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Mercenaries, Missionaries and Misfits

Representations of Development Personnel

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Abstract ■ The argument of the article centres around three stereotypes of the development worker: mercenary, missionary and misfit. The origins of this tripartite characterization of the aid community are unclear but certainly it has a currency, or at least a resonance, within the industry. The argument is not so much concerned with the truth or otherwise of this characterization. Rather it seeks to use these stereotypes as an entry point for exploring the tensions and contradictions in ways in which people working in the industry view themselves and others. While there are individuals who can be recognized as approximating to each of the three stereotypes, in general people veer between them, at different points in their careers and even at different points on the same day. Finally, although these three characterizations – missionary, mercenary and misfit – appear to be contrasting, this article will argue that they are in fact variations on a common theme and a modern version of what people in the industry tend to see as the new ‘white man’s burden’.

Keywords ■ anthropology of development ■ anthropology of expatriates ■ discourses of development

The development industry is a major world employer. Literally thousands of people are employed by the various banks, development agencies, private sector companies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which exist to encourage development. Each year, millions of dollars pass through this industry financing a huge range of activities. Furthermore, it is extremely complex both institutionally and in terms of what it produces. It consists of a tangled network of organizations and individuals related through systems of donation and contracts, involved in activities ranging from heavy construction through communications and infrastructure projects to local-level institution-building activities.

Given the size and importance of this industry, our understanding of the people working within it, who they are, where they are from, their hopes and dreams and their own views of what they are doing is still very limited, at least from the anthropological point of view. This is all the more surprising given that the industry is a major employer of anthropologists, and anthropologists often share the same space, both geographical and social, as development workers. While there is an increasing anthropological

literature concerned with how development interventions work – for better or worse – and on particular institutions involved in the development business,¹ the social and cultural aspects of the industry have so far been rather neglected.² There are admittedly a few biographies and autobiographies, some of which I will refer to later. But we probably know more about the missionaries and colonial civil servants of the 19th and early 20th centuries than we do about contemporary development workers.

This article is an effort at beginning to understand the social and cultural nature of the development industry from an anthropological point of view. It focuses on the culture of the aid industry: on how people view themselves and others in that industry and what sorts of ideas they have about their role and activities. It deals, admittedly with a rather broad brush, with the representations people have of what they are doing, why they are doing it and how they understand their role in the development process.

The argument of the paper centres around three stereotypes of the development worker: mercenaries, missionaries and misfits. The origins of this tripartite characterization of the aid community are unclear but certainly it has a currency, or at least a resonance, within the industry.³ The argument is not so much concerned with the truth or otherwise of this characterization of aid people. Rather it seeks to use these stereotypes as an entry-point for exploring the tensions and contradictions in ways in which people working in the industry view themselves and others. While there are individuals who can be recognized as approximating to each of the three stereotypes, in general people veer between them, at different points in their careers and even at different points on the same day! Finally, although these three characterizations – missionary, mercenary and misfit – appear to be contrasting, this article will argue that they are in fact variations on a common theme and a modern version of what people in the industry tend to see as the new ‘white man’s burden’.

Mercenaries

The easiest place to start is with the ‘mercenaries’. This is a very common stereotype of a category of people I shall refer to as ‘development professionals’, those who work permanently for the major international development banks, the multilateral and bilateral official agencies, and consultants hired by these and other agencies on a fixed-term basis. This stereotype represents these development professionals as simply being interested in the material benefits they gain from working in the aid industry. They have no commitment to eradicating poverty or whatever, but simply to their own self-interest. As their title suggests, they are motivated solely by this self-interest and not by any higher morality.

Such a stereotype pervades works such as Graham Hancock’s *Lords of Poverty* (Hancock, 1989) and some of the writings of more respectable

authors such as Robert Chambers (e.g. Chambers, 1983). At times it is claimed that the employees of international development organizations are grossly overpaid given their relatively low levels of competence, and that short-term consultants, Chambers' 'development tourists', are the recipients of ridiculously high fee rates. The same criticisms of these development professionals are made by many other writers who explicitly or implicitly contrast the poverty of those whom the industry is meant to help with the wealth made out of this industry by those who are supposedly helping, and this is a common media stereotype. Cocooned as they are in their expensive hotels and air conditioned vehicles, their contact with 'real people' is mediated through government officers, interpreters and go-betweens of various sorts.⁴ Only slightly better in terms of morality are longer-term expatriates employed by these agencies. Even though they may be living in poor countries, they are again seen as being out of touch with the 'real world' of the poor, living in expatriate enclaves and enjoying a quality and style of life which makes it impossible for them to know the 'real world'. These people, it is argued, are only in the business for the money. They are mercenaries with a vested interest in the continuing existence of poverty.⁵

Of course there are pure mercenaries in the development business, people whose only interest is in making money. In part this is not surprising; after all, many commercial companies are involved in the aid business building dams, roads, railways and so on. Their business is to make money. It would be surprising if what is seen as a virtue in the world of commerce in the developed world should be suddenly dropped by the same organizations and the same individuals working elsewhere.

But what is being claimed in these stereotypical criticisms of development people is not just that these mercenaries are being overpaid but also that they are incompetent. This is a major strand running through the work of writers critical of the role of the international development banks, the multilateral agencies and many of the official bilateral agencies. Because these mercenaries are only interested in money they care little about what they are doing. Furthermore, because they infrequently come into contact with the poor, they can have little knowledge or understanding of the nature of poverty and are more interested in maintaining good relationships with their employers than with development. Thus it is claimed that, not surprisingly, most projects fail and that most development funding is a waste of money.

Again, it goes without saying that there are incompetents, frauds and fools in the development business as there are in any industry. But there is little hard evidence that this is more the case in the development business than in any other sphere of activity and a lot of evidence that the complexities of the situation faced by development organizations and their employees are much greater than those faced in normal commercial life. The problem for development agencies is that they have to attract

competent personnel, and working in an international milieu the salaries and fees they pay have to reflect the international market. Not surprisingly the scale of fees varies with specialisms, just as it does for jobs in any other industry. So a lowly social development consultant will earn much less than an accountant or a management specialist. Furthermore, there is a premium for working as an expatriate given the transience of most posts and the changing concepts and contexts of gender relations and family life. As far as short-term consultants are concerned, there is also the problem of finding continuing work without too much dead time, as well as their own overheads such as insurance, taxation and pension contributions. So although it is undeniable that many people, especially international consultants and staff,⁶ are paid vast amounts compared with salary levels in the countries in which they are working, it is doubtful whether income levels of most people working in development are much out of line with those for people in comparable jobs in the mercenaries' home countries.⁷ It is also extremely doubtful that more than a small elite ever become rich through development – and they would probably have become rich whatever industry they were in.⁸

Even if there is little evidence that people who work for the major international development agencies either as staff or on a consultancy basis earn much more than their counterparts who work in comparable jobs at home, what is perhaps surprising is how strong the mercenary caricature is among development personnel themselves. If one asks people working for such agencies why they are there, only too frequently they will couch their reply in terms of money. Whenever a group of short-term consultants gets together there is much discussion of fee rates, subsistence rates and per diems, class of hotel provided, class of airfare supplied and so on. The image which people present of themselves is that they are operators attempting to maximize their incomes. Their involvement in development is simply a means to an end.

Yet although this is often the way that such people present themselves, it is by no means the whole truth. Although people working as consultants for the multilateral and bilateral agencies or for consultancy companies frequently present themselves as mercenaries, they also display a level of commitment and involvement which is at odds with their representation of self. Two brief examples, one from Sri Lanka and the other from Indonesia, illustrate this commitment which belies the mercenary images cultivated by those involved in the projects.

The first of these examples concerns the expatriate staff working on a European Union (EU) funded rural credit and agricultural development project in some of the poorest areas in Sri Lanka in the mid 1990s. Although the project focused on a group of extremely remote villages, the three expatriate personnel lived and were based in Colombo. In conversation with them, it was difficult to realize that the project was concerned with alleviating extreme poverty and benefiting poor people. Rather the

day-to-day conversation concerned such issues as the administrative problems they faced when dealing with the EU and with the consultancy company which employed them. There was talk of the competence (or otherwise) of their counterparts and local staff employed on the project, of the cost of imported vehicles, of their relative salaries and entitlements compared with others they knew working for other agencies and companies. All three affected an extreme degree of cynicism and lack of interest in the project and in what it was attempting to do. If directly asked, all three claimed that they were only in Sri Lanka to earn money; that they were uninterested and uncommitted to the project and had little interest as to whether or not it succeeded.

Yet if one criticized the project, if one volunteered one's own opinions as to the design and potential outcomes of what they were involved in, a very different picture emerged. All three reacted strongly to any criticism of the project and were extremely defensive about the very real problems the project faced. Despite the veneer of cynicism the expatriate staff were, if anything, overcommitted to the project. They all worked extremely long hours going far beyond what was expected of them in terms of their job descriptions and expending much physical, emotional and intellectual energy on trying to make the project fulfil its objectives.

The second example concerns a Department for International Development (DfID) funded forestry project in Indonesia. This project involved expatriate staff being stationed in various provinces throughout the Indonesian archipelago, often being the only foreigners in extremely remote situations. Again, in casual conversation these people would present themselves as only being interested in the money accumulating in their bank accounts at home. They would present their lives as characterized by boredom, isolation and indifference to the project they were involved in. But again, all this supposed alienation was belied by the hours they worked and the efforts they put in to a project which was beset by a series of intractable problems. As with the Sri Lankan example, any overt criticism of the project was rejected vigorously.

These two cases are not isolated examples and they could be paralleled with a host of similar cases. Over and over, there is a dissonance between a mercenary-like self-representation of what people are doing, and a deep involvement and engagement in the development process. And this raises the obvious question of why there should be this contrast between a public persona and private commitment; of why so many people who work in development downplay their commitment to what they are doing. A number of factors appear to encourage such a self-misrepresentation.

The first of these is guilt. Even if people who work in development are not earning more than their counterparts at home, they are in general earning much more than their counterparts with whom they are working. Furthermore, they are earning much more than most people who work for NGOs and who are often most vociferous in their criticisms of the

'mercenaries'. So, for many, there is a certain degree of guilt, and one way of dealing with this is to turn it into a virtue: that far from being a sin, making money out of working in development, as in any other occupation, is a virtue.

Dealing with guilt is by no means the whole picture. There is also what might be called the 'angst' of development. There has always been uncertainty as to what development is, but in the past it was probably easier to see what it was than it is now. In the past it was a matter of doing things: making things such as roads, bridges, reservoirs and dams, planting forests or creating irrigation systems. But now the whole picture has changed and what is development is much less tangible than it used to be. Now development is much less material and visible, much more concerned with changing institutional structures, creating new forms of organization, encouraging participation, good governance and so forth. Thus, not surprisingly, among development professionals there is a sense of uncertainty as to the value of what they are doing and what they are engaged in. A veneer of cynical disinterest is one way of dealing with this issue and of not becoming over-involved in potentially paralysing debates as to what development is and is not

If a mercenary self image is a way of dealing with uncertainty as to what development is and the significance of what they do, such an image is also a way of dealing with another problem: responsibility. In the past, when development was about doing things, success and failure were visible: a dam constructed; a road built; a plantation established. But now it is much less clear as to what success is and is not. As more and more development interventions are concerned with less tangible objectives and are defined in terms of social rather than physical criteria, so the dangers of failure, or at least accusations of failure, multiply. Cynical withdrawal, an overt denial of commitment to the objectives of development, allows people to avoid such accusations. After all, it is simply a job: a means of earning a living.⁹

So the mercenary self-image cultivated by many development professionals can be seen as a form of defence, a means of avoiding troublesome issues and making a virtue of the criticisms of others. But this image must not be taken at face value: it is a mask. Furthermore, it deflects criticism away from a much more significant aspect of what development professionals are doing and the values, beliefs and ideas that underlie many of their activities. Before looking at these in more detail, it is worth turning to the 'missionaries'.

Missionaries

Archetypically opposed to the world of the mercenaries, the development professionals who work for the multilateral and bilateral agencies or are employed by commercial consultancy companies, is the world of the NGO

worker.¹⁰ This, in terms of common stereotypes, is characterized as a world of commitment, enthusiasm and verve. Not for them the world of executive lounges, expensive hotels and air-conditioned vehicles, but rather of a direct meeting and identification with the 'real people'. In this sector of the development world, people are motivated not by money but by a personal moral commitment. Here there are no 'development tourists' in search of the good life but rather people with a sense of mission, people with a vocation driven by a sense of duty.

At the level of stereotypes, 'motivation' is what marks out the missionaries of the NGOs from the mercenaries of the development business. While the latter are presented, and present themselves, as being motivated by financial gain, the stereotypical NGO worker is motivated by a sense of duty and obligation. This may derive from some sense of guilt at the poverty of the developing world; it may derive from a particular political agenda or it may be fuelled by some romantic dream. No matter what, the outcome is the same: a sacrifice of self in the pursuit of some greater goal. And thus the image conjured up of the NGO worker is of someone enduring privation, of sharing suffering and poverty with the poor of the world, of being actively involved in a direct and unmediated way with the poor.¹¹ Such contact ensures direct access to information and a lack of dependence on government and 'official' sources, and thus ensures a 'truer' picture of the 'real' situation. Furthermore, while development professionals are seen as working with the state or state institutions, NGO personnel work at the 'grassroots level' where it is claimed they can be more effective in dealing with real development challenges.

As far as the development professionals are concerned, this is only half the truth and they would add other elements to the picture of NGO workers. First is their amateurism: that no matter how enthusiastic, many NGO workers are simply incompetent, with romantic and misguided views of the world. As far as the development professionals are concerned, NGO personnel only too often have a limited grasp on reality, unaware of the true nature of the global and national processes which create the problems they seek to address, and suggesting unworkable solutions to ill-understood problems. Linked to this is their ineffectiveness. Because they are incompetent they have little impact on the development process.

There has of course been a vast literature on whether or not development NGOs are any more effective than 'official' development agencies, and whether or not NGO personnel are any more effective than development professionals remains an open question.¹² Here we are dealing with stereotypes not with aid effectiveness. Certainly there are some amazing cases of incompetence and ignorance within the NGO world, but so too in the world of the development professional. What I want to stress in the present context is that, despite this stereotypical opposition between the mercenaries and the missionaries, in practice this contrast is overdrawn and that there are perhaps more similarities than the two camps might wish to acknowledge.

First, no matter what the rhetoric, NGO personnel appear to be no closer to the 'real people' than their mercenary counterparts.¹³ While it is undoubtedly true that there are cases where individuals do identify themselves whole-heartedly with 'the people' and develop close contacts with them, there is no real evidence to suggest that this is more frequent among NGO personnel than among the development professionals. It is rare to find these missionaries living with the poor they are working with, and although friendships do develop these are as common among the development professionals as they are among NGO personnel. In Colombo in the mid 1990s, there were cases where foreign aid personnel had married local partners, but the numbers were fairly equally distributed between NGO workers and development professionals.¹⁴ At the same time, although it is true that expatriate development professionals tend to live an enclave existence, frequenting their own clubs, beach resorts and drinking haunts, so too do NGO personnel.¹⁵ Their circuits may be rather different from those of the mercenaries but they often overlap. Both are as socially separate from the local world as each other.

Second, despite the frequent claims that NGO personnel have a better knowledge of local conditions than the development professionals, there is little evidence to back this up. There is little difference as to how long development professionals as distinct from NGO personnel stay in any one country and little difference as to the numbers who learn a local language. Both groups are dependent on counterparts or local employees to generate the information on which they base their actions. Admittedly the sorts of knowledge generated may be different, but whether or not one is better than the other is an open question. In both cases knowledge appears to be generated to suit the market, the sorts of messages that are generated differing in terms of the preconceptions of those who need the information.¹⁶

Third, and perhaps most important of all, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between an NGO and a commercial consultancy company, and this is having a major impact on the sort of personnel employed by NGOs. Over the last two decades, bilateral and multilateral agencies have made increasing use of NGOs as contractors, and NGOs have become increasingly dependent on these contracts (Cooley and Ron, 2002; Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Hulme and Edwards, 1997). This in turn has led to an increasing 'professionalization' of many NGOs, especially the larger international organizations. Now the sort of virtues and qualities demanded by the official aid agencies are also being demanded by many NGOs. And not surprisingly they have to pay for it. Salaries are rising and the pay-gap between the mercenary development professionals and the NGO professionals is narrowing.

Finally, and leading on from the last point, missionaries frequently become mercenaries. In part this is the result of NGOs becoming increasingly professionalized, an MBA for instance being seen as a desirable quality in recruits. In part it is the result of individuals creating a career path which

takes them from the world of the NGOs to the world of the development professionals. Thus one common path is for an individual to start out as a volunteer for an NGO; to move from there to a series of posts in NGOs, and from there to positions in the bilateral and multilateral organizations. Occasionally there are cases of people moving the other way but these are rare. Experience built up in the world of the missionaries forms the basis for a career in the world of the mercenaries.¹⁷

In sum, although at a stereotypical level the world of the missionaries is far distant from the world of the mercenaries, in practice the gap is not as wide as is frequently claimed. Increasingly the two depend on each other and increasingly the people employed in these two sectors come to share common views of the world and common work practices. Of course, there are people working for NGOs who attempt to live up to the dream of the stereotype, and they are frequently outspoken in their criticisms of those organizations and individuals who have 'sold out'.¹⁸ But, at the same time, the extent to which NGO thinking on development matters has penetrated the world of the official donors has meant that there is further blurring of the differences between the two worlds. It still exists, but primarily at the level of rhetoric and self-image. And while mercenaries may disguise commitment under a cloak of cynicism, missionaries can cloak long-term material interests under a veneer of commitment and vocation.

Convergence

So what are these missionaries committed to? Here, at the risk of falling into another stereotype, their commitment is to the litany of contemporary development orthodoxy: participation, empowerment, 'bottom-up' approaches, gender sensitivity and the importance of indigenous knowledge. These are the objectives of their development activities and act as a set of articles of faith. They exist as ultimate values, unquestionable and absolute. They take on the status of the Creed in the Catholic Church or of the Thirty-nine Articles in the Anglican Church. The NGO missionaries are involved in the promulgation of these values and of liberating people from ignorance, poverty, marginalization and injustice. And, like any missionary movement, this requires those who are proselytized to change their ways of seeing the world, organizing the world, acting in the world and organizing society.¹⁹

Yet what is particularly striking about the vision of the world pursued by these missionaries is how it involves a particular model of the person; of the person as an activist, a participating individual who is committed to changing society. The goal of their activities is the person who is free from social or other forms of constraint, who is empowered, who is no longer marginal or oppressed, whose knowledge is recognized as being as good as anyone else's. All of this is based on a concept of the social which is

ultimately premised on the idea that society should consist of individuals entering into forms of social contract with each other which deny pre-existing forms of hierarchy, dependency or powerlessness. At the back of all this is the model of the 'individual' in the sense that has evolved in the post-Enlightenment West.²⁰ Ultimately it is an idea of a strangely asocial, acultural, universalized person

Although this stream of development thought is respectful of cultural difference, indigenous knowledge and traditional cultures, in practice it is not and cannot be. It introduces new values, new organizational forms, and new ways of thinking and doing things. It is a universalizing force based on universalistic assumptions about the nature of the person as a free agent, a conscious decision-maker, a consumer in the malls of development. What is striking about this vision of the person is its modernity and the weight it places on a modern vision of the free individual. No matter how often terms such as 'community' are invoked within the rhetoric of the new orthodoxy, it stands as a vague romantic dream in a process which necessarily involves the destruction of any form of the social which is not based on a Hobbesian notion of the social contract.²¹

At this point it is worth returning to the development professionals, the 'mercenaries' with whom this article began. Earlier in this article I argued that the veneer of cynicism disguised a certain commitment, yet left it unclear as to what that commitment was to. On one level, for many development professionals it is to the physical manifestations of development: roads, bridges, water supply schemes, hospitals and so on. Yet at another and more significant level, it is a commitment to more than just a physical or technical vision of modernity: it is a commitment to new social forms. Thus the great rallying cries of the development professionals over the last 20 years or so have centred on social objectives such as structural adjustment, the free market, good governance and liberal democracy. In many ways, such objectives are based on the same set of values as those of the NGO missionaries, in particular the stress on the 'free individual' and the importance of 'becoming modern' in the sense of being freed from the chains of pre-modern hierarchical forms of organization and irrational 'custom'. There are differences of course. While development professionals may stress empowerment as something to be gained through the market, NGO personnel may stress it in a more political fashion. Furthermore, while the NGO missionaries may claim to be working from the bottom up and stressing the importance of grassroots processes, development professionals (perhaps more honestly) tend to couch their activities in terms of 'top-down' training and education.

In the end, however, there is little difference between the ultimate objectives which both missionaries and mercenaries strive for: the creation of a 'modern' world based on a shared concept of the free individual as the basis of society. Not surprisingly, NGOs rose to prominence in the international development business during the period when free-market

ideologies were at their peak in the Thatcher–Reagan years of the 1980s. For while on the surface NGOs often appeared to resist the activities of the multilateral banks and the official development agencies, at a deeper level there was and still is a commonality of purpose. Whether we are talking about the mercenary in his air-conditioned Land Cruiser or the NGO volunteer on her bicycle, they share at base a common commitment and a common goal: to produce the modern person in their own image. Changing hearts and minds is at the core of development practice.

Parallels with the past

What the mercenaries and missionaries of the development world are doing is in no way new. Their commitment, their vision, is in many ways a continuation of past efforts by Western agents to change the rest of the world.

First, let me introduce another frequently held stereotype in the worlds of development. It is commonly claimed by people working in the industry that NGO personnel are the offspring of missionary forefathers, while those who work for official agencies such as the bilateral institutions and the multilateral banks are the children of colonial civil servants, overseas military personnel and similar people. While of course this is yet another gross generalization, there is a germ of truth in it. Certainly a very large proportion of people who work in the development industry have or had expatriate parents, although it is difficult to identify any clear relationship between a person's activities and those of their parents.²² Much more important, however, is that it is possible to identify a continuity of approach between today's development workers and their expatriate predecessors. The development missionaries of today are not just the offspring of the religious missionaries of the past: they also share much the same vision of the future and of their role in 'converting the heathen'.

Nineteenth-century missionaries were in many ways very clear about what they were trying to do. They saw themselves as a liberating force introducing new ways of thinking and of conceptualizing the world. They saw themselves as freeing the natives from the chains of superstition as well as fighting more material forms of subjugation. Frequently they became the self-appointed protectors of 'the people' against the rule of the colonial state and the activities of commercial organizations. Missionaries frequently saw themselves as the vanguard of modernity and civilization, a liberating and empowering force.²³ But even so, they were not above using 'indigenous knowledge' when they thought it might be useful, missionary practice being full of examples of indigenous goddesses becoming local versions of the Virgin Mary.

Central to missionary activity was the conversion experience. Converting the heathen; making them change the way they understood the world; making people see the error of their past beliefs and actions, was and still

is core to missionary practice. Not surprisingly, the central trope in many missionary texts is precisely this process, often described in great and loving detail. Precisely the same process is at work in the world of development, especially that part occupied by those I have labelled as 'NGO missionaries'. Here too, the object is to convert people to a particular way of thinking, a particular set of beliefs and practices of development. Thus Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) workshops frequently involve personal conversion statements, accounts of how the individual has been transformed, in a sense 'reborn', with a commitment to participation and empowerment rather than to a pre-conversion faith in the virtues of top-down approaches to development.²⁴

But of course, just as the religious missionaries of the past worried about the 'reality' of conversion, so too do today's development missionaries. Whereas, once upon a time, the worry was whether or not a convert 'really' believed or was simply adopting the externals, so today the worry is how 'real' is participation and how far is it simply a matter of adopting a form of rhetoric rather than being 'true' participation.

Put differently, one can see much of what goes on in contemporary development practice as a matter of inducing specific forms of discipline. In the past, missionary activity attempted to move from the imposition of disciplinary forms (exclusion from Mass; from church schools) to enforce compliance to a situation where ideas, beliefs and practices were instilled in the person. Thus self-discipline took over from external forms of discipline. So too in the world of development. What starts out as external forms of discipline (if you form a committee, if you have meetings, if you involve women then you will get assistance) is hopefully inculcated into the people and becomes part of their everyday social practice. If successful, conversion is internalized and external forms of discipline become unnecessary. This process is usually presented in terms of 'empowerment' and 'liberation'; of freeing people from the shackles that bind them. Ultimately what is involved in this process is the remaking and reconstitution of local practices in line with the values of the missionaries. And, just as religious missionaries attempted with varying degrees of success to indigenize their organizations through creating local branches or local hierarchies, so too in the NGO world foreign NGOs create local NGOs, theoretically independent of their creators.²⁵

It is perhaps too easy to recognize the continuities between the religious missionaries of the past and the NGO missionaries of the present. After all, they are linked by a historical thread, many of today's NGOs growing out of religious organizations of the past, while both sorts of missionaries are motivated by a sense of duty, service and faith. But so too are the development professionals and their historical predecessors, colonial civil servants. Just like religious missionaries, colonial civil servants were also intent on change and 'progress'. To read their memoirs or the mass of letters, reports and memoranda which they wrote is to see a

commitment to a particular view of change and a moral and ethical engagement with what they saw as 'improvement' and 'social uplift'. All this can not be simply dismissed as a form of window dressing; as a means by which the horrors and oppression of colonial rule could be disguised. As far as the colonial civil servants were concerned, they were active agents in what for them was a civilizing process, the 'white man's burden'.²⁶ And this involved trying to change ways of doing and thinking, as most forcefully put in Macaulay's famous Minute on Education in India. On one level colonialism was about introducing new forms of education, new forms of political and administrative organization, new ways of thinking about the social and collective forms such as the nation.²⁷ What is striking about the activities of these colonial rulers and bureaucrats is how much, and in how many ways, what they did and the values they lived by parallel the actions and values of contemporary development professionals. The use of terms such as 'good governance', 'institutional reform', campaigns against corruption, building roads, dams, bridges and canals, are common to both groups.²⁸

So if today's NGO missionaries are trying to convert the world from the bottom up, using ideas and methods which have their origins in the missionary world of the 19th century, today's development professionals, the 'mercenaries', continue the work of their colonial predecessors. Yet in the end they share a common objective.

Misfits

So far, the argument of this article has been predicated on two of the stereotypes of the development worker. I have tried to argue that, in many ways, the mercenaries and the missionaries are engaged in a common project. There may be tensions between them, and these tensions replicate in many ways the tensions between missionary and colonial civil servant in the colonial past, although these tensions are not such as to make it impossible for the two to work together or for 'missionaries' to convert into 'mercenaries'. But the stereotype with which this article began also includes a third category, the 'misfits'. Implicit here is the idea that besides those motivated by money or by mission, there are also those who enter into the world of development because they are misfits in their home country; that involvement in the expatriate world of development allows them a form of escape.

There are of course some spectacular examples of misfits who see the world of development as a means of escape from the world they come from. One particularly spectacular example, Emma McCune, is the subject of a recent biography (Scroggins, 2003).²⁹

Certainly there are such people, but in a sense they are few and far between. If the argument of this article is correct then the development industry depends upon people who are in one form or another committed to the world of modernity. Their role is to transform the developing world

into something similar to the world from which they come. Those who lack commitment to this modern world, those who are misfits, are unlikely to survive in the development business.

Yet even if it is difficult for misfits to survive in the development world, there is at the same time a deep element of nostalgia which hankers after a different sort of world. A common refrain among people working in the development business is to invoke precisely the qualities which the development process inevitably destroys. This is expressed in a number of ways. First, there is the continual search for 'real people'. They are not those in the host country with whom both mercenaries and misfits have most contact – their counterparts and people working in government or in local NGOs. Rather, both NGO workers and development professionals tend to glorify rural society, those unaffected by the corrosive effects of urbanization, commercialization and development, those who have not yet been affected by the modernity the development worker is so assiduously trying to introduce. And this is linked up with a glorification of 'community' – which again exists far from the urban centres where most development personnel are to be found. 'Real' people, the 'true' Ghanaian, Sri Lankan or whatever, are not those whom the foreign aid workers directly work with but a somewhat essentialized and artificial image of what should be, or rather, what should have been.

Second, there is a continual tendency to be on the 'frontier': to be in new pristine areas ripe for the developers' presence. This is frequently expressed in terms of the challenges offered by the frontiers of development, the possibility of moving into new development territory unsullied by the mistakes of previous development efforts. Those who stay behind, long-term expatriates who are well established in a particular country, romanticize the past. They talk longingly of a time when things were different, less spoiled, less diluted by the process of change which is development (Rajak and Stirrat, 2006).

One of the attractions of this imagined, undeveloped world is that it is a world where the development worker can be 'important'.³⁰ Thus when I first knew her in the mid 1990s, a fairly senior NGO representative in Colombo remarked on a number of occasions that the reason she was in the development world was that here, 'she was somebody'. People listened to her; she was recognized in a way which she wasn't back in the UK. Here she could escape the anonymity and routine of her previous existence. In this sense she found her escape from being a nobody at home by entering the development world.

Talking to this same woman a few years later produced rather a different picture. Having moved on from Colombo, where she frankly admitted she had found herself becoming less important, and having spent over a decade in the development business, she now found that she was a misfit in a different sense. On the one hand, the demands of her personal life pulled her back towards the UK, but at the same time she found herself more and more unfitted for a life 'back home'. By now she had become

accustomed to a particular style of life. She found the Britain she was considering returning to very different from the Britain she had left. And she lacked the skills to gain a job which would support her at home. She began to accept that she was caught in an expatriate life, moving from country to country as posts appeared, but never able to return home.

This sort of trap is particularly common for those who work as long-term consultants for NGOs and other development agencies. Permanent staff who work for the multilateral banks or the bilateral agencies do not have the same problem as they tend to be cycled through a series of home and overseas postings.³¹ But for those who do not have this security, the development world can become a new form of prison. Thus another permanent exile first entered the development world to escape personal problems.³² Now, thirty years on and having worked in Tanzania, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Uganda, he finds it impossible to go home.

So rather than simply see the world of development as a home for misfits from the developed world, participation in the world of development makes people from the developed world into misfits. Over time they become trapped in an expatriate lifestyle, unable to face adjustment to the changing nature of their own societies. This is particularly tragic for those who have lost faith in the whole process of development. Rather like the whisky priests of the past who had lost their faith in religion, they often become bitter and cynical, yet unable to escape a way of life to which they have little commitment. What openings are there for disillusioned tropical foresters or irrigation specialists back in the UK?

Conclusion

As I commented in the introduction, this article is not concerned with whether or not these three stereotypes of development workers are correct or not, but rather with what they tell us about the values and self-identities of people who work in the aid business. The temptation of course is to see these three stereotypes as stages in individuals' life cycles. So, as a career progresses, a person will move from NGO missionary through a mercenary professional stage to becoming a misfit. Alternatively, a person may start out as a misfit and over time become a missionary or even a development professional.

Although there are cases like that, what I think is more important is that, at different points of time and in different contexts, people who work in development understand themselves and others in terms of various approximations to these stereotypes. They are means of justifying and explaining both their own behaviour and that of others. But the basic distinction which runs through the industry is not so much between missionary/mercenary/misfit but rather between the mercenaries and missionaries on the one hand, and the misfits on the other. The former want to change the world. At base their goals are the same and the

assumptions they make about the desired nature of society share many common features. This stands opposed to the vision of those misfits who see development as a means of escaping from the modern world and who dream of a world based on a nostalgic view of the past.³³

Of course, the sort of discussion presented in this article would be dismissed as irrelevant by most people working in development. No matter what sort of organization they are involved in, development people are primarily 'doers' not reflectors. But the danger is that if they do not reflect on what drives them, what motivates them and the values that they are purveying to the world, they are in danger of producing precisely the opposite of what they are hoping to encourage. Keynes once referred to politicians as being the slaves of outmoded economists. Development workers are only too often the prisoners of outmoded social theoreticians and simplistic ideas about what development is. In a sense, the romantic dreams harboured by so many of them are indicative that, at a deeper and perhaps subconscious level, there is a level of discomfort with what they are trying to achieve.

Notes

This paper is based on a lecture given in the University of Sussex 'Development Lectures' series, also presented as a seminar paper at SOAS. It is partly based on research carried out while in receipt of a grant from the ESRC. Particular thanks are due to people working in the development industry for their willingness to talk to me about the world they (and I for much of the time) work in. It is invidious to mention names, but Elizabeth Harrison, Dinah Rajak and James Muir have been particularly helpful.

- 1 The best anthropological treatment of the development industry remains Crewe and Harrison (1998). On issues concerning 'discourse' there is a vast literature including Escobar (1995), Ferguson (1994), Crush (1995) and Rossi (2004) as well as the collection edited by Grillo and Stirrat (1997). Other relevant collections include Pottier (1993) and Hobart (1993). There is also a large anthropological literature on the nature of development projects which includes Mosse (1996, 2005), Porter et al. (1991), and the work of Long and Long (1992) and Arce and Long (2000).
- 2 Two exceptions are Kaufmann (1997) and Simpson (2004).
- 3 I was first introduced to the use of this phrase to describe development people by Harriet Stanley, and I am indebted to conversations with her about the topic.
- 4 See for instance the marvellous poem by Ross Coggins which acts as a preface to Hancock's *Lords of Poverty* (1989).
- 5 This also comes out in recent critical reports on the use of development funds produced by various NGOs (see for instance War on Want, 2004).
- 6 There is a complication here in that 'international staff' are not necessarily expatriates. One may gain the coveted status of being an 'international consultant' with all that the status attracts while working in one's own country.
- 7 As a glance at the adverts in journals such as *The Economist* will show. However, it should be added that this ignores overseas allowances etc., which can be considerable.

- 8 There is evidence, however, that the gap between the incomes of international staff and consultants and local counterpart staff has widened. One consultant I interviewed, who had started life in the colonial service, reported that in his first job he was earning twice as much as his counterpart and that when he retired he was earning 17 times as much as his counterpart!
- 9 Thus many development professionals focus on 'outputs' – what their intervention produces, for instance material objects or trained staff – rather than the impact these outputs are meant to have in terms of developmental goals such as reducing poverty or increasing life expectancy.
- 10 Here I am only too well aware that I am lumping together a vast range of organizations with very different forms of organization and objectives. Furthermore, this stereotype is of Western development NGO workers, not those working for indigenous NGOs of the developing world, which are stereotyped in very different ways. In this article, the focus is very much on expatriates working for large and small international development NGOs.
- 11 See the photos which adorn NGO publications and websites.
- 12 Here we should note Mosse's comments that whether projects are successful or not is not so much a matter of whether design is turned into reality, but rather whether or not 'policy models' are sustained (Mosse, 2004: 657).
- 13 For an excellent discussion of expatriate NGO workers in Tanzania and their relationships with Tanzanian counterparts, see Baaz (2005).
- 14 This is obviously a very impressionistic comment. There were probably many more NGO personnel than development professionals in Sri Lanka at that time, but it was also true that NGO personnel tended to be much younger than development professionals.
- 15 In major development centres there may be four or five 'national' clubs catering to different groups of expatriates. This is part of a wider network, which includes schools, voluntary organizations and religious groupings, which further accentuate the distance between the expatriates (not just development personnel but others such as diplomatic and commercial employees) and the host society (see Rajak and Stirrat, 2006).
- 16 So for instance recent research on Coastal Zone Management in north-western Sri Lanka indicated that local organizations were systematically misrepresenting the situation so as to appeal to potential funders.
- 17 This tendency is actively encouraged by the official donor agencies, which frequently demand three to five years' experience in development from new recruits. It was also evident in a dispute over allowances between different groups of volunteers working for an international agency in Sri Lanka, the would-be professionals demanding what amounted to salaries.
- 18 This was very clear in Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami, where small, brash, recently formed NGOs were highly critical of the larger, long-established NGOs, which seemed to move with immense slowness. And, from the other side, the older NGOs were critical of what they saw as the 'unprofessionalism' of these new upstarts (see Stirrat, 2006).
- 19 What is striking is how much of the NGO position has been more generally adopted by the development industry over the last 10 to 15 years. Yet there is, I think, a difference. While values such as 'participation' are ultimate values for the NGOs, for the professional agencies and their personnel, they are means to ends, means to achieving development goals which are still defined in more material dimensions.
- 20 From an anthropological point of view, the best representation of how this idea of the person has evolved is the work of Louis Dumont (1977; see also Carrithers et al., 1985; Stirrat, 1998).

- 21 For more on this argument see Henkel and Stirrat (2001), Stirrat (1996). See also Arce and Long (2000).
- 22 Thus in Sri Lanka in the mid 1990s around 70 percent of all expatriate development personnel I interviewed had parents who were expatriates. It was much more difficult to obtain clear figures on the linkages between parental occupation and children's occupation but, strikingly, I found very few people who worked for NGOs who came from military or colonial civil service backgrounds.
- 23 See Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, 1997). For critical discussions of missionary activity as 'cultural imperialism' see Porter (1997) and Grant (2001).
- 24 Much of the language of the NGO world has its origins in the missionary or at least the religious world. Terms such as 'sharing' and 'partnership' are examples of this continuity. In many ways this is not surprising. After all, many NGOs were originally missionary organizations and this continues today, where some organizations see themselves as both development NGOs and missionary organizations (see Berger, 2003; Bornstein, 2003; Dorman, 2002).
- 25 Of course, this sometimes leads to problems, the offspring of both Western churches and NGOs objecting to and criticizing the actions of their parent organizations.
- 26 There is a massive literature which could be cited here, but one particularly poignant example is the second volume of Leonard Woolf's autobiography, which covers his time in what was then Ceylon as a member of the Ceylon Civil Service. Unfortunately, people working in development seem less prone to writing memoirs, but see Klitgaard (1991), Mallon (2000), Morris (1991) and Nelson (1995) for some examples.
- 27 For a collection which deals with these 'torchbearers on the path of progress' see Fischer-Tine and Mann (2004).
- 28 On colonial development, see for instance Cooke (2003), Cowen and Shenton (1996), Ingham (1992), Summers (1998), van Beusekom and Hodgson (2000) and van Beusekom (2000).
- 29 Another recent biography, this time of James Wolfensohn, perhaps indicates a different trajectory that a 'misfit' can take (see Mallaby, 2004).
- 30 This is particularly true for relief workers in disaster situations.
- 31 Short-term consultants have rather different problems, a sort of craving for short-term assignments and continual travel, the 'Memphis blues again'.
- 32 In this particular instance it was to escape from an unhappy love affair!
- 33 This theme – and its various ramifications – is explored in some detail in Rajak and Stirrat (2006).

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