

**UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS FOR MAKING A BETTER LIFE:  
YOUNG MALIAN MEN COPING WITH  
THEIR POST DEPORTATION ADVENTURES**

**Susanne U. Schultz**

Bielefeld University  
Graduate School of History and Sociology  
Universitätsstraße 25  
D-33615 Bielefeld, Germany  
susanne.schultz@uni-bielefeld.de

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## **Unfulfilled expectations for making a better life: Young Malian men coping with their post deportation adventures**

*This article offers insight into the unfulfilled expectations of young Malian men, who sought a better life in Europe, and to contribute to their families, only to be forcefully returned. Tracing these men's trajectories and daily life representations, it explores their experiences and narrations, and how these contribute to scholarly debates on youth, migration, and work. Based on cases from Kita, southern Mali, the article questions whether these men are thrown back into "waithood," prevented from obtaining the status of social adulthood. The data indicate potential coping strategies. Many may talk about re-migrating, but ultimately remain in their village. While some are held in "involuntary immobility," others cope with the presumed failure and make a better life where they are.*

**Keywords:** Mali, young men, post deportation, (im)mobility, expectations, re-migration

## **Expectativas frustradas de alcançar uma vida melhor: Jovens malianos a lidar com as suas aventuras pós-deportação**

*Este artigo oferece uma visão das expectativas não atingidas de jovens malianos que procuraram uma vida melhor na Europa, e ajudar as suas famílias, e acabaram por serem repatriados à força. Traça as trajetórias e representações da vida quotidiana destes homens, explorando as suas experiências e narrativas, e como elas contribuem para os debates académicos sobre juventude, migração e trabalho. Com base em casos de Kita, no sul do Mali, o artigo questiona se estes homens são reenviados para a "idade de espera", impedidos de obter o estatuto de adulto social. Os dados apresentam potenciais estratégias de adaptação. Muitos falam em emigrar de novo, mas finalmente ficam na sua aldeia. Enquanto alguns mantêm-se em "imobilidade involuntária", outros enfrentam o suposto fracasso e constroem uma vida melhor onde estão.*

**Palavras-chave:** Mali, jovens, pós-deportação, (i) mobilidade, expectativas, reemigração

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We sit in the shadow of a little shop that belongs to Seku, our young host in this small Mandé village in southern Mali. It is a small group of young and some elder men, all of whom have been formerly deported, involuntarily returned, mostly from North African countries. Seku has spread the word that my colleague, Birama, and I are here and would like to talk to some of those formerly deported. Although we had agreed to speak to individuals and visit their families, many have come to Seku's shop and discuss with us their experiences. Seku was the first to tell his story. He has been to Libya twice. The first time, in 2006, he returned deliberately to show off the money he had earned and to get married. Two years later, he took the road again to Libya with the plan to continue on to Europe. He wanted to take a boat to Italy where a friend of his was staying. However, he did not make it further than to Libya. There, he was deported, after he had been unexpectedly apprehended on an open street. "By those policemen," he says. Having no permit to stay, he was detained and after six weeks without proper water, bread, or sleep, he was brought to the airport and flown back to Mali. It was the time of the turmoil in the initial post-Gaddafi's era<sup>1</sup>, and he was not the only one involuntarily returning. Several of the village youth, in emic terms those men between the ages of about 16 and 40, were deported or repatriated via air or land during and after this time. Each one of them continued to suffer from his personal and above all financial loss and had a story to tell, leading to an engaged discussion that lasted several hours (Group discussion, November 7, 2015).

Many of the participating men had ventured out to "search for money" (Bambara: *warignini*) in their youth. Their migratory journey is called adventure (French: *l'aventure*) in large parts of West Africa. This adventure should allow both exploring the world and emerge as men to support and learn the necessary skills to become a household head (Koenig, 2005, p. 80). Since structural adjustment measures in the 1980s have transformed and confined the economic, historically agricultural life (Lachenmann, 1986), existing pathways to achieve such social status have been blocked for large parts of the young generation. As I will discuss later on, migration has been an integral part to achieve social maturity since generations. However, it is particularly in light of this current and widespread lack of perspectives that emigration offers a means to escape in order to gain the status and responsibility of social adulthood. Moreover, while processes

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<sup>1</sup> The Libyan uprising in 2011, though forming part of the so-called Arab Spring in the region (e.g., in Egypt or Tunisia), was essentially a movement against the leader of the country, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. In the course of events, it "rapidly spiraled into a protracted civil war, with the aftermath posing challenges quite different from those experienced in other countries, including a migration crisis" (Aghazarm, Queada, & Tishler, 2012, p. 8).

of globalization have further deteriorated prospects of young people, they created a need for global connectedness among youth (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 2000). From the beginning of the 1990s, migrations increasingly meant going to Europe in this region in the Malian south that I will discuss. Hence, it is the simultaneous need of local and global belonging which forms the basis of contemporary migration as adventure and social necessity.

However, the narrations of hardship, disillusion, and of loss of their so-called adventures completely contradict these young men's goals. Most had crossed the Sahara and tried to enter Europe, the assumed "El Dorado" (also Nyamnjoh, 2010) on a small vessel. Due to restrictive migration policies and multifold borders, the journeys of the mostly young men are interrupted, stopped, redirected or reversed (Drotbohm & Hasselberg, 2015). After their forced return, hopes for success connected to the adventure remained unfulfilled and the often perceived personal failure may have led to instances of (social) shame, thereby impairing the deportee's dignity, an experience that ought to be avoided not only as a Malian man (Broqua & Doquet, 2013). Deported, they may be thrown back into a situation of "waithood," what Honwana (2012) called the extended phase between youth and adulthood that does not allow young people to follow the established paths to gain social status as their preceding generations did.

In the following, I will critically examine the narrations of the deported young men along the lines of waithood, a generation "in the-waiting" (Schulz, 2002, p. 806) and involuntary immobility. By analyzing the social realities of deportees in situations when the aspired expectations of a better life suddenly fail to materialize, while people keep going on or look for alternatives, I aim to go beyond a notion of deportation as sheer failure. The article follows the trajectories of young male deportees in the Malian south. The retrospective stories of these deportees offer insights into a spectrum of strategies for coping with the situation of a forced return. I begin by introducing my fieldwork and relevant aspects of mobility, migration, and deportations in southwest Mali, particularly Kita. Second, I outline the ambivalence of the "failed" migratory adventure in light of unmet expectations for adventure and the consequent social reactions between failure and success, shame and suffering on the one hand, but likewise joy and gratefulness of being back healthy and alive, on the other hand. Herein, I describe how deportations, as increasingly collective experience, become integrated in established circular migratory forms. While the hegemonic foil of again leaving persists, many are torn between leaving and staying, but significantly less actually leave again. Not only does this finding contradict some of literature on post deportation that refers to re-emigration as a common consequence of forced return (e.g.

Dünnwald, 2012; Schuster & Madji, 2015), more importantly, the reminiscence to the previous and potential anew adventures is source for one's masculine personhood and contributing to becoming an adult man. I will eventually display deportees' local engagement, creating agentive ways and thus proactively coping with the presumed failure by positively focusing on the village, "back to the soil," and alternative forms of economic income, internal and social mobility. The names of the informants have been changed to preserve their anonymity. For the same purpose, the villages mentioned will not be named.

## Approaching situations of post deportation in the field

This article is based on extensive qualitative fieldwork completed over the course of eight months in Mali (between 2014 and 2016)<sup>2</sup>, which focused on the everyday life and self-representations of deportees in urban as well as rural contexts. Of particular interest were the deportees' social embedding and the question of how and to what extent a deportation characterizes a person's life after return.

For my fieldwork in the communities of origin, where deportees would (finally) return, which more than expected turned out to be also their places of anew settlement, I was mostly assisted by Birama Bagayogo, a young Malian anthropologist. While such collaborations have evoked concerns regarding power hierarchies and the role of translations, for instance (cf. e.g. Englert & Dannecker, 2014), this research constellation was particularly beneficial as most informants were male and being there with a male counterpart created additional commonality. Though one might assume people would have difficulties to speak about a traumatic or shameful past, we encountered a lot of openness. Birama reasoned that, as I was an outsider, there was nothing to hide and no potential competition in the usually narrow social context. This explanation would feed into what has been discussed as a positive effect of being a researcher from outside the specific field (Diawara, 1985); it might also be connected to the observation that former deportees want to share their stories (Lecadet, 2011).

The data selected and presented here derive from one small Malinké village close to the capital of the Kita district, in the administrative region Kayes, as well as from the main village of a Malinké-Fulbe area, a rural community 40 kilometers south of Kita city. Kita was chosen as a research site as it had received

<sup>2</sup> During this time, I met former deportees, potential (re-)migrants, their families, and their close acquaintances. The methods used were informal conversations, semi-narrative interviews, and group discussions as well as ethnographic (participant) observation. I also interviewed governmental and other institutional representatives from NGOs and embassies.

a significant number of expelled migrants from Mauritania, Morocco, Spain, and since 2002, repatriates from Côte d'Ivoire, likewise from Libya, particularly around 2011. In 2015 and 2016 it continued to be a place of high-frequency migration, considerable numbers of shipwrecked and again increasing deportations.

## On mobility, migration and deportations in Mali

The district of Kita is considered as a region of international emigration par excellence (Konaté & Gonin, 2016, p. 25). There are municipalities where emigrants have developed models of public, political, and economic investments and connectivity through constructing schools, health centers and roads (Lima, 2005), and thus positioning themselves as true agents of development. However, despite its current emergence, migration is not a new phenomenon in Kita and the role attributed to migration builds on the (historically) grown cultures of circular migration, nomadism and ritual journeys within the region (Bredeloup & Pliez, 2005; Hahn & Klute, 2007). It forms the basis of the “migratory adventures” (Bredeloup, 2008) and dynamic transnational spaces today (Manchuelle, 1997).

The migratory adventure builds on former pilgrimages into the wilderness as “the first collective or individual experience of a man. [...] Weeks of walking through the forests, savannah, and soils reinforced his masculinity” (Dougnon, 2012, p. 152) as initiation to social adulthood. This wilderness has now been replaced by big cities or far away countries, while its function as a rite of passage remains, facing risks, violence or even death<sup>3</sup>. The migratory adventure, not necessarily toward Europe, to gain economic, social and personal success, is “reinterpreted, as a prestigious, ‘initiatory’, value-giving experience” (p. 162). The adventure is thus about learning and becoming someone. Since the 1960s, the migratory voyage, respectively “the adventure,” is a part of local culture and a popular theme in music, literature and everyday life (Dougnon, 2013, pp. 39-46). Children, particularly boys, are trained from early on through (first of all often internal) labor migration (Dougnon, 2012, p. 144). Many young boys in Mali grow up with the desire and expectation to leave home both to study and to also potentially support the family (Hertrich & Lesclingand, 2013, p. 181). In this context, mobility as path to social adulthood is intrinsically connected to masculinity, economic success, socio-cultural recognition and families’ livelihoods.

<sup>3</sup> Similar ways to adult- and manhood building on rites of ‘initiations’ can be found in Cameroon, for instance, where *bushfalling* commonly refers to going abroad against all obstacles and returning successfully (Alpes, 2017), while in Sierra Leone the civil war became means of initiation of young men by joining rebel groups (cf. Jackson, 2005).

The post-colonial international emigration in Kita was spurred by the “rail crisis” and the shut-down of the state-owned peanut oil mills between 1986 and 1995 because of a more pro-active liberal economic state policy. Export revenues of groundnuts fell in Mali, Senegal and Gambia by 50 to 80% from 1960 to 1980 (Badiane & Kinteh, 1994, p. 6). The transfer to Mali’s Cotton Mill incited a surge of migration towards Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire. Due to increased possibilities of mobility through processes of globalization and the political unrest in the 1990s in Côte d’Ivoire, many migrants from Kita moved further North (Mauritania, Morocco, Spain and Italy), and primarily to Libya between 2004 and 2008 (Konaté & Gonin, 2016, pp. 117-119). This coincided with the EU and its member states experimenting one of the most rigorous border management policies in Libya, including large deportations on the African continent since the 2000s (cf. also Sylla & Schultz, forthcoming a).

Mali has been affected by a high number of forced returns of its citizens since its independence from France in 1960, most importantly from other African countries, partially through massive deportations, of e.g. 500,000 “aliens,” including Malians, from Ghana in 1969. These were economic and xenophobic measures, mostly in moments of crisis, to strengthen the postcolonial state’s sovereignty (Bredeloup, 1995; Sylla & Schultz, forthcoming b). The first deportations from France date back to 1986 and were particularly symbolically charged (Lecadet, 2011). In the course of the progressive externalization of EU border and migratory control into the African continent, the transit countries in the Maghreb increasingly implemented mass deportations of “irregular” migrants (Lecadet, 2011). Malian migration statistics estimate that of more than 100,000 Malian migrants who were expelled between 2002 and 2012, 91.8% were expelled from countries on the African continent, while deportations from Europe represented 6.6% of all deportations during the same period (MMEIA, 2014, p. 55). The previous circularity of migration was forcefully interrupted, people forced to return in an undignified way, to take dangerous routes to (re-)migrate or to remain involuntarily immobile (e.g. Jónsson, 2007). Since the European “refugee crisis,” the EU interventions have reached a new dimension of collaboration on migratory control, development and increasingly “assisted voluntary returns” (Trauner, Jegen, Adam, & Roos, 2019), which are often described as deportations by returnees and the Malian civil society alike.

Some of these patterns and discourses seem to be reflected by the young deportees’ narratives depicted in the following sections. Particularly the increasingly collective dimensions of deportations seem to generate a certain normalization of its social effects as well. Still, at the community level, young deported men face

ambivalence and hardship upon return and expectations related to the collective imaginary of migratory success remain high.

## “Failed” adventure: ambivalences and social embedding

This section shall develop the in-depth ambivalence of the migratory adventure in case of its supposed “failure,” where deportees are thrown in involuntarily with empty hands, facing the expectations of their social circle unfulfilled and having to demonstrate the productivity of their conditions simultaneously. Since pre-colonial times, the return from the pilgrimage to the wilderness was thought to be favorable and returnees were celebrated as heroes who had overcome the arduousness of the unknown (Dougnon, 2012). In the small village close to Kita, Seku has demonstrated his success following his first return when he came back mostly “to show off.” Most importantly was the money he had earned: he married, handed out presents and lived “*la belle vie*,” as he laughs in recounting. The deportee, in contrast, usually returns with empty hands, at the most with a plastic bag from the airport. Others are thrown into the desert, directly re-emigrate or muddle through from here, and, supported by undertaking little jobs, continue their return to their villages.

Particularly the involuntary return to the village is a sensitive issue, and post deportations in this respect come with particular social and economic challenges for returnees. In the village, social spaces are clearly defined, and it is usually all too obvious who is a deportee. Boureima, from the main village of the rural community, explains: “Everybody knows that this is a deportation. If you spend two years [abroad] and then you’re deported, your objective to succeed is not achieved” (Boureima, personal interview, October 30, 2015)<sup>4</sup>. “Deportee, deportee,” they may call after you in the street, “and then they denounce your mother,” he indicates a crucial connection.

It is not uncommon that a deportee stays inside the extended family’s house, not wanting to talk to anybody: “I haven’t left the house in a month,” Boureima admits, now two years later. At 27 years old, he has already been deported twice from Equatorial Guinea, and once from Libya. He continues:

It was my friends in the village that helped me and said “go out again.” It was them who unburdened me at every moment to forget these gruesome days. Bit by bit, I regained my confidence though I was having pains in both hands and it took almost a year before I recovered (Boureima, personal interview, October 30, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Many of the quotations included are originally in Bambara and then translated to French in collaboration with my colleague, Birama Bagayogo. For the purpose of this article, I have translated them into English.



Mandé society is organized and adhered around norms and ideas of respectability and relatedness in the conception of (masculine) personhood. They imply a positive debt, in the sense of a “debt of life” (De Latour 2002, as quoted in Bredeloup, 2008, p. 301), or a “family debt” (Mbembe, 2006, p. 327) towards one’s close. This implies a general reciprocity, which not least helps to constitute the social fabric and cohesion. Money plays a central role herein. Individual felicity and affluence, social harmony and the respect of the others are thus only possible through compliance to socially prescribed roles (Brand, 2001, p. 134). Against this background, the adventurer is thought to leave and return to earn money for his socially close, furthermore, knowledge and experience through the journey for becoming a man and a household head. At first sight, Boureima’s “unsuccessful” return marks his failure to achieve the objectives of the migratory adventure. First, he reacts by internalizing this failing out and his pain, ashamed to leave the house fearing the villagers’ judgment. Still, it is the friends who support, providing relief in this delicate moment and thereby opened up new ways to self-assurance and potential social harmony.

In other cases, deportees might not immediately return to their villages; and sometimes, they may not return at all, re-emigrate directly or stay in the capital Bamako in social distance, with more anonymity and autonomy. After being deported from Libya in 2011, Karim (45 years old), from the same village as Boureima, for instance, went to his elder brother, a teacher in another province in the south:

In this moment, it was really hard for me. I was sad: I went to school, which didn’t work, and then I left on adventure, which also did not work. These two failures have quite affected me. Since the adventure did not work out, I was unsure how to return to the village and explain this to my family. This was difficult. My father and mother were both old, and I returned from adventure with empty hands (Karim, personal interview, October 31, 2015).

Equally, Karim is ashamed about his repeated failures in light of his symbolical as well as literal empty hands. He takes all this very personally, unclear how to confront his aging parents. More than that, the villagers criticize his capacity of being an honorable man. Karim adds: “People were saying I was not man enough to stay abroad” (Karim, personal interview, October 31, 2015). He finds relief through his brother who helps him recover, buys him a radio to relieve the distress, and encourages him emotionally to return to the village and go on.

Many deportees have to cope with gossip and mistrust alongside being grateful for their health and life. One be called *fa den sago*, in Bambara, as the neighbor

of one explains; literally translated as “the capacity of one’s will, desire or aspiration has stopped.” The missing success in migration may thus be equaled with laziness which demonstrates a literal threat to one’s masculine personhood, narratively describing social death.

The young men’s narrations depict “returning with empty hands” as the major reason for their suffering after deportations, which is expressed as an individual defeat. One was not able to find the money aimed at, “one has not made it” as it is usually said. Kleist calls returning empty-handed the “epitome of failure,” which should be avoided by all means (Kleist, 2017a, p. 184). It may imply a considerable loss of status for the entire family (Koenig, 2005), and the danger of not being respected as a man for the individual deportee as one cannot reimburse the money socially and economically needed and expected. Bredeloup (2017) terms the “anguish of returning empty-handed” with “the anxiety of facing others and their views of humiliating one’s relatives because of one’s failure” (p. 147). Schuster and Madji (2015), for instance, discuss deportees’ social situations post return with the concept of stigma, which is produced in social interactions, “as a way of punishing those who have failed to repay the family’s investments and as a way of holding on to the dream of a better life in a distant destination, a dream challenged by deportation” (p. 648). Indeed, Boureima as well as Karim describe being ashamed of returning involuntarily and without money.

According to Scheff (2003), shame appears in the moment one does not apply to the expected role, as when “seeing one’s self negatively from the point of view of the other” (p. 247). Deportees such as Karim or Boureima are far from applying to the obvious expectations of returning “successfully” and fulfilling the role of the adult son taking care of the family. Worse than that, one may be left debated, traumatized and impaired of honor and dignity. Deportees often use *maloya* to describe their sensation of shame. The Bambara expression *maloya*, usually translated with shame, but also with being shy or embarrassed, is one of the most important principles in Mandé societies to indicate correct behavior (Brand, 2001, p. 16). First of all, it has a socially preserving function and also positive connotation. As central sentiment to keep society together, shame may prevent from returning to save one’s face, but moreover the reputation of the entire family.

Particularly the deportees I encountered shortly after their deportations were indeed restless, anxious, delusional and urgently searching for something in a rather desperate “stress, between hyper mobility and waiting” (Streiff-Fénart & Poutignat, 2006, p. 137). Madou (31 years old), from the same village as Boureima and Karim, retrospectively described his feelings after the ship he had been travelling on wrecked crossing the Atlantic: “At that moment, the idea of a journey

had taken over my mind. Either I went on an adventure or I would die, because there is so much poverty in Mali," he recalls (Madou, personal interview, October 31, 2015). Flown back to Bamako, he re-emigrated directly with some of the money his brother had obtained, even if his uncle who spent him refuge was neither in favor nor aware of the plan. The nephew did not care; his individual and collective expectations had to be satisfied.

Such stress appears to be a logical consequence of the primary expectations related to the notion of adventure. Many want to avoid such hardships at all cost. Lucht (2017) depicts deportees stranded in Niger as preferring to die rather than returning empty-handed and facing potential social death. More than that, he frames it an "eternal existential unrest" in the "human struggle that migration represents in the globalized world" (p. 155). Hence, as long as the adventurers keep going and try to make it, they see value in their lives as they can still achieve something better for themselves and their kin.

### **Integration of deportations in circular mobility livelihoods**

For generations, family economies have played and continue to play an important role in southern Mali, particularly as a survival strategy in times of crisis. Even if decisions to migrate are often taken individually, they contribute to the generational and circular family migration system, which is so economically functional that deportations and migratory restrictions cannot break it. Mohamed, from Seku's village, who was deported from the Libyan border to Algeria in 2010, illustrates:

My elder brother left on an adventure in 2000 and was deported in 2001. He recommended that I stay as he would not want me to confront the same difficulties. I said I would leave because everybody's chances differ: It's possible that I would not encounter the same difficulties as him. Later, I was also deported. I handed the same advice to my little brothers: They equally did not accept. The one who comes right after me is in a gold mining site. He has been there in Senegal for two years (Group discussion, November 7, 2015).

The difficulties his elder brothers had experienced did not prevent the others from leaving. This meets established conceptions of sharing economic responsibilities and diversifying risks: "One of the brothers shall always be abroad," Karim's mother asserts: "They cannot all be here; somebody needs to look for money abroad" (Bintu, informal conversation, November 1, 2015). Currently, Karim's elder brother is financially taking care from Bamako. His own son is in Spain, despite Karim's recommendations that he shall rather stay at home. Karim

is, nevertheless, also a bit proud of him. The migratory adventure remains the hegemonic foil. In all these cases, deportation is included in the process of circular migration. It becomes a sort of family re-emigration, though not necessarily to Europe. At the same time, deportation is somehow normalized within this process which contributes to an ambivalent perception of failure.

Even if the adventurers' decisions to leave were taken individually in most of the cases described here, and parents were only asked for their consent and benediction, they are deeply socially embedded. Boureima financed his journey mainly through farming and other work during travel; conversely, Seku received help from his elder brother. Often family members report that they contributed to the adventurer's travel budget if they could. Even if the families were not necessarily experiencing high-levels of financial family debt, Seku's brother, for instance, was indeed unhappy that he returned without financial support. Still, he accepted and welcomed the returnee.

As highly individualized endeavors (also Dougnon, 2012), migratory adventures relate otherwise to the collectively accepted conceptions of becoming an independent and autonomous man, the hazardous experiences and perceived failure may often be internalized and silenced towards the family after deportation. "I did not say anything" or "we did not talk about what has happened" are often heard accounts. On the one hand, this allows maintaining respect for oneself as well as the broader family, not giving reason for the broader village surrounding for "punishing those who have failed" (Schuster & Majidi, 2015, p. 648). More than that, such internalizations may eventually allow upholding the collective imaginary of a better life through migration as one is not explicitly confronted with what actually occurred.

Eventually, the relatives' reactions to the son's potential failure in adventure are torn. Boureima explains that his family was very grateful to have him back healthy and alive, although his desire to make a better life through adventure still persists. Failure and shame thus appear very complex and ambivalent phenomena. Despite of financial and emotional suffering, the families take their sons back. Exclusions from the village society are very rare. Some family members and acquaintances may have experienced deportations themselves. In Seku's village, a large part of elder and younger men has been deported or repatriated previously. Villagers seem to exchange about what has happened, much more than in the village of Boureima and Karim, where much fewer have been forcefully returned. Forced return can become a collective experience (cf. Plambech, 2018, for the case of Nigeria), even memory. This certain normalcy (Galvin, 2015), particularly due to the increased inner-African deportations, may allow balancing

the pressure. It is this tension between the gratefulness of being back healthy and alive and the shame about the loss of money or not obtained, which illustrates the term “failed” adventure in light of the danger of being called *fa den sago*. The collectivity of deportations still creates a particular form of coping and going on as I will shortly explain.

For the deportees in Kita, the question of staying or leaving again is involuntary, and difficult to strategically plan, since adventures are unexpectedly interrupted. A new departure may never come; sometimes only after many years. Life and family situations have to adapt to this unexpectedness. In Karim’s case, his involuntary immobility after deportation results from his family’s will:

If my father had not told me to stay, I would have returned on adventure. Money is the solution for everything. My elder brother cannot take care of his family there and the expenses here. Therefore, I had to search for money so that I can take care of my family. That was my objective, but my father told me to stay. I did not have another choice.

Karim stayed in light of the perceived defeat, accepting his father’s authority. He experiences, however, inner conflict between the individual demand to financially support his family, which is only possible if he leaves, and his father’s expectation that he would support them by remaining in the village. His mother had greater difficulties after the son returned involuntarily. It took some time until she could accept it. This may also relate to the social standing of the mother intrinsically connected to the migratory success of the son and expectations of sons taking care of their mothers in particular (cf. also Nyamnjoh, 2010, p. 134 and Brand, 2001, p. 17). It seems that people need “to become conscious of this new era of forced return and new types of immobility” as Drotbohm (2012, p. 137) states. Still, these young men want to go and experience their own adventure as some of their elder brothers in the village openly complain. In the end, they finally accept and support them if the parents agree. The migratory adventure receives a particular place and value in memorizing, collectively sharing as well as imagining.

### **Memorizing, sharing and imagining adventures and suffering**

In all this, deportees, their families and the broader surrounding give often little thought to the fact that the disruptions that hinder the adventurer’s journey are the results of physical borders as well as political and structural hurdles. Instead, the “failure” is rather related to the individual adventurer. As, for example, Alpes (2017) concludes, death, hardships, and deportations do not frighten.

The suffering of the adventure rather contributes to one's growing and learning. As Seku explains, "a man that has not known the suffering, you can never know how the others have succeeded. Somebody, who has suffered a lot, that's also an apprenticeship. Suffering is an apprenticeship." It contributes to becoming an honorable man. The former or future adventurers, young and elder, have very clear ideas about how to go abroad. They are experts explaining their ideal journeys and migratory projects, and the dangers they may face: "If you go on an adventure you have to be aware that you might die. But you will die anyway" (Group discussion, November 1, 2015). Risk and suffering are implied in the concept of adventure and consciously accepted (Dougnon, 2013).

In situations after deportations, suffering is omnipresent in the deportees' narrations and moreover receives a particular value. It is "always the same suffering," Mohamed complains in light of the expectations failed, the hardships experienced and his struggle to go on. In fact, references to "suffering" are very common in everyday conversations in Mali (Diawara, 2003, p. 70, as quoted by Gaibazzi, 2015, p. 72), particularly for illustrating agricultural work. According to Gaibazzi, who worked in a Soninke village in Gambia, going on adventure builds on having been trained on agriculture and having proved to be a real man. Knowing how to suffer is thus a part of it. A certain hardship in the education of children is widely practiced (pp. 74-89). Former deportees thus describe their experiences with the socially recognized codes of suffering while conditions after deportations may become a form of everyday suffering, which can have an approving as well as normalizing effect. In this sense, also the learning through adventure can be met and recognized: "I feel different than the others since I have been on adventure," Boureima and others explain. His mother exemplifies how her son is grown up and taking responsibility now.

Heroically talking about an imagined new adventure, like talking about the previous one are acted out in group discussions and informal talk. Therein, "just talking is far from being without aim," Schulz depicts in "the world is made by talk" where Malian youth are trying to perform worldliness, consumption values, and adulthood through listening to and talking about music culture in Bamako (2002, p. 812). Schulz speaks of a "discursive mode of imagining," that is the combination of debate and imagining, rather than uncritical consumption. Herein, talking serves as a performative, establishing, and self-ensuring act (p. 822). In this sense, talking and exchanging about adventures are deeply agentic acts, which go beyond the migratory adventure as a form of consumption demonstrating collectively reflecting about its hazards as potentials for personal transformation. Not least this may add to restoring one's masculine personhood.

It is not that people pretend to be worldly and knowledgeable, but they are recognized as such even as deported adventurers (cf. also Maher, 2015, p. 59).

The immobility people are potentially forced into, before or after a deportation, may also result in unconvinced and relativizing accounts. Another young man from Boureima and Karim's village, for instance, explains: if he were to leave again, he would rather go by airplane, which seems hardly realistic. He continues: "If I do not find enough money, I may also go by land. But if I find the money, I would rather stay and use it to establish something here" (Group discussion, November 1, 2015). Such vague argumentation and uncertainty may be interpreted as a sign of disorientation, which has been described as rather characteristic for this generation in Mali and other African countries, where young men are sitting, waiting, and searching (e.g., Schulz, 2002). Contingency and indeterminacy are integrated parts of the everyday, of this age group in particular. Furthermore, it could be seen a strategy to keep options to leave again open. This uncertainty is accepted and constructively embraced. It is not a passive waiting, but a meaningful activity.

These deportees' narrations perfectly reflect how Streiff-Fénart and Poutignat (2006) describe the ambivalence of the adventure as "a career in which one enters with more or less trumps, that one accomplishes with more or less success and thus one finishes one day or the other, to leave in a more or less honorable way" (p. 131). In Mali, there are numerous popular songs that depict the positive and negative sides of the migratory adventure. Following these relativities, failing, the related shame, and feared lack of dignity can be part of the same project in which the passage to Europe represents only one of many possible outcomes. In contrast to some of the literature (e.g., Dünnwald, 2012; Schuster & Madji, 2015) that depicts deportees who directly re-emigrate or remain in the capital, my research shows that although informants may talk about potentially re-emigrating, they eventually remain – sometimes after experiencing several failed attempted adventures – with their family in their village of origin, while others stay in Bamako. The "failed" adventure becomes part of suffering as a condition of life. Talking and imagining creates dignity, and become coping strategies themselves, and as also Kleist (2017b, p. 337) suggests, potentially enable the deportees to restore their masculinity. Silencing the hazards lived through, collectively sharing one's experiences or imagining new ones receive a socially preserving function, while opening up new allies to go about. Against this background, a supposed failure can be integrated and become a productive category towards social adulthood, becoming a man and courageously going on (cf. Maher, 2015, p. 33). Hence, the former deportees' waiting is rather active and the experience of

hardships may turn out to be productive. Indeed, there seem to be multiple ways to cope with the situation beyond notions of waithood, as the following section describes.

### **“Back to the soil” and reintegration? Important is to go on**

Some (finally) decide to stay and engage where they are. “We’ve all been deported,” Madou asserts recalling his second deportation, and describing how he sat together with his brother and decided to stay because there was “nothing better than the soil on which they were born” (Group discussion, October 30, 2015)<sup>5</sup>. The two brothers do well. Madou has managed to establish a small fish-culturing project through a family friend who has a contact in an NGO. Little by little, he can contribute to the family from where he is. The youth in the village now talk about his project, and that they want the same. It has become a new source of envy, one not earned through migratory success.

During the village stays, Birama and I find ourselves frequently in situations where we discuss the small projects that allow the young men to invest, build up a small garden, or organize animal breeding. In the case of Madou, his family also convinced him to stay, as they need his responsibility and engagement where they are. Boureima, in the same village, was married shortly after his second deportation, which served, as he infers, “to give an additional reason to stay and an obligation to take care of.” Three of Boureima’s brothers have been abroad – in Equatorial Guinea and two at the margins of Europe in Mauritania and Algeria – for years without sending money and without returning home. Notwithstanding, Boureima asserts: “If I were to have the money for the transport, I would still convince them to leave again. This is between the parents and a child; they will not refuse” (Group discussion, October 30, 2015). The focus abroad persists in light of potentially recognized immobility. There is still so much to learn and achieve and the family economy needs to survive.

Personal feelings of defeat may last despite staying. “It’s so long that I’ve not talked and thought about all this” (Ibrahim, personal interview, January 27, 2016), Ibrahim, Seku’s father, reflects when we speak to him one evening. He had also gone to Libya in 2001, and was deported several years later, caught in the street like his son. “You cannot be satisfied when you return with empty hands,” he recalls, and concludes, what is often the final sense-making: “But it’s God who

<sup>5</sup> This relates to the idea that Gaibazzi (2015) refers to in terms of those who remain in their Gambian Soninke village, where one should always keep one foot in poverty and never forget “where one comes from” (pp. 72-73), with the difference here that the early return and staying were not chosen as such.



decides, so you have nothing about which to complain.” Ibrahim did not want his son to leave and was particularly against him crossing the Mediterranean. He had almost died on the way when he had tried to get to Europe. Seku should have continued school. Now neither their adventures nor Seku’s schooling worked out. Upon return, Ibrahim re-started his agricultural activities, which he continues until today. He has married twice in the meantime, has eight children, and is established in the village community. His age and distance from the deportation may help him to cope and digest the unmet expectations. Still, he seems to have remorse: “It helps that there are other deportees, but you cannot forget what you’ve lost.” He wants his son to stay now – “I’m becoming old” – although he is aware of the small profit one gets. “A good education is crucial,” he depicts, to realizing a better life here or there. For Seku, such information is too late, but maybe not for the ones to come.

Migratory attitudes and perceptions of the adventure may be in a process of change. That is, alternative concepts of learning and staying may coexist with the established adventurous ways (e.g., Daum, 2014). Whether it is the restricted mobilities, a growing self-consciousness of where people come from, seniority or desperation, (young) men engage locally and thus may overcome the presumed defeat through deportation, or even use it productively. “Back to the soil” is what the first socialist president of Mali, Modibo Keita, preached in the 1960s. Today, the hazardous conditions in agriculture meet certain ambiguity in young people’s perception.

Seku and his friends express their criticism of how little they get from their agricultural work. One conclusion the young men draw is: “We need factories!” The Malian state is explicitly criticized: “There is no support, no possibilities here,” they complain (Group discussion, November 7, 2015). It is a structurally induced “negative” suffering, which creates peoples’ feeling of marginalization and is thought to be overcome. Support and possibilities are rather linked to international experts and NGOs. Their discourse about creating alternative income opportunities for the youth and of valorizing agriculture has long been vivid. In the meantime, the prospect entered the new Malian migratory policy, even if it remains largely unfunded until this day. It is under the EU Trust Fund, which, as a consequence of the European “refugee crisis”, majorly finances to fight “irregular” migration, the reintegration of deportees as well as providing alternatives for the youth. As if leaving for a better life would be something unusual and disregarding that each departure already implies a return (also Dougnon, 2013). Interestingly, the young men’s engagement toward staying and searching out alternative opportunities not only seem to reflect the current political discourse;

some successful voluntary returnees or transnational family members, in France or Spain, have claimed a “back to the soil” for the youth as well, and engage in community initiatives and alike. At once, these families often self-evidently reintegrate the failed returned son despite of their disappointment, the economic loss and of reputation against the other villagers as above shown. It is questionable whether these prospects are equally attractive for the youth in light of the prestigious established adventurous ways towards social adulthood, worldliness and becoming an autonomous as well as contributing man.

Eventually, prestige can equally result from going to Bamako or one of the increasing informal gold mining sites in the Malian southwest or in neighboring countries. These possibilities of income generation build on established paths of internal or regional mobility, which since centuries have secured livelihoods by cultivating peanuts, cola nuts or doing little business (Gary-Toukara, 2008). Seasonal, but also yearlong informal gold mining, has become established alternative and complement to agricultural work, and above all for constrained international mobility. Even if it serves for major conflicts about potential dangers and benefits, especially between generations (Hilson & Garforth, 2012). The narratives from there appear similar to those of the adventurers. Still, the adventure is the more desirable – and in the long-term, promising – path; at least once in a lifetime.

## **Conclusion: post deportation, mobility and making a better life beyond waithood and involuntary immobility**

This article has presented a spectrum of potential coping strategies and going on activities of former deportees in their villages in the Malian south. These question the concepts of waithood and involuntarily immobility, which serve rather as a critical foil to discuss young men’s narrating, imagining and engaging after deportations. It has become clear that the implicitness of mobility and the self-evident connection of success through mobility and thereby making a better life, particularly as a man, are still fundamentally established in the youths’ narrations. At the same time, the EU’s expansive externalization of border controls and deportations, in addition to the Libyan crisis, have been producing the phenomenon of mass deportations, increasingly collectively experienced, shared and memorized. Instead of reflecting on these structural aspects, I have shown how former deportees describe the glamor of the personal adventure and multiple sufferings involved in the memories of experienced hardships on the journey and through forcefully returning with empty hands. The latter of which in

particular results from facing one's expectations of success and self-perception as a man falling apart in a globally connected world that suddenly seems inaccessible and the social repercussions accompanying. Some may try to re-emigrate immediately, while others prepare to leave later or only talk about re-emigrating in order to at least discursively follow the predetermined ways to making a better life and becoming a man. The sublimation of adventure, talking, memorizing and imagining about re-emigration have become central coping strategies.

Although an unsuccessful returnee has difficulties in complying with the expected role as a man in Mandé society, the social reactions and support presented here vary at the level of the family and in the broader village context and expectations for the forcefully returned are not unidirectional and necessarily excluding. The deportees' friends, their brothers as well as those that have been deported themselves, including their own fathers or other men in the village, play a particularly important role. The omnipresence of massive (post) deportations in everyday village life is recent and may contribute to changing perceptions of and ascriptions to (im)mobility. As this article has developed, the concept of the migratory adventure is ambivalent, involving more than economic success. The self-determination of leaving abroad and surviving hazardous situations – even when the final “El Dorado” was not reached – appears to help the deportees in being accepted, growing up, and becoming a man (though not in economic terms). Upon return, young men try to create opportunities so they can stay, searching value in the soil where they are born, enduring the sufferings of agriculture or engaging in seasonal livelihood mobility to another city or informal gold mining sites. All this contributes to regaining dignity and renegotiating alternatives for going on.

The realities presented clearly go beyond the concept of waithood, when returned young men may be married as soon as they get back and engage in the family economy and take over responsibility. There is accordingly a number of alternative ways to social adulthood despite all constraints and setbacks. The actors in these cases cannot be called involuntarily immobile, when they prefer to stay where they come from regardless of structural obstacles such as border restrictions. More than that, many take multiple forms of internal and regional mobility.

Despite their potential hardships and silent reproach, young men continue to employ themselves and courageously search for new ways to make a better life for themselves and their families, every day and everywhere they go, even though if it may mean occasionally sitting, waiting, and exchanging. As Conlon describes, waiting can be “actively produced, embodied, experienced, politicized

and resisted across a range of migrant spaces” (2011, p. 355). This active sense of waiting is even more important as immobility might be perceived as threat to hegemonic masculinity (Gaibazzi, 2015) or rather as a female characteristic. While the elder’s time to leave again has passed, the younger ones are still in the age of mobility including new chances for leaving, but also multiple forms of going about and becoming. Eventually, such reinterpretation of waiting and staying link in with discussions about young people’s tactical strategizing, navigating, hustling, or active sitting in African countries today (e.g. Gaibazzi, 2015; Vigh, 2006). Even if some deportees have a feeling of complete standstill, an “active waiting” defined as a constantly incorporated mode of being can be seen as a “motion within motion” (Vigh, 2006, p. 14), which is trying to make the best out of the possible choices. This article has shown that deportations in the Malian south do not necessarily lead to social death, as predicted by others (e.g. Bredeloup, 2017; Kleist, 2017a). Even if potentially physically stuck, former deportees seem to form (re-)integral parts of their societies, eking out a living as many of their contemporaries do. Rather this demonstrates a continuation of the complex negotiations of (constrained) social mobilities and becoming.

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