

University of Gothenburg
Department of Social Anthropology

”I came here because of the future”

A study of students' life-conditions
at a vocational school in West Africa

Social Anthropology
Master Thesis, 2008
Eva Nilson
Supervisor Jan Lindström

Abstract

Title: "I came here because of the future" – A study of students' life-conditions at a vocational school in West Africa"

Course: Master Thesis in Social Anthropology

Author: Eva Nilson

Supervisor: Jan Lindström

Pages: 37

Key words: poverty reduction, vocational school, livelihood strategies, West Africa, life-stories.

The life-stories of eight students at a vocational school in a rural area in Togo, West Africa constitutes the bulk of this article. From this perspective we look at vocational training as a notion for poverty reduction. The student's life-stories show us one single strategy: education – as a mean for development, but as we learn from Chambers "fox strategy" the education is one part of a greater web of livelihood strategies. The initiative of sending a daughter or son to a vocational school is one part of the families strategy of spreading their activities for increasing their chances of income support. We find that many of the students at the vocational school "CRASE" have dropped out of primary or secondary school when something has happened that have made an extra weight on the economy of their family.

We also look at the vocational school from the development economist Easterly's theory of incentives, where we find the incentive for attending at the vocational school stronger than the incentive for completing primary or secondary school. We find the vocational school in the rural area in Togo as the opposite from its original aim; to prevent urbanization – nowadays it rather function as a way into the city. One major opinion among the youth attending at

the school is that there is more work in the city. There is also a different lifestyle tempting outside the rural areas.

Acknowledgements

First of all I would like to thank all the people that made this work possible. I have had a lot of support and help, which made my study in Togo, West Africa, an important experience and I hope that this paper will contribute with greater knowledge and understanding of the work for a better future.

I wish all the best to the students at “CRASE”, (Centre Rural deactivates Socio-Educatives) in Kuma-Dunyo who let me into their lives and treated me with all the kindness and love I never could have imagined. They all have made an everlasting impression on me and I will always be grateful for their contribution in this article, but mostly for the unconditionally friendship they showed me.

I would also like to thank Director Tsogbe and Mrs Adidja who looked after me and supported my visit and my work to the fullest. I would also like to thank all the other teachers, whom I have the greatest respect for. My good friend Duho Jawo and his lovely family and my old friends in the area; Mr Fili and his family, Mr Agbekponu, Mrs Helene and her family, Mr Zikpi and his family, and Mrs Samma in the morning-market, they all made their best to make me feel at home and more than welcome.

Jan Lindström at the Department for Social Anthropology in Gothenburg, gave me the best inspiration and support when I applied for the Minor Field Study-scholarship and has since then followed my work and been a great support.

I owe a lot to Mr Mats Matsson, my former teacher from “Molkoms Folkhögskola”, who was my contact in the ”Svenska Togoföreningen”- Association Suedois Togolais. He supported my project and helped me with necessary contacts in Togo, valuable information and material. Mats passed away after I had returned home from Togo, in the year of 2004 and I would like

to think that this paper in some way is a tribute to his long-lasting engagement in Togo.

My greatest appreciation is also given my family and friends who encouraged me to follow my heart.

Are you a fox or a hedgehog?

This article aims to expose and give insight into the lives, values, strategies and priorities of young men and women facing a structure of poverty in Togo, West Africa. The reality of people's lives in poverty differs from place to place since poverty is much more complex and multidimensional than what our conventional Western way of looking at the phenomenon by income rates reveal. We find one general aspect of poverty that can be measured in access to safe drinking water, infant mortality, school enrolment rates, literacy, agricultural inputs, quantity and quality of food consumed, access to health and education services, land ownership, power, dependence and respect (Narayan 1997:7-18). Another significant dimension of poverty, though rarely recognized by outsiders, is what Robert Chambers call "the fox strategy" (Chambers 1997:164).

"The fox has many ideas but the hedgehog has one big idea"
(Chambers 1997:164).

Facing the structures of poverty people in the south often adapt to the fox-strategy of livelihood. The fox-strategy constitutes a portfolio of activities, while the hedgehog relies on one source of income. The general way of life in the North is the hedgehog-strategy, while in the south the fox-strategy is dominating. Though poverty can capture people in a hedgehog-situation if they become exploited and desperately depending on one survival strategy for example as slaves, sex-workers or beggars (Chambers 1997:163). The portfolio of activities found in the fox-strategy as sources of support, food, income and

means of survival include for example, cultivating field crop, keeping livestock (both for self-provisioning and for barter and cash income), share-rearing of livestock, home gardening, common property resources (hunting, fishing and gathering etc.), processing-hawking-vending and marketing, transporting goods, mutual help (borrowings from relatives, loans from saving groups), contract outwork, casual labour, specialized occupations (blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors etc.), domestic service, child labour (domestic and agricultural work at home), craft work (making pots, baskets etc.), family splitting and migration (Chambers 1997:164-165). The different members of one family seek and find different ways of income, food or support during different times of the year. In this way they find themselves not depending on one source of income and they spread the flow of livelihood more evenly over the year, which increase their security and well-being (Chambers 1997:170).

The young men and women who tell us about their lives, strategies and visions through this article put focus on some of the activities mentioned in the fox-strategy, but mainly the strategy of a vocational occupation as a dressmaker, carpenter, blacksmith, tailor or hairdresser. This study of students at a vocational training-centre shows one or a few pieces of the puzzle, but if you look close enough you might get a glimpse of the greater picture as well. These young women and men come from families who seek opportunities for a better livelihood. These young women and men are foxes.

Returning to the school

Ten years had passed since I last visited the vocational school – “CRASE”, and the villages in the Kuma-area in Togo, West Africa. When I travelled the winding road up the mountainside, the beauty of the nature –again - struck me, as I looked at the steep hillsides where people grow fruit-trees and work in their fields. I approached the school where I had once stayed for a few months a long time ago as a member of the supportive Swedish association. I returned, this

time as a student in Social Anthropology. I came with a desire to get a greater depth in my understanding of the role of education and learn about the reality the women and men here face in their daily lives. I was to explore questions I did not ask the first time. Why did the students come to the school and what were their expectations and dreams concerning their future life? With these two questions I found out, not only about the students' hopes of their future, but also about the life-situation of poverty that from one day to another has the power to change one's life-course.

The moment I stepped out of the car that had slowly taken me to the top of the mountain, the sky opened and one of the first big rainfalls of the season started. Standing on the porch outside my room, waiting for the heavy rain to ease, I was stunned to be back, many years had passed, but still, here I was and for the next seven weeks this mountaintop, once more, would be the place I called home.

The school-area looked the same, except for the many fruit-trees and perennials that had been planted since my last visit. Papaya, mango, citrus, nut-palms, pepper, manioc and many more species grew wherever there was a spot free to cultivate. The area around the buildings and the paths and tracks where people move around, were cleared from grass to keep un-welcome animals, snakes and insects away as well as to keep it tidy. The grey concrete-buildings where the students live, cook and work had not been restored since they were built, more than twenty years ago.

When the students greeted me they almost looked scared, certainly shy, but clearly excited. From that moment I was an exotic element among them, who was going to be studied closely.

As I climbed up on the water-cistern and looked over the surrounding green mountains, I saw the village down in the valley with the road of red earth running through. Occasionally I heard the sound of a car that passed by, but mostly just the sounds of goats that wandered around in the village or people who sang as they practised in church. The sounds travelled easily up the

mountain and even from villages further away you could hear the drums in the evening. After the sunset the evenings got really dark, the moon was the only source of light, which I only saw occasionally during my stay. The students and I was spending a lot of time in the evenings laying on the water-cistern watching the sky and, when dark, listening to the sounds from a distance, with the stars above us.

The lack of water and rain can be a problem apart from moments such as the one when I arrived. The school has two water-cisterns for the collection of rainwater from some of the roofs, but they are mostly empty, so the students have to walk the steep track down to the brook for water and carry it up again, slowly and steadily balancing buckets on their head.

Early in the morning you hear the steady sounds of the “kop-kop”- machetes-inaugurating the working day, when the students clear the ground from grass. This is followed by the sweeping sound when the students clean the area with the traditional brush made of grass.

At seven thirty someone rings the school-bell and the students rush down the path to the studios that are placed on the downside of the school-area. Lined up they sing the national hymn and thereafter a prayer is said by one of the students. Then, maybe a couple of hours after getting out of bed, the students walk to the classes. In the dressmaking studio it is mostly quiet, the sewing machines are operated by foot, and do not make much noise. The respect for the teacher limits any kind of talk. In the neighbouring studio where the future carpenters work the atmosphere is louder. There is never a tool left unused, as soon as someone has finished with a tool another student take it to carry out his own work. There is a constant sound of hammering and sawing in wood, as the students manufacture beds, chairs or coffins or other items that someone from a village has ordered. Just a little bit further down the path the students in hairdressing are sitting outside in the shadow of a mango-tree, talking or singing with a relaxed and joyful tone while they practise making braids, or working

with loose hair, fastening it on threads. Next to them a few students and their teacher in the blacksmith studio swing the hammer, and make sure that the glow is hot by pumping air into the fire. Next to the blacksmith studio we find the tailors' studio.

At midday there is siesta and when the bell sounds again the students walk up to their rooms and kitchen, to cook something to eat for lunch. The young women share one small building where they have constructed their own cooking place with clay, piling it up from the floor so that they can place a bowl on top of it and make a fire underneath. Inside the kitchen there are about ten to fifteen of these small fireplaces. The smoke can drift away through the walls since the bricks have not been placed in a compact way. The holes in the walls also provide the young women with some light during the daytime. Each student is supposed to cook her or his own food, but often they share what they have prepared with some of their friends. The men have their own room for cooking at the end of the building where they live. The students who live in the nearest village walk back home during the siesta.

When the siesta is over they return to their studios. After an hour or two some of the studios might have a theoretical class, or someone in the class has been given the task of leading a group discussion about health, contraceptives or HIV, except on Wednesdays, when all the girls gather to play net-ball, and the boys play football. Youngsters from the nearest villages also join in to take part in the game.

After a long workday the students go to fetch water, prepare their evening meal and later in the evening there is another activity for the students who live at the school. Usually they gather for a meeting or just to have fun by playing cards. But one evening each week the youngsters from the nearby villages join in once more. That is on Thursday evening when it is time for dancing and singing. The boys from the villages bring large "tam-tam" drums, and they play constantly for a couple of hours when the girls and some of the boys dance in circles

around them. Those who are not dancing are standing to the side singing and clapping hands, supporting the rhythm of the tam-tams.

A short presentation of Togo

You find Togo, a pencil-thin strip of land on the map in West Africa with an area of 56 785 sq km, situated between Ghana and Benin, in the north bordering Burkina Faso. Its population is estimated to be around 4.8 million people of which around 1 million live in the capital Lomé situated by the coast. (Sweden covers an area of 450 000 sq km and has a population of 9 million.) The official language of Togo is French, but apart from French about half of the population speak or understand Éwé. The second largest and a widely spoken African language is Kabyé. Most of the students at Centre Rural d'Activities Socio-Educatives ("CRASE") come from the Éwé-group. There are about 40 ethnic groups but the two largest are the Éwé and the Kabyé. The group of Kabyé is concentrated in the northern part of Togo around the town Kara and in the central part of Togo. The Éwé speaking people are concentrated in the southwest. Most people in Togo live as self-sufficient farmers. The main export crops are cocoa beans, coffee beans and cotton. These crops suffer from low market-prices, which result in low incomes. Another factor that harms cultivation is the low and erratic rainfall (Newton, 1995:870-871).

The notion of education as a mean for poverty reduction

Approximately half of the people living in Africa, around 290 million, live their lives with less than one dollar a day in income (*Afrika i förändring* 2002:14). *The Human Development Report* presented in the year of 2004 by the United Nations Development Program compares the human development in the world through the parameters of health, education and expected length of life. The countries in the "ASS" - Africa South of the Sahara, are found in the bottom of the ranking-list where Norway and Sweden are found in the top-positions. The

political leaders in the world have agreed on the “Millennium-goals” in which they declare the will to reduce the poverty in the world by fifty per cent until the year 2015. By the end of 2004 the UN’s Human Development Report had new figures of the reality the world is facing. The head of UNDP, Mark Mall och Brown was pessimistic about the figures that in 2004 showed that the poverty in “ASS”, instead of being halved by the year of 2015, might be halved by the year 2147. Since then the poverty in “ASS” has grown, and if the trend is not reversed the poverty will never be halved in Africa (Imerslund, 20051016, *Det är möjligt att halvera fattigdomen*, www.undp.se).

How to reduce poverty and to move forward in developing the continent in a positive direction are topics that are discussed at different levels. Apart from the “Millennium-goals” stated by the UN, the group of G8 has stated their terms for supporting Africa in the document “G8 Africa action plan”, as a response to the document “New partnership for Africa’s development” (NEPAD) which is an African initiative which shows the will of the African leaders to fight poverty. The government of Sweden has also formulated its goals in official documents concerning poverty reduction in Africa (*Afrika i förändring, en uppföljning av regeringens Afrikaskrivelse*, 2002, Globcom, 2001). The Swedish government points out the importance to increase knowledge about poverty both from a south perspective and at an individual level.

In this article I focus on vocational education and the young men and women’s notions of the vocational educations ability to approve their livelihood. Though the general discourse concerning education often concentrates on the goals of reaching a higher proportion of children participating in primary and secondary school.

My study aims at investigating the student’s notion of vocational training as a mean for improving their livelihood. I investigate the notion of vocational training as a mean to fight poverty.

The ideological foundation of the Nordic folk high school is to provide and raise the level of education for adults who lack schooling from their earlier years. The Nordic folk high school as well as a vocational school provides adults with a second chance of an education.

The development economist William Easterly analyses in his book *The Elusive Quest for Growth* (2001) different solutions that has been adapted to the African continent. He finds that enrolment in formal education has not shown to be a reliable cure for poverty (Easterly, 2001:84). The quality of the formal education has been insufficient but also not adjusted to the needs and realities of the student's life-conditions. Easterly finds that one important key to fight poverty is the human capital which is depending on more than formal schooling, as for example knowledge transferred from social life, like family and co-workers and skills learned from working (ibid: 98). Easterly's main point is that "people respond to incentives" (ibid: 143). For people to invest in education they have to believe that there will derive a positive result from the invested time and money. "But if knowledge has a big economic payoff, then people will respond to this incentive by accumulating knowledge" (ibid: 148). Easterly however, does not discuss the impact of vocational schooling. Instead he concentrates on the formal school system that has been one of the many solutions tried out in the quest for growth.

These are the words of a woman working in the rural area with a forest and agriculture-project, close to the village where she grew up.

"The young people need the possibility for an education, to learn a trade that is useful for them. The younger wants money. Through the education they get an opportunity to work and get money. If they don't do anything they might end up stealing or become prostituted."

She tells me that the vocational school “CRASE” is important for building the students’ self-confidence and awareness.

I will compare “CRASE” with another well-documented vocational school in order to illustrate its character. Anders Närman points out in his analysis of Moshi National Vocational Training Centre (1992:128) in Tanzania, that the alternatives for those who leave primary school are limited. A vocational training would constitute a second chance for formal education dropouts. The Moshi NVTC aims at a higher technical level with advanced equipment. The Moshi centre provides vocational training in 13 trades, for example Machine Tool Repair, Electronics, Machine Fitter and Mechanical Drafting. While “CRASE” aims at a level of education where the former school dropouts find it possible to adjust, the Moshi centre, due to the cost of running it, finds it necessary to reach a high level of efficiency. The more advanced courses can be difficult for students with limited formal education. At the same time, the students who have graduated from secondary school might already have adjusted to a lifestyle opposed to a vocational career (Närman 1992:128). “CRASE” has over the years operated with scarce resources, the equipment in the classrooms are of low standard and doesn’t depend on electricity, large investments or advanced maintenance. At the Moshi NVTC the classes are held in English which is difficult for students with a lower grade of formal schooling. At “CRASE” the classes are held in the local language.

Let us now take a look at poverty reduction from a socio-economical perspective:

World Bank economists like Adrian Ziderman and Richard K Johanson point out the importance of investments in human capital, and states that “Investing in people promotes their individual development and enhances their ability to escape poverty” (Johanson 2004:17). By developing human capital you achieve not only higher worker productivity but also improve the worker’s opportunity

to be included in the economy. According to Johanson you also achieve an improvement in job mobility where workers can move into other productive sectors. Further, investments in human capital also influence business and technological development when workers apply and adapt current knowledge but also develop new knowledge. Johanson finds human capital accumulation more important than physical capital accumulation.

“Improving human capital is thus crucial for Africa, both to reduce poverty and to improve people’s lives. Efforts to boost human capital in the region must cover a broad front, including education, health and skills development. Skills are an important means to increase incomes and sustainable livelihoods for the poor” (Johanson 2004:17).

According to Ziderman many “ASS” countries are characterised by a trend of high population growth and demographic changes, which has led to high unemployment and – especially for young people - low wages. In the “ASS” countries the formal employment sector remains small and stagnant while the informal sector, especially in urban areas, constitutes the most expanding source of employment growth and work opportunities. Ziderman finds a trend of social awareness where needs among the weaker in society is more and more turning into the government’s concern. There is a general acceptance of the responsibilities of the government’s necessary support and work in poverty reduction. Investments are held back in “ASS” through lack of government funding. Ziderman finds these investments, such as in skill provisions appropriate for donor interventions (Ziderman, 2003:3).

From the discussion of incentives and human capital and the ability to achieve a better livelihood through investing in skills, we will in this article look deeper

into the lives, dreams and expectations of young women and men striving to become dressmakers, carpenters, hairdressers or blacksmiths.

The vocational school Centre Rural d'Activites Socio-Educatives

The vocational school, “CRASE”, (Centre Rural d'Activites Socio-Educatives) is situated on the top of a mountain near the village Dunyo in Togo, West Africa, a couple of hours drive up north from the coast, close to the border of Ghana. The area is characterised by mountains and green surroundings. There is a town about fifteen kilometres from the school, Kpalimé. It has electricity, internet-services, telephones and big commerce. When you travel from Kpalimé you leave the flat landscape and the road goes up the mountain and pass just two villages five kilometres apart, then the bumpy road of sand and rocks just a few hundred meters later passes the third village called Dunyo. You reach the school “CRASE” by walking a path a couple of hundred meters from Dunyo to the top of the mountain. There are several villages within a radius of about five kilometres in different directions, which are most easily reached by foot on tracks up and down the mountain, through forested areas and plantations.

The school, with about fifty students in the age between eighteen and twenty-four, provides vocational training for crafts like carpentry, dressmaking, hairdressing, blacksmithing and tailoring. It takes three years of training to obtain a certificate, except for hairdresser that takes two years. The students come from all over the country. Some live in the nearby villages and can stay in their homes since they walk to school in the mornings and back again in the evenings. Some of the students have the possibility to return home during the weekends to help their parents and also to fetch crops for food preparation during the school-week. The students who live further away will stay in the school and only have the possibility to visit their families if they have money for a lift with a car. Less than half of the students, around twenty-five, live at the

school during the weeks, and half of these, ten to fifteen, also stay at the school during the weekends.

The students work in the studios in order to be trained in a craft, but there is also time for them to work on their own cultivation on the hillsides around the school. This is necessary because many students prepare their own food from what they grow. Additional activities during the school-week are classes with the local language Éwé, health, song and dance, group-discussions, and work on the school-ground, but also playing card in the evening-time and sport once a week in the afternoon.

The school started in 1969 and has since then been supported by the Swedish Association: "Svenska Togoföreningen", mainly contributing with salaries for the school's teachers. Sida (the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) has also contributed through the Swedish partner by financing some of the school-buildings in the eighties. The Swedish partner "Svenska Togoföreningen" was from the early start made up of people connected to Folk high schools in Sweden. The founder of "CRASE" was a man named Gérard Toviekou who, in 1962, studied the idea of the Swedish Folk high school on a scholarship from Sida. Toviekou returned to Sweden in 1965 to search for a partner in order to build a Folk high school in his home area, in Togo. The idea was to start a combined Vocational and Folk high school in the rural area. The Swedish partner wanted to implement the ideological ideas sprung from Swedish Folk high schools in "CRASE" and Togo. The students from the neighbouring rural and poor area would learn a craft that would give them an opportunity to stay and work in their home villages. They would also learn agriculture and to use the local resources which would give the students enhanced knowledge in how to cultivate and make a living from the land. The social elements at "CRASE" like sport and music were meant to bring the students together in a positive way. Classes in the local language Éwé was also central to the idea of making the rural area attractive to the people living there

(“Molkoms folkhögskola/Svenska Togoföreningen”, (nd) “CRASE” i Kuma-Dunyo: Ett folkbildningsprojekt i Västafrika).

At one point in the early years the school was closed because of a dispute between the principal of the school and the Swedish partner. The principal wanted to change the vocational classes into a more advanced technical school. The Swedish partner refused to support this change, pointing out that the students would not have the possibility to work with electrical machines in the rural area. One of the original main goals with “CRASE” was to try to counteract the process of urbanisation (Sibbe, Tannerfeldt 1974:21).

The government of Togo is responsible for the school director’s salary, and recently also for the tailoring-teacher’s salary. The goal of the Swedish partner is that the school shall become self-reliant, and that the government of Togo shall cover the financial needs. This has not happened yet.

The Swedish partner wants the training at the school to be free of charge for the students, but at the moment the students pay about 10 000 Cefa franc (around 10 pounds) for three years of training. The fee is paid in small instalments during the years the student study at the school. This arrangement is made because the administration of the school realises that it is difficult to raise the amount of money and pay all at one single occasion.

Data collection: sitting on the cistern under the African sky

Through a scholarship from Sida I had the opportunity to make a short field study in Togo that lasted from the second half of April to the beginning of June in 2004 a total of seven weeks. During my previous visit in 1994 I spent the months of January, February and March in this area. This time I arrived in the middle of April, the month when the rainy season begins. Prior to the rainy season there is little that can be harvested from the fields. At the beginning of each year the farmers burn their fields and plant for the new season. The smoke

from the plantations combined with the wind, which carry sand and dust from the deserts to the north, not to forget the heat, makes it a special time of the year.

My previous visit at the school made my introduction this time a bit easier, at least for me. I was prepared and had some knowledge about the customs, traditions and the facilities, such as where to do my washing, how to shake hands in a proper way, saying hello in Éwé, how to get around. I knew where the villages in the area were situated and how to walk the tracks in the forest and knew how to behave to get a ride home from the town in the evening. There were friends from my earlier visit in 1994 that still lived in the villages near the school. Some of the teachers at the school were the same as ten years ago and they knew that I was capable of managing the way of life at the school which facilitated my time in the field. What I did not expect was that the students were in most cases astonished by my presence. It took a longer time than I had imagined establishing a comfortable and relaxed relationship between the students and me. Many times the young women took my hands, amazed by the soft palms revealing the absence of hard work.

During my fieldwork I was focusing on building more solid relationships with the students studying at the school. I did not make efforts to reach a close relationship with the staff at the school, partly because I had a limited time, but also because there is a hierarchical structure, which could have jeopardized the relationship with my informants if I was associated with the teachers. I wanted to learn as much as possible about the students' life-conditions and it was important to my study that I was thought of more as one of them rather than one above them. Mostly I was treated as a special guest, but when I socialised with the students in informal situations I was treated as a friend, one among many.

My time in the field was concentrated to the vocational school "CRASE". I was living at the school and was following the students in their daily lives: running to attend at the morning ceremony, attending the classes, working in the

kitchen, going to the market, doing my laundry in the river, playing cards in the evening, working on the plantations and going to church on Sunday morning.

The time in field were too short for me to make a full-fledged participant observation. This method demands a long-term participation, which I did not have time for since my time in field was limited (Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias 1996(2002): 282-291). There was for example not enough time to learn the local language, though I had about forty volunteers that gave me lessons when possible. The fact that I did not talk Éwé meant that I could not follow the students' conversations. Both the teachers and the students spoke Éwé most of the time. In conversations with me we used French, but after a while also Éwé, which I learned at a lower, basic level.

I combined participant observation with semi- structured interviews. After I had completed my interviews I structured my field-notes in coded schemes and analysed the material (Repstad, 1999:112-113). I worked with an interpreter during the semi-structured interviews, partly because my French is limited, but mainly because the students prefer the local language. I did not use a tape-recorder during my interviews, I used my interview-guide, which I created after some time in the field, and made notes on paper during the interviews. This method worked very well, the students took time to think about their answers and they found it important that the answers were written down properly. As mentioned, the students start their day very early in the morning, but in the middle of the day there is time for siesta. This was the time when I could go to my room and work on my field notes.

In this paper I present eight of the students' life stories that will give the reader first of all a picture of the unique life of every individual and secondly the structural conditions these young people face growing up in West Africa.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews that constitute the bulk of my material I have also discussed with many of the students in daily conversations about life, love and everything in between. Sitting on the water-cistern in the

evening the students often talked about the future and their dreams with each other and if possible they translated so I could understand. Once a week the students had a meeting where they discussed issues that concerned them, while they lived at the school. At these meetings there was always someone who translated from Éwé. I also spent time with previous students at “CRASE” to learn about the life after school, mainly one carpenter and two dressmakers in Kpalimé and two dressmakers and one hairdresser in a small village near the school. I also visited another vocational school outside the town of Kpalimé. That school, built with German support, had a much higher fee but also electricity and modern machines, though not as many students. The school I visited for this minor field study –“CRASE” has no electricity or running water. All work is made by hand or foot, the dressmakers work on paper from cement bags instead of cloth, which is too expensive, and in the carpentry there are a limited number of tools. While “CRASE” is intended for the rural young men and women from poorer conditions, the “German school” with a much higher fee only have the possibility to attract students from wealthier families.

The study does not claim to be representative for other vocational schools, mainly because other similar schools might be more expensive for the students to attend. Even though the Swedish partners wish that studies at the school should be free of charge, the administration demands of the students a fee of around ten pound for the whole education. Even if this is a low fee compared to other schools, it can be difficult for the poorer families to raise the amount. If the family does not pay, the student will not get his or her degree.

Conversations with students:”A better future if God protect”

Susan is a vivid girl in her early twenties. In spite of her youth she is full of confidence and strength, she does not hesitate to speak her mind and she is never afraid to go her own way. Her smile and appearance and her way of action shows a proud young woman. She is studying to become a dressmaker and

dreams about a future where she can work in her own studio. She jokes about her wish to marry a white man, "but it is difficult because white men do not want to marry African girls" she says with a smile. Apart from her dream of her own studio she has a dream of going to America, "I want to marry a man who also wants to go to America". One of her brothers has made it overseas. She has not heard from him since he left, but she hopes that he will help her so that she can move to America as well. She has a struggle and a lot of hard work to raise money so that she can manage from week to week. "A white person cannot be poor", she is sure of that, and if she could marry a white man she would never again have to worry about money.

The dream of living in the West is vivid to many of the students I was talking to. Several women dream of finding work as dressmakers or as a maid. When I explained that it is difficult for Africans to move to Europe the students find it really surprising, "but we shall eat too". By that they mean that they will work but they will also buy food, which will be good for the people in Europe. Another girl is sure that she can move to Sweden or America when she gets her diploma as a dressmaker. "If you have a diploma you can go", she told me with a firm voice.

In Togo there has been, up until recently, a chance of getting a Visa-card to USA in a lottery called "Visa-lotto". You could participate in the "Visa-lotto" by Internet -it was free except from the cost of using a computer and sending a letter. A former teacher at "CRASE" told me that many people did get selected from the lotto and called for an interview. He explained that after the interviews maybe as many as a couple of thousand every year was given Visa-cards. They had to pay for their own ticket though, so in the end there were not many who actually left.

Susan is one of two sisters with seven brothers. Her father has left the family and married a second woman. He has a coffee-plantation in Ghana and has started out with his new family there. He is out of the picture and does not

contribute to the economy of the family or spend any time with his children or grandchildren from his first marriage. In Togo a man may marry more than one woman though it is a matter of costs when the family extends. The woman from the first marriage might not approve of the husband's idea of a second wife either, but she does not always have a say about it.

Susan moved to one of her older brothers, who live in Ghana when she was a child. While she lived there with him and his family, she attended primary and secondary school. It was her brother who was responsible for her and paid her school-fees and clothes, etc.

When she was in the second grade of secondary school she got pregnant and had to move back home to her mother in a small village in Togo. The father of the child did not wait for Susan to return to Ghana and married another young woman. He does not help her or take any responsibility for the child.

The house where Susan's mother lives is situated on a steep rocky mountainside. It is close between the houses, just a few meters to the nearest neighbour. The ground is cleared from grass and goats climb up and down in their search for something to eat. As in most villages in the Kuma-area in Togo there is no electricity in the village. The valleys have brooks running through them. Most people in the villages have to walk to a small brook and carry the water in a big bucket on the head back home. The house of Susan's mother is small, only two rooms where the mother lives with Susan's child but also a couple of her other grandchildren, whose parents work in a town. There are just a small bench and a bed inside the house, some items for preparing food and on the bed there are some clothes and textiles. Outside are a kitchen; a fireplace made of clay, and a small roof made of palm-leaves, some wood and pots.

When her child was a couple of years old Susan's mother wanted Susan to study to become a dressmaker at "CRASE". The school is not so far from her village and most important, it is not so expensive.

The school-fee for primary and secondary school education is expensive, and having a baby is also a big cost for a family. Just going to the hospital for the delivery costs around 12 000 Cefa franc- about 10 pound.

Susan's mother sells fish in the village. Once a week she travels down to the coast and buys fish that she sells back home. She can also earn some money from working at a mill, but it's a long way to walk back and forth. In the weekends when Susan goes home to the village she can also work at the mill grinding corn and earn some money as a contribution to the family economy. Susan wants her child to begin primary school, but she and her mother do not have the money to pay the fee yet. She is afraid that it will take a long time before she can afford to put the child in school. She has just begun her education at "CRASE" and after she has finished school she will have to work as a maid to earn the money to buy a sewing machine. Then she can start to work as a dressmaker. She thinks that it will take about three years of work as a maid before she can afford to buy a machine. She says that if she gets married her husband will not help her financially with her child since it will not be her new husband's biological child.

While she lives at "CRASE" the responsibility for her has been placed on all her brothers, whom all help out financially for her needs. She is optimistic about her life-situation and the future: "if God protects" she will move to Accra or America and work as a dressmaker. In a town it is easier to find work she says, there are more people and they spend more on dresses than people in the villages do. In a town it does not take such a long time before you can find work, she tells me.

At the age of twenty-four, *Cecilia* still has another year of studies until she has completed her education to become a dressmaker. She is the youngest in her family of five brothers and four sisters. Her father has recently died, and before he passed away it was arranged for Cecilia to be married and move to her

husband. He is a tailor and the one who thought Cecilia should study at “CRASE”. He and his mother are paying for her education. Cecilia’s mother is a farmer and so are her sisters and brothers except one who is a driver. When I ask if she was in love with her husband when they got married she doesn’t know what to answer, it seems like the question is strange to her. In a society where poverty is a heavy burden you probably have different parameters for a good marriage than those I am used to from growing up in Sweden. She tells me that it was her husband who suggested to her father that they should get married. He had said that since he is a tailor he could make sure that she would get education in the same profession /teach her his profession.

When she has finished school she thinks that she will have to work as a maid to earn money to buy her own sewing machine, which will take about two years. In the future she wants to be with her husband and have two children. She would like to work as a dressmaker together with her husband. She wants to follow the will of her husband she says: “I want to do whatever he wants to do in life”.

Cecilia is always the well-behaved woman she has been brought up to be.

Whether it’s when she is moving slowly and smoothly over the ground with a sharp eye at the plants for picking ripe pepper or peanuts to dry, working with a hatchet or machete down the hillside planting corn or jams, or working concentrated in the studio.

Catherine completed primary school, but she did not want to continue to secondary school, “I was older than the others in primary school”. It is up to the family when the child starts primary school so the age varies. There are tests that you have to pass in order to move from one stage to the next. If a child starts late and/or have problems at school, perhaps because there is a lot of work to do in the house or in the field, it can take a long time to proceed through the school system. Catherine wanted to start to work in the own town, but her uncle who takes care of her thought that it was better for her to start study at “CRASE”.

She is studying to become a hairdresser. Catherine's father is dead, and her uncle who then took care of her knew about "CRASE". During the weeks, she lives at the school, but during the weekends she lives at the house of her uncle. She is twenty-two and possesses the most emotional and warmest heart I have ever known.

In the future she wants to have her own hairdressing studio, maybe in a town. "In the town there is water and electricity, and there are more people and more work to do". "If God protects me I will work in my own studio and find a husband and get married".

Kathy is a quiet, shy girl, who is twenty years old. She has eleven brothers and sisters, some of whom go to school and the rest of whom are farmers as her parents. She lives with her family in a small village one hour's walk from the school. There are many small mountains and valleys where people have their fields for cultivation. Kathy completed the six steps in primary school, but then she got pregnant and because of the costs of having a child she could not continue to secondary school. She does not have a relationship with the father of her child and he does not help her financially with the child. By now her child has reached the age of four and Kathy has just started at "CRASE". She studies to become a dressmaker. She is certain that she would have continued to secondary school if she had not become pregnant. Instead she had to stay at home to take care of the child and work on the family farm. She is happy about going to "CRASE". She walks back and forth every day and in the evening she walks the road once more to join the student's living at the school in the evening activities.

In the future she wants to stay in the village where her parents live and work as a dressmaker. She also wants to get married and have one more child. Directly after finishing her education at "CRASE" she is going to work in her field for

about three years with growing crops to sell in the market and raise money for buying a sewing machine.

Adam is twenty years old, the firstborn child of many brothers and sisters. He is the son of a sheet-metalworker. His family lives in a town around twenty kilometres north of “CRASE” where his mother sells vegetables in the town’s market. In his hometown there are schools for learning the craft as a carpenter and Adam first thought about attending a school there. But he then heard of “CRASE” through a relative who studied there and he went for a visit. Since “CRASE” was cheaper, he and his family decided that he would go there instead. He wants to become a carpenter because it is a good profession, though he does not want to return to his hometown. There are already many people working as carpenters there, “I want to live in Lomé and have my own studio there, or work with my brother who is also a carpenter in Lomé”. He thinks that the capital of Togo is a better town for work opportunities.

Adam has finished five out of six steps in primary school, he loves books and whenever he is not working in the studio I find him sitting by himself with an old newspaper that he has found. He is not so good at reading French but he tries. After he has finished his education at “CRASE” he plans to study carpentry for six months at another school to get one more certificate. He thinks that he has to work at a mill in his hometown for maybe one and a half year to save money before he can start working as a carpenter in his own workshop. When we talk about the future he tells me that he wants to open his own carpentry and then get married and have five children. If it doesn’t work out well for him in Lomé he thinks that he will move to Ghana instead. But “if God protects I will work in my own studio in Lomé”.

“I came here because of the future”. This is *Kent*’s answer when I ask him why he came to this school. Kent’s father is dead, and his family moved from the

northern part of Togo and settled in a village close to “CRASE” because they had planned for Kent to start there to become a carpenter. An uncle who lives there told the family about “CRASE”. Kent was told that the school was good and that there was light there, “but when I came I did not see anything”, he tells me. “The tools are bad and broken, I have to stand and wait for a tool because they are occupied all the time”. Kent is the youngest child in his family with six brothers and sisters. Everyone else in his family work as farmers, they grow what they need for sustenance and they also sell some of what they grow. Kent comes from the Kabyé-group. When I ask him about his plans after graduating from “CRASE” he tells me that he will go to another country, open his own studio and get a wife and two children. When I ask him what country he will go to, he says “Kara”. “But that is a town in Togo” I reply. He answers me with a steady voice “it is a different country because it is Kabyé”.

I ask him what he would have done if he had not come to “CRASE” and he answers: “ I would have been a farmer like the others in my family, up north in Kara”. When he graduates from “CRASE” he will work as a farmer for a couple of years to save money to be able to open his own carpentry. I ask him to look into the future and he tells me “when God protects I will open my own studio, get a wife and get money to continue my own life”.

One of the students in the blacksmith studio differs a bit from the other young men at the school. *Paul* is thin and he looks much younger, though he is about seventeen years old. His father has moved to Benin to sell medicine, but when Paul had just finished the second last grade in primary school his father stopped paying for his school fee. He is the oldest child in his family with three brothers and two sisters. His mother is a farmer, she cultivates to meet the family needs but she does not have enough crop to sell for an income. Paul could not continue in primary school since his mother alone could not afford to pay the school fee. His mother now pays the fee for the vocational training in the

blacksmith studio at “CRASE”. Paul lives with his mother and brothers and sisters in one of the closest villages to the school and he walks back and forth every day in his ragged shoes. I ask him what he thinks that he would have done if he had not come to “CRASE” - he answers me that he would just have stayed in the house. After he has finished school he will help his mother with farming before he can start to work as a blacksmith. He thinks that his village is good, but the road is really bad and there is no electricity or water. He tells me that he wants to start his own blacksmith studio in the village because there is none working as a blacksmith there yet.

Mathew is in a way the opposite of Paul, he is tall and one of the oldest among the students with his twenty-four years of age. He comes from a large family, among the four brothers and six sisters in the family Mathew is the third born. His father is a priest and his mother is a farmer. The family lives in a village in the southern part of Togo. One of his brothers is also a priest and one of his sisters has married and moved to Accra. Mathew has the most advanced education of the students that I met. After he finished the third grade in secondary school he got married and had a child. He moved to Accra and worked there as an assistant construction worker but returned to his family after one year when work opportunities got worse. He and his wife had another child and thereafter Mathew started his education to become a carpenter at “CRASE”. He knew about the school through other people from his village that had been students there. When he gets his diploma as a carpenter he wants to open his own carpentry in Kpalimé, a town not far from “CRASE”. But before this is possible he will work as a carpenter in his village for a couple of years to save some money. He tells me that it is more expensive to open a carpentry studio in Lomé, the capital, than in Kpalimé, that is why he wants to work in Kpalimé. His village is situated halfway between the two big towns Lomé by the coast and Kpalimé further up the country.

I also ask him about the difference between his village and Kpalimé: in the town there are more people who can buy furniture than in the village. If he hadn't come to "CRASE" he would have been a farmer. But he wants to work as a carpenter instead because he thinks that it is a better job. He says that the land where his village is situated is not that good for cultivation. "One day if God protects I can open my own carpentry in Kpalimé, bring my wife and build a house for us to live in". Mathew tells me that even if he in the future works in his own carpentry, he needs to grow crops and have chickens and a cock and some goats to meet the needs of the family, but also to sell some surplus. Thinking about the fact that he has two children and a wife at home waiting for him, I ask him if it is difficult to get an education. He responds: "It is difficult going to school if you don't have money, it is not difficult if you have money".

Let me finish this chapter with a short story from a carpenter in Kpalimé: One former carpenter student that I visited several times told me his life-story. He had been a promising student, but then his father got sick and needed an operation. He had had to drop out of school and began to study to become a carpenter at "CRASE" instead. After he had finished at "CRASE" he worked in the village for a couple of years, thereafter he moved to the city. The family managed to pay for the operation his father needed. The carpenter borrowed money to buy modern electrical machines. He now has his own carpentry where he works hard every day to be able to pay back what he has borrowed. And he also has a few employees in the carpentry.. He and his wife rent a small house in the town where they have electricity and even a television. Their daughter started primary school at an early age and is doing well. He looks at me as I sit still, thinking about the effect his fathers sickness had on his life-course, and he assures me: "my life is happy now".

Concluding remarks: The fox strategy at school and in the future

As my study shows many of the students came to the vocational school for some reason in their life histories. Many of them had studied at primary school and some had also passed through to secondary school. The family have to pay a fee of about ten pound per year for primary school. Secondary school is much more expensive, around forty pounds a year. Living under the conditions of poverty the families have difficulties meeting the expenses, especially when something unexpected happens. With the term "*Low Margin Life Strategy*", (L-M-L-S), I aim to describe a life-change that is caused by the conditions of poverty. The reason may vary, but the result is the same, life takes a turn.

In this study I have discussed with the students why they came to this vocational education centre. I found that it was common that some factor had created an extra weight on the economy of their families. As a result, the student dropped out of primary- or secondary school and after a while started at the vocational school. Through this strategy the family have to pay for a three years long education which the student finish with a diploma as a carpenter, dressmaker, blacksmith, hairdresser (two years) or tailor. It might be that the student would have started at the vocational school anyway after having completed primary school, or even after secondary school, but in these cases the students took a shorter way in their aim for a vocational trade.

I discovered that many of the students had left primary school due to problems concerning the economy of their families. In several cases as with Cecilia, Catherine and Kent, the father had died and this of course has a bad influence on the household economy. In some cases the father had left the family and stopped contributing to the family-economy as in the cases of Susan and Paul. Some of the students have children, such as Susan, Kathy and Mathew. As we can see in this article two of the four women interviewed have borne children. I do not claim this to be showing the actual situation for women in general since I find my material is too small to make that kind of conclusion.

In this study Adam does not fit into the term of “Low Margin Life Strategy” since he came to the school mainly because he had a relative there. The low fee did contribute to the decision however.

I use the term “Low Margin Life Strategy” because in these cases the family manage to let the young woman or man continue an education though they change from primary school, and in some cases secondary school, to a vocational training. It means that she or he gets the opportunity to have an education, but also that she or he will not in any greater extent contribute financially to the household for another two or three years.

According to the wishes of the Swedish partner, “CRASE” aims at giving the poorest young men and women in the rural area an education that they can afford and that will contribute in a positive way concerning chances of finding work and approving their livelihood. Another term close to the “L-M-L-S” would then be called “No Margin Life Strategy”, (N-M-L-S). With this term we would be talking about circumstances when there is no chance to implement a longer strategy, when the household is struck by economical difficulties that makes the children work for the family’s everyday life struggle. Many of my informants would have been limited to stay at home and work at their family plantation if they would not have had the opportunity to study at “CRASE”. The family is then more sensitive to droughts and seasonal changes when depending on one single form of income like farming. In this perspective the family that finds themselves in a “No Margin Life Strategy” situation would then be more sensitive to be captured in a hedgehog-situation, with only one limited way of supporting themselves.

Dreams of the future

Almost all of the students that I talked to have a dream of that one day have their own studio as a dressmaker, a carpenter, hairdresser or blacksmith. Most of them also dreamed of moving to a town to find better work-opportunity, but also

a different lifestyle with the assets of electricity, piped water and more people. “CRASE” has been supported from the start by the Swedish association “Svenska Togoföreningen” with the aim of giving the young women and men an education that would make it possible for them to work in their home-villages. The original idea was that “CRASE” would work against urbanisation. By talking to the students it is obvious that a majority of them want to live in a city. At present the school provides them with an opportunity to have an education that the young women and men – and their families – find useful for working and living in a town. Over the years the school has changed as a mean for working against urbanisation to a mean for rural young men and women’s dreams of working and living in the town.

There are many former students still living in the rural area though, working in their homes when possible as dressmakers or carpenters. In the average village life people also need to work on their fields growing crops for their own household, and if possible for sale on the market. To have an education and earn money beside cultivation gives people an extra income that contributes to the family economy in a positive way. The investment the family does by putting the young woman or man in a vocational school is a part of the fox-strategy, the investment is made to spread the family’s possibilities on the labour market. It is an investment that in the longer run is expected to favour the family economy. It is clear that the students find the education as a mean for development. In their life stories it is shown that the students find the education as an important step forward, a step towards a new lifestyle, a step in their personal development. But the vocational education is also a step for the family who put efforts into complementing their different ways of livelihood.

Most households have a few chickens and some even a couple of goats. The children are working in the household from an early age, fetching water, washing clothes in the river, preparing food, mending the house, etc. The children also work from an early age on the family plantation. If the parents live

and work in a city they usually leave their younger children with their grandparents living in the village. The fox strategy is found everywhere in the village life. The strategy of diversification appears when we look closer into the lives of these families. The family-members are occupied with different kinds of activities during the seasonal year as hunting and gathering, the making of different craft work, processing-hawking-vending and marketing, child labour (domestic and agricultural work at home), transporting goods, borrowings from relatives, contract outwork and casual labour, specialized occupations, family splitting and migration.

The economic possibilities to complete the formal school system lacks in these cases that we have looked at. For many of the students it is not possible, or worth it, to raise the money for the school fee at primary or secondary school. High school is even more expensive. However, to send a daughter or son to the vocational school does seem to have an incentive that is strong enough for the time and money invested. In most cases it is the student's family who pay the fee for the vocational training. This is an investment by the family and relatives that are spreading their possibilities of support. When we look closer at each family that stands behind every man and woman in this article we find families with different occupations and different ways of support.

The vocational training does give the students a second chance of getting an education but it is also seen by many of the students at "CRASE" as an opportunity to attain a different lifestyle. There are students who want to stay in their village, but for the majority the town is more tempting. It is not primarily the capital that entice, any big town will be of satisfaction for many I talked to. It is a common notion among both young and old people I talk to that the village does not have much to offer the younger generation. A young woman who helped me carry my goods up the track one evening answered when I asked her about her future: "The villages are not good for the young people, there is no electricity or water, and nothing happens there". The vocational school

“CRASE” with its original aim at preventing urbanisation, today provides the poorer young women and men a chance of, or more correctly speaking- a dream of making it in the town. In a wider perspective the vocational school is hoped to provide the family and relatives of the student with a source of income from one specialised occupation as carpenter or dressmaker, hairdresser or blacksmith as one piece of the puzzle that constitutes the families’ fox-strategy.

But the prospect of having one’s own workshop as a dressmaker or a carpenter, tailor, hairdresser or blacksmith is far from easy to attain. These occupations are getting popular. After finishing the training at the vocational education centre most of the students who want to make it in town need to find a studio to practice in. During the time a student work as a trainee he or she in many cases also pays a fee at the studio. To buy a sewing machine or the necessary tools to start a blacksmith studio or carpenter’s tools is a large investment for these families. The students are in many cases prepared to work in a different trade than their profession for a year or two to save money and to buy necessary tools before getting started in the occupation they have been trained for . The investment is expected to provide the family with one additional way of income. The family is investing in a diversification of the family-members sources of support and work. The knowledge of dressmaking, carpentry, hairdressing or the craft of a blacksmith is one part of the fox-strategy that these families use to improve and spread their ways of finding income, food, security, respect and means of survival.

The majority of people in Togo are self-sufficient farmers. With a vocational education these families find one more way of income that makes them less dependent on the weather and seasonal changes. Ordinary handicrafts like the collection of grass to make brushes or bowls, weaving mattresses or other items to sell at the market does not bring in much income but is one way of earning a little bit extra, additional to the cultivation of fields. Knowing the skill to build chairs, tables, beds and coffins, sewing dresses or making coiffures or repairing

hoes and other tools is providing the young men and women with a chance of getting a job with a higher remuneration. The vocational education provides the students with a notion towards a better livelihood. A family who can make the necessary investments either for the woman or man to start her/his own studio or to buy a few tools to work in the home has extended their possibilities according to the fox strategy.

Two years after this minor field study I returned to greet the students who were about to graduate many of which were my informants in 2004. The future these students face consist of many obstacles, but for the last couple of years they have grown in confidence and in their beliefs that they can make it. I admire their strength and will to work hard for what you dream of. I am grateful for the privilege I was given in taking part of these students' lives, struggles and dreams.

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