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'I take an oath to the state, not the government':

**Career trajectories and professional ethics of
Ghanaian public servants**

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Abstract

The effectiveness of state bureaucracies depends not only on institutional structures and available resources, but also on the reliability of the civil and public servants' performance of their roles as well as their readiness and capacity to improvise and innovate in order to accomplish the organisational goals vis-à-vis inevitable contingencies. These requirements presuppose bureaucrats who are well trained, highly committed to serve the public interest, and who neither use their office to satisfy particularistic expectations of kin, friends, or political allies nor mobilise such networks in order to advance their public service careers. Obviously, bureaucracies and bureaucrats in West Africa (and beyond) do not fully live up to this model. However, West African public servants often invoke these universalistic norms to legitimate their own actions, criticise their peers' or superiors' behaviour, or fend off their inferiors' or clients' pressure for preferential treatment. Furthermore, despite undeniable weaknesses, West African bureaucracies do function and deliver services, and there are remarkable 'islands' of rationality and efficiency, created by dedicated and capable public servants.

This paper will investigate the images of a 'worthy' public servant and a well-functioning bureaucracy that senior Ghanaian bureaucrats develop, and discuss on which biographical, ideological and social resources they draw in their endeavour to live up to these images. My case study is based on in-depth biographical interviews with thirteen high-ranking administrators from Ghana's Upper West Region who entered various branches of the public service between the late 1960s and the late 1990s. I will analyse my interviewees' views on changing professional trajectories, on the role of merit, seniority and patronage in public service careers, and on professional ethics. The paper will pay particular attention to the role that a rigorous Catholic education, certain ethnic stereotypes of 'hard work' and 'honesty', and membership in close-knit, regional-ethnic elite peer groups play for the Upper Western public servants' professional commitment.

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**‘I take an oath to the state, not the government’:
Career trajectories and professional ethics of Ghanaian public servants¹**

Introduction

Emmanuel Zuwera, a retired career diplomat, entered the Ghanaian Civil Service in 1969. Serving in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 1971, he was posted to a variety of embassies in Africa and Europe, with intermittent periods back in Accra, and eventually rose to the rank of a Minister, the highest administrative grade in the Foreign Service, comparable to a chief director, the top civil service position in other ministries. Starting his career under Prime Minister Busia, the head of government of the liberal democracy established after the military coup that toppled Ghana’s first president Kwame Nkrumah, Zuwera has served under governments of different ideological orientations. During the Acheampong military regime (1972–79), he was posted to the Ghanaian embassies in Dakar and Mali; during Rawlings’ military coups (1979, 1981) and the brief democratic interlude under President Limann (himself a career diplomat), he worked in Uganda; and during much of Rawlings’ PNDC (Provisional National Defense Council) government (1982–92), he served as Minister Counselor in the Ghanaian embassy in Germany. After the return to democracy in 1992, Zuwera was sent to Algeria, and, following a brief stint in Ouagadougou, he took up one last post, now under the NPP (National Patriotic Party) government of Kufuor, to the Ghanaian embassy in Brussels. When I first interviewed Zuwera in 1989, in his bungalow in Meckenheim near Bonn, he carefully weighed his words when commenting on the challenges that the repeated regime changes had presented for his career. ‘Traditionally’, he explained,

a civil servant is supposed to loyally serve every regime that comes in. This is what I was taught. And because you are not supposed to be biased in your political thinking, it doesn’t matter whether it is a socialist or a conservative government. ... This has always been the case, and I was made to understand that this is the sort of service that is expected of me. Well, recently revolutions have come around, and they want civil servants to sing the song of the revolution...²

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- 1 A first draft of this paper was presented in the seminar series of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Mainz University. I thank my colleagues, and particularly Thomas Bierschenk, for their helpful questions and comments. Research for this paper conducted in 2006-07 was made possible by the Volkswagen Stiftung-funded project ‘States at Work’; earlier field work in the Upper West Region was financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. A sabbatical year that I was able to spend at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research and the Committee on African Studies, Harvard University, provided the opportunity to analyse my interviews and write up the findings. I am also grateful to the Fulbright Foundation for supporting my stay in Cambridge with a travel fellowship. Thanks also go to the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana to which I was affiliated as a research associate, and to my many Dagara colleagues, friends, and adopted family who have supported me during my many years of research in Ghana. Because I have not yet been able to get an authorisation from all my interview partners for the quotes used in this text, I have decided to anonymise their names.
 - 2 Interview with Emmanuel Zuwera, Bonn-Meckenheim, 2 Aug. 1989.

When I enquired whether such ‘revolutionary’ expectations had created any problems for him, Zuwera diplomatically explained that he had probably not ‘gotten to the stage yet where I could suffer’, by which he meant that for civil servants of his rank, political pressure was not as pronounced as for top diplomats. Even in this early interview, Zuwera did not present himself as a fervent adherent of the Rawlings’ regime, but it was only after his retirement that he would openly declare his sympathies for Kufuor’s NPP.³ In a recent interview in 2007, he spoke much more freely and told me one of the stories that must have circulated among his colleagues at the time and that had inspired his earlier remarks on the problematic politicisation of the civil service under Rawlings. During the early days of the PNDC government, Zuwera related, one of the Foreign Service directors was quickly removed from office because in his welcome address to the young men who had just been sent to his department, he told them ‘that their loyalty was to the state and not to any government’. This candid avowal of the classical professional ethics of the civil service effectively cost the outspoken diplomat his job.⁴ Although Zuwera himself obviously avoided such open confrontations, he fully subscribed to the director’s understanding of the duties of a worthy civil servant and to the idea of a moral contract sealed between ‘the state’ and the officer – a vision of public service that was also taught in the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration, an institution established in 1961 to which all newly recruited administrative officers were sent for professional training and from which Zuwera had graduated in 1971. ‘The Civil Service I know’, he explained,

the rule of the civil servant is that we should be neutral so that we are able to give our best to our governments. ... I serve the state. I pledged, ... we take an oath to the state, we don’t take an oath to the government. ... We provide information that will help shape the foreign policy [and] the economic policy of Ghana, that will help defend the territorial integrity of Ghana and that will help to bring welfare, good welfare, to the people of the state of Ghana.⁵

Political neutrality, professionalism, commitment to the welfare of the nation, or, as Zuwera put it, ‘the people of the state of Ghana’: these are the basic pillars of the professional ethics that all Ghanaian civil and public servants whom I interviewed endorse. They differ in their motivations to join the public service and their career trajectories, but unanimously share this Weberian ideal-type image of a worthy bureaucrat and well-functioning public institutions, and believe that ‘the state’ is distinct from the current government. And many of my interviewees told me stories like Zuwera’s tale of the heroic director who suffered the consequences for upholding these ideals, or related conflicts they themselves had faced when confronting favouritism or ‘nepotism’. While admitting that it was sometimes necessary to mobilise some ‘networks’ in order to enter the public service, they were adamant that ideally only a high standard of qualification, ‘hard work’ and dedicated service towards the common good should determine public service careers.

3 Faithful to the political traditions of his family – staunch Catholics from the Nandom Traditional Area in Ghana’s Upper West Region and since the 1950s loyal supporters of the old Northern People’s Party, later amalgamated into the United Party, the Nkrumah opposition – Zuwera contested, albeit unsuccessfully, the NPP primaries in 2004 for a parliamentary seat in his home constituency.

4 Interview with Emmanuel Zuwera, Accra, 13 Feb. 2007.

5 Interview 13 Feb. 2007.

In this paper, I will explore such normative statements and narratives that feature role models or castigate discrimination and patronage. I argue that these ideals and stories create moral boundaries and support an 'esprit de corps' of dedicated public servants. Such 'boundary work' (Lamont 1992) often invokes stereotypical images of opportunistic or corrupt politicians, or of less qualified and uncommitted civil servants, against which the interviewees set off the group of highly motivated, competent and honest administrators to which they aspire to belong. These stereotypes, in turn, are often associated with ethnic and religious distinctions, and I will discuss how such particularist identities are mobilised in the construction of an universalist ethos of public service.

My discussion is based on a case study of the career trajectories and views on the 'state' and professional ethics of thirteen public servants from Ghana's Upper West Region who have entered government service between the late 1960s and the late 1990s, and, in the case of my older interviewees, have risen to top positions in the civil or public service. Most of these men, with whom I conducted in-depth biographical interviews in 2006 and 2007, sometimes following up on initial encounters in the late 1980s, were among the first educated members of their extended families. My 'sample' is thus biased in that I am dealing not with street-level bureaucrats, but members of the upper echelons of the public service, with successful career-makers, not 'losers', and with people from a specific region. Northern Ghana, and the Upper West in particular, is, until today, generally regarded as a 'marginalised' region, in terms of infrastructure, educational and employment opportunities and general living standards as well as in terms of political influence in the national arena. This regional background plays an important role for my interviewees' careers in and perceptions of the public service. The impression that I gained from my interviews, and more generally from my long-term fieldwork among Northerners, was that 'marginalised' people who have to work very hard to gain entry into an institution tend to identify strongly with the latter's ideals and official norms, and are often particularly perceptive with regard to discrimination, patronage and other departures from these norms. An analysis of the experiences and 'boundary work' of such a group can throw an interesting light on broader questions of the construction of professional ethics in the public service. I will explore how my interviewees' career trajectories and work experiences in the public service have changed over the decades, and how these changes, in turn, have influenced their images of the 'state', public service and the ideal administrator. The paper will pay particular attention to the role that a rigorous Catholic education, ethnic stereotypes that associate Northerners with 'hard work' and 'honesty', and membership in close-knit regional-ethnic elite peer groups play for these public servants' professional commitment.

There are only few, mainly historical, studies on African administrators, and virtually none asks how professional ethics are generated, disseminated and upheld.⁶ I am aware that my approach is not self-evident. One may object that it is naïve, if not misleading, to study what public servants say about professional ethics because the institutional framework is so firmly entrenched in a neopatrimonial logic that no administrator can escape it and individual

6 Robert Price (1975) has conducted a survey among Ghanaian civil servants in the late 1960s that I will discuss below; for examples of historical research on African administrative careers, see Eckert 2007 and Larrance et al 2006. Haruna's (2008) discussion of public service ethics in Ghana develops a 'transcultural' normative model of how the administration's integrity should be based on a traditional 'community ethos', but is not based on any empirical study of public servants.

reform efforts can hardly challenge the overall configuration. Furthermore, one could contend that, quite in keeping with the neopatrimonial paradigm, my interviewees only put up an eloquent façade of universalist ethics behind which their ‘real’ actions, guided by particularistic norms and expectations, remain hidden. It would therefore be important to focus on the ‘practical norms’ that effectively guide the administrators’ conduct – an approach that Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, among others, has proposed (Chauveau et al 2001; Olivier de Sardan 2004).

The study of ‘practical norms’ is indeed important, but I would also make a case for paying attention to the ‘official’ norms as well. Instead of taking the latter for granted, we need to investigate how administrators produce, defend, or modify them. As the Ghanaian political scientist Ayee (2001: 1) argues in his analysis of the recent civil service reforms in Ghana, ‘the motivation and involvement of civil servants themselves’ are particularly relevant ‘in a bureaucratic system that is too weak to impose central top-down reform’. In other words: the less coercive power a state bureaucracy commands in imposing a specific work discipline on its members, the more its efficiency depends on the reliability of the civil and public servants’ role performance as well as their readiness and capacity to improvise and innovate in the interest of accomplishing the organisational goals. This, in turn, requires bureaucrats who are not only well trained, but also committed to serve the public interest. The ways in which they have adopted official norms, and how they perceive and guide their own and their colleagues’ actions thus matter. And, I would argue, this is particularly true for public servants who, like most of my interviewees, occupy top positions in their institutions and control, or at least attempt to influence, the actions of often numerous colleagues and subordinates.

The public servants’ interview statements about their commitment and professional ethics should certainly not be understood naïvely as straightforward blueprints for their actual behaviour, nor should their stories about their own or their colleagues’ actions be taken at face value. However, neither are they wholly disconnected from lived experience. In his analysis of German local politicians’ narratives about communal conflicts, Fritz Schütze (1976) argued that the normative orientations as well as pragmatic considerations that guided his interviewees’ actual behaviour were reflected in their narrative choices. Furthermore, the very ‘logic’ of narration – such as the necessity to sequence events, or to bring a story to a conclusion – compels the interviewees to reveal more than they may have intended. The communicative dynamics of narrative interviews – the method that I largely relied on – thus limit the possibilities of ‘invention’ and façade making, and allow to reconstruct aspects both of ‘real’ experience and normative orientations.⁷

In sum, I propose to adopt a non-reductionist, non-instrumentalist, and historically informed perspective. We need to be sensitive to questions of power and ‘context’ as well as to the impact of collective norms, both official and ‘pragmatic’, and, finally, to individual commitment. This paper will investigate which image of a ‘worthy’ public servant and a well-functioning bureaucracy senior Ghanaian bureaucrats develop, and on which biographical, ideological and social resources they draw in their endeavour to live up to these images. By focussing on the ‘actors’ and their perspectives, I hope to contribute to the renewed sociology of (African) bureaucracy that Jean Copans (2001) has recently called for in an article whose title provocatively suggests that former studies have treated ‘the African state’ as if it worked

7 For an elaborate discussion of the methodological challenges of narrative and biographical interviews, see also Rosenthal 1995.

without bureaucrats. At the same time, my paper is part of a larger research project that explores the emergence of an African middle class, looking at three generations of elite men and women from North-Western Ghana who work not only in the public administration, but also the educational sector, the free professions (lawyers, doctors, etc.), the army and the Catholic church (Behrends and Lentz 2005, Lentz 2009, Lentz 2010).

In what follows, I will first briefly sketch some aspects of the changing institutional context in which my interlocutors' careers developed, and give an overview of the educational background of the public servants whom I interviewed. I will then discuss their experiences and views with respect to two major themes: firstly, the motivation to join the public service and the factors they identify as determining their own and other public servants' career trajectories; secondly, their ideas about the 'state', their own role and their professional ethics. Finally, I will look at the ideological and social resources that they mobilise in their quest for a dignified professional life.

The Ghanaian public service: some facts and figures

Up until the Second World War, the civil service of the Gold Coast Colony and the Ashanti and Northern Territories Protectorates was a rather small institution. In 1931, there were altogether 866 senior posts, and just about 20 of them occupied by Africans. Even in 1948, when the total number of senior appointments rose to somewhere between 1,300 and 1,400, only 98 of them were held by Africans (Greenstreet 1963). The constitutional reforms initiated in 1948 marked a turning point in British attitudes towards African involvement in the public service, but the Africanisation of the civil service did not gain momentum until the election of Kwame Nkrumah as Prime Minister in 1951. Between 1952 and 1960, the ranks of the senior civil service (posts paying over £ 680 per annum) swelled from 1,970 to 3,515 posts, and the percentage of Africans among these civil servants rose from 31% to nearly 79%. In absolute numbers, the increase of Africans employed in the upper ranks of the civil service was even more impressive, from 620 African civil servants in 1952 to 2,766 in 1960 (Greenstreet 1963). And while in 1954 all of the principal secretaries, the highest civil service positions, were still filled with Europeans, by 1960 half of these secretaryships were held by Africans (Price 1975: 43–5).

Initially, it was not easy to find enough qualified African personnel to staff senior civil service positions. Achimota College was founded in 1927, but did not offer the requisite graduate courses. Not until 1961 was the University College of Ghana, established in 1948 but offering only a limited range of liberal arts subjects, transformed into a fully-fledged university that could award regular BA and graduate degrees. The 1960s also saw the establishment of the Faculty of Law and the Ghana Law School (1960-61), the University of Ghana Medical School and the University College of Cape Coast in 1962 (transformed into a fully independent university in 1971) (Daniel 1997-98). Thus, only from the mid-1960s onwards did Ghana produce her own university graduates. Before, degrees had to be awarded by external examiners from the University of London; students interested in subjects other than those of the liberal arts had to venture abroad, mainly to Britain or, in a few cases, to the US or Canada. Senior public servants had to be recruited either among these Ghanaians who had studied abroad or, more often, among graduates of teacher training colleges who were then trained on the job or at the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration.

Until well into the 1980s, the public service continued to grow, particularly in the junior ranks, but also with regard to senior positions. For Ghana's university graduates this meant

secure career opportunities. In the early 1960s, according to a representative survey (Foster 1965: 284–90), more than 80% of the secondary school leavers went into teaching or ‘clerical duties’, mainly in the public sector, and thus found some form of government employment. Among university graduates, this trend must have been just as pronounced, and it continued well into the 1970s. My older interviewees recalled that members of the Public Services Commission regularly came to the university campus to distribute application forms and conduct interviews with students interested in a civil service career. Job security, quasi automatic promotion, relatively high salaries with numerous fringe benefits such as access to government bungalows, good health care and easy credit, as well as the prestige that went along with a senior position in the public service made the latter an attractive option for many young university leavers.

The ‘good days of the civil service’, as Ayee (2001: 3) refers to this period, lasted from the late 1950s until the mid-1970s, when, due to repeated political upheavals and a massive and prolonged economic crisis, the Ghanaian public service faced increasing problems. The structural problems that Ayee enumerates include logistical shortcomings, i.e. overcentralisation and excessive ‘red tape’; substantial overstaffing and uncontrolled recruitment at the junior level, while senior grades lacked qualified personnel due to the increasing ‘brain drain’; grossly inadequate wages and narrow increment levels; and, consequently, low work morale and lack of incentives to deliver competent service. Particularly senior public servants faced a dramatic decline in salaries. In 1984, the real salary earned by a high-ranking administrative officer dropped to 10% of the 1977 income, and even five years later, during economic recovery, would only reach 43% of the 1977 level. For a chief director, the decline was even more dramatic, falling to a low of 7% of the 1977 income in 1984, and only very slowly rising to 36% in 1989. The motivation to achieve promotion by pursuing training or improving service delivery was further undermined by the decreasing wage compression, that is the relationship between the highest and the lowest pay grades in the civil service that fell from 6:1 in 1977 (a director thus earning six times as much as a manual worker) to 2.2:1 in 1984. Salary structure reforms during the late 1980s increased the wage compression to 10:1 in 1991, but this was still below the 13:1 ratio recommended by, for instance, the civil service reform advisors of the British Overseas Development Agency (Ayee 2001: 13). In short, from the late 1970s onwards, it became much less attractive for well-trained and high aspiring Ghanaians to work as public administrators. On the other hand, however, increasing general unemployment and job competition in other sectors of the economy still made the public service an important option for many university graduates.

First attempts to restructure the civil service were initiated in the late 1960s and mid-1970s, but political instability and successive regime changes seriously hampered the implementation of the suggested reforms. Renewed reform initiatives followed during the early years of the Rawlings regime, but it was only towards the late 1980s, in the context of the Structural Adjustment Programme, that public sector reforms were seriously tackled. The first initiative was the Civil Service Reform Programme (1987-1993) that aimed at an overall improvement of the effectiveness and quality of public service delivery, but ended up concentrating mainly on the downsizing of the staff and a reform of the salary structure (salary and wage increases, transformation of benefits and allowances into part of the pay, etc.) (Ayee 2001: 22-3). Its major effect was the retrenchment of the civil service. Figures are notoriously unreliable, because the payroll system was computerised only around 1990, but the number of junior and senior civil servants in 1987 is supposed to have been 131,000 (including extraministerial departments), and was reduced to 108,000 in 1992. By the end of the 1990s, alto-

gether 50,000 staff were retrenched from the civil service and the Education Service, and the civil service was cut down to approximately 91,000 employees (Ayee 2001: 10-2, 25).⁸

Because the first reform initiative was unable to achieve its farther reaching goals – mainly due to the ‘lack of commitment on the part of both politicians and bureaucrats’, as Ayee argues (2001: 7) – a new programme was set up in 1995, namely the Civil Service Performance Improvement Programme. This programme was less concerned with retrenchment than with reorganising salary structures and improving service delivery by reforming the guidelines for career progression and training. It involved senior staff in the reform effort, and introduced instruments of self-appraisal, management by objectives, surveys among beneficiaries of the services, and other measures in the vein of New Public Management programmes. In 1996, ‘reform’ was made a continual exercise by establishing a Civil Service Reform Coordinating Unit and a Committee on Administrative Reforms.

Robert Price’s survey among Ghanaian civil servants in the late 1960s revealed that job security was one of the major incentives for embarking on a public service career, and that promotion worked quasi automatically mainly along lines of seniority, resulting in a ‘practically age-graded’ civil service (1975: 188). The dominance of ‘high security careers, shaped by length of service and seniority’ (Ayee 2001: 31) continued until well into the 1990s. Regular interviews and annual confidential reports by the civil servants’ superiors were supposed to motivate high achievement, but in reality, as President Rawlings once complained, the reports were ‘just a matter of routine; almost everybody, that is, the hard-working and the lazy, get a good confidential report’ (quoted in Ayee 2001: 18). It is only in recent years that the efforts to re-orient civil service careers towards higher remuneration coupled with performance-based evaluation have begun to be felt on the ground, and that the new philosophy of ‘meritocracy’ and customer orientation gradually has taken hold among some of the senior staff (Ayee 2001: 37-8).⁹ This trend was clearly noticeable in the emphasis that some of my interviewees laid on service delivery, efficiency and achievement while lamenting that their reform enthusiasm was hampered by entrenched structures of promotion by seniority and by the role ‘networks’ and patronage played in recruitment and postings. Furthermore, my younger interlocutors were affected by the continued policy of restrictive recruitment of new staff, and had faced increasing competition on the job market. All of my interviewees agreed that unlike in the 1970s and 1980s, nowadays some form of patronage has become necessary in order to secure an appointment. How these changes in career trajectories and opportunities are reflected in my interviewees’ cases is the question to which I now shall turn.

8 A workshop paper, probably written in the early 2000s, gives the figure of 300,000 for the entire public service staff of which 170,000 worked with the Ghana Education Service (teachers and support staff) and 76,000 as civil servants (www.public.iastate.edu/~fowusu/Accra%20workshop/wkshp_appendixC.pdf; consulted 25 May 2009). Under the most recent reform programme, the National Health and the Local Government Services were established as independent of the Civil Service, transferring 30,000 civil servants to the Health sector, and 20,000 persons to the Local Government, and leaving the core civil service with only 30,000 persons.

9 A succinct summary of this new philosophy can be found in the ‘Code of Conduct for the Ghana Civil Service’ issued by the Office of the Head of Civil Service probably around 1996 that calls for a civil service that ‘is customer sensitive and responsive to its social obligations’ and guided by principles of ‘selflessness’ (‘decisions solely in terms of the public interest’), ‘integrity’, ‘justice and fairness’ (‘choices based solely on merit’), ‘accountability’ and ‘transparency’ (<http://unpan1.un.org/intrdoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan011074.pdf>; consulted 9 June 2009).

Public servants from the Upper West Region

In order to better understand the nature of my ‘sample’, it is useful to point out that my interviews with public servants are part of a more comprehensive study of several generations of educated men who hail from the former Lawra District (now subdivided into the Jirapa, Lawra-Nandom and Lambussie Districts) and work in a wide variety of professions.¹⁰ My first biographical interviews in the late 1980s focused on members of the earliest generation of the educated elite, nearly all of whom have since then passed away.¹¹ These ‘pioneers’ went to the area’s first colonial and missionary schools that were opened from 1935 onwards. They worked as teachers, nurses and clerks for the colonial administration, generally remaining within the region and, with the exception of some politicians who played an important role in the national political arena, distinguishing themselves as elites mainly vis-à-vis their local constituencies.

In the late 1980s, and then again in 2006 and 2007, I also interviewed members of the second generation of highly educated men whom one could describe as ‘achievers’. They entered school after the Second World War and profited from the expanding higher educational opportunities as well as the backing of their teachers and sometimes also their families. Many of them studied in the newly opened Ghanaian universities or abroad, and they usually found employment outside their home region. Their careers were the most upwardly mobile, and they entered a much broader range of professions than their predecessors, namely the public administration, institutions of secondary and tertiary education, the medical and legal professions, senior positions in the army, and, finally, the Catholic church. Most of these university graduates were, just like the ‘pioneers’, the first in their immediate families to have gone to school and secured a prestigious white collar job.¹²

Many members of the third generation of highly educated men, on the other hand, who graduated from secondary school after the mid-1970s, have educated parents and were born and raised in the cities. But due to the general economic and political crises of the late 1970s and 1980s, they generally faced more difficulties in accessing high-quality education and have been confronted with growing competition on the job market. By the time I interviewed members of this generation in 2006 and 2007, they, too, had finally embarked on promising professional careers. But their perspectives differed markedly from those of the second generation, and most of them expressed a clear sense of belonging to a different, younger generation that faced new challenges. In order to succeed in their professional lives, they have to rely more heavily on vertical patronage and become adept in making broader national and international contacts. These factors have become even more important for the emerging careers of

10 I follow here Karl Mannheim’s (1964) definition of generations as communities whose members participate in common ‘historisch-sozialen Lebenseinheiten’ (ibid.: 542), i.e. socio-historical life phases. Departing from a genealogical as well as a biological understanding of ‘naturally’ succeeding generations, Mannheim suggests that generations crystallise around the historical experiences of a particular group, garnered mainly during their youth, which distinguish it from other groups. In my case study, the primary factor distinguishing elite generations is the various phases in which the educational infrastructure developed in North-Western Ghana, where schools were generally established much later than in the South.

11 For some results, see Lentz 2006: 199–209, 228–33. For a study on educated women from Lawra District, see Behrends 2000a and 2000b; on the trajectories of first-generation educated men from Southern Ghana, see Miescher 2005.

12 For a discussion of the second generation of educated men from Lawra District, see Lentz 1994; specifically on home ties and the role of funerals as arena of elite self-representation, see Lentz 2009.

a fourth generation of highly educated Upper Westerners who have graduated from university in recent years and encounter considerable difficulties in entering the job market.

All of the public servants whose careers and perspectives I discuss in this paper belong to the second and third generations of highly educated men from the old Lawra District. It is not easy to draw an unambiguous line between these two cohorts, but as far as their educational histories are concerned, Sebastian Debuur and his younger peers (see overview) can be counted among the third generation whose training has been severely disrupted by the student strikes and university closures during the early and late 1980s. Charles Zaabaar, on the other hand, can still be regarded as a junior member of the second generation – an association that is also reflected in his membership in specific ethno-regional clubs that are dominated by second-generation elite men.

Career trajectories of earlier entrants into the public service (1968 – 1981)

The educational and professional trajectories of the public servants who belong to the second generation of educated elite and entered government service before the mid-1980s are relatively smooth and straightforward. Careers were facilitated by the high quality of secondary school education in the North, the increasing intake of the universities and, finally, the growing or at least steady demand for university-trained personnel in the public service. Almost all interviewees of this group continued more or less straight into university after passing their GCE (General Certificate of Education) A-level exams, and were recruited into the civil service as soon as they received their bachelor degrees.

Name	born	father religion, work	university degree	entry into public service; age at entry	highest position achieved	Remarks
Tangsege, John	1942	Catechist; farmer	1968 BA 1978 law/ called to Bar	1968 chief inspector, Police Service age at entry: 26	director BNI (1986-96) IGP (1996-2002)	retired in 2002; private practice as lawyer; paramount chief
Zuwera, Emmanuel	1942	Catholic; labour migrant	1969 BA	1969 admin. officer, Cape Coast; since 1971 Foreign Service age at entry: 27	minister (= chief director) (since 2001)	retired in 2002; public relations officer Catholic Univ.
Tangviel, Peter	1950	non-Catholic, died in 1953; 1954 V. and brothers converted	1972 BA	1972 Ministry of Finance, Accra (later various ministries) age at entry: 22	chief director of Ministry of Women and Child Welfare (since 2006)	presently pursuing two-year professional law course
Aafere, Felix	1947	Catholic; labour migrant	1973 BA 1992 law/ called to bar	1975 Office of the President (later various ministries), Accra age at entry: 27	director in Ministry of Interior (since 2003)	
Sanziri, John	1951	Catholic; labour migrant	1976 BA	1977 Ministry of Trade and Tourism, Accra age at entry: 26	senior commercial officer (since 1983)	redeployed late 1980s, 1990s left Civil Service
Dometang, Ivan	1950	Catechist; farmer	1977 BA	1978 Internal Revenue Service (IRS) (Accra, later Wa etc.) age at entry: 28	Deputy Commissioner Operations IRS (since 2006)	
Zaabaar, Charles	1954	Catechist; farmer	1979 LLB Hons, 1981 called to bar	1981 Prisons Service, Accra age at entry: 27	Director General of Prisons Service (2000-03)	'sacked' due to political conflict; since 2003 on UN mission in Sudan
Debuur, Sebastian	1959	Catholic; labour migrant	1985 BA; 1999 called to Bar	1987 Internal Revenue Service (Wa, later Accra) age at entry: 28	??	died 2000
Beyaa, Paul	1958	Catholic; Standard	1986 BA 1995 PhD	1989 Ministry of Agriculture, Ta-	research scientist, head	

		VII, work in Medical Field Unit		male age at entry: 31	of farming systems unit Upper West Region	
Mwinyele, John	1967	Catholic; university degree (BSc); director Min. of Agric.	1997 BA 2002 MBA	1990 Comptroller and Acc. Gen. Dep., Tamale (junior officer) (later Accra) age at entry: 23/30	Head of Personnel, Comptroller and Acc. Gen. Dep. (Accra) (since 2003)	Attending university on study leave from Comptroller and Acc. Gen. Office
Kuuyaa, Alexander	1967	Catholic (ex); Polytechnic dipl.; dispensing technician at hospital	1994 (BSc/ diploma); 2004 MBA	1994 Kumasi Metr. Assembly; then private sector; 2004 Ghana Health Service age at entry: 37	quantity surveyor (rank ?)	wants to leave public service, work as consultant + contractor
Aadaryeb, Paulinus	1965	non-Catholic, farmer	1996 MSc (Russia)	1996 Electrical Company of Ghana, Accra age at entry: 31	senior engineer	
Zaabaar, Ignacio	1959	Catechist, farmer	1988 dipl. Polytech.; 1996 MSc (Russia)	1997 Ghana Highways Authority, Accra age at entry: 38	principal engineer	

Overview of interviewed public and civil servants

A typical example of this 'smooth' pattern is Peter Tangviel who passed his A-levels in 1969, immediately entered the University of Ghana at Legon to study philosophy, political science and modern history, graduated with a BA in 1972, successfully sat the entrance exam for the civil service, and in the same year joined the Ministry of Finance in the administrative officers' class, at the age of only twenty-two. Participating in the regular promotions every four years, and accepting postings to various regions in Ghana, Tangviel reached the rank of a substantive director in 1996. In 2001 he returned to Accra, and, after serving as acting chief director in the Ministry of Information, was finally appointed chief director of the Ministry of Women and Child Welfare in 2006, thirty-four years after he entered the service and four years before his retirement.

Not quite as straightforward, but typical of the career of students from humble backgrounds who struggled with financial constraints, is John Tangsege's trajectory. Due to pressure from his parents to earn money as soon as possible, Tangsege went to a teacher training college, after completing sixth form (the two years' course leading up to the A-level exams) in 1960. Next, he worked for two years as a teacher, and entered university in 1964 while on a study leave. Initially, he was supported by a scholarship from the Ghana Education Service. But when he decided that he would not return to a teaching career, he had to secure the necessary funds from elsewhere. After completing his BA in 1968, he was immediately recruited into the Bureau of National Investigation branch of the Ghana Police Service, as chief inspector, still only twenty-six years old. In the 1970s he was granted leave to study law, received the LLB at the University of Ghana in 1975, and was called to the bar in 1978. Like Tangviel, he was regularly promoted, rising to the rank of commissioner. In 1986 he was appointed director of the Bureau of National Investigations, at the age of forty-four, and in 1996 he rose to Inspector General of Police.¹³ After his retirement in 2002, Tangsege worked on a part-time basis as lawyer in a law firm in Accra, was enskinned as paramount chief in his home town in 2005, and appointed to the Council of State in 2009.¹⁴

Emmanuel Zuwera also taught for one year after his A-level exams in 1964, but without any intention of becoming a trained teacher. 'At my time', he explained, 'it was the fashion that after sixth form you go and cool down for one year and then come to university'.¹⁵ In 1965 he began his studies of French and Latin at the University of Ghana, was sent to do an intensive course of French at Dakar University in 1967, graduated in Legon with a bachelor's degree in 1969, and was recruited into the civil service in that very year, at the age of twenty-seven.

Ivan Dometang taught for one year after finishing sixth form in 1973 because he needed time to repeat some of his A-level exams in order to attain admission into university. Dometang was born in 1950, in the same year as Tangviel, but because his father could not afford to pay the school tuition, he had to wait until his senior brother had completed school and was able to support him. Thus, young Dometang was already ten years old when he finally enrolled in primary school and twenty-three when he graduated from secondary school. Once he made it into university, however, his career was straightforward. After completing his BA

13 In addition to considerations of work experience and qualifications, these appointments were, of course, a highly sensitive political issue; rumours have it that Tangsege's intelligence work protected Rawlings severally against coup attempts, and that he was rewarded for his loyalty.

14 The 1992 Constitution stipulates that one of the members of the Council of State whom the President appoints has to be a former Inspector General of Police.

15 Interview 2 Aug. 1989.

in history, English and religion in 1977, he did his national service,¹⁶ and entered the Internal Revenue Service in 1978. After eighteen months of in-service training in Accra, he was posted to the Upper West Region, the Northern Region, the Western Region and Ashanti Region consecutively, and eventually promoted from inspector to senior inspector, principal inspector, assistant chief inspector and finally chief inspector, before returning to Accra as director of the Large Taxpayer Unit in 2003. Finally, in 2006, he was appointed as the deputy commissioner of operations, responsible for overseeing the collection of all direct taxes in the entire country.

In sum, although some of these early public service entrants put in a stint of teaching between secondary school and university, the transition from university to the public service was uninterrupted, and none of the entrants was older than twenty-eight. Those who had to perform national service after graduation usually served in the public sector institutions that later recruited them. Up until today, the national service scheme functions as a kind of employment agency that allows graduates to connect with future employers.

All of the ‘second-generation’ public servants studied liberal arts or social science subjects. This actually implied that they had few professional choices besides joining the civil service or embarking on a teaching career. An exception in this regard was Charles Zaabaar who studied law and was called to the bar in 1981, but still decided not to go into private practice but instead to join the Prison Service, where he had done his national service and was invited to build up the legal department. Others among my older interviewees, too, studied law, but only after they had already joined the public service. They did so partly in order to enhance their public service careers and partly to qualify themselves for income opportunities after retirement.

By the time they retire, members of this generation of public servants have usually worked for more than thirty years in the public sector. The only two departures from this pattern are mainly politically motivated. John Sanziri entered the civil service in 1977, steadily advanced in his career and successfully attended an interview for promotion to principal commercial officer in 1989, but then became a victim of the above-mentioned retrenchment and redeployment exercise. Although the labour dispute in which he was involved was eventually decided in his favour, he is said to have been denied a promotion because he had fallen out of favour with one of the relevant ministers. Eventually, Sanziri decided to leave the civil service and work as an administrator elsewhere.¹⁷ Political reasons were also the main factor that triggered Charles Zaabaar’s exit from the Prison Service of which he had been the Director General. Officially, he was only sent on ‘leave’ and continues to enjoy the privileges of his former office, but he does not expect to be reinstated when his service on a UN mission to the Sudan eventually comes to an end. It is possible, of course, that this will change with the most recent transfer of executive power back to the NDC under whose regime Zaabaar’s career once began. How he and other interviewees perceive, and deal with, this kind of ‘politicisation’ of top-level civil service appointments is a theme that I will discuss later.

16 The National Service scheme was established in 1973, and confirmed in 1982, and obliges all able-bodied Ghanaians between the ages of eighteen and forty to work for one or two years, depending on the candidates’ educational status, for the common good in a variety of employments, mainly in the public sector.

17 I interviewed John Sanziri in early 1990, during the height of his struggle to be reinstated in his office; information on his further career was provided by some of his peers during my last field trip in 2006–07.

Career trajectories of later entrants into the public service (1987 – 1997)

For later entrants into the public service, access to employment and regular promotions have been much more difficult. Particularly since the 1990s, the ‘third-generation’ of educated men have had to struggle with the fact that the civil service in particular, but also other public sector institutions, were recruiting less new personnel while the expansion of tertiary education establishments has swollen the ranks of employment-seeking graduates.

While some younger entrants like Paul Beyaa, John Mwinyele and Matthias Kuusob were aided by the personal networks that they were able to build up during their national service, others went through a period of unemployment. Charles Zaabaar’s younger brother Ignacio, for instance, came back from Russia in 1996 with an MSc in Civil Engineering and spent almost a year without a job before he was finally employed by the Ghana Highways Authority. He had to use all his ‘connections’, mobilising his brother and other Upper Westerners, in order not only to learn from the Ministry of Finance exactly when new positions for engineers were to be allocated to the Highways Authority, but also to make sure that he was given a fair chance to attend the recruitment interviews. Once he achieved his entry into the institution, however, Ignacio insisted he ‘pass through the normal channels’, namely the regular interviews and membership in the Ghana Institute of Engineers, and eventually was promoted to the rank of a principal engineer.¹⁸

Alexander Kuuyaa’s case, on the other hand, is typical for a new generation of university graduates who no longer aim exclusively at a public service career, but see employment in the public sector as just one phase in their trajectory. Such considerations reflect, in turn, the trend that the public service no longer offers secure and relatively well-paid employment for large groups of university graduates. Kuuyaa studied building technology at the University of Technology and Science in Kumasi. After graduating in 1994, he worked as quantity surveyor with the Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly, a British consultancy, a Ghanaian firm of water technology and Architectural and Engineering Services Ltd, each time for relatively brief periods. Then, he decided to return to university for further studies, and in 2004 graduated with a Master of Business Administration that he regards as a useful stepping stone to a future entrepreneurial career. Financially and logistically, however, he did not yet feel quite prepared to work on his own account, and when a friend from his earlier university days told him that the Ghana Health Service was searching for a quantity surveyor, he applied and was recruited. At the same time, he continues to do private consultancy jobs, and hopes to be eventually able to use the contacts he can build in the public service to set up his own business.

Compared with the earlier generation of public servants, most of these ‘third-generation’ educated men not only faced difficulties in gaining entry into the public service, but also in organising their university education – a fact that is also reflected in the higher age at which they joined the public sector, namely in their early or even late thirties. Four of my six ‘third-generation’ interviewees had to resit some of their A-level exams in order to improve their grades for admission into university, or sought alternative ways of accessing tertiary education. After finishing sixth form in 1980 Ignacio Zaabaar, for instance, accepted a job as untrained teacher while taking private classes in technical drawing and related subjects in order to be able to enrol at Accra Polytechnic in 1982 for a course in construction technology. After his first degree, he worked for two years with a construction firm, and then re-

18 Interview with Ignacio Zaabaar, 2 Feb. 2007, Legon.

turned to the polytechnic for a further course. After a two-year term of national service with Architectural and Engineering Services Ltd. he successfully applied for a scholarship for further studies in Russia, and returned, as mentioned above, in 1996 with a Master of Science. When John Mwinele's A-level grades did not allow him to enter university, on the other hand, he chose to join the Comptroller and Accountant General's Office as a non-graduate junior civil servant. In his free time, he studied hard in order to resit some of the failed exams, gained entry for a BA course at the Accra Workers' College which accepts part-time students, and finally was granted study leave by his employer to finish his degree at the University of Ghana in 1994. He continued to work with the Comptroller and Accountant General's Office, now employed as a senior officer, was able to take another study leave in 2000, graduating with a Master in Public Administration from the University of Ghana, and in 2003 was promoted to become the head of personnel in his department.

It is, of course, difficult to judge why these younger public servants failed to score better results in their A-level exams. But the fact that they all eventually managed to achieve university degrees, and at that often higher degrees than their predecessors, suggests that their academic performance probably has more to do with sinking standards of secondary school education in the North from the late 1970s onwards and with increasing competition for entry into the universities than with lack of ability. In any case, my younger interviewees had to work extremely hard to 'make it' against all odds, and even those who gained immediate entry into university after sixth form were faced with the disruptive developments of student strikes, task force exercises and university closures, particularly in the early 1980s and again in 1988. Prospects of university closure were what made Matthias Kuusob and Ignacio Zaabaar, among others, accept scholarships to study in Russia; although they were not convinced that Russia was really the best place for training, it was better than remaining in Ghana and not studying at all.

The 'Northern factor'

While most of the changes in civil service career trajectories discussed so far are probably also typical for many of my interviewees' colleagues, regardless of their regional origins, the above-mentioned problems in accessing high-quality secondary education are more specifically a 'Northern' problem. They are the result of regional inequalities in public educational infrastructure combined with the fact that none of my interviewees' parents had the necessary resources to send their children to expensive but more efficient private schools (nor would they, at the time, even have known where to send their offspring). Until well into the 1980s, secondary school education in the North was highly selective¹⁹, but the few schools that existed had a very good reputation, such as Tamale Secondary School, St Charles Minor Seminary, or St Francis Xavier Minor Seminary. However, these high standards could not be maintained when secondary education was expanded. Many of the more recently founded schools lacked basic infrastructure and qualified teaching personnel, while some of the established schools faced dramatic deterioration, not least due to the general economic crisis and political

19 In 1960, there were 101 secondary schools in Ghana (according to Foster 1965) of which only five were located in the North. By the mid-1980s, the number of secondary schools in the North had increased to eighteen but still lagged far behind other regions. In 1984, only 1% of all Upper Westerners above twenty-five years of age held secondary school GCE O- or A-level certificates (calculated on the basis of the 1984 Population Census of Ghana, Demographic and Economic Characteristics of the Upper West Region).

instability. Towards the end of the 1980s, more than three quarters of the graduates from Nandom Secondary School, for instance, which had earlier on been counted among the country's best secondary schools, did not make it into university and had to resit their A-level exams.²⁰ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the long-term effects of the school reforms of the late 1980s, which abolished the traditional sixth form and introduced a system of junior and senior secondary schools. Suffice it to say that the establishment of a large number of new senior secondary schools did not solve the problem of maintaining or improving educational standards, and my 'fourth-generation' interviewees often faced problems in entering university that were not unlike those of the 'third generation' discussed here.

In some respects, the highly educated men and women from the Upper West Region were 'late-comers' in the national arena. Unlike the coastal elite, they had no access to secondary school education before the 1950s, and unlike their Southern peers, no Northerner studied abroad before the newly independent Ghanaian universities opened their doors. Thus, when the civil service was expanded and 'africanised' in the 1950s and early 1960s, very few Northerners were available for recruitment for the senior ranks. This situation gradually changed when Tamale Government Secondary School, the first Northern secondary school to offer A-level courses, produced its first batch of sixth form graduates in 1960. While some of these graduates received scholarships to study in Europe, many joined the first, and still rather small, groups of students who enrolled at the newly independent University of Ghana. Thus, when the first Ghanaian post-independence institutions of tertiary education were established, Northern students were ready to participate in these new opportunities; and from the mid- or late 1960s onwards, they could enter the senior grades of the public service. However, university graduates from the North were very few. In 1984, a total of only 237 persons from the Upper West between twenty-five and fifty years of age had ever attended university, making up for just 0.1% of their respective age cohorts, and the same percentage, that is only one out of one thousand persons, was then enrolled in university.²¹ This was considerably lower than the national average of 0.7% of the relevant age cohort attending university.²² Secondary school and university graduates from the Upper West, and more generally the North, were thus indeed 'the fortunate few' (Clignet and Foster 1966). That they were often very successful in their studies and later careers is not as unusual as it may seem at first glance. As Foster (1980: 219) has pointed out, children from regions with underdeveloped educational infrastructure and relatively low school enrolment rates had to overcome so many obstacles in their educational careers that they tend to be highly motivated and successful students. Or, in other words, the high selectivity of the educational system results in a larger percentage of 'high achievers' than is normal in situations with less restrictions to enrolment.

High academic achievement alone, however, did not suffice for Northern graduates to enter the public service. Encouragement from friends and family and role models were also important factors for embarking on careers that departed from the established professional trajectories of teacher or nurse. A central role in this respect was played by Abayifaa Karbo, from the Lawra chief's house (and later himself the paramount chief of Lawra) and a prominent member of the 'first generation' of educated men from the former Lawra District. Born

20 Interview with John Mwinyele, 29 Jan. 2007, Accra.

21 Figures according to the 1984 Population Census of Ghana, Demographic and Economic Characteristics of the Upper West Region.

22 Figure for 1988, according to Daniel 1997–98.

in 1927, he was among the first graduates of the Tamale Senior Boys School (later to become Tamale Government Secondary School), and continued to the newly opened Tamale Teacher Training College where he received his Set B teaching certificate in 1945, and his Set A certificate in 1948. He returned to Lawra to teach at the government middle school while pursuing further studies through a correspondence course at Cambridge University. One of the British district commissioners was so fond of Abayifaa Karbo's intellectual and organisational talents that he supported his enrolment at Glasgow University. But shortly before leaving for the United Kingdom, Karbo was drawn into politics, and successfully ran in the 1954 elections on a NPP ticket. He represented the Lawa-Nandom constituency in the Ghanaian parliament until 1965 when he was detained, as a member of the opposition to Nkrumah, and released only after Nkrumah's overthrow in 1966. While in Parliament, Karbo enrolled as student at the newly opened Law Faculty at the University of Ghana, and in 1965 he was called to the bar – the first lawyer from North-Western Ghana. After his release from prison, he briefly practiced as lawyer in Accra while also serving as a member of the Political Committee of the National Liberation Council government (1966-69) and in the Constituent Assembly that drew up the constitution of Ghana's second republic. In 1969, he was appointed member, and soon afterwards chairman, of the Public Services Commission, an office that he held until 1977.

It was in this capacity that Karbo was instrumental to the recruitment of Northerners into the public service. Not only did he actively propagate information about opportunities to work in the civil service and, during recruitment interviews, ensured that Northerners were given a fair chance, but his very presence in this high-ranking office served as a source of encouragement for the younger generation of educated Northerners. Either during their secondary school days, if they completed their sixth form in a school in the South, or at the very latest during their time at university, all of my interviewees, up until very recently, had to struggle against more or less blatant prejudices against Northerners as being backward, 'less civilised' than Southerners, pre-modern, dim-witted, and the like. Against this background, it was difficult, particularly for the earlier graduates, to imagine that a career as lawyers, doctors or civil servants, competing on a par with their Southern peers, would be available to them. That Abayifaa Karbo had not only become parliamentarian and lawyer, but even served on a highly prestigious government commission demonstrated tangibly that it was indeed possible to 'make it'. And it is probably due to Karbo's direct and indirect influence, that from the late 1960s onwards an increasing number of Upper Westerners found their way into the public service.

It is interesting, however, that a public service career apparently appealed exclusively to graduates from Catholic families who had gone through Catholic secondary schools. With only two exceptions, my interviewees' fathers were all staunch Catholics, some even catechists, and had sent their children to Catholic schools. The two men from non-Catholic families had converted during their early student days and also attended Catholic secondary schools. Due to the colonial educational policies, students in government-run institutions were usually recruited from chiefly families, and until well into the 1970s, this resulted in a bifurcated educational system – government and Catholic – and two groups of graduates who generally pursued different careers.²³ Catholics became priests, teachers or civil servants; government

23 See Lentz 2006: 133–7, 171–4 for more details on the government versus Catholic school divide, and the different educational goals.

school graduates often studied law or medicine, or they went into the army. That some of the Catholics studied at government-run schools for their sixth form was simply due to the fact that until the late 1970s none of the Catholic secondary schools in the North offered A-level exams. Catholic students thus either continued their education in one of the Catholic schools in Southern Ghana or had to attend the government schools in Tamale or Navrongo. But even then, most of their secondary school training had been in the hands of priests and teachers approved of by the Catholic mission.

One of the reasons why Catholics went into the public service rather than, for instance, into the medical field, may have been that in those early years Catholic schools generally offered a good liberal arts and language, but no strong science education. Catholic graduates may therefore not have achieved the requisite grades in subjects they needed to be admitted to study medicine or other science subjects. Studying liberal arts or social sciences were their best available options, and this qualified for a teaching or a public service career. This does not explain, however, why not more Catholics went into law, for instance, or why none of the government school graduates with a chiefly background applied for the civil service. It is likely that the Catholic schools also imbued their graduates a specific creed of rendering service to the common good that resonated well with a public service career, while the educated chiefly offspring tended to subscribe to a leadership ideology that was not quite as service-oriented. Be that as it may, the Catholic background plays an important role for my interviewees' understanding of their role and duties as public servants, and for their perspective on worthiness, 'hard work' and honesty.

'Serving my country in any capacity': organisational commitment and career motivation

A survey among more than four hundred Ghanaian civil servants that Robert Price (1975) conducted in 1968-69, found that more than two thirds would accept a job outside the public service, if it offered better income, and only 9% would recommend an intelligent young man to become a civil servant. Asked what they 'liked' about the civil service, only 10% of Price's interviewees mentioned the opportunity to contribute to Ghana's development and 'serve' the people, while more than 70% stated that they were attracted by the 'security' of a civil service career. Price (1975: 183) concluded that 'Ghanaian civil servants... are overwhelmingly committed to the civil service in an instrumental sense; only a small portion manifest a commitment based on an identification with the goals which the organization could and allegedly does seek, such as the development of Ghana and public service, or on satisfactions that are intrinsic to the role they are called on to perform'. However, these findings need to be taken with a grain of salt, for Price's survey questions were at best rather naïve, if not outright biased and normative. Moreover, his methodology did not allow him to capture the peculiar 'mixture' of motivations that may well have characterised his respondents' attitudes, nor was he able to acknowledge that motivations may change in the course of a professional career. As I will show below, in-depth biographical interviews can yield more nuanced results.

The security of civil service careers also figured prominently in my interviewees' considerations why they sought employment in the public service. This was true for both the older and the younger generation. But security was only one among several factors, and particularly the older generation invariably mentioned that they also had been attracted, for instance, by the 'respect' which the Ghanaian public once accorded her public servants. As Peter Tangviel who entered the civil service in 1972 narrated,

what attracted me into the civil service was the respect that the civil servants had at the time, particularly the administrative officer class. ... I had a friend who was working with the Customs and Excise, and I just fancied his sitting at the Accra International Airport here every day.

Tangviel was not quite as impressed by the salaries paid to the officers, particularly when measured 'against the responsibilities that one has to meet', both in terms of his work load and the expectations that his wider rural family had for material support. But, he explained,

I stayed on despite that bad salary because initially, for the first ten years, the situation didn't look that bad. In fact, it looked quite promising, the job was quite secure, and one was very optimistic that the economy would expand and you could have better opportunities or make it better still within the civil service. It happened not to have been it, after the tenth year. But then after ten years, getting out into a new place, you'd probably most likely go and meet your former colleagues and you will be a subordinate to them. So that was one thing that kept me back in the civil service all this while. The other one, too, of course is the general attitude of one not being sure of what the future holds for you. If you leave, what is available now?²⁴

Despite the fact that the conditions of service and salary levels improved in recent years, Tangviel would still not recommend his children and other young people to join the civil service; he would rather see them work in a private enterprise with higher remuneration. If someone was interested in material gains, Tangviel reasoned, the public service was certainly not the best place to work, unless he or she was prepared to become one of those young people who 'make it in a crooked way'. 'Because of the economic situation', Tangviel argued,

and the outlook of life, coupled with the effect of globalisation, the young ones who enter the civil service now are out immediately for making bread, not for commitment to work. They come in, and the first thing they are thinking of is, in the first year, they even want to buy a car. As for other things like these gadgetry in houses for domestic use, they think they should be first-time basics, which were not some of the things when we joined the service in the 1970s.

His pragmatic considerations of job security, income levels and lack of opportunities to change his career mid-way did not prevent Tangviel, however, from speaking quite enthusiastically about the challenges of his work in the ministry and the personal satisfaction he derived from honesty, integrity and loyal service.

Like Tangviel, Emmanuel Zuwera, the retired career diplomat, would not recommend a Foreign Service career to his own children:

Many people are now shying away from the civil service altogether because there is no money there, and nobody wants to die a pauper. Even if you go to the private sector, you can still serve your country, and earn more money there. ... But at our time [towards the late 1960s], when you graduated, there were very few options for us, in terms of work - no choice! There was no private sector where you could have gone. So having finished university, your parents having spent money on you, you want to get a job where you can take care of your brothers and your parents. So the civil service was one of the areas... it was the largest employer.²⁵

24 Interview with Peter Tangviel, 10 Feb. 2007, Accra.

25 Interview with Emmanuel Zuwera, 13 Fe. 2007, Accra.

Given a choice, he ‘would not go back the same road’, Zuwera argued, but he, too, spoke very positively about the many interesting aspects of his work as diplomat and the ‘pleasure and satisfaction’ he derived from it.

Ivan Dometang’s reflections make particularly clear that Price’s survey method misses out on the important temporal dynamics of career motivations – an aspect that a life-history approach can capture much more adequately. Dometang remembered that his initial motivation of joining the public service in 1978 after his university studies was ‘just finding a job’:

The eagerness was to get a job. Then you also looked at your peers who had joined, other peers or people you knew who had joined such departments, and how they were faring. And we also just followed. And there was nothing like assessing or picking up a job because you had the desire or the habit or because you were professionally inclined to it.²⁶

However, as Dometang explained, ‘I wanted to do something different, I didn’t want to go where most of my people were’, namely the administrative officers’ class. He decided to apply for the Internal Revenue Service, underwent the service’s obligatory eighteen months’ in-service training, and worked as tax administrators in various regions until he finally rose to become the Head of Operations of the collection of direct taxes in the entire country. He described vividly how he soon developed a strong interest in his work – ‘I got engaged, I enjoyed the job’– and how ‘exciting’, ‘interesting’ and ‘very engaging’ his tasks have been all along. Raising taxes was providing the basis for the country’s development, he believed, and thus his work was of utmost importance. Looking back on his career, he asserted,

I think now I have the experience, the wisdom and the maturity to say if I were given a choice, I would chose where I am now. But probably because I’m already addicted to that area [of tax collection], that is why’

Like Tangviel, Dometang would advise the younger generation to be ‘more enterprising than just going to the public service where the chances of making it and improving your life are very little’. Unless they become corrupt and ‘throw away all decorum and work ethics and try to do certain things’, young entrants could not earn much money in the public service. Therefore, he recommended,

if you want to be rewarded, work for it through your own enterprise. ... But if you think of riches in going to the Public Service or Civil Service, don’t be anxious about that. If you go there and you want riches, and you are anxious, you will damage your own life.

Those young people, however, who are interested in serving the public good, should follow his own example:

I’m the happiest and most comfortable person on earth. I don’t walk with some feeling of intimidation in my chest. ... I would advise the young ones who want happiness, if you are sure of your integrity, go to the Public Service, come out and you are respected, even though they won’t point at you because here in Africa we don’t acknowledge the dedicated ones.

For the younger generation, too, the security of a public service career seems to have lost nothing of its attraction. Ignacio Zaabaar, for instance, who finally secured employment

26 Interview with Ivan Dometang, 12 Feb. 2007, Accra.

with the Ghana Highways Authority after an extended period of unemployment, compared his peers' opportunities with the career trajectories of the older generation and found that for the latter,

it was much easier for them to find a job. ... the opportunities were there, much more than we have now. And I think there is also an over-concentration of all of us trying to get into the formal system. ... Because the private sector is not too stable, everybody wants a stable job, [like in the public service] where when you are taken, it is very difficult for you to lose your job. The private sector, if you work for somebody, he can decide to terminate your appointment. So that is why there is that over-concentration in trying to get into the civil or public service, so there is that competition, the jobs are not enough for us ... It is becoming more and more difficult by the day.²⁷

At the same time, Ignacio Zaabaar, like Tangviel and Dometang, developed a strong intrinsic motivation, and derived satisfaction from 'seeing after my duties'. 'There is no way', he proudly stated, 'I will be given a task, and it will be half done. I must be very concentrated to do it completely, to the satisfaction of whoever has given me the assignment'.

Without any prompting from my side, most interviewees expressed such a strong commitment to their work. John Tangsege, for instance, who joined the police service in 1968 and later rose to become the director of the Bureau of National Investigation and Inspector General of Police, explained that as a young man he was attracted by the 'respect' that police officers enjoyed 'at that time' and by their 'many privileges'. At the same time, he enjoyed telling me about the excitement of intelligence work and the unique opportunities 'of seeing many different people and different directions' and acquiring 'an all-round knowledge of nearly everything' that the police service provided.²⁸

Similarly, when looking back on his career as a researcher in linguistics, director of the Ghana School of Languages, and finally full-time member of the Public Services Commission, Aloysius Daanikuu declared that he was 'ready to serve Ghana in any capacity', and the way he spoke about his duties as commissioner clearly revealed how much he enjoyed these challenges.²⁹ Charles Zaabaar, for his part, could have chosen a career as a lawyer outside the public service, but decided to join the Prison Service, where he had been posted during his national service. His superior had advised him that he 'would have a future in Prison Service', and could rise fast to the top ranks, and Zaabaar indeed made himself a name in the institution by building up its legal department, and finally became the service's director general, not least due to the professionalism of his job performance.

This intrinsic interest in their work can also be found among the younger generation. John Mwinyele, for example, who joined the Comptroller and Accountant General's Department in 1990, explained that 'all along ... I wanted to be an administrator' because 'I like to interact with people, and basically administration deals with the day-to-day running of an organisation'. He liked to 'solve problems', and found his work 'interesting' because it confronts him with such a variety of tasks, ranging from organising postings and recruiting staff to writing speeches for the Minister of Finance.³⁰ Matthias Kuusob and Ignacio Zaabaar, the two engineers among my interviewees, preferred working in Ghana's public sector, because it

27 Interview with Ignacio Zaabaar, 2 Feb. 2007, Accra.

28 Interviews with John Tangsege, 24 and 30 Jan. 2007, Accra.

29 Interview with Aloysius Daanikuu, 1 March 2007, Accra.

30 Interview with John Mwinyele, 29 Jan. 2007, Accra.

offered more challenging assignments, while private companies were ‘not really that advanced’ and would not demand their full range of knowledge and skills.³¹

More generally, then, even if my interviewees entered the public service because of down-to-earth considerations such as the availability of employment, job security, income levels and status, this does not mean that they did not also develop an intrinsic interest in their work. They were all proud of their professionalism, and although some would, with hindsight, not ‘travel the same road’ again, all of them found satisfaction in performing their tasks with commitment and ‘excellence’. Furthermore, many expressed a sense of ‘serving the nation’ and contributing to the public good through their professional work. Such nationalist commitment, however, did not preclude a pragmatic interest in earning a decent income, or as Emmanuel Zuwera expressed it, tongue in cheek, ‘in serving your country, you also earn some money’.

There was only one member of the younger generation who expressed a decidedly instrumentalist attitude towards his work in the public service. For Alexander Kuuyaa, a quantity surveyor who worked with private firms before joining the Ghana Health Service, his current employment was helping him to acquire the know-how and establish the contacts that he would later need to set up his own property investment and construction enterprise:

The profit motive is one of the things that is driving me into that particular area [of property investment]. I want to go into business, I don’t want to get into civil service. I don’t want in the near future to be employed by anybody. I want to do my own work and employ people. ... the civil service, I like it for now, because it is helping me to establish some kind of network within the civil service and know where and what, so that at the appropriate time, when am out there in the private sector, I know how to use the Civil Service for my business transaction.³²

Alexander Kuuyaa explicitly criticised the older generation of civil servants who were ‘always looking at job security’ and joined the civil service because they were ‘risk averse’. And he explained how his own grandfather, one of the first career diplomats from the Upper West Region, had wanted him to study medicine or law or enter the public administration and had initially opposed Alexander’s choice of studying building technology. However, Alexander had always made it a point during his secondary school and university days to establish friendships with peers beyond the narrow circles of the Dagara community, and thus exposed himself to other perspectives on making a career and earning one’s living. He felt that it was important to overcome the ‘inferiority complex’ that was typical of many Northerners. By ‘being self-assertive and proving your worth’, he believed that he and other younger Dagara graduates could also enter new professional fields that so far seemed to have been a reserve of other groups. Whether Alexander will serve as a role model for future generations of Dagara graduates is an open question, but he is certainly typical of the ‘business’ orientation that some of my youngest interviewees outside the civil service expressed. At the same time, he fully subscribed to the ethics of professionalism, and ‘hard work and excellence’ that my other public-servant interviewees held in high esteem. Even though he saw his commitment to the public service as only temporary, he felt it was important to ‘challenge yourself’ and ‘give your best’. And the ‘profit’ which he eventually hoped to make from his own enterprise was

31 Interview with Matthias Aadearyeb, 15 Feb. 2007, Accra.

32 Interview with Alexander Kuuyaa, 6 Feb. 2007, Accra.

supposed to help develop his home region, and in particular contribute to the education of the children in his paternal village.

‘Godfathers’, ‘friends’ and ‘untouchables’: the role of patronage in public service careers

Max Weber described bureaucracies as professional ‘machines’ that achieve ‘technical superiority’. ‘Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs – these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration’ (1978: 974-7). Bureaucracies need ‘experts and specialised knowledge’ (1978: 1002), and the recruitment of personnel is therefore regulated by meritocratic principles and certified educational achievements (‘Fachprüfungswesen’) (1978: 999). Similarly, promotion within the service follows, in principle, universalist rules, namely a fixed career trajectory (‘Laufbahn’) through which the entrant moves according to work experience, measured in terms of seniority, and intellectual qualification, determined through a system of examinations (1978: 963). Patronage or the purchase and use of public offices as a prebend are, in Weber’s eyes, characteristic of a feudal administration and ‘tend to loosen the bureaucratic mechanism’ (1978: 967).

Like other modern bureaucracies, the Ghanaian public service’s official norms correspond quite neatly to Weber’s ideal-typical description, and it was these norms that my interviewees had in mind when discussing their own and their colleagues’ professional trajectories. But they also developed ‘unofficial’ normative ideas about the (il)legitimacy of patronage and ‘friendship’ in public service careers that adapted these official norms to local realities of ethnic and political clientelism. In this section, I will first discuss my interviewees’ personal experiences of recruitment and promotion, and then explore their more general views on the changing role of patronage, ‘networks’ and ethnicity.

Speaking about their own careers, all of my interviewees, across the generations, emphasised ‘hard work’, ‘intelligence’ and ‘excellence’ as decisive factors that allowed them to enter into, and progress in, the public service. For most, having to struggle hard for advancement was not a new experience, but something they had already lived through during their secondary and tertiary education. As I have already pointed out, many did not have the requisite grades to enter university straight after secondary school and used all available opportunities to better their grades in order ‘to make it’. Quite a few interviewees also went to great lengths to further their education after they obtained employment in the public service, studying for a master’s or doctoral degree or undergoing extra training. More generally, the Upper Western public servants expressed an unbroken belief in the power of education, both for their personal careers and for ‘uplifting’ the rural poor in their home region. This went hand in hand with a strong commitment to meritocratic principles with regard to the selection of personnel and professional promotion.

Most of my older interviewees prided themselves on not having relied on a ‘godfather’ or ‘friend’ in order to obtain employment in the public service. ‘Sacrificial and hard work’, loyalty and ‘intelligence’ were, according to John Tangsege, the qualities that had made his career in the Police Service possible. Felix Aafere, who entered the Civil Service in 1974, insisted that

getting more chances than others actually depends on the individual abilities, because if a Dagara man or woman goes to school and tries his best, I think he has equal chances

as any other person. If not, I wouldn't be sitting down here because there is no one who put me here.³³

Ivan Dometang believed that his successful career in the Internal Revenue Service was 'earned by merit':

I would say, first it's hard work. Secondly, I have been very modest and not ambitious... I just stayed and worked. ... I have acted in leadership positions in several places, and the challenge was to impress the people I was leading. So it also entered in my working field that I constantly wanted to impress that I can deliver. And that became a culture in me, always thinking of delivering. And because of that, I got the eye of people who supervised me. They saw I was always eager to deliver, and they found me delivering. So unconsciously I got to this level. Sometimes I don't even believe I'm the one. But that is it. ... our work [as tax collectors] is easily assessed, our performance is easily measured. And because of that, your promotion is basically on those, ability to deliver and ability to manage.³⁴

At the same time, Dometang felt that in addition to being hard-working and dedicated, 'luck also has gone my way'. In a similar vein, Charles Zaabaar declared that he was 'accidentally' drawn into the Prison Service, and that he was 'lucky' and even did not quite 'know what happened' that he eventually rose to the position of the service's director general. All interviewees indeed believed that their professional success was owed to a combination of 'hard work' and 'luck'. 'Luck' could mean, for instance, that a sympathetic superior 'discovered' the interviewee's exceptional abilities; or it could refer to the fact that due to a university closure or other circumstances, someone had to face few competitors when applying for a position. The idea that success depended on both 'merit' and 'luck' was reflected in the language that my interviewees employed: they combined an 'active' register ('I struggled hard', 'I was anxious to learn', 'I took advantage' etc.) with 'passive' constructions such as 'I was nominated', 'I was sent', or 'I was asked'. 'Luck', in any case, was not the same as protection or patronage; it rather explained the fact that others who had been similarly hard-working were not as successful as my interviewees. It was a metaphor that summarised the fact that it is never sufficient to be highly qualified and dedicated, and that one also needs opportunities and to be at the right place at the right time.³⁵

All interviewees agreed, however, that the combination of opportunities and qualifications that could 'move' someone 'up the career ladder' did not suffice to bring a public servant to the very top positions in their respective institutions. In order to be appointed ambassador, for instance, from among the higher ranks of career diplomats, 'you need a little bit of patronage, you need somebody powerful to help you get up', Emmanuel Zuwera explained. This 'patron' does not necessarily have to be from one's own ethnic group, he continued, 'you just need a mentor, somebody who likes you and thinks you are a very hard-working officer, and who is in the position to guide you and take you along'. When considering the different factors that played into top-level appointments, Charles Zaabaar, who had been ousted from his position as director general of the Prison Service, felt that his regional background had played an important role for his dismissal:

33 Interview with Felix Aafere, 25 Jan. 1990, Accra.

34 Interview with Ivan Dometang, 12 Feb. 2007, Accra.

35 More generally on the conditions of 'success', see Gladwell 2008.

I was the first Northerner to get there. I got there alright, on my own right; I didn't have anybody from the North ahead of me. ... [I believe that] may be, my hard work and my professionalism propelled me to get up there. I wasn't being pushed, I didn't have a godfather, and definitely if I had a godfather in this government, I don't think I would have been treated the way I was treated [namely, being removed from office]. So ethnicity is definitely a factor.³⁶

Networks based on ethnicity could have kept him in office, Zaabaar believed, but of equal importance for arriving at, and remaining in, top positions in the public service were party political alliances and the ability to 'survive intrigues' by knowing 'the ins and the outs of the office', having 'informants' in the relevant ministries and maintaining good contacts with the media. In other words, a 'godfather' alone was not sufficient; horizontal networks, based on 'old boys' associations, shared ethnicity or other linkages of friendship were just as important.

The older generation asserted that ethnicity could play a role for passing the 'bottle-neck' to very senior appointments, but they insisted that ethnic background had not mattered for their recruitment into the public service and for regular promotion. Many shared Emmanuel Zuwera's experience, who explained that during the 1960s and 1970s, 'if you were a Northerner and you applied for a job and you qualified, they [the Public Services Commission chaired by Abeyifaa Karbo] interviewed you, and if you passed, they took you, ... irrespective of where you came from'.

Interviewees from the younger generation, on the other hand, mentioned more often that ethnic background and, more generally, patronage played an important role in gaining access to the public service. Sebastian Debuur, for instance, who tried to enter the Foreign Service some twenty years after Emmanuel Zuwera, did not succeed in his endeavour, despite passing the entrance test with relatively good results. The Foreign Service, he argued,

is a very sophisticated place where you need to have serious connections ... It is not as open. Possibly because I don't have these connections, I didn't pass, because I was using my brain only. ... It's not overt; if there is any discrimination, it must be covert... In the situation with the Foreign Service, there was a point where I felt that because I was a Dagara that I wasn't taken, honestly. I was fourteenth on the list for the intelligence tests ... You need a pivot somewhere along, it might not be only those from Nandom, but everyone needs somebody who can push you.³⁷

Other, younger interviewees, too, attributed their own or their peers' failure to enter a specific segment of the public service or to be promoted as rapidly as they thought they deserved to the increasing competition for public sector employment and their lack of a 'pivot', a 'godfather' or some other useful 'connection'. But just like their predecessors, the younger public servants explained their professional success by a combination of hard work, determination and 'luck'. John Mwinyele's thoughts on 'godfathers' are a case in point:

some of us are basically here on the basis of merit [but others had a godfather who supported them]... a godfather means you come in, maybe you have one of your bosses there who you are pet to, and then he keeps moving you, putting you where you want to be. Some of us didn't come in with that kind of background. We just came in, and by virtue of the discharge of our responsibilities, we are where we are. So I think God is our godfather. We just pray to him and say well, lead me, and direct me. ... I don't owe

36 Interview with Charles Zaabaar, 19 Jan. 2007, Accra.

37 Interview with Sebastian Debuur, 13 Nov. 1989, Wa.

anything to anybody... I'm working hard to justify myself and where I should be ... I came to the head office here, and, incidentally, I've always been projected, I don't know, by grace.³⁸

I will return to the role of religious convictions for professional ethics in the conclusion. At this point I just want to draw attention to the way in which Mwinyele and other interviewees drew a boundary between 'we', the morally upright who did not rely on patronage, and 'the others' who did. Obviously, such questions – how someone achieved entry into and promotion in the public service – were not only explained in the context of my interviews, but are also discussed among colleagues in the work place. And placing oneself in the group of the incorruptible ones stabilises self-esteem and, in the long run, enhances job satisfaction as well as security.

This became particularly clear from Ignacio Zaabaar's narrative about the long odyssey he had to undertake to obtain employment with Ghana Highways. In fact, Ignacio was the only interlocutor who openly admitted that he had to 'hustle' and eventually draw on his brother's and his own contacts in order to secure entry into the public service. It took him some amount of 'lobbying' to even learn about new job openings and to be invited for the interview. But if it would not have been for the protection of the minister in charge, he would still not have made it. He believed:

fortunately I prepared myself before going for the interview, and I went through it, but I think because the pressure was also coming from the Minister, whether I went through it or not, they would have taken me... So it had to do with the connection eventually. Otherwise, if I were going through it the normal way, I wouldn't have ever gotten a job with Highways.³⁹

When I asked Zaabaar how he felt about using 'the connection', he explained,

I was not too happy about it, but eventually it gave me an advantage because I could have become an untouchable in Highways ... But from my own experience I didn't use that advantage. I just went through the normal thing, and I made friends with those directors who were not happy about the way the Minister intervened for me. So eventually they became my very good friends, and in fact when I finished training, the Minister wanted me to be posted the way I wanted, and I said, no, because then it would be a case of isolation and I could be victimised when he was not there. He should just allow me to go through the normal system, so that I will grow up with my training mates. So I just went and passed through the normal channel, and I have risen to where I am through the normal channel.

Relying on patronage, thus, implied risks, and it was because of these pragmatic considerations, but also because of his belief that he was indeed excellently qualified for the job and would earn further promotion by merit that Zaabaar insisted on limiting the influence of patronage in his career. Moreover, he felt that using his 'connection' was legitimate because he was qualified for the position to which he aspired; he needed this extra 'advantage' because otherwise he would have become a victim of the nepotistic strategies of others who pushed in less qualified candidates.

38 Interview with John Mwinyele, 29 Jan. 2007, Accra.

39 Interview with Ignacio Zaabaar, 2 Feb. 2007, Accra.

While their personal experiences have changed over time, all interviewees argued that competition for public service positions had increased, and thus made patronage and protection ever more important. John Mwinyele, for instance, felt that incidences of ‘tribalism’ in the public sector were on the increase:

The older generation, I think at that time it may have been a little better than now because that division, those tribal sentiments ... were [not] as pronounced as now. ... But for our generation, it is seriously a contest ... in the sense that maybe you have to see somebody to put you where you are. ... Some of us are just there and ... they look around and see that this is the man who qualifies to be there, and then they put you there ... and you don’t go lobbying for it ... But in other instances they compete, you have to see maybe a minister somewhere, you have to see maybe a chief director or someone somewhere to push you into a particular place.

Jessi Bonaventure Beyaa, too, asserted that ‘ethnicity, old-boyism, influence of maybe your parents, political alliance or leaning would play a role in jobs right now’ and that much depended on ‘the networks, associations, clubs that you belong to’.⁴⁰ Just like John Mwinyele, however, he explained that he himself had not needed such networks for his professional career as a research officer in the Ministry of Agriculture. He attributed this not only to his high academic qualifications, namely having obtained a PhD degree in the United Kingdom, but mainly to the fact that very few persons wanted to be posted to the Upper West, where he had insisted on going – ‘so nobody envies my position’.

At the recruitment stage, ‘godfathers’ and ‘friends’ were needed, my interviewees explained, in order to receive information about job opportunities that were sometimes not publicly advertised, and to make sure that the selection committee did not ‘overlook’ a qualified candidate or conduct the recruitment interview in an unfair manner. Furthermore, patronage was often necessary in order to ‘follow up’ and make sure that the successful interview eventually resulted in actual employment. Promotion within the service then usually followed ‘the normal channel’, as Ignacio Zaabaar put it. But a ‘godfather’ could help to be selected for some special training, including well-remunerated international courses, or to be awarded a study leave or other ‘extras’. And, as mentioned above, some sort of protection was regarded as necessary for passing the ‘bottleneck’ to the superior positions in the respective service.

Interestingly, my interviewees invariably presented the increasing necessity for younger Northerners to rely on some form of patronage as an unfortunate, but basically legitimate reaction to the dominant and illegitimate nepotism by non-Northerners. The justification was tied to the status of Northerners as a disadvantaged minority. ‘I’ll call it nepotism’, Ignacio Zaabaar explained with regard to the general trend in public service recruitment and promotion,

because everybody wants to help his brother, so when we all have the same qualification and he [the employer] now has a choice, he’ll definitely choose the brother. So for us who are from up there [Northern Ghana], we are a little bit disadvantaged, we are fewer in the system. ... we are a minority, so when you come to nepotism, we are at a disadvantage. ... There is always a lot of lobbying, especially when you come to these bottleneck positions. I think from the position of principal engineer to directorship, it should be on merit and not on lobbying or on whom you know, connection or political

40 Interview with Paul Beyaa, 16 and 20 Nov. 2006, Wa.

influence, it should be on merit so that we will all have equal chances. That is what I would like to see. But it looks like it cuts across everywhere, it's really very difficult to do away with certain things.⁴¹

By the same logic, my older interlocutors who had risen to top positions in their respective services did not hesitate to admit that they acted as 'patrons' and protectors of younger entrants from the North. Ignacio Zaabaar's brother Charles, for instance, related how he responded when he was questioned as to why he should have endorsed the employment of so many Northerners in the Prison Service:

I said the Constitution said 'equitable distribution of positions in the public service'. It's there, 'directive principles of state policy'. So, I said look, if there are ten regions, and we have recruited a hundred people, then every region should have ten. So if I am bringing four or five people from each Northern region, from any of the regions from the North, I have not even complied with the Constitution. That one, they keep quiet. Of course, some definitely grumbled, he is filling the place with Northerners.⁴²

Others like John Tangsege, Aloysius Daanikuu and John Mwinyele, too, reported that they were not only regarded as role models by younger Northerners, proving by their very success that people of their origins could 'make it', but also actively intervened to help highly qualified Northerners to be placed according to their merits. One could even summarise the underlying argument in the paradox that they believed that some amount of patronage and protection was necessary in order to implement meritocratic principles of recruitment and promotion according to achievement. Yet patronage that promoted candidates who did not have the necessary qualifications, on the other hand, was regarded as illegitimate.

On a more general level, one could argue that bureaucratic norms indeed need to be upheld through personal intervention when the institutionalised checks and balances are not very strongly rooted. My interviewees' statements regarding the legitimacy or illegitimacy of 'protection' and 'networks' reflect ongoing debates among peers and colleagues, both within and outside the public service. Sometimes, their judgments are made explicit, but much is also 'said' in more indirect ways through narrative strategies and semantic choices. They construct boundaries, by the use of 'we' and 'they', between deserving bureaucrats and reformers on the one hand and scroungers, nepotists and unqualified protégées on the other. They narrate stories of morally upright 'martyrs' and victims who put up with condescending criticism of their naiveté and sacrifice by more adept 'winners'. They employ a variety of terms and metaphors with different connotations, sometimes with a note of irony, for supportive networks that mark different degrees of legitimacy. The 'godfather', for instance, reminds of problematic Mafia networks, the 'untouchable' of the Indian caste system; reliance on 'friends' is certainly more acceptable than 'favouritism', 'old-boyism' and 'nepotism'. And they oscillate between the optimistic hope that their personal behaviour might serve as an example and the pessimistic resignation that 'nepotism' is a 'disease' that spreads and that it is very difficult to avoid 'being infected', or, as Sebastian Debuur put it, 'personal conviction doesn't matter, you have to reckon these forces'.

41 Interview with Ignacio Zaabaar, 2 Feb. 2007, Accra.

42 Interview with Charles Zaabaar, 19 Jan. 2007, Accra. The relevant section of the 1992 Ghanaian Constitution is § 35, 6c.

‘Hard work’, excellence and commitment to the nation: images of a worthy public servant

The discussion on patronage and meritocratic principles feeds directly into my interviewees’ image of a worthy bureaucrat. Some of my interlocutors spoke eloquently and at length about the ‘ideal’ public servant; others presented their ideas more implicitly in the form of stories and examples. Again, the norms they subscribed to did not differ much across the generations. This is in itself an interesting finding because it means that despite the increasingly difficult conditions of recruitment and promotion, my interviewees did not adopt a cynical view of what it meant, or should mean, to be a public servant.

My interviewees’ image of the worthy bureaucrat was closely tied to their view that the ideal state should serve as an effective agency of ‘development’, promote the public good, uplift the poor and bring about regionally equitable development. They distinguished between ‘the state’ and incumbent governments, and while governments were dominated by party politics, inevitably partisan and catered to special interests, the ‘state’ should, at least to a certain extent, be politically ‘neutral’. The major figure against which the ideal public servant was set off was, therefore, ‘the politician’, and in many interviews, the conflict-ridden relations between public servants and political appointees were an important topic. Politicians, my interviewees elaborated, want to be re-elected and therefore need to act in accordance with short-term considerations aimed at securing the voters’ favour. Civil servants, on the other hand, should consider the long-term effects of their actions for the public good, and have to implement sometimes unpopular measures that will, nevertheless, in the long run help to increase state income, distribute benefits more equitably according to impartial rules, or in other ways serve the nation’s interests.

It is useful to keep in mind here that I am not dealing with ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky 1980) at the interface of bureaucracies and popular clients, but mainly with high-ranking officials whose relevant partners in professional interactions are, on the one hand, their subordinates in their respective departments and, on the other, ministers or other political appointees and politicians. It is against this background that their critique of the irresponsible behaviour of ‘politicians’, but not ‘the state’ as such, needs to be understood. My interviewees would complain about salaries that did not adequately compensate their professional efforts or about the lack of sophisticated equipment to support them in their duties. But they did not express any feeling that ‘the state’ to whom they had pledged their loyal service had not honoured its side of this contract and failed them, and that they could therefore legitimately withdraw from their obligations. On the contrary, the sense of a moral ‘contract’ which both sides needed to respect, and indeed did respect, was dominant (Bierschenk 2009). This is probably an important difference compared to lower ranking state employees who may well complain that ‘the state’ has broken this moral contract by neither acknowledging their services with an adequate remuneration nor providing them with the sufficient means to fulfill their professional duties.

Concerning the critical view of ‘politicians’, Emmanuel Zuwera’s institution, the Foreign Service, may be a special case in that ambassadors are regularly drawn from among both career diplomats and political appointees – a feature that is true of foreign services in many other countries as well. But officials in other state departments, too, sometimes find their own promotion to top positions ‘blocked’ by appointees that did not ‘climb the career ladder’ but were chosen according to political considerations. For Zuwera, it is understandable that political appointees do not subscribe to what he learnt as ‘the civil servants’ rule’, namely that ‘we

should be neutral so that we would be able to give our best to our governments', regardless of whether this government was to one's own political liking. Zuwera's criticism instead focused on career ambassadors who then behaved like politicians:

The politician, you understand him. He comes there, he tells you: 'Look, I have a mandate to protect, I have a position to protect. You have to do this, you have to do that'. Sometimes they ask you to do things that are not within your competence or that are not within your schedule. Yes, those are areas of friction. But the career ambassador who knows what you are expected to do, he is the one who would go out and ask you to do those unlawful things. ... I don't know, whether it's a potion you take. Maybe you have somebody very nice, once he becomes an ambassador, you'll see that he is a completely changed person. So I think, there are areas of friction. ... If you want to maintain your honour and your good name, your character or whatever name you've made back at home, it's up to you to be able to assess the situation.⁴³

Other interviewees, too, insisted that their moral contract was with 'the state' and the 'constitution' to which they pledged an oath, not 'the government'. Aloysius Daanikuu, for instance, was appointed to the Public Services Commission and in this capacity advises, and even admonishes, the various ministries regarding equitable policies of recruitment and promotion. 'Some politicians have always seen the Public Services Commission as an obstacle', he observed, but insisted that the commission actually 'was a very, very sure way of ruling well, of getting the best out of the best ... it is sort of an ethics organisation'. And he felt that he had a moral obligation towards the 'state' and the 'constitution', and ultimately 'the Ghanaians', not party-political governments:

I am a servant to the state, so to speak ... I have taken an oath to defend the Constitution and to defend the rights of the Ghanaians. So if I see something wrong, it is important for me to say the truth and to advise the person concerned doing the wrong thing. And if he doesn't take my piece of advice, well... the state ... it is the public.⁴⁴

Daanikuu himself even stood as a candidate for the New Patriotic Party during the parliamentary elections of 2004, and the president may well have been appointed him as member of the Public Services Commission in recognition of his party-political engagement. However, once appointed, Daanikuu insisted, his role had changed:

even when you declare your political stand, but when you are acting as a public servant, as a member of the public service, ... you take off that hat and act in a neutral way, in a very objective way, for the good of the state, the person concerned, the Constitution. So that you will not be found wanting, as far as the Constitution is concerned.

Reflecting about the difficulties, but also advantages of steadfastly declining to do the politicians' bidding, John Tangsege asserted that

the politicians want you to do what is not right. If you are somebody who is frank and truthful, they can't even sack you because what you have done is the truth, they can't send you away. But they will want you to do what they want, and not what you want and what is right. ... If you do that, others will be watching and seeing that you can be moved, you can be enticed to do what they want, and they will also want to use you, you know. But the moment they realise that this man, he calls a spade a spade, they will

43 Interview with Emmanuel Zuwera, Accra, 13 Feb. 2007.

44 Interview with Aloysius Daanikuu, 1 March 2007, Accra.

all want you. Because they know that if these people are able to twist you, they can also come and twist you to do what they want, but if you tell them the truth and they find out it's the truth, they will receive it.

Ivan Dometang was not quite as optimistic that the politicians would eventually change their mind about what was 'right'. He was discouraged that they remained reluctant to support his work of raising state revenue, because they feared for their own popularity:

As a tax professional, I've been conscious ... that [the politicians] feel that talking about taxation would diminish their political support. ... They say, 'we have appointed you as professionals, we are paying you salaries, go and talk about it [tax compliance]. But as a politician, I am attracting people to myself, so I wouldn't go and talk about taxation which is hated by everybody.' But if they kept on talking about it, the people would begin to know that it's not something to be hated, it's part of the civil responsibilities. But we haven't succeeded in getting that round. ... and when you go so firmly about some tax issues, they call and say that you have to be careful, that kind of thing.

In all these narratives, my interviewees presented themselves as 'state men', as Ivan Dometang put it, that is as professionals who were working for the public good in a non-partisan way. They felt frustrated that politicians, as well as media or other 'public' voices, usually did not recognise, much less praise their service, but they compensated this by taking pride in their work and holding fast to the conviction that they contributed towards the well-being and progress of 'the nation'. As Dometang explained,

I'm only being a good citizen, I'm trying to be a state man. I'm prepared to do my professional work. And that is why I have been able to go through all... being appointed here and there. ... My joy is to be a state man. People want to be a politician to come up. But I want to end up with the state as a state man... A state man, very committed to the state. And of course a politician is committed to the state, but in the partisan way. But for me, it's just on the public service. Trying to serve in the public service dutifully, to record that you really contributed to the nation, without probably going any political side. ... A state man who is prepared, whoever is the government in power, I am there to contribute for the nation and not for one particular government. That is the kind of person I would call really a state man. His interest is in serving the nation and that is all. Whoever comes, he believes that the fellow has come in the interest of the nation and I will deliver for the nation to go forward. And this is my ambition.

With his rejection of party politics, Dometang even went a step further than Zuwera and Daanikuu, who had both stood as party candidates for elections. While distinguishing between their professional role as civil servants and their personal political convictions, Zuwera and Daanikuu were convinced that certain developmental problems, and more specifically regional inequality, could only be addressed by 'politics'. But Ivan Dometang, like a few other interviewees, did not even want to become involved in politics, but rather wished to devote all his energy to his work as a public servant.

Political neutrality was only one of the criteria that distinguished a worthy public servant in the eyes of my interviewees, albeit an important one. Other elements that defined worthiness were professionalism and expertise, commitment and dedication to one's work, rule-bound and even-handed discharge of one's professional duties, and, finally, a spirit of service to the nation. 'Qualification first' was John Mwinyele's succinct answer when I asked him what defined a good public servant. To ensure that the public service employed only 'quality people', Aloysius Daanikuu explained, was one of the priorities of the Public Services Commission. All interviewees agreed that a high educational standard and the necessary, job-

related expertise were of utmost importance. Some pointed to further qualities that a public servants should have: politeness, fairness and the ability to work collegially in a team.

Expertise and qualification alone, however, were not regarded as sufficient; they needed to be coupled with commitment and dedication to one's duties. Public servants should strive for 'hard work and excellence', many of my interviewees believed. When asked what advice he would give to a new member of the civil service, Peter Tangviel elaborated with the following little speech:

Approach your work with commitment, be loyal to your political boss of the day. Be honest and sincere with him, open about what you are doing and what you are saying, and be as hard working as possible. Accommodate both your superiors and your subordinates and guide your subordinates as much as possible to do what they are expected to do. Put in your best, so that at the end of each day when you are going home, you are convinced that you have earned the day's wage. That is what I'll tell anybody joining the civil service at any rank.⁴⁵

John Tangsege went even further and claimed that it was necessary to 'love your job' and 'have pleasure in what you do'. When I wanted to know to what factors he attributed his successful career in the Police Service, he insisted that it was

simply dedication. Love for the country. And hard work, sacrificial work, that must make you go. And you must have initiative ... You have to be knowledgeable, initiative, you got hard work ... You must have pleasure, you must love the job. If you don't love the job, you can't work on it. ... Whatever you achieve, you think it is great, and you want to improve on it.

In addition to commitment, a good public servant was defined by the 'impartial discharge of our responsibilities', as John Mwinyele put it. He told me how as director of personnel he had to learn from a senior and more experienced colleague how to deal firmly, but also politely, with particularist expectations of family relations or friends. And he used the popular image of the 'government as elephant meat' to explain how important it is to distinguish between private and public property and to drive this distinction home to all public servants:

We need to completely sway away from the fact that: 'oh it's government work', so nobody takes it seriously. That is one basic thing. And then, it's a government property, so there's no ownership. Nobody thinks that this is my property, they just misuse it. ... In our Ghanaian parlance they say the government is an elephant meat. An elephant meat, in their local dialect means that it's so big that one man can't eat it all. So several people eat it. So they look at it from the other side: government is the big elephant, and so everybody accesses it in different ways, in whatever manner. So if I can pick [sic] this copier home to my house and own it, even though it is for government, then I have picked my part of the elephant. Somebody will use the offices to extort monies, you know. Government allocation is there for a purpose, they misappropriate it. ... So there needs to be a radical change in our attitude in the civil service, in general.⁴⁶

Mwinyele firmly believed in the value of 'training' in order to effect a change in attitudes. Not all of my interviewees were as optimistic. Ivan Dometang felt that serving as a role model

45 Interview with Peter Tangviel, 10 Feb. 2007, Accra.

46 Interview with John Mwinyele, 29 Jan. 2007, Accra.

himself was certainly important, but insisted that it was also necessary to be ‘very smart and checking’. And later in our interview he added that in the field of tax collection, computerisation and certain institutional designs also went a long way in making the personal appropriation of public funds more difficult. ‘When there is too much interfacing between the officer and the tax payer’, Dometang explained,

the danger is for work ethics to be sacrificed and then the tendency to do some few things. So as the head ... you have to discourage that and promote ethical practices. ... So sometimes you just have to... try to train them to think about the moral aspect of the work. ... So you will target probably the regional directors and the district managers ... to try to let them live a bit of an example life. In my approach that is where I concentrate on. And then, when you hear anything about those far under them, then you put the challenge to the district managers and the regional directors. ... I know very well that society in Ghana is not so exemplary. So you have to target certain people and keep on drumming down to their mind that, please, you got to put your hands to the ground. The reality is that people these days are compromising a lot. So you have to be very smart and checking. ...

It’s not easy, because sometimes you are considered too ideal ... about things. Sometimes they try to find ways mostly just to discourage you, with statements and suspicion. But when you know that you are trying to be upright about things, you don’t get worried about it. Just stay fair. They will do all sort of things, but once you don’t compromise and give yourself up, you manage all.⁴⁷

Personal integrity, my interviewees agreed, is the indispensable foundation both for controlling the behaviour of one’s subordinates and dealing with the illegitimate expectations of one’s superiors. One of the driving forces that motivates a good civil servant to remain steadfast and duty-bound despite various temptations or lack of respect is his conviction that only in this way will he serve ‘the nation’. All of my interviewees felt that the basic aim of their work was ‘to help the country’, as Matthias Kuusob put it. Or, as John Tangsege explained, whenever he found that ‘governments want their work to be done’ but what they want ‘is not necessarily the right thing’, he would ask the simple question of whom his work served:

I want to be free to be able to exercise my mind, exercise my intelligence without any fear or favour. So if somebody [a politician] comes, and says this is wrong, I should do... this, and he wants me to make it right, it’s not possible. ... [The question we need to ask is] does it offend? I mean, look at your work, does it offend more people, do people derive pleasure from what you have carried out? Or only few people derive pleasure? You are supposed to maximise felicity for the majority of the people.

All of my interlocutors took pride in describing how their particular duties contributed to the common good – by increasing the state revenue, securing societal peace and safety, improving Ghana’s international relations, developing her infrastructure or increasing agricultural production. And contributing to the public good by rendering competent and impartial service and being dedicated to development, not pursuing personal enrichment, was the most important element of what constituted a worthy bureaucrat.

47 Interview with Ivan Dometang, 12 Feb. 2007, Accra.

Religious and ethnic sources of professional ethics

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present a detailed discussion of the resources on which the Upper Western public servants draw to stabilise their professional ethics. A few remarks, however, are useful because they also help to understand why my interviewees' arguments were sometimes remarkably similar, and which role their Northern background plays for their professionalism and commitment. The chief sources of the personal convictions that informed the public servants' professional ethics are to be found at the 'individual' level, namely in the interviewee's personal upbringing and beliefs, and in the collective 'sub-culture', both within the bureaucratic institution and among the regional peer groups of highly educated men and women. These peer groups are particularly important in order to insulate the bureaucrats against particularist expectations of their extended rural and urban kin and of other persons from the 'home' area or ethnic group.

With respect to the individual resources that support personal integrity, my interviewees' religious background was of utmost importance, and all of them regarded their strict Catholic upbringing as crucial for the formation of their ideas of a meritorious life. It is most likely that in a different historical setting, and in other parts of Ghana, Protestant churches could work in a very similar way, and it would be worth while exploring in which way a Muslim upbringing affects a public service career. In the Upper West Region, however, with the exception of the area around Wa, the Catholic church has been, since the 1930s, the dominant, if not almost exclusive, Christian denomination. It has played an important role in the establishment of schools, and since most public servants are Catholic school graduates, they have been impregnated with certain ideals and norms. Furthermore, the fathers' of four of my interviewees were catechists, providing for an even more direct influence of Catholicism on their sons' moral upbringing. Ivan Dometang, for instance, narrated how his catechist father was at first shocked that his son wanted to enter the Internal Revenue Service and deal with other people's monies because he felt that it would be very difficult to resist the temptations to pocket some of these resources for personal ends. It was Dometang's firm resolution to disprove his father's fears that kept him disciplined, despite the fact that not many people would praise him for such steadfastness. The people generally

don't acknowledge... if you are hard-working, dedicated. If we were able to highlight the good and dedicated people, people would see them as role models. But at times, the dedicated one is considered too naïve, too disciplined, so they don't even highlight you. Though in the quiet they will see that his dedication, his hard work is yielding the country something. But they don't come out with it. Because generally everybody thinks you are being naïve.

That these considerations did not make him falter was, Dometang believed, due to his upbringing and his faith in God:

When I finished university... [my father] asked me, what I was doing, and I said I was collecting taxes, money. He told me that if he had his own way, he would have stopped me from doing that. Anything that has to do with money, he would not advise his child to do it. So that worried me a lot. Which means that when my father would die, he would have been wondering, 'will this man survive, in this fearful place? I do not think that my child should go. I am going, what is his fate?' So anytime I thought about it, I said, well, my father was too apprehensive about the job I was going to take. I will prove him wrong.... Secondly, I have the fear of God in me. And I'm a very timid per-

son when it comes to those, I'm very timid. A very, very timid person. And the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

In a similar manner, John Tangsege, another catechist's son, regarded his 'good conscience' as the most important orientation for constantly interrogating his actions, both within and outside his profession. 'You should have a good conscience', Tangsege explained,

that means your conscience is not worrying you, that what you have done is wrong. If it is worrying you, it means that there is something wrong somewhere. Then you must go back, did we take this decision, on what basis? It is most likely you may have to call your Commissioners back. We decided this, I want us to look at it again. Are we being fair to that man? Are we being fair to these people? Don't you think that it is wrong, if it is wrong, let us find out where it is wrong, and correct it.

When I asked him where he learnt such an attitude, he pointed to his Catholic upbringing:

the Catholics have pumped in a lot of discipline in my mind. If you are doing anything wrong, you find that what you are saying is wrong, ... your conscience. If you lie down to sleep, it says: 'no, it's not right'. So that's the conscience and the way you are brought up. ... So stealing, telling lies and all those things, these are things that we abandoned in childhood. I told you, my father was a catechist and the moment you told a lie about your sister, my mother or my father would beat you. So we got used to speaking the truth, nothing but the truth. It is the Christian principles that I inherited from the Church.

Most of my interviewees regarded these Christian principles as intimately connected with the Dagara 'ethnic' character of 'hard work' and 'honesty'. The greater part of the Dagara are indeed Catholics, up until today,⁴⁸ and my interlocutors felt that the church has left an important imprint on the way the Dagara act and perceive the world. John Mwinyele, for instance, who was brought up by educated white-collar parents outside the rural context, claimed not to know much about 'Dagara culture', but was still convinced that he was socialised according to the Dagara principles of 'honesty' and 'uprightness':

When I look at my parents, I look at the older generation and I see some of them, their lifestyles and how they have ended [namely without many riches], then I think that there is this element of sincerity, honesty, obedience, godliness to some extent, because the Catholicism has actually dominated and it has schooled us in a certain manner. So you see a Dagara man, and you see an upright man more or less ... I see myself in it, and I think this is as a result of the culture. Because there are certain things I do, and my conscience keeps hunting me, that 'no, you shouldn't have done this'. To somebody else that will mean nothing to the person. But I think that tradition is still trickling down to some of us where you can't do a wrong. It's extremely difficult to do the wrong, yes, I think culture has inculcated this pattern of behaviour in the Dagaare man.

Peter Tangviel sketched the same ethnic 'psychology', but wished that the Dagara would become more enterprising and interested in material progress. He felt that their sense of humility and honesty was standing in their way, and he included himself among those whose careers had been characterised by these commendable principles that did not quite fit with the dominant ways of 'making it' in Ghana:

48 On the history of Catholicism in the Upper West Region which started with the coming of the White Father's mission to Jirapa in 1929, see Lentz 2006: 153–74.

You see that the normal Dagara is rather too humble for success and too honest for the present system that we are running in the country. ... You end up, you have opportunities of making it in a crooked way, you don't do it. You get back and people don't understand why, compared to another one from another tribe, why he is making it that much this far, and you don't seem to be doing it the same way. That is the major problem of the Dagao. Someone like me, up to the grade I am within the civil service, if you compare me materially, what I'm worth as against even some juniors of mine in other tribes. Some of my people [from my family and village] know of this, and it gives them the idea that I should be probably worth more than I say I am, and as such they think I am not helping them to the level that they expect. Then you will see the plight of the typical Dagara man who has lived by the culture of his people, the sort of training that he is given at home. ... I would want to see the Dagarti man being more forceful than he is. Not getting too satisfied too early in terms of progress.

But even Tangviel would not, of course, want this progress to be achieved by illegitimate means. He would only recommend that more Dagara choose professions outside the public service, and 'take advantage of opportunities that are there to do genuine business'. And by improving their lot, 'you give the chance to others [to also progress], as you yourself are progressing'.

That my interviewees talked about 'the Dagara character' in very similar terms reflects the fact that they do indeed exchange such ideas in formal and informal social meetings among Dagara educated men and women in Accra and other Ghanaian cities. All of my interlocutors are involved in one or more of the ethno-political associations that Dagara migrants have created since the mid-1970s (Lentz 1995), and they also meet in church or informal get-togethers. These social networks are usually grouped according to generations, but at certain festive occasions, such as marriages or funerals, Dagara from the Upper West meet across distinctions of gender and age, and often also social position. But it is particularly in the more 'elitist' social circles that the public servants' careers and life styles are evaluated and compared with those from other ethnic groups. It is at such occasions that stories and comments regarding what is considered legitimate or illegitimate behaviour, regarding 'ethnic' traditions, necessary reforms and commendable lives circulate and constitute a relatively close-knit tapestry of social control – a phenomenon that Charles Werbner (2004) has highlighted in his study of the Kalanga bureaucratic and managerial elites' contribution to the public good in Botswana. Such exchanges among the 'elite' also establish norms regarding the amount of support that one's rural relatives can legitimately expect, and where to draw the boundary with regard to favouritism. Robert Price's (1975) contention that Ghanaian bureaucrats were victims of their extended family's particularist expectations and would compromise their professional ethics because they found it much more important to maintain their good name in their rural home communities was probably already problematic and too one-sided at the time he conducted his research during the late 1960s. It is most certainly too simplistic now, some forty years later. One of the factors that allows public servants to insulate themselves, to a certain degree, against their relatives' demands is precisely elite sociability. That honour and shame are ascribed not only by one's 'home' community, but also, or even mainly, by one's peers allows precisely the compartmentalisation of roles – the public servant distinguished from the kinsman – that Price sees as the prerequisite of an efficient bureaucracy.

This insulation is also supported by an inner-bureaucratic 'esprit de corps' to which my interviewees referred when they distinguished between 'we', the reform-oriented and dedicated public servants, and the 'politicians' or corrupt officials. It is further strengthened by cross-ethnic associations such as the Free Masons or other lodges to whom many of my interviewees

wees belonged and that partly overlap with ethno-regional networks. All of these networks serve to stabilise professional ethics and promote a spirit of ‘excellence’ and ‘service’ by creating a moral community in the eyes of which the public servants want to be regarded as worthy and deserving. They constitute arenas in which standards of legitimate ‘patronage’, aspirations to material wealth, engagement in political activism and many other aspects of professional life are constantly negotiated and re-evaluated. That in such discussions my interviewees tended to subscribe to rather strict norms of meritocracy and ‘hard work’, finally, also reflects a specific ‘Northern’ perspective. Because they had to struggle so hard to pursue their education and achieve entry into the public service, they fiercely defend the universalist norms of a meritocratic order. It remains to be seen whether the younger generation of Dagara that has grown up in an urban, multiethnic environment with educational privileges provided by the professional positions of their parents will develop a different outlook.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the career trajectories of a group of public servants from the Upper West Region as well as their views on professional ethics and images of a worthy bureaucrat. The assumption underlying this focus on personal careers and perspectives is that particularly in a bureaucracy where systems of incentives and sanctions are somewhat weakly institutionalised, the bureaucrats’ personal attitudes and behaviour make a difference. Most of the public servants whom I interviewed were not ‘street level bureaucrats’, but had senior positions in their respective departments, and were responsible for managing the work of sometimes several hundred officials and employees. In other words: my interviewees’ perspectives on the state, the public good, and what constitutes an upright public servant are potentially influential, and to a certain degree shape the management culture in their institutions. This is in line with what organisational theorists like Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn, for instance, have argued. Organisational effectiveness, they contend, depends not only on the personnel’s ‘dependability of role performance’, but also on non-routine behaviour that goes beyond the expected and prescribed duties and helps to achieve the organisation’s goals in the face of unavoidable contingencies (quoted in Price 1975: 22-3). Such ‘spontaneous behavior in the service of organizational goals’ (Price 1975: 24) is more likely to occur when the bureaucrats not only pride themselves on their status and rank within their respective institutions, but actively identify with the latter’s goals.

My research was not aimed at analysing the public servants’ actual behaviour, but understanding their self-perceptions – how they evaluate their professional trajectory in the public service and their own role vis-à-vis the state. Nevertheless, my interest in these perceptions was guided by the assumption that a person’s actions are not entirely unrelated to his or her norms, both official and pragmatic. Furthermore, many of the work-related stories that I was told probably form part of the repertoire of narratives and images that circulate among my interviewees’ peer groups within and beyond the bureaucracy. These stories and judgments are part of what Michèle Lamont (1992) has called ‘boundary work’ and create a web of collective normative orientations. By distinguishing between ‘we’, the worthy public servants, and ‘they’, the corrupt employees, politicians or clients, who all expect particularistic favours, these narratives reinforce, or discourage, certain behaviours by associating them with ‘honour’ or ‘shame’.

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