

“Barça ou Barzakhe – Barcelona or Death”?

Negotiating a Path to Adulthood in Dakar

Adama lost both his parents within less than a year some time ago. He is now 36 years old and the head of household in the house his parents left him, with the responsibility for his four younger siblings. Two years ago he married Awa who also lives in the small house in Gueule Tapée – a calm residential neighbourhood facing the sea on the northern fringes of Dakar. Adama once spent most of his time and effort on attaining a forged visa to a European country. He did it for his family; because he saw no other way of securing an income that would provide for his siblings. But he failed. He was deceived by the middleman and lost more than one million franc CFA (appr. 1.500 €), an amount that would have provided for his family a long time, he now tells me with an embarrassed smile.

Since Adama has also become a respected Muslim, in an urban chapter (*daaira*) of the Tidyani brotherhood – Senegal’s largest Sufi order – in addition to being a head of household with a steady income through a respected craft as a carpenter, his position as a mature adult seems a matter of fact – not least to many of his less fortunate peers in Gueule Tapée. But Adama does not see it that way. He still dreams of new strategies for attaining a visa to Europe and sees his predicament as still being caught in the category of youth.

This paper is based on a five-month ethnographic fieldwork in Dakar, Senegal, in the first half of 2006. Through the exploration of Adama’s story I show how emigration figures as a strategy among young men in Dakar for securing the social position that will enable them to settle as adults. In deteriorating socio-economic circumstances, Adama and his peers are

forced to negotiate new understandings of what it means to be successful and what it means to become an adult – a difficult navigation between the norms and ideals of both parents and peers.

Life-making: Understanding Livelihood as Social Becoming

This study has taken its point of departure in an approach that combined an interest in anthropological migration theories with understanding the place(s) of Africa in a 'global' political order. In these literary explorations, I found the concept of 'mobile livelihoods', as developed by Nina Nyberg Sørensen and Karen Fog Olwig in the introduction to their edited volume *Work and Migration. Life and Livelihoods in a Globalizing World* (2002) promising. Challenging the conventional understandings of migration as, firstly, 'a recent historical phenomenon linked to the globalization of capitalism' (2002:1) and, secondly, as 'involving one-way movements between nation states that entail ruptures with former livelihoods' (ibid.), the editors argue that

... mobile populations do not necessarily migrate to start a new life elsewhere, but rather to search out new opportunities that may allow them to enhance and diversify livelihoods practiced and valued back home (2002:1)

If we emphasise the notion of a mobile livelihood being *valued back home*, mobile livelihoods may be seen to encompass more than merely wage labour and include the broader socially and culturally embedded project of creating a meaningful life, or what Lisa Åkesson (2004) has called 'life-making'. The difference between 'labour' and 'livelihood' in this understanding is similar to the difference between 'labour' and 'work' in John & Jean Comaroff's study 'The Madman and the Migrant: Work and Labour in the Historical Consciousness of a South African People' (1987). Their exploration of 'modern Tshidi consciousness' identifies labour/work as a 'root contrast' where labour signifies the

asocial wage labour imported by colonialism and where '[w]ork, in short, is a positive aspect of human activity, and is expressed in the making of self and others in the course of everyday life' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1987:197).

This interpretation moves away from the original concept of 'mobile livelihoods'. As Åkesson points out, the concept of does not encompass all that is at stake in analysing the social significance of migration – perhaps particularly so when focusing on those who stay behind, a feature that her study of young aspiring migrants in Cape Verde has in common with the present one. She explains that in São Vicente,

People say that the meaning of their migration project is to *fazé um vida* (make a life). Life-making is associated with livelihood, but it also signifies the transformation of an unfulfilling life into a potentially fulfilled one. The desire to migrate and make a life is therefore intimately connected with local notions of what constitutes a good life (Åkesson 2004:22)

Navigating Social Paths to Adulthood

This, I believe, is also what is implied by the notion of 'social becoming' in the edited volume *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood* (2006), which explores an emerging literature¹ on the anthropology of youth that attempts to incorporate in its analytical scope both the social and economic changes facing contemporary generations of (African) youths, and the theoretical rethinking of social categories in anthropology from being more or less internally coherent and static as well as externally distinctive from each other. This literature, in other words, addresses both empirical and epistemological changes that affect our understanding of African youth.

¹ Several edited volumes have been published in the past few years on this topic, including 'Makers and Breakers' (2005); 'Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood' (2006); 'Vanguard or Vandals' (2005); 'Generations and Globalization' (2007), as well as a number of monographs applying a youth oriented approach to specific empirical fields, e.g. 'Navigating Terrains of War' (2006) and 'Sweet Battlefields' (2003). Furthermore, the anthropology of youth has been discussed in research articles by Durham (2002; 2004), Cole (2005), and Bucholtz (2002).

In terms of the epistemological changes in anthropology, current theories on African youth attempt to move beyond two more established approaches. One approach, which may be recognised in the classic Africanist anthropology – e.g. the work of Meyer Fortes (1969) or E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1940) – is the study of youth as a developmental *life-stage* between childhood and adulthood, which corresponds to the physical and psychological changes that take place in adolescence. This approach has often centred on African *rites of passage* (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967) that serve to bring young people safely through the transition from adolescence to adulthood in a socially sanctioned manner, thereby understanding such rites of transition as a social mechanism to manage an inherently biological transformation. This view, however, presupposes not only a universal agreement on the limits between various stages but also a correspondence between biology and social life that misses the ‘... manner in which definitions of youth and adulthood are intertwined with issues of power, authority and social worth’ (Christiansen, Utas & Vigh 2006:14-15; see also Johnson-Hanks 2002).

The second approach that the anthropology of youth attempts to move beyond is the more recent study of youth as sub-culture – a perspective most often emphasised in studies of young people in the North Atlantic world. This approach is inspired by Talcott Parsons’ understanding of *youth culture* (1964) and on the work of the Birmingham School, and implies ‘... researching the ideational systems of meaning and practices that young people, explicitly or implicitly, create as they interact with other youth globally and locally’ (Christiansen, Utas & Vigh 2006:15). What the anthropology of youth literature sees lacking in this approach is, firstly, an understanding of the flexibility of social groups – along the lines of the more general (postmodernist) critique of the concept of *culture* (e.g. Hannerz 1992; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; Gupta & Ferguson 1992) – and, secondly, an appreciation of the broader structural conditions of these expressions of youth identities. Analysing such youth identifications in relative isolation paints a picture

of a *youth culture* '... as an almost autonomous group, capable of constructing worlds of its own and living lives separated from the surrounding society' (Christiansen, Utas & Vigh 2006; see also Barrett 2004).

Rather than claiming to free itself from these previous approaches to the study of young people as a separate category, the anthropology of youth proposes a framework that challenges the rigid focus on social structure and biological development of the 'life cycle approach' and the overly detached understanding of the agency and internal coherence of the 'youth culture approach'. What is intended is a *relational* understanding youth where the active (self)application of the category describes not only an intersubjective relationship but also a wider range of social and structural dynamics that surround the utterance: to call someone a youth, then, is '... to position him or her in the terms of a variety of social attributes, including not only age but also independence-dependence, authority, rights, abilities, knowledge, responsibilities and so on' (Durham 2004:593).

Empirically, designating someone as 'youth' obviously implies different things in different socio-cultural contexts but the case studies presented in the edited volume mentioned above present similar tendencies across the African continent. In the North Atlantic world youth is often associated with privileges such as consumer goods targeted at young people and the availability of time and freedom to explore and experiment with different self-chosen life styles. In an African context, 'youth' as a social category generally takes on more negative or derogatory connotations; implying a dependency on one's parent generation and a lack of influence in decision making processes. At the same time, however, young people in Africa – as elsewhere – demonstrate ingenuity and determination in creating room for manoeuvre, and increasingly take part in expressions

of global identifications such as Rastafarianism and political youth associations².

Life-making and the Anthropology of Youth

Understanding African social dynamics through a focus on the predicaments and aspirations of young people provides an optic that includes global orientations and local life situations. Key to this approach is to understand 'youth' as, on the one hand, an empirical category that implies particular social positions and positionings, that is, a relational category that is both self-applied and ascribed to others, and, on the other hand, an analytical concept that calls attention to the structural conditions that influence these practices of naming and claiming.

In this sense, I would argue that the concept of life-making represents an approach that resembles what I wish to elucidate by discussing young people's paths towards adulthood. Not only is providing for oneself an important part of being perceived as an adult, independent person in many parts of Africa but what lies at the core of both the notion of life-making and paths towards adulthood is the notion of mobility as a central resource in producing and affirming one's social significance.

In the brief case that I described in the introduction, Adama seems in many senses to have achieved a social position of an adult; he is married, and lives in his own household as the main provider. I have now explored two interrelated concepts which help to explain why his current position is characterised by the predicament of youth; of remaining in an insecure position of relative inferiority to some age-mates in Guele Tapée, and of being on the lookout for new opportunities to change this state of affairs. Firstly, social adulthood (as understood in the concept of 'paths towards adulthood') is a multifaceted position that

² Barrett's study illustrates through his conception of 'spaces of freedom' (Barrett 2004, Part Three) that the young people in Western Zambia are able to find spaces to act out their desire for freedom from parental control, emphasising the similarities between young lives in different parts of the world more than space permits in the present framework.

implies more than simply economic independence from one's parents and being able to marry. Again, this does not imply that either achievement is insignificant but merely that Adama's story should direct our understanding of social adulthood towards a more nuanced and less utilitarian conceptualisation. What Adama seems to be searching for may be understood as the sense of being a 'complete man' (Vigh 2006); of achieving not only independence – which in his case was in fact forced upon him by the death of his parents – but also a sense of consolidated life-making.

Secondly, the notion of life-making, understood as 'the transformation of an unfulfilling life into a potentially fulfilled one' illustrates that navigating social paths is much more about potentiality, and the idiom of a consolidated social position, than it is about 'arriving' and staying put in any given status. Moving towards adulthood is characteristic of the social position of youth but the process of social navigation itself – of being oriented towards new social positions in general, is a fundamental premise of social life. This understanding illustrates the close link between the notion of social navigation and the theories of social practice it builds upon.

With these reflections in mind, I discuss a slogan that emerged in the Senegalese media during my fieldwork in Dakar and quickly found its way into the discussions and reflections of my informants. The slogan was intended as a commentary to the phenomenon of small fishing boats, or *pirogues*, arriving in the Canary Islands crammed with young West African men (yes, this form of migration has been described as almost entirely a male preoccupation). From early 2006 this hazardous migration strategy received considerable attention from the international media, and this attention, in turn, generated heated debates in the Senegalese media. But before I explore the slogan further, I offer a brief sketch of the significance of transnational labour migration to my informants in Gueule Tapée.

Emigration Discourses in Gueule Tapée

In response to the near impossibility of actually achieving one's aspirations to migrate (Carling 2002), some informants would express their frustration with the closing doors of the European Union while others would insist that if they were not welcome in Europe, they would rather pursue alternative livelihood strategies and life trajectories.

Luc was trying to manage on his own as a house painter but often had to rely on his (social) parents for food. He told me that he was really an artist and that he wanted to sell pictures to tourists on the beaches of Dakar, but that he could rarely afford the materials to produce the paintings. Although he generally insisted on seeing his situation in an optimistic spirit, he lamented the fact that his friends who had made it to Europe seemed to make more money in a month than he would be able to in a lifetime as a house painter in Dakar, and that as he passed the age of thirty in the same position he had been in for a decade, they were on the verge of returning to Dakar to build houses and establish themselves in their own homes. Whether his impressions of the emigrant friends' success were realistic or not is not the issue here. Rather, what matters in understanding Luc's prospects of life-making is that his friends abroad served as a frame of reference, and made it harder for Luc to commit to his social navigation in Dakar. Despite being dressed in fairly expensive clothes and having a room of his own, he was seen by other young men in the neighbourhood as something of a failure, spending all of his money on alcohol and fancy clothes, and doomed to be stuck in youth despite his *'fresh'* attitude.

"Barça ou Barzakhe"?

While Luc is perhaps not representative of most young men in Gueule Tapée, his life situation is illustrative of what is at stake for most of the young people I met in Dakar. Many informants would tell me with nostalgia about the exemplary solidarity, or *teranga*, of the past that had worn thin in recent decades. Nowadays a young man was expected to

provide for himself and some people were fed up with not being able to contribute to their families, as an independent man should. As one informant put it, “when you see your mother work and cannot help her, it hurts”.

As several informants explained, it was this sense of despair that had coined the current phrase, relating to the increased media attention on the *pirogues* arriving in the Canary Islands: “Barça ou Barzakhe”, “Barcelona or Death”, became a slogan of the Senegalese youth during the time of my fieldwork in response to the condemning reprimands by the parent generation in both public media debates and discussions within the home. One might at first inspection take the slogan to mean that the young migrants acknowledged that they risked their lives on the open sea, and were proud to do so, but such an interpretation misses a crucial point. When I asked one informant, Lamine, to explain the phrase to me, he told me that when a strong young man is unable to contribute to his family, he will gradually become more frustrated as he loses his self-esteem and also the esteem of others around him. In this way, it is as if he gradually dies. This is what is equal to death: one might be able to survive physically, by the charity of one’s friends or family, but that is not enough to make one feel alive; to feel that one matters.

To Lamine, and other young people in Gueule Tapée, “Death” in the slogan is equivalent to staying put in Dakar, or alternatively in Senegal or in Africa’. In this sense, “Death” is equivalent to Ghassan Hage’s notion of ‘social death’, as the ‘absence of the possibility of a worthy life’ (Hage 2003:132). That so many young aspiring migrants equate Dakar to such a state of stagnation is an important illustration to the feeling of living in a state of perpetual crisis. What is at stake in this critique is the widely shared feeling among the young people in Dakar of being caught in a ‘social moratorium of youth’ (Vigh 2006) with no means of progressing in life from the position of youth. Many young people in Gueule Tapée were said by others to be wasting their lives drinking, acting ‘*fresh*’, and doing

nothing – as people would say of Luc when he was not there. To avoid such a feeling of apathy requires skills and ingenuity, as implied in the notion of social navigation: and it is not to be taken for granted.

The slogan “Barça ou Barzakhe” also inspired the Senegalese rapper Awadi to reflect on the *pirogue* phenomenon in his hit song ‘Sunugaal’ (‘our canoe’, in Wolof). Awadi’s lyrics play on a more literal understanding of death, but illustrate how migration discourses would evoke the broken promises of President Abdoulaye Wade’s “Sopi” regime and the general deterioration of living conditions, rather than the ‘Eldorado’ images expected in European accounts. To offer an English translation of the French translation of the Wolof lyrics, the song begins like this:

You promised me that I would have a job
You promised me that I would no longer be hungry
You promised me a real occupation and a future
In fact, up until now, I still see nothing
That is why I have decided to escape, that is why I throw myself in a *pirogue*
I swear! I can’t stay here a second longer
Better die than live under these conditions, in this hell
Come what may
I still prefer to die³

Awadi’s interpretation of the motivations of the young *pirogue* migrants, while to some extent capitalising on the dramatic effects of evoking a death wish, emphasises the potential of the emigration discourses for an ‘internal’ or national social critique; in this context the dramatic images of destitute compatriots being apprehended at the shores of

³ My translation. Downloaded from <http://www.studiosankara.com/sunugaal.html> on 6 November 2006.

the Canary Islands is turned on the failures of the President, rather than a lamentation of the European immigration regime.

Migration as a Path towards Adulthood

The navigation away from a position of social death may be seen as a central aspect of navigating a path towards adulthood; of becoming (and remaining) a socially meaningful person. In discussions about illegal migration with informants in Gueule Tapée, the urge to remain mobile was more often related to imagining a meaningful life in Dakar than succeeding at the aspirations to migrate. It was, in other words, a sense of social, rather than physical, mobility that motivated young people to attempt migration towards Europe. Being mobile, in this sense, may both be a position where one is able to think ahead; to act with directionality through long-term strategies. This is the ideal sense of mobility sought by my interlocutors in Gueule Tapée. But being mobile may also imply a less focused urge to at least retain some sense of agency – through short-term tactics (cf. de Certeau 1984), if you will – in times or situations where the social moratorium draws you ever closer to a standstill. Being mobile thus implies several forms of mobility at once. What is significant is that these forms of movement – from the confident navigation of a clearly defined path, to the restless attempts to escape the social moratorium of youth – are intimately connected in the lives of the young men in Gueule Tapée. Adama's story shows us that although his life-making seems to be pointing towards a confident consolidation of his social becoming, he retains the sense of insecurity and urgency implied by the position of youth – a restlessness that urges him to pursue new ways of migration to Europe.

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