there were three visits scheduled. These visits are often seasonal due to transport limitations during the rainy season.

14. Admittedly, while my analysis concentrates on the work of World Vision as an NGO that facilitates relationships between sponsors and sponsored children, it is an analysis skewed toward the NGO. A promising area of research (but one that is beyond the scope of my study) would be to analyze the experiences of sponsored children at rural development projects. Reynolds (1985) has argued persuasively for a shift in focus to emphasize what children in the third world do, think, and feel. She cautions against approaches to “childhood” that take it as a whole, or a level, and she proposes an understanding of childhood that is many-layered, changing, and inclusive of the life decisions and participation of children themselves. Far more than I do here, Reynolds (1985, 1996) and Burman and Reynolds (1986) place the lives of children central to their ethnography, presenting a compelling argument for the agency of children within kinship structures.

15. In anthropological terms, sponsored children are fictive kin. This takes on a different moral tone in the context of journalistic critiques of child sponsorship. For example, *Chicago Tribune* (1998) sought to show that the “magical bond” between child and sponsor was “mostly fiction.” According to *Chicago Tribune*, “letters purportedly written by the sponsored children or members of their families were often composed by workers for the sponsorship organizations themselves. Many of the children and their families never learned their sponsor’s [sic] names. Some were never told that their sponsorships had ended. A few never understood they had been sponsored at all.”

16. This is a common name in Zimbabwe; I met several people who had this name.

17. This story of Bob Pierce was an institutional origin myth that many people repeated to me during interviews in the United States and Zimbabwe. See Irvine 1996 for the history as told by one director.

18. I was first exposed to the evangelical theology of World Vision during interviews in its International Office in Monrovia, California in 1994. The extent to which World Vision staff agreed with this theology varied widely in both the U.S. and Zimbabwean offices of the NGO.

19. For a description of the language of conversion and the concept of being “born-again” see Harding 2000, especially chapter 1, “Speaking is Believing.” World Vision, through child sponsorship, supports small-scale rural community development projects that include drilling boreholes; installing irrigation schemes; and encouraging microenterprise development, the latest trend in development. In this way, World Vision is very similar to so-called secular humanitarian organizations involved with international programs of economic development such as CARE International and Save the Children; the list of such organizations is extensive.

20. This supposedly definitively Christian motivation was something I also heard described as “humanitarian” by staff of NGOs in Zimbabwe that were not Christian identified. This issue begs the question of whether even so-called secular development may be religious in Zimbabwe, a nation whose population is largely religious if not primarily Christian. When I asked World Vision staff what was Christian about child sponsorship, I received a repeated response: “helping the poorest of the poor.” It should be noted that the level of actual commitment to Christianity varied widely among World Vision staff. This variance and the play in professing a Christian identity at work are the subject of a separate article. The concept of motivation comes from a 1997 interview with a consultant for WV Zimbabwe who also was former international sponsorship coordinator for WV International and WV Australia.

21. Peter is a pseudonym.

22. An Area Development Project (ADP) covers a larger area than a Community Development Project (CDP). Peter was affiliated with an ADP. Most of the projects I visited in the course of my research were CDPs. At that time, CDPs were being phased out in favor of ADPs.

23. There is an interesting emerging literature on jealousy and witchcraft in Africa as distinctly modern phenomena (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Englund 1996; Geschiere 1997). On witchcraft in southern Africa, there is an extensive literature—far too large to address here. Of relevance to this argument, specifically on the relation of witchcraft to power, see Ashforth 1996; on witchcraft in Zimbabwe with the Shona, see Bourdillon 1991. I do not delve into debates on the reality of witchcraft. I follow Durkheim’s lead and assume that “there are no religions that are false” and that religion is, foremost, social (Durkheim 1995:1–18).

24. *Missiology* is a term for the academic study of Christian missionary work. There also is a journal by the same name. Seminaries that offer courses in mission studies sometimes use textbooks with this title. For an example, see Verstraelen et al. 1995.

25. World Vision operates throughout Zimbabwe in complex linguistic (Shona, Ndebele, Tonga, as well as specific dialects) and lineage contexts. Although my research concentrated on Shona-speaking regions in the northern and central parts of Zimbabwe, Peter’s narrative is drawn from the Ndebele-speaking south. Albert was Shona-speaking. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on specific kinship structures, some classic texts (Bourdillon 1976; Gelfand 1973) lay a foundation for analysis; still others elaborate on the *mhondoro* (spiritual medium) cults that transcend kinship and assert claims to land (Lan 1985; Schoffeleers 1978). Few works document the flux that kin structures undergo, linking rural-urban settings in cycles of economy and work in contemporary Zimbabwe. For a related analysis, see Ferguson 1994, 1997.

26. For a compelling historical exegesis on the history of “helping” and international development, see Gronemeyer 1992.

27. All of the full-time staff of WV Zimbabwe whom I interviewed were black and Zimbabwean, except for one American who was on a three-year contract. He served as coordinator for natural resource management and environmental rehabilitation. There were two consultants I interviewed who had held positions in WV Australia and WV USA, but they were not hired as full-time staff of WV Zimbabwe.

28. Aside from the project coordinator, the three other staff members had been elected from the local community. At the front of the meeting were the chair of the Local Management Committee of the development project, the World Vision field officer with whom I had traveled to the project from Harare, the project clerk, the project bookkeeper, and myself.

29. The meeting was attended by members of the rural community that housed the development project. In attendance were the headman, the VIDCO (Village Development Committee) chairman, the headmaster, the school committee, the chairman of the World Vision project committee, the Evangelism committee, the Women in Development committee, the project bookkeeper, and the project clerk, along with parents of sponsored children. Some committee members had children who were being sponsored by World Vision and whose school fees were being paid by the sponsorship. This meeting, as with all meetings at community development projects, was conducted in Shona. Translations are my own.

30. World Vision sets up committees at each Community Development Project (CDP). Elected by the community, these committees oversee the development efforts alongside World Vision staff members who live in the community and those who visit monthly to monitor the project, such as the project coordinator.

31. Along with this documentation were pictures of the official opening of the project office, which was located at the school. World Vision had moved into the new building in July 1996. He remarked how different churches had participated at the opening and that there had also been an evangelism rally led by the churches during which Bibles were handed out and youth were educated about Christianity.

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accepted October 28, 2000

final version submitted December 4, 2000

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