
31 Ghettoisation, migration or sexual connection? Negotiating survival among Gambian male youths

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Introduction

In The Gambia, successful livelihoods among youths are challenged by unemployment, underemployment, low employability due to limited skills, early school drop-out, high inflation rates and fledging groundnut prices (DoSFEA, 2006: 24; Heintz et al., 2008: 23–9; Jones and Chant, 2009). Important national policy frameworks such as the National Youth Policy 1998–2008 and Poverty Reduction Strategy 2007–2011 highlight the significance of youth unemployment to national development.

In communities, adults and elders complain about contemporary young people suffering from delayed maturity and its disadvantages. Struggling against the current, youths either succumb to apocalyptic pronouncements of a cursed generation, or innovatively resist this marginalisation.

This chapter explores how male youths cope with failing livelihoods by fantasising about exodus, in publicly derided cliques, and examines how they (re)craft values of success amid poverty.

Methods and context

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork between 2003 and 2007 in rural and urban parts of The Gambia. The study aimed at obtaining emic perspectives. Data collection triangulated participant observation, individual interviews, focus group discussions and policy review.

The Gambia is the smallest country in West Africa. The predominantly youthful population is urbanising rapidly. The economy depends on agriculture, tourism and services. Islam is the main religion. The main ethnic groups are Mandinka, Wolof and Fula.

Socialising is a gendered activity in The Gambia, and in this instance I was particularly interested in young men who hung out with other young men in ‘the *voos*’.^{1,2}

Fashioning the *voos*

The concept of ‘the *voos*’ – a colloquial term locally defined by male youths as ‘a meeting place’, ‘a joint for hanging out’, ‘a hideout for chilling with my boys’ and ‘a place where we are on our own doing our own thing’ – was important to locate social spaces in which these youths freely congregated. The *voos* is a social rather than a geographical space, with fluid intangible rules of association, specific criteria of membership and patterns of etiquette. Often, a group of particular male youths congregate around a charcoal-stove brewing *attaya* (Chinese green tea), sit on *togals* or wooden stools, and begin to talk ‘boy-talk’. They could meet at a street-corner, backyard quarters of one member, the beach, on a balcony or in the sandy streets between houses. In the *voos*, they are free to be themselves: idle, restless, obscene, angry and daydreaming. Many youths openly

smoked marijuana (weed) and/or cigarettes, drank alcohol and shared stories of their sexual exploits. They also shared tips about getting employment, foreign-exchange rates, the latest car models, how to pass a visa interview, groundnut prices, the dominance of Nigerians and Ghanaians in the Gambian economy, the latest football craze, stories of nagging mothers, and so on. Frequently, they exchanged stories about their frustrations of life, fantasies about furnishing themselves a better lifestyle and strategies for attaining this betterment by migrating to the West. In the *voos*, these male youths expressed solidarity and support for each other. While hanging out in the *voos* and daydreaming with like-minded youths about accumulating untold wealth in the West, it is common practice to listen to reggae music, brew and drink *attaya*, and roll up their unkempt hair into dreadlocks. These practices are summed-up as ‘Nerves Syndrome’.³

To outsiders in society and critics involved in policy-making, sitting in the *voos* is stereotypically constructed as a dangerous pastime, a waste of youthful resources, idleness, illusory daydreaming, stress-inducing activity, an avenue for associating with social misfits and hence learning bad morals. Some parents of urban youths freely expressed discontent:

They afford money for music cassettes and batteries, but they cannot even buy a small piece of soap for the compound. I don’t know where they get this money. (Ma Fatou, Kotu)

Our youths are useless! They don’t want to work. They just sit chatting, chatting, chatting. We call it *wahatan rek* (just go to have a chat)! Better to go and look for a job because the parents who paid school-fees need to start getting some profits out of it. But they just sit chatting away their youthfulness. Allah help us! (Yayi Binta, Serrekunda)

Similar sentiments were expressed by the late director of the Gambian National Youth Service Scheme, Sebastian Njie:

These young men are crafty. They have a new *barada* (pot for brewing *attaya*), money for *attaya*, sugar and charcoal. But they will not help anyone. They just sit at home, eat food from the common bowl, and fold their hands. Just depending on their elders! Big able-bodied boys who are ready to go off to Babylon whatever which way! It is in these groups where they learn what to do.

Likewise in the public media, at open rallies and in cabinet, policymakers and youth development workers condemn this facet of Gambian youth subculture. ‘Hanging in *voos*’, ‘Nerves Syndrome’ and daydreaming about migrating to the West are criticised for encouraging a generation of laziness, promoting youth redundancy, and perpetuating dependency on a few over-burdened adults. Interviews with National Youth Council members revealed that youth policymakers and implementers associate the *voos* with petty crime, antisocial behaviour, juvenile delinquency and introduction to vices such as substance misuse, petty theft, pick-pocketing, hustling tourists, deception, sex tourism, drug or pornography peddling, and pimping. Even President Yahyah Jammeh in his national addresses regularly criticises youths who are idle, chat, drink *attaya* and think that wealth will somehow drop in their laps.

From the ghetto *voos* to Babylon: the role of social networks

Given this widespread opposition, why do youths maintain the *voos*? It was important to capture the youths’ own logic, and justifications for frequenting the *voos*.

It is a place where we get ideas about how to do to go to Babylon. Your boys share stories about so-and-so who did this, so-and-so who did that. And you learn from these examples. (Bojang, Talinding)

After the embassy refused me a visa, I was feeling real bad in my heart. I couldn't go anywhere else for comfort but then I went to my boys in the *voos*. We listened to the music of 'Burn down Babylon! Burn down Babylon!' as we puff-puff pass. And my boys consoled me to try again for another visa. *Billahi!* (Swear to God!) I felt the world was alright again. (Marcus, Kotu-Kololi)

For me, meeting the ghetto boys is necessary to maintain contact with others who travelled first. 'Yeah man', they call and say, 'now I am on the metro. Now I am on the escalator. Now I am touching on the snow'. Things like that which we do not have in The Gambia here. So it helps us to prepare for our turn of going. Even it makes you feel closer; much closer to Babylon. (Malick, Kotu)

When I don't hang out with my boys, where do you want me to be? If you stay with girls too much, people say you are like a woman. They call you *gor-jigen* (man-woman). Better to hang out with the boys in the ghetto than to be with the women and girls at home! (Ansumana, Bakoteh)

If you rub shoulders with boys wanting to go to Babylon you get sharpened up and you will go, deh! Definitely. They give you ideas about how to answer those mean officers at the embassy. And they can even connect you to a *Toubab* (white person) for a letter of invitation that you show at the visa office of the embassy. It is good for contacts, contacts, contacts. (Joof, Banjul)

Rather than a site festering with social vice, these urban male cliques were positively discussed by the male youths who participate in them. The *voos* were emically constructed as:

- a networking resource for reaching others of like mind
- a club of belonging where it was acceptable to be themselves
- a space for forging or drawing support and comfort for non-conformist behaviour
- a fertile site where dreams of Babylon were nurtured and experiences shared
- a ground for strategising against multiple systems, for example, the state, family, foreign embassies
- a source of relaxation and leisure, for example, music, games, conversation and daydreaming
- an avenue to vent frustration against self, the older generation and the establishment
- a masculine space where only females 'connected' to male members had temporary access
- a hub for generating or maintaining alternative livelihoods, for example, peddling, pimping, forging immigration documents, and fabricating plight stories to lure tourists.

In their attempts to beat looming poverty, many Gambian youths aspire towards migrating to 'Babylon' (Ebron, 2002; Gaibazzi, 2008; Jones and Chant, 2009; Nyanzi

et al., 2005). In focus group discussions, we jointly assessed options available to youths who tried their luck at prosperity by remaining in the country. The lists they mentioned always included cultivation, livestock rearing, wholesale import trade, retail petty trade, the service industry (specifically tourism), teaching and secretarial or computer services. Rarely did they consider professional employment such as law, medicine, nursing, dentistry, veterinary, social work, administration, engineering or architecture. When queried about this, they reasoned that their minimal educational attainment was a limiting factor. Similarly, very seldom did they mention microenterprises, although many Gambian youths are refashioning alternative livelihoods through this route. When I probed about this disjuncture, a common rejoinder was the lack of initial capital to embark on business.

It was interesting that many youths were willing to try their hands at meeting the costs of migrating to the West, and yet found the initial capital of investing in their own small-scale enterprises unaffordable. Families, friends and networks were able to pool resources to facilitate overseas travel (see Shipton, 1995), and yet seemed unable to invest the same resources in (a probably more viable) business in the youth's hometown or homeland. This contrast highlights the constructedness and situatedness of success and youth livelihoods in The Gambia. Shipton's (1995) study reveals the historicity of today's high value that society places on youths migrating to the West in the hope of making wealth. Many stories are recounted of (mostly male youths) risking their lives in illegal trafficking scams, attempting long trips by sea either in pirogues or on the cargo decks of ships, being smuggled in the back of long-distance trucks, travelling by land for many months through various Sahelian countries, sex tourism with the promise of emigration, and cross-generational sex with much older tourists in exchange for visa and air ticket. Narratives of deportation do not discourage them, but rather sharpen their resolve to make it and not get caught in the process.

For youths with ties to kin who can support accessing the much desired West, connections made in the *voos* were not necessary to actualising the aspiration to emigrate. However, for the majority of disillusioned youths, the *voos* offered a stepping stone into a promised land flowing with untold opportunities. Many are the nights when we rehearsed answers and practised potential questions posed at visa sections of different Western embassies, consulates and high commissions. I frequently helped members of different *voos* to fill in application forms for passport or visa applications, or spell-checked a request for an invitation letter. After each embassy visit, we congregated, either to offer solace and comfort, revise strategy, or indeed to celebrate any rare successes. Youth members of a *voos* clique cooperated to support one another's dreams, build on strategies to beat migration systems, and discuss schemes for soliciting monies for travel. Lacking relevant connections to strategically positioned kin or patrons, youths from marginalised sub-population groups often linked up with ghettoised urban youths already embedded into networks of emigration.

Sexual connection as a route out of poverty: sex tourism and arranged marriages

Sexual connection was discussed as a viable route out of poverty by many male and female youths in The Gambia. Rather than seek employment bringing a monthly salary, many youths believed it was more strategic to partner with a wealthier individual who could facilitate travel to the West, or else save the youth from impoverishment. Sexual

liaisons with powerful or wealthy partners were thus widely sought. This sexual connection commonly took the shape of either sex tourism or arranged marriages. While sex tourism was mostly a strategy for the boys, arranged marriages featured largely for the girls.

Young men in The Gambia are widely reputed for offering sexual services to foreigners mainly comprising tourists and expatriates, in exchange for possibilities of foreign travel, a Western work permit, permanent residence or citizenship overseas (see Ebron, 2002; Nyanzi et al., 2005). Instead of feeling shame for this transactional sex, male youths involved in the practice boldly justified it as highly lucrative, a shortcut to prosperity, and even cited examples of wealthy Gambians who succeeded through this avenue. They reasoned that the remittances sent home from such unions are the backbone of diverse local assets, developments and investments.

Family members often contract an arranged marriage for their daughter/son with a family that is wealthy and well respected. Although decried by human rights activists, the justifications for arranged marriages include either the need to keep wealth within a particular family, village or ethnic tribe, or else to link up with a wealthy family in order to absolve one's children of poverty. Arranged marriages are often contracted for young virginal brides, and much older, wealthier men, with established position, social status, family wealth or political acclaim. Many of these older men are already married (sometimes to multiple wives) and with children. Poverty disables the girl to contest these arrangements. Marriages of urban girls are sometimes arranged by their brothers or friends in networks with *semesters* (local word for Gambians who live abroad). Often, these girls have never met the groom, but their families consent because of the hope of exodus to a better life of imagined wealth and prosperity.

'But I cannot dig myself out of poverty': rural boys' perceptions about livelihoods

While *voos* are often presented as an urban phenomenon (see Gaibazzi, 2008), I variously found similar gathering places in the form of *bantabas* (a central place in the village, trading centre or family compound) in rural areas. Often roofed with thatch, and furnished with makeshift seats, the *bantaba* is not only the usual venue for village meetings, but also collects (usually gendered and generation-segregated) cliques of people on an informal basis. For example, in DibbaKunda Fula village, the elders regularly met to listen to Fula fables on radio, chew kola nuts and play cards or a board-game. In Sankalang Wolof, it was often young men who met to talk about football, hunting or the latest cross-border smuggling exploits. In Marakissa, the male elders regularly lay on the log seats after *juma* (prayers at the mosque).

Thus I met with rural male youths either in their compounds, or at the village *bantaba*. Similar to hanging-out in the *voos*, my moments with these young men were spent chatting about everyday life in The Gambia. We talked about girls, growing up, family, culture, tradition, hunting, making money and their frustrations with trying to get a job. We talked about farming, buying seeds, selling produce at the weekly *lumo* (cyclical market) in Farafenni, repairing the family's donkey-cart with a new wheel, fund-raising for a wedding or a naming ceremony. Interestingly, these rural male youths also aspired towards migrating to the Kombos, the heartland of Gambian tourism on the coast. While the dream of many was to get into casual labour in the Kombos, some aspired towards exodus to North America and Europe in order to 'get rich quick'. Often, they

requested me to link them to Westerners able to facilitate their emigration. A few were so persistent in their pleas that interaction sometimes proved personally uncomfortable,

Me: But why do you only talk about going to America, whenever you are with me?

Cherno: Because I need to go. Aminata [my anthropological name], Allah must help you to help me to go in America. If that should happen, I will be the happiest man, Billahi, the happiest man.

Me: But what is wrong with Sansakono village?

Cherno: Poverty, Aminata, poverty. We farm groundnuts and rice, but then we do not even get enough fish-money to last the year. We work, sweating so hard here in the provinces, but we do not get plenty money like the people who are over there in America. They work little, but then they have plenty dollars. We cannot hoe ourselves out of this poverty. The hoe will not solve poverty.

This dialogue, recorded early in my fieldwork, captures sentiments frequently expressed by many rural male youths. Parents who believed that wealth and better incomes were located in the capital city, or better still, abroad in the West, shared similar views. Six different parents approached me during this ethnographic fieldwork, with pleas of helping their sons leave the provinces and emigrate to London where they knew my university was. They were testing the potential of their social connection to me to facilitate their children's exodus.

However, not all Gambians believed that emigration to the West was the solution to local poverty. For example, my fieldwork father, an elderly *alkalo* (chief) of a small Fula hamlet in Northbank division was adamant:

Alkalo Pateh Bah: America . . . [vigorously shakes his head] me, to go to America? Why would I ever want to go to America? What is there that is not here in this village? We have cows and milk. We have rice and couscous, groundnuts and fish. We have our children and grandchildren, our wives and mothers. Me, I have batteries in my radio and I can listen to anyone anywhere. If I want anything (stares directly into my eyes), anything at all, I buy it from the *lumo* or I send for it from Kombos. What do I want in America? My America is right here in this village of Dibbakunda.

Discussion

Although poverty is often conceptualised as belonging to the margins of society, this chapter illustrates that poverty actually does transcend simplistic bounded classifications. Poverty is felt by the youths in this study although they have diverse characters of empowerment: male gender, urbanity, youthful age, relative education, access to the West, and globalisation. Although more educated than their rural counterparts, urban youths cannot get employment because they are not that qualified, and there are no jobs. They fall very short of social expectations on them as young men to become exemplary breadwinners and responsible citizens. Lacking resources (financial, social, technical, geographical) to access immigration documents, they seek the comfort of their clique members, weed and fantasy. They are dependent, redundant and frustrated. They are ostracised by responsible adults, and criticised by policy elites.

Rather than giving up on their dreams of exodus, these young men fan alive their aspirations in the *voos*. They strategise, converse, discuss and link-up with Gambian youths in the diaspora to consult about routes to success. When they fail to make it on their own, they are willing to (and do) exchange their sexual bodies and sexual services for

friendship, partnership or marriage that will bring the cherished ticket to North America and Europe. They logically ‘marry’ their way out of poverty to an imagined better life in the West. Amid idleness, redundancy and unemployment, the *voos* offer an alternative space to refashion meanings of success among these male youths. Extrapolating from the experiences of other Gambian youths who ‘made it’, the youths in the *voos* build their own pathways to success, however unconventional. The *voos* thus become schools where youthful minds are exercised in their own terms. Youthful energies and potential are released, fashioned and shaped within the *voos*. Value systems of what is right and wrong, success and failure get re-scripted during the time spent in the *voos*. Thus, cultivating groundnuts and rice for subsistence attains meagre importance relative to migrating to an imagined West to strike success. Hanging out in *voos* becomes an integral part of these urban youths because their dreams and values are reinstated by other clique members. Belonging to a *voos* takes on significance as a space in which male youths’ sense of security, personhood, value, identity and future is re-established by others, even though the present circumstances of poverty and lack may still abound.

In the absence of government provisioning for disoriented youths, the *voos* are a coping strategy that male youths in The Gambia have fashioned for themselves, to allow them to deal with their multiple frustrations and aggravations. Rather than being new to Gambian society, the *voos* is a male youth generation-specific modification of the *bantaba* concept. Perhaps more accurate is the observation that the unwritten rules of membership and the activities engaged in have changed to suit postmodern Gambia. However the idea of sitting together in age- and gender-specific groups to chat is integral to Gambian social fabric.

Rather than condone these male youth activities, national youth workers, policymakers and programme developers should engage with youths to assess how they can best harness the existing model of *voos* to create safe, productive and legal clubs of association for disoriented male youths. More research is needed to examine why such *voos* prevail, what need they are meeting in contemporary Gambian society, what they are offering to these male youths, how best they can be enhanced as vehicles for conscripting male youths into productive service, and how they can be made safer and thus more accessible to other male youths who do not associate with them for fear of ostracisation by parents and other elders.

Notes

1. In Brikama and Farafenni, boys also referred to ‘the ghetto’ to describe a similar concept.
2. Elsewhere I discuss the socialising avenues of female youths, such as the ‘programmes’ (political, cultural or neighbourhood festivities), the home and beauty parlours.
3. Rather than actual psychosis or a diagnosable psychiatric condition, ‘Nerves Syndrome’ is a local label for a wide repertoire of antisocial behaviour, including seclusion, associating with juvenile delinquents, and idleness, the latter characterised by no desire to seek a steady job, loitering, having heaps of visa application forms, spinning deceitful stories to solicit money for processing travel documents and fares, forging identification papers, smoking weed and blatant rudeness. These phenomena are mainly associated with frustrated male youths who feel thwarted at their failure to achieve the much coveted aspiration of going to ‘Babylon’ – a term used to describe North America and Europe (see Gaibazzi, 2008).

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