

Development:

To Hold on or To Let Go

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Stepping out of a four cedi taxi ride, the sensory overload of the Makola Market in Accra, Ghana greeted us. Smells of smoked fish, sewage, Cayan pepper, and freshly churned peanut butter characterized this maze of local foods, household items, and women with children on their backs and baskets on their heads. We were greeted with “hellos”, funny looks, and blunt questions about ourselves, our relationships, and our homes. After getting lost somewhere in the middle of all the chaos, we were stopped by a gentleman who’s wife, children, and friends all spent long days in the market together. For three days, I went back to that place to spend time with Aui and his beautiful young daughter Mariama. Aui told me about his hopes and dreams for his eldest daughter. Attempting to navigate feelings of hope and pride as well as sadness, Aui shared with me that Mariama would be living in New Jersey with her grandmother in order to receive a Western education in just a few short years. I wondered: why not send her earlier so the adjustment to the United States would not be so difficult? When I inquired about this, Aui told me that he did not want her to forget him or where she comes from. Mariama’s playground, her home, her family, and her means of survival all existed in the market. When I realized this, all of a sudden the smells became less intrusive, the market less intimidating, and the questions more of a comfort. I watched Aui struggle with the thought of his only daughter leaving while simultaneously feeling an immense pride that he could give her something better than what *he* thought she would get from growing up in Accra. The last day I spent there, Mariama took my hand and walked me through the market to the Tro Tro station where we would part for the last time. Only four years old, she looked at me with eyes that she knew would probably never see me again. I have an immense amount of hope for this little girl and the honor she will bring to her family. Her story made me question what the price of development is—what we all must sacrifice in order for wealth to accumulate. In Mariama’s case, being sent to New Jersey is her

father's attempt to give her a chance to accumulate a wealth of knowledge and opportunities. But she will have to sacrifice her home and the sight of her friends and parents every day. Likewise, her father will have to live knowing that he will not get to see his daughter grow up.

All people struggle with the transition from where we come from to where we want to go. Sometimes it is saying goodbye to the ones we love or breaking away from tradition. Sometimes it is learning where the line between the celebrated past and the potential for a better future lies. When we looked at Ghana, many of us saw abject poverty; when I looked at Ghana I saw pride, culture, and fierce loyalty to family and community. Ghana is currently in a huge state of transition and everyone feels that change from the government all the way down to the smallest child. Development has a price for individuals, families, communities, and nations. Ghanains are struggling with how to hold on to the beautiful culture and the triumph of independence they earned and develop into a nation that can have some bearing on the world stage economically, politically, and socially. But I wonder what we lose in the pursuit of our dreams for ourselves and how the people who must let us go grapple with our absence. Several weeks later India led me to some answers.

After hours in the back seat of a white Honda, we arrived in Jaipur, India. Meeting our couch surfing host, Amit, for the first time meant meeting several of his co-workers, being given the keys to his car to let ourselves in, and a short drive to his home. Meeting Amit's beautiful family meant becoming a part of it. Over homemade Indian rice and Masala Tea, Amit shared with us that he left his village to work in the city of Jaipur without telling his father or anyone else. Coming from a strict traditional family, this changed, perhaps forever, Amit's relationship with his father. Amit also told us about his arranged marriage with his wife Neelu, as his father did not approve of the five year relationship Amit had built with a woman below their caste.

When we asked Amit how he felt about his choice, he expressed that Neelu was wonderful and his father knew best. The legacy of the caste system lingers in India, as it is still quite significant for those who come from Amit's village. Early the next morning, Neelu dressed me in traditional Indian clothes and we joined her, Amit, and their nine-month old son Nick on a visit to the village Amit grew up in to celebrate a festival with his family. We spent the day touring the village and the fort it surrounds, visiting a newly built temple, and being followed around by a posse of local school-aged boys, most of whom had never seen a white person before.

How we define development is paramount to understanding the difficulty of moving forward from a past rich with tradition. Ghanaians and Indians face a similar struggle as they attempt to pull their way out of poverty and oppression. But unfortunately someone along the way will need to make a sacrifice. Aui is sacrificing the joys of fatherhood to contribute to the future of Ghana just as Amit sacrificed his relationship with his father to live a "better" life. Amit, however, had to toe a certain line. He had the experience being in the middle of the convergence of India's past and its future. He took a flying leap towards development when he left his village, but also held on to a deeply rooted cultural tradition by participating in a caste-driven arranged marriage. The personal sacrifices individuals make are the building blocks for national development. The questions most people face, however, are what must those sacrifices be? Should Aui have to sacrifice fatherhood in order for Mariama to reach her full potential? Should Amit have had to choose between his family's traditions and the possibility for a more modern lifestyle? As a BRIC nation, India finds itself in a crucial place on the international platform, but that development is contingent upon the personal sacrifices of Indian citizens. Ghanaians find themselves in the same difficult position, because if Ghana has any intentions of becoming a more developed nation by international standards, its people must learn how to

compete internationally and be recognized as legitimate leaders for the world. Perhaps this will start with sending ten small children like Mariama to get a Western education. But I ask then, what is so good about the West?



Churning peanut butter at the Makola Market; Accra, Ghana.



Saying, "Goodbye," to Mariama at the Makola Market; Accra, Ghana.



Local people living in Amit's village outside of Jaipur; India.



Posing with Amit and his family: Wife Neelu and son, Nick; Jaipur, India.