Multi-Sited Ethnography

Problems and Possibilities in the Translocation of Research Methods

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6 'What Do You Call the Heathen These Days?'

For and Against Renewal in the Norwegian Mission Society

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INTRODUCTION: NMS IS IN RENEWAL

'NMS is in renewal. We've heard it for so long now that we'll soon begin to believe it'. This wry remark was made from the stage one morning at the General Assembly of the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS) in the summer of 1999, and the ensuing laughter and exchange of glances showed that the delegate on the stage had struck a chord with the audience. Since the mid-1990s, the phrase 'NMS is in renewal' has become so commonplace within NMS that when used as a parody everyone 'gets the joke'; the 1,000 or so gathered in the hall that morning all recognized the phrase as the catch-word reference to a whole set of events and ideas, evoking wide-ranging associations and emotions among the audience.

I find this 'renewal' fascinating. I first encountered its emotional undertones at the General Assembly in 1999. I then discovered some of its striking disjunctures when I carried out discourse analysis of almost 200 articles and 45 editorials from NMS's magazine, *Misjonstidende* (literally 'mission tidings', MT) from the period 1997 to 2000 (Hovland 2001). Finally, I made the link between interpreting the renewal strategy and using multi-sited ethnography when I was engaged in a one-year period of fieldwork in NMS from 2003 to 2004 and was struggling to define my 'field'. During my fieldwork, the organization had a head office in Stavanger, Norway; nine local offices in other towns across Norway; around 2,500 so-called 'mission groups' throughout Norway that donated funds to the organization; 12 field offices in 12 countries around the world; and staff in each of these countries who were based not just at the field office but also throughout the country. In sum, the organization is typical of international development or mission organizations: it is a disparate set of points spread out across the world map.

I started to think of my field as a web of connections and associations between these points. But the most important thing I learned in this respect was that the significance of the web does not lie in whatever geographic lines of connections I could make. Instead, the significance lies in whatever

connections and associations exist in people's heads. Elsewhere I have examined how these connections produce flows of different meanings within the organizational system of NMS—even quite 'disconnected' meanings—in relation to one of the most important figures in NMS, namely the figure of 'the missionary' (Hovland 2009). In the present chapter I shall examine some of the same connections and associations, this time in relation to the 'renewal' agenda in NMS. I will do so by focusing on a few linguistic terms used in NMS—first some of the mission metaphors that they use, and then their use of the term 'heathen'.[1] In this way I hope to draw out some of the ways in which different groups of people in NMS think and act from different sites, and how they often do so in explicit relation to other sites within the organization. I use the term 'site' here as a layered concept; sites in NMS are geographical, spread out across the world map, but they are also related to organizational hierarchies and spaces. By focusing on NMS's strategy of renewal, I will sketch out some aspects of people's own 'site awareness' within NMS.

First, what is this 'renewal' about? NMS is a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Norway, with connections to the Lutheran church, that carries out both mission activity and development work in several countries across the world. Like many other Western Protestant mission societies, NMS has recently come to the harsh realization that they need to make some changes in order to survive in today's society—including changes in their strategy and public relations. While they wish to retain their Christian evangelization activity, they are aware that spiritual truth-statements that claim universal authority—e.g. that everyone should become Christian—are largely seen as morally dubious in Western, post-modern society—even unethical—and provoke accusations of ideological imperialism. In response to this, NMS, along with several other Western Protestant mission agencies, has entered into a phase characterized by frustration, a certain amount of panic and a sense of 'crisis', as well as a will to think innovatively and to redefine their mandate. Mission societies that wish to renew themselves will sometimes argue that the imperialistic connotations to mission were an offshoot of the 'Enlightenment paradigm', and that it is now time to move into a 'postmodern paradigm' of mission that emphasizes more palatable concepts such as dialogue, mutual learning, and partnership (cf. the theoretical basis for this shift provided by Bosh 1991; Küng 1989; Newbigin 1978).

NMS has followed this trend and has officially been 'in renewal' since 1995. As senior members of staff in NMS told me when I conducted some interviews with them in 2000: 'We are in the middle of a big turn-around process here', and, 'It is an enormous job to turn around the way of thinking [within the organization]'. In using the term 'to turn around', they imply not only the need to turn in a different direction strategically but also the perceived need to turn their gaze from the traditional mission 'fields' to include engagement with their own Western society. However, the story of

renewal and turning around does not seem to be used by all members of NMS. At the same time as I was talking to members of the leadership about their vision and strategy of renewal, I was told by other members of staff—sometimes with a smile, sometimes with an overbearing shrug—that: 'The leadership use many big words', or that, 'Change and renewal within NMS is nothing new, they were concerned with this in the '70s as well. There may be too much change sometimes'.

I shall have to limit my discussion here to the issue of what I might loosely call 'strategy awareness' within NMS, including how people at different sites within the organization frame their own stories of what the organization is about. In this way this study bears some similarity to Roe's (1991) analysis of different development narratives that are used to account for uncertainty. I will not here be able to compare strategy formulation with implementation. But by focusing only on strategy awareness this time, I aim to show something of what strategy is for the people who order their work around it—in this case: what strategy is for the people in NMS. In this way I hope to maintain a 'close-up perspective . . . [and] to discover new paths of connection and association by which traditional ethnographic concerns with agency, symbols, and everyday practices can continue to be expressed on a differently configured spatial canvas' (Marcus 1995: 98). I shall start by outlining different appropriations (and non-appropriations) of the 'renewal' strategy in NMS through discussing my findings from the articles in NMS's magazine from 1997 to 2000, focusing especially on the use of mission metaphors by different groups in NMS. Following this, I shall briefly turn to my fieldwork period and give some examples of how the 'renewal' strategy was related to by looking at a different linguistic question, namely how the term 'heathen' is used by different groups in NMS. In conclusion, I will draw out what this case can tell us about the advantages and limitations of using multi-sited ethnography in order to understand organizational strategy.

MISSION METAPHORS

The different tensions that accompany a period of crisis and renewal in NMS manifest themselves clearly in the use of metaphors in NMS's magazine. I will therefore present a few examples of metaphors used in the articles and editorials that I examined from the magazine. I looked at all the articles concerning Africa that were published in NMS's magazine from January 1997 to August 2000 (196 in all). These articles were mainly written by or about missionaries, i.e. the field staff of NMS. I also looked at the editorials in the magazine in the same period (45 in all). My understanding of the articles and editorials was backed up by interviews and conversations with the leadership and other staff at NMS's head office in 2000.

It is worth bearing in mind that the NMS magazine is the main source of information from the missionaries and the NMS head office to the

'grassroots' of the organization in Norway—i.e. members and others who provide financial contributions. As Repstad points out, 'subscribers [to the mission magazine] have invested time, money, interest and identity in the mission, and are concerned to see what effects their efforts have had' (1974:1). The NMS magazine had around 14,500 subscribers in 2000. It must be noted that it is written only in Norwegian. In other words, its contents are specifically aimed at the Norwegian support base of NMS. In addition, the magazine reaches a wider audience in Norway since it conveys 'the official opinion of NMS', and as such it is also 'written for our critics, so that they can see what to criticize', as one staff member told me. The way these various expectations silently frame the stories presented in NMS's magazine is best shown through a brief example, and for this purpose I have chosen a story about the Bara, who live in south-west Madagascar.

In the autumn of 1998 something unusual happened among the Bara, to whom NMS has been sending Norwegian missionaries since the late nineteenth century. Within NMS, the Bara have traditionally been considered a 'hard' people to reach with the gospel. But in 1998, a Bara woman had a vision of Jesus and was then endowed with tremendous charisma and a deep conviction that she would be the one to bring the Bara people to Christ. Word about this woman, known as Mama Christine, quickly spread throughout the area. People flocked to Mama Christine in large crowds, many were helped with physical or spiritual problems, and a whole host was baptized within a short period of time.

The story of this event among the Bara was communicated to NMS members in Norway through several issues of the NMS magazine. Two excerpts follow; the first is taken from a conversation that one of the Norwegian missionaries in Madagascar had with Mama Christine. In this conversation he reports:

> The Bara strongly *resist* the gospel, says Mama Christine, and tells of the work to reach the Bara people with the Word of God[. . .]—This is the old area of the mission [says Mama Christine], you have worked and *sowed* here for many years. And now the Bara are *opening up* too! [. . .][After the revival,] people stopped drinking, gave away their magical instruments, and started doing useful things in the village instead. These are powerful witnesses of *life* and genuineness. (MT 10/1999, my emphasis)

I have italicized the metaphors used by the author. The second excerpt is taken from the next issue of the magazine, where the missionary author describes how the Christian revival has transformed the village:

> A little over a year ago there was not a single Christian in the village. Digny and the other medicine men held the village in their *grip*. There was no school for the children, and among the adults only a few could

> read. Village parties with both old and young raving around drunk were commonplace | . . . | Here too in many respects *night has become dawn*. People are taking on responsibility, the children are cared for, the liquor trade is floundering, married couples are talking to each other, the fear of the ancestors is *losing some of its grip*. (MT 11/1999, my emphasis)

The missionary author uses a number of metaphors to convey his message: 1) 'resistance' versus 'openness' (the Bara resisted, but now they are opening up); 2) the mission 'field' (where the missionaries have sowed); 3) from 'death' to 'life'; 4) being 'caught' and made 'free' (including being caught in the 'grip' of medicine men and in the 'grip' of fear of ancestors); and 5) 'darkness and light' (or 'night and dawn'). The five metaphors highlighted in these excerpts represent five of the eight main metaphors that I found to be in use in NMS's magazine from January 1997 to August 2000. The mission authors naturally assume that the readers of the magazine are acquainted with these. The remaining three metaphors that were used a number of times were: 6) 'the way' or 'walking together with'; 7) 'the good fight'; and 8) 'the unreached' (though I will not discuss these in this chapter). Other metaphors that were used only once or twice were: 'the shepherd' (twice), 'the triumphal procession' (twice), 'the great banquet' (once), 'one body, many parts' (once), and 'the talents' (once).

In order to unpack these mission metaphors further, let me look more closely at one of them, namely the metaphor of the mission 'field'. As Mama Christine reportedly said, the missionaries have been 'sowing' among the Bara for a long time. The basic plot of the mission field metaphor-story goes as follows: The 'seed' is the Word 'sown' by the missionary-sowers. The African soil, the mission 'field', is then hoped to bear 'fruit' in the form of converts to Christianity. As the number of converts and the church 'grow', the missionaries can collect the 'harvest'. The majority of the references to this metaphor-story in NMS's magazine cast the missionaries themselves in the role of the sower agent and places the mission field in Africa. For example: 'At the moment they are experiencing great revivals in Baraland. That which has been *sowed* through many years [by the missionaries], without visible results, is now *sprouting and growing*!' (MT 2/2000, my emphasis). The metaphor of sowing and growth is used to paint a picture of mission as an activity where inputs from the outside (seeds sown by the Norwegian missionaries, perhaps even a century ago) stimulate development inside Africa (Christian revivals). Despite the fact that the revival among the Bara in 1998 was triggered by a Bara woman, Mama Christine, the long-term input from the missionaries is highlighted as a crucial causal factor in the story.

The other four metaphors highlighted in the excerpts above all refer to the same basic story of cause and effect. They describe and justify the activity of mission by pointing to the dramatic changes that it brings about in

the lives of people. As the metaphors used in the story about the Bara show, for example, people who became Christian in the Bara revival are conceptualized as moving from 'resistance' to 'openness', from (spiritual) 'death' to new 'life' or to genuine 'life', from 'bondage'—in the 'grip' of fear and in the 'grip' of medicine men—to 'freedom', and, finally, from 'darkness' to 'light'—'night has become dawn'.

From these examples, it is possible to see that a metaphor describes one object or process by comparing it to another. At this point it may be helpful to distinguish between metaphors and similes. The main difference between the two is that metaphors create resemblance by using the verb 'is' (to be), while similes use the phrase 'is like'. In other words, while a simile would say, for example: 'The change brought about by the Christian revival in the village *is like* the change from night to dawn', the metaphor simply says: 'The Christian revival in the village *is* turning night into dawn'. The power of the metaphor stems from the fact that it no longer explicitly acknowledges that the image of night and dawn is make-believe; instead, night and dawn are treated as if they were literal realities. Of course, all the readers of the mission magazine will be aware that the Bara village was not literally enveloped in darkness prior to the Christian revival. Yet in a very real sense the metaphor of night and dawn claims that the Bara village *was* in darkness and that the Bara villagers who are not yet Christians *are* in reality still living in darkness. The metaphor's created resemblance says something about the 'really real' or the underlying reality of the world (Ricoeur 1977).

Metaphors also say something about what ought to be done about this underlying reality. They often become guides for action. As Bevans (1991) argues, metaphorical images are not simply interesting picture words; they are really concentrated theologies of mission. The metaphors used in the story about the Bara communicate a mission strategy by implicitly referring to what things were like among the Bara before the missionaries came (there was resistance, hard soil, lack of life, darkness or night, and bondage) and at the same time referring to what the missionaries brought with them (the ability to open what is closed, seeds, new life or genuine life, light or dawn, and freedom from bondage). These metaphors clearly indicate what kind of mission strategy is desirable: a one-way process of giving and teaching, where the Norwegian missionaries give and teach, while the Bara villagers receive and learn. The metaphors themselves may be small phrases or even just words, but they refer to big stories.

It seems fair to assume that the way metaphors are used in articles in the NMS magazine, and the underlying stories they refer to, say something about the worldview of the (missionary) author. However, it is worth adding that this conclusion is problematic if left on its own. The articles in the magazine provide a space that enables the missionaries to communicate. This space is limited by expectations of what the missionary ought to be doing out there in the mission field (i.e. saving people) and perceptions of

what constitutes legitimate stories and writing styles (Repstad 1974). The complexity of the writing situation is further underlined by the awareness that the image portrayed in the NMS magazine is crucial in 'selling' the mission to ensure financial contributions from the readers. It is therefore worth noting that the metaphors may partly be painting the missionary's own image and partly the image of the imagined readers that the missionary bears in mind when writing (Skeie 2001).

THE 'RENEWED' USE OF METAPHORS IN NMS

The metaphors from NMS's magazine that I have discussed so far have been used within a worldview where mission is the event that takes place when a Norwegian missionary, endowed with knowledge of the truth and the capacity to act, travels from the West out to the mission field in Africa (or Latin America or Asia or the Middle East). However, as noted above, NMS's renewal strategy entails a shift away from this traditional missiological worldview and towards a new understanding of mission. Interestingly, this renewal is reflected in a new way of using old metaphors in the magazine—at least by some authors.

For example, in 1999 the General Secretary of NMS travelled to Madagascar and visited the area of the Bara. Afterwards, he reported his impressions of the Bara revival in an editorial in the magazine. He wrote:

> Perhaps our [Western] worldview *closes off* the possibility of certain experiences [. . .] This visit to Madagascar tells me more than ever that we have a lot to learn from the spiritual *life* and the spiritual experience our Malagasy friends represent. We are approaching a time when we must find new ways of organizing mission practice (MT 10/1999, my emphasis).

This brief editorial comment frames the Bara revival quite differently from the story excerpts discussed earlier. Instead of emphasizing the role played by Norwegian missionaries, the General Secretary instead focused on the role played by the local Malagasy church and the assessment of the revival made by local Christian leaders. Even more interestingly, in the General Secretary's editorial the focus is not on the changes that had taken place among the Bara—'night has become dawn', and so on—but instead on the changes that need to take place in NMS and in the Church of Norway. In his account, the people who are closed off (or resisting openness) and who lack life are not the Bara villagers but NMS. The people who need to learn and who need help are not the Baras but the Norwegians.

A few months later, another member of the top leadership group of NMS expanded on this theme in another editorial. He wrote about the need to shift towards new ways of thinking about mission:

> Through this change in our worldview, the experiences that Christians in the Two Thirds World have of the Christian faith will have a larger impact on churches in the West. This can lead to a *renewal* of our faith and our experiences [. . .] [We need to] *open up* to the spiritual experiences of our brothers and sisters and perhaps prepare for *new growth* in our Western churches. Mission societies have a job to do in facilitating the exchange of spiritual experiences between different cultures and contexts (MT 3/2000, my emphasis).

What is interesting about these two quotes is that they develop a new framework of seeing mission, and that they do so by using the old metaphors but with new meanings attached. In the earlier story excerpts, metaphors were used to imply that there was a need for spiritual growth among the Bara. In the editorials, on the other hand, metaphors are used to put forward the argument that there is a need 'for *new growth* in our Western churches' (MT 3/2000, my emphasis). The new use of the metaphors rewrites the target group or object of change. The mission 'field' is no longer located only in Africa but is rather seen as 'the whole world' (editorial, MT 1/1999)—including Norway. The metaphors are no longer used only to describe the (deficient) situation in Africa but instead are used to describe the (deficient) situation within NMS or the Norwegian church: '[Let us admit to] NMS and the [Norwegian] Church's lack of inner spiritual *life* [. . .] In this [confession] lies the *seed* to change and *new life*' (editorial, MT 3/1998, my emphasis). Or: 'We [NMS] too can become *caught* in the importance of our own history and our safe thought-patterns [. . .] This requires that we *renew* our focus on listening' (editorial, MT 8/1999, my emphasis). The metaphors of life, growth, and bondage are used to express a theme of critical self-examination and a need for change within NMS. This orientation implies a different image of what mission is and a more equal relationship between Africans and Norwegians, illustrated by the terms 'exchange' or 'dialogue'—two of the words used frequently by the NMS leadership to explain their position.

When examining the use of metaphors in NMS's magazine, I found that a little over two thirds of the references to the five most frequently used metaphors were framed in the traditional way (as in the earlier excerpts from the story about the Bara village), while almost one third were framed in the 'renewal' way (as illustrated by the editorial comments above). Of the smaller selection of texts that used the metaphors in a renewal way, a full four fifths were written by members of the top leadership group in NMS, a group of six people over this period (including the General Secretary, senior heads of policy and the Chair of the Board). In other words, the majority of people who send in texts to be published in the magazine—most of whom are previous or current missionaries—use metaphors in the traditional way to explain and legitimate their mission stories as illustrated in the story about the Bara revival written by a Norwegian missionary in Madagascar.

On the other hand, when the top leadership at the NMS head office in Stavanger, Norway, write editorials for NMS's magazine, they are more likely to use metaphors in a new way to support their agenda of renewal.

Let me return briefly to the NMS General Assembly in 1999, mentioned in the introduction, to illustrate the politics associated with this use of renewed meanings attached to old metaphors in NMS. At the General Assembly in 1999, the leadership of NMS put forward plans to reduce the number of Norwegian missionaries sent out by the mission society from around 200 to 125–150. This seemed a logical step, following their emphasis on reciprocity and the acknowledgment that mission activity was not solely the privilege of Western missionaries any longer. However, the novelty and almost radical quality of this idea became apparent as it sparked a protracted debate among the delegates to the General Assembly. The Assembly was attended by around 1,000 people variously connected to NMS, the vast majority of whom were Norwegian. As they discussed the proposed reduction, it became increasingly clear that the grassroots of NMS clearly wanted to have more, not fewer, Norwegian missionaries (also described in Hovland 2009).

The picture of mission that most of the delegates at the General Assembly had in their minds seemed to be the traditional picture according to which a Norwegian missionary travels overseas to share the gospel with people who have not yet heard or not fully understood it. As all the traditional metaphors show, good things happen when a Norwegian missionary arrives on the scene, and if a Norwegian missionary is not sent then the good things probably will not happen—the Africans will remain resistant, spiritually dead, in darkness, and so on. Thus at the General Assembly, the suggestion of the leadership to reduce the number of Norwegian missionaries was challenged. An amendment, stating that NMS would work to increase the number of Norwegian missionaries instead, was suggested by a delegate and voted in by a majority. The leadership of NMS, however, has considerable room for maneuver, and they proceeded to reduce the number of Norwegian missionaries and to write this reduction into their long-term plans anyway (e.g. NMS 2000).

What does all this organizational maneuvering tell us about different sites within NMS? It tells us that the use of common metaphors both serves to forge connections between different sites in NMS—such as the head office in Stavanger and the missionaries in Madagascar (not to mention the NMS members spread out across Norway, who read information written by the missionaries in NMS's magazine)—but the use of common metaphors also serves to differentiate these sites and set them apart. In NMS, the same metaphors can be used to represent mission in different and even contradictory ways. Moreover, the different meanings attached to the metaphors also imply different and contradictory plans for action and for organizational strategy. However, this does not mean that the metaphors disintegrate and fragment into uselessness. Certain metaphors in NMS, such as

the 'mission field', are so ingrained in the way of thinking within NMS that they serve as focal points to connect and unify disparate meanings and mission strategies, acting as bridges across different sites within the organization. And verbal symbols such as 'light and darkness', for example, seem to be experienced as so historically laden and emotionally powerful for people in NMS, across all sites, that they are ready to remain loyal to the symbol itself, regardless of whether it is used with one meaning or different, contradictory meanings. But, more politically, it is not difficult to see that metaphors are (unintentionally or intentionally) used in struggles over strategy in NMS, by groups who think and act from different locations—whether from Madagascar or from different organizational spaces in Norway. In this way the metaphors also become manifestations of power relations and conflict within the organization, rather than expressions of consensus or loyalty. It is important for people in NMS to use the right metaphors and to use them in certain ways in order to position themselves. A certain use of metaphors provides legitimacy in certain sites.

THE HEATHEN

Let me turn now to a few examples of the way that the renewal agenda was still being worked out across different sites within NMS during my fieldwork in 2003–2004. Instead of examining metaphors this time, I will examine a different linguistic question that is pertinent in NMS, namely what to call one of their target groups: the 'heathen'. One of the overarching aims of NMS is to bring their church and development projects to the heathen, but for reasons of political correctness, the heathen are no longer called the heathen. The term 'heathen' was in fact taken out of NMS's bylaws and policy documents as early as the mid-1960s and replaced by the term 'peoples of the world', but the shift away from using the term 'heathen' informally within NMS did not seem to come about until the late 1980s or 1990s, simultaneously with the shift towards the renewal agenda. This raises interesting questions of site awareness. Let me use just three brief episodes from my fieldwork year to illustrate this.

The first episode is from the NMS head office staff retreat in November 2003, at which NMS had hired in a management consultant to talk about the nature of organizations. In his talk he was making a point about an organization's customers, and he asked the assembled staff: 'What do *you* call your customers?' The room was quiet. He tried again, and, hoping to provoke an answer from the audience, he asked: 'What do you call the heathen these days?' Still nobody answered. It was a funny moment because I am sure everyone in the room knew the group that he was talking about and was able to conceptualize it for themselves—and yet nobody dared to throw out a label for this group in front of all the other staff. Finally, one man, in something of a cop-out and in order to break the awkward silence,

said out loud: 'We now call them "the target group",' and the pause was eased by general laughter.

The second episode occurred a few months later, when I went to Madagascar to interview NMS staff there—the missionaries. They were aware that I had come straight from the NMS head office in Stavanger and that I would be going straight back there. They knew that I was not employed by NMS, that I was asking questions, and that if they told me what the world looked like to them I would write it down and that, just possibly, at some stage in the future someone might read it. In their answers to me they played on all this awareness—their system awareness, if you like, or their attempts and ability to quickly situate me in these systems. So they would, for example, sometimes answer my questions about head office policy in either a very pointedly positive manner or in a pointedly critical manner—as a means to situate themselves in relation to me, perhaps indirectly hoping to use me to influence the head office in some way or simply as a means to communicate their unspoken site and system awareness—because this is important to them.

Thus I asked one missionary, in our interview, what she would do if she were suddenly given the opportunity to make all policy decisions in NMS. She said she would employ more (Norwegian) missionaries. She explained that the Malagasy say: 'We are only heathen, we need more missionaries'—and then she looked straight at me and pointed out, in case I had missed it: 'I use the word "heathen", because they use it about themselves'. Now, she was fully aware that the official policy of NMS no longer refers to the heathen and that the term does not sit well with the leadership's strategy of renewal in Stavanger. At one level, therefore, this missionary in Madagascar was very obviously using the word 'heathen' because she knew that I knew that she was not supposed to use it. Beyond this, I think she was also using it because it expressed something significant about what she saw as the heart of her work. She felt that she was closer to the Malagasies than the head office staff in Stavanger, and that she was able to express this by subtly and indirectly commenting on the official policy. By using the term 'heathen', she was able to situate herself in a position of critique in relation to the head office in Stavanger and to the organizational strategy of renewal. She was also able to situate herself in closer proximity to the Malagasy and to her own understanding of her role in Madagascar.

The third episode occurred when I returned to the head office in Stavanger after my trip to Madagascar. I had a brief conversation with one of the high-level policy staff, and I said I had been surprised to find that the term 'heathen' was still used by missionaries. He did not seem surprised, but he—just like the missionary in Madagascar—had placed me in his system awareness, and, just like her, he knew fairly exactly what I was expecting to hear from him. So he shook his head and commented on the use of 'heathen' in his best laconic mode: 'And it's been strictly forbidden for ten years now!' he said. And then he added: 'We do see that as a challenge

from here. Not to say a problem.' This shows another side of organizational strategy in NMS: it enables policymakers to locate (in fact, to site) 'problematic' elements within their organization and to draw a clearer line of differentiation between 'challenges' and corresponding 'solutions' within the organization.

In sum, multi-sited ethnography does not just add together different perspectives on the policy on heathen in NMS. Rather, it challenges our very understanding of how this policy functions, how it is given significance, and how we can examine it. The renewal agenda, including the official shift away from using the term 'heathen', is a tool for the head office to guide staff within their organization regarding what position they would like them to take. Conversely, it has in some cases become a tool for staff to site themselves in relation (and in opposition) to the head office strategy. It is a tool for defining 'problems' within the organization from the head office, but at the same time it is also subverted by some missionaries in order to site themselves as the people 'in the frontline' and 'in the know', while the head office is framed as more irrelevant to 'the real work' that is carried out.

This gives us an insight into one aspect of organizational strategy—namely its contested nature—that is not always immediately visible from a single site. In this sense the case of NMS can be read as a contribution to other literature that also critically examines organizational policies and plans in NGOs in order to draw out their nonlinearity. Long and van der Ploeg (1989), for example, critique the notion of organizational intervention as a straightforward process and instead suggest that we need to identify 'the types of arenas, interface struggles, negotiations and transformations that take place' (238). And Suzuki (1998) shows that conflicts and tensions over policies between the head office and field offices is not uncommon in international NGOs. Mosse (2005) takes this debate one step further by suggesting that organizational policy still serves an important, though counter-intuitive, purpose. He draws a picture of a UK development project in India in which development policy did not serve as a guide for implementation. On the contrary, what was implemented served as a guide for policy, which from time to time was formulated in form and language that was deemed an appropriate system of representations for funders in London, and which would successfully act as an exchange commodity in return for further funding to the project.

In fact, as the controversy over Mosse's book shows—in the attempts to have it substantially changed and to delay and hinder its publication (Mosse 2006)—policy is sometimes deeply important to the people concerned in a way, I would argue, that goes beyond the issue of a system of representations or an exchange commodity. Organizational policy, even though we are not used to thinking about it in this way, can be personally important to staff in many international development or mission organizations. Not because it tells them what to do; often, in fact, it may be distinctly difficult

for them to do what policy says they should do. At other times policy may be important precisely because it gives them the opportunity to register what the official policy is and then demonstratively not to do it. Multi-sited ethnography shows us that organizational staff sometimes need to have an official organizational strategy in order to have something to disagree with, something to site themselves in relation to, within their system, and something that allows them to (defiantly) articulate what for them is at the heart of their work. But above all, I think policy is important because it enables people to think who they are within their system—through their siting of themselves in relation to the policy system, or the policy field, of their organization. Like me, they too continuously try to find out what the policy field is. And multi-sited ethnography in turn enables us as anthropologists to get at this site and system awareness that people live within.

CONCLUSION: MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY

I have spoken about the connections and associations—and disjunctures—between different sites within NMS that multi-sited ethnography makes visible. Multi-sited ethnography enables us to rethink the relationship among places, projects, and sources of knowledge (Des Chene 1997:81). It opens up spaces that may otherwise be invisible from the single site. Therefore, although multi-sited ethnography gives the researcher less time—and less depth of interpretation—at each specific site, the method may overall give a researcher on organizational strategy more depth of interpretation than one would otherwise have. Multi-sited ethnography gives the researcher a deeper understanding of what strategy is 'from the native's point of view'. Strategy awareness is part of the unspoken and the everyday across all sites of an international organization like NMS. And some of the distinctive marks of ethnography are precisely to capture the unspoken and the everyday, and to attempt to see these from people's own point of view. If the unspoken and everyday perception of strategy is examined from only one site, the examination will in some ways run the risk of remaining superficial. Multi-sited ethnography brings out the shifting strategic sensibilities within an organization that always desires to do the impossible.

This leads me to a concluding point concerning method. In my opinion, when multi-sited ethnography is used in order to 'follow an idea', as I have done in NMS, it may be important not to emphasize the 'multi' of 'multi-sited ethnography' too much. Let me explain. Elsewhere I argue that multi-sited ethnography is most amenable to ethnographic interpretations of flows of ideas when the connections between the sites are not seen as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, which fit neatly together, but rather are viewed as aspects of an incomplete whole that the researcher gradually gains deeper—and more partial—insights into (Hovland 2009). Here I wish to make the related point that if we see multi-sited ethnography simply as a

collection of multiple sites (1 site + 1 site + 1 site = multi-sited ethnography), then it is easy to slip into a situation where we examine connections that we have constructed, but which are not important to the people we are studying, and which are not a part of their unspoken, everyday world. Multi-sited ethnography is not just something that helps us to add together perspectives from multiple sites, but instead it forces us to change perspective. Multi-sited ethnography is about the very question of what a 'site' is in ethnographic research. It does not just give us two or three categories to compare instead of one; it questions our ways of constructing categories in the first place. And in the case of organizational strategy, it gives us a better understanding of what strategy is 'from the native's point of view'—the natives in this case being the organizational policymakers and the staff who are expected to follow their strategic vision and policies.

Therefore, if we shift the emphasis from 'multi' to 'sited' and see multi-sited ethnography as an examination of people's own site and system awareness, then we are closer to gaining a deeper ethnographic—and both rewarding and provocative—interpretation of flows within an organization, including organizational strategy. In the case of NMS, for example, this includes linking the perspective of some people in Norway (such as the delegates to the General Assembly) to the perspective of missionaries in Madagascar and juxtaposing this with the perspective of other people in Norway (such as the leadership at the head office). Just as people in NMS do not see the geographical site of Norway as a singular site, but as a site internally divided because of the relationship to another site, namely Madagascar, ethnographers need to be open to conceptualizing sites in different ways depending on the case in question. In this way multi-sited ethnography gives us a method that both makes us recognize our own site awareness and makes us more able to explore the site awareness of those we are writing about.

NOTES

An earlier version of the section on metaphors was published in 2001, in Norwegian, in *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjon* 55 (2):67–86.

1. Heathen is 'hedning' in Norwegian.

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